The Media Salience of Germany’s Bilateral Relations. What Are the Driving Forces?

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*Henrike Viehrig*
University of Bonn
Dept. of English, American and Celtic Studies

Viehrig@uni-bonn.de
**Introduction**

The paper investigates the salience of Germany’s three foremost international partners in the Western alliance – the US, France and the UK – in the German media between 2001 and 2011. The media salience of these countries is an indicator of their salience in the German domestic political discourse at large and speaks to the intensity and societal anchoring of bilateral relations with the three countries. The main objective of the paper is to contribute to the debate on the driving forces behind the domestic salience of foreign affairs issues. Specifically, we introduce a model that consists of three interrelated catalysts of the domestic salience of foreign countries which refer to the power of the countries in question, the news value of events in relation to these countries and the extent of domestic contestation over bilateral relations.

To this purpose, the paper will proceed in four steps. First, it will briefly introduce the concept of domestic issue salience and relate the concept to the analysis of bilateral relations. Second, the paper will spell out the sources of the domestic salience of foreign countries and suggest a model that identifies three interacting drivers. Third, we will attend to methodological issues involved in our empirical analysis and fourth the paper will present and discuss its findings on the salience of Germany’s three selected international partners in the German media. Our empirical data support the notion that the interplay between country, event, and contestation may act as a catalyst of a foreign country’s media salience. At the same time, several questions remain concerning the operationalization of domestic contestation and hence its impact on the media salience of Germany’s bilateral relations.

**Domestic Issue Salience and the Analysis of Bilateral Relations**¹

The concept of issue salience refers to the relative importance or significance that an actor ascribes to a given issue on the political agenda (Soroka 2003:28-29; Wlezien 2005:556-561). It is a measure of the attention actors devote to the issue in question and of the issue’s overall prominence in the minds of decision-makers. In analyzing foreign policy, the concept captures a cognitive shortcut of human actors to select which information they process before deciding on a course of action. Following the basic tenets of cognitive psychology, decision-makers have to cope with a “bottleneck of attention” (Jones 1994:65) and thus rely on

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¹ This section draws on the accounts in Oppermann and Spencer (2011) and in Oppermann (2011).
on heuristics to delimit the amount of information they need to consume. In consequence, their attentiveness is highly selective and they use but a tiny fraction of available information when making choices (Simon 1985:301-302; Vertzberger 1990:7-10).

Along these lines, an important cognitive shortcut of actors to reduce the informational burden of decision-making has been referred to as the “top-of-the-head” phenomenon: decision-makers will primarily base their choices on information which is most readily accessible in their memory and which they can most easily bring to mind (Taylor and Fiske 1978). This shortcut, in turn, can be operationalized by the concept of issue salience. The concept is strictly relational and reproduces the trade-offs that human actors in the arena of foreign affairs face when they focus their attention on some issues at the expense of others. Of the countless political issues that compete for their attention at any point in time, these actors will concentrate their cognitive capacity primarily on issues which are amongst their uppermost concerns, i.e., which they consider most salient. When forming their opinion on international affairs and when deciding how to make use of their institutional competences to devise or influence foreign policy, these actors will therefore mainly consult information on those issues in the international arena to which they attach the highest salience.

The salience of foreign policy issues can be investigated on different levels of analysis. Not the least for methodological reasons (see Black, Bryan, and Johnson 2011), the focus of salience analysis has not been on foreign policy decision-makers themselves, however, but rather on the domestic constituents of foreign policy. From the perspective of decision-makers, in turn, the salience of foreign policy in the domestic arena is an attention-directing device that signifies foreign policy problems which they have to attend to as a matter of priority.

Specifically, the domestic salience of foreign affairs issues has been studied for different actors, including political parties (Steenbergen and Scott 2004) and members of parliament (Jäger, Oppermann, Höse, and Viehrig 2009). The most sustained efforts in this regard, however, have clearly been devoted to the general public. In particular, a long history of research has investigated the link between issue salience and voting behavior (Rabinowitz, Prothro, and Jacoby 1982; Niemi and Bartels 1985; Krosnick 1988, 1990; Fournier, Blais, Nadeau, Gidengil, and Nevitte 2003). Also, a substantial body of work has tracked changes in the salience of international affairs to general publics in single countries – above all in the US.
(Asher 1992; Persily, Citrin, and Egan 2008) – as well as similarities and differences across countries and specific issues. Most notably, there is evidence for systematic cross-country differences in the public salience of defense issues (Wlezien 1996; Soroka and Wlezien 2004, 2005) and European integration (Franklin and Wlezien 1997; De Vries 2007).

The theoretical significance of studying the salience of international affairs in domestic constituents, first and foremost, is in assessing the role of these actors in foreign policy decision-making. In particular, the concept of issue salience captures a cognitive precondition for actors in the domestic arena to be able to influence the conduct of foreign policy and thus to have an impact on the decision-making process. The formal powers of domestic actors to assert their preferences in the realm of international affairs will be of little use if the issue in question has not sufficiently drawn their attention. By contrast, the higher the salience of a foreign affairs issue to a domestic actor is, the more mobilized the actor will be to make her views heard and the more consequential the actor’s preferences and power become.

General publics, governing parties and parliamentary majorities, therefore, will be more likely to employ their institutional powers to sanction governments should they engage in foreign policies that run counter to their interests, the more these policies have come to their attention, i.e., the more salient these policies are. Foreign policy decision-makers, in consequence, will only have to reckon with domestic audience costs for going against the wishes of their constituents if the issue in question has crossed a domestic “salience threshold” (Van Belle 1993:172). As long as a foreign policy issue ranks below this threshold, decision-makers can expect their policies to remain unsanctioned. Consequently, in this case they do not need to consider domestic audience costs when deciding between different courses of action. In contrast, the higher the decision-makers’ estimate of an issue’s salience to their domestic constituents is, the more prominent the prospect of potential audience costs will loom in the decision-making process. In other words, decision-makers employ their view of the domestic salience of foreign policy issues as a heuristic device which shapes their attention to domestic demands and constraints in the decision-making process. It primes certain issues on their foreign policy agenda at the expense of others.

Thus, the salience of foreign affairs issues in the domestic arena is a determinant of the significance of domestic constraints on the making of foreign policy. Other things being
equal, these constraints will be more prominent when an issue is highly salient to public opinion, members of parliament, political parties, the media or interest groups than when the salience of the respective issue to these actors is low. For one, foreign policy decision-making can be expected to follow an entirely different path in high-salience environments compared to low-salience environments. When foreign policy decision-makers presume that an issue is highly salient among their domestic constituents, domestic-level political incentives will weigh more heavily on their decision calculus than when the domestic salience of the issue is low. In addition, patterns of conflict and cooperation on the international level will more likely be affected by the interplay of domestic-level constraints on governments when the issues in question are considered highly salient by domestic constituents in at least one of the affected countries.

When it comes to bilateral relations, studying the domestic salience of a country’s international partners is relevant in at least two respects. From a liberal perspective on the analysis of foreign policy (see Powlick and Katz 1998: 31-39), first, governments will face different incentives and pressures from public opinion when they pursue bilateral relations depending on the respective country’s salience in domestic discourse. On the one hand, they will have broad leeway in their decision-making to ignore public opinion on a foreign country when the public does not ascribe much salience to the bilateral relationship. On the other hand, governments will have strong incentives to play to the gallery of public opinion in their dealings with countries on which the public has highly salient views: when these views are positive, governments can be expected to put a premium on seeking particularly close and friendly relations with the countries in question; when the public holds negative valuations of a foreign country, in contrast, governments may find it expedient to distance themselves from this country and to highlight their disagreements with its political leaders. The salience of partner countries in the domestic arena, therefore, delimits the extent to which public opinion can become a relevant parameter in the conduct of relations with these countries. The higher the salience of a country to members of the public is, the easier they can retrieve positive or negative valuations of it from memory and the more prepared they are to contest the policy-making towards this country. While the public’s image of a foreign country, for example, as an ally or as an enemy remain latent and largely inconsequential when the domestic salience of the country is low, its views turn into manifest parameters of the
political debate and carry greater political weight when the respective country’s salience is high.

Second, the analysis of a foreign country’s salience in public opinion can yield insights into the intensity and societal anchoring of bilateral relations with the country. While linkages between two countries are most commonly assessed in terms of elite-level cooperation and conflict, they are underpinned by mutual sentiments at the level of general publics. The long-term shape and stability of bilateral relations cannot be reduced to the scope of complementary interests between decision-makers, but also depend on their embeddedness in public opinion (Rasmussen and McCormick 1993: 516-521). High levels of a partner country’s salience in domestic discourse would thus indicate that relations to this country are seen as particularly important and that the general public is highly attentive to the state of the relationship.

Against this background, this paper investigates the driving forces behind the domestic public salience of a country’s international partners in the news media. It will be argued that the interplay between the power of the country in question, the specific events in a bilateral relationship and the extent of domestic contestation over the relationship are crucial in this respect.

**Key Drivers of Domestic Salience: Country, Event, Contestation**

The salience of a political issue in the news media can be analyzed with the help of a market analogy. In such a setting, the salience of foreign policy at a specific point in time would be conceived of as the equilibrium between competing market forces. According to Baum and Potter (2008), these competing forces comprise the main actors of the public-foreign policy-nexus: the foreign policy decision makers, the media, and the public. All three actors are linked with each other through their communicative performance, while simultaneously exchanging information. Two actors – the decision makers and the public – want to realize their preferred politics. Thus, their interests are at odds and they compete for realizing their favored course of action. The third actor, the mass media, however, do not develop a political agenda of their own (Mermin 1997). They do not pursue political preferences, but can be conceived of as economic actors. Accordingly, they contribute to the competition by influencing the market of information and the salience of political issues. The media are thus
acting in the light of rivaling forces: they depend on information supplied by different sources, most of them by policy makers who wish to get favorable media coverage; and the media depend on the public that demands information and wishes to receive interesting news. In trying to satisfy the public’s demand, journalists and editors are selecting “news that’s fit to print” according to expected sales numbers and anticipated audience reactions. The media thus produce the kind of news that they think fit both, the public demand for information and the sources’ demand for adequate coverage. The media’s reporting influences to a large degree which issues become salient for the public as well as for policy makers – which makes mass media a valuable field for exploring issue salience.

The market analogy developed by Baum and Potter (2008) replaces attempts to construct a causal framework of linear influence between foreign policy makers, media and public opinion. As an alternative, their model projects simultaneous adaptation processes between the three actors. In their endeavor to create “a dynamic characterized by expectations, anticipated reactions, and constant updating” (Baum and Potter 2008:56), they provide a useful framework for analyzing the public-foreign policy-nexus. In our view, the market analogy does not only hold for the exchange of information but also for the allocation of salience, and allows analyzing the ups and downs of issue salience.

We conceptualize the salience of foreign policy with the help of a similar market analogy. In such a model, media salience stands for the importance that the mass media attach to an issue, reporting on real-world events, statements of policy-makers and foreign policy actions. However, mass media only report on those issues which they deem newsworthy and interesting for their audience. Therefore, the salience of foreign policy issues in the mass media represents a journalistic trade-off between available information from their suppliers, i.e. politicians and other sources, and newsworthy information for their consumers, i.e. the public. Issue salience of foreign policy in the media, thus, represents the equilibrium between supply and demand for news on foreign policy. We argue that the media take much more influence on the amount of coverage than on the sheer content of coverage, which is source-dependent (Gans 2004). Restricting the market model to the salience dimension thus allows us to perceive the mass media as a coequal actor on the market for foreign policy information. The market thus allocates issue salience on the different agendas, i.e. the public agenda, the policy agenda, and the media agenda (see Manheim 1994: 129).
Furthermore, the market model sheds new light on the driving forces behind the salience of Germany’s bilateral relations in the news media. Issue salience, first, is driven by the characteristics of the country in question that account for the long-term salience of a bilateral relationship; second, by events in the relationship that spur short-term peaks in domestic salience; and third, by the extent of domestic contestation over the relationship that may aggravate these short-term peaks. Following the notion of ‘power indexing’ (see Bennett 1994; Zaller and Chiu 2000), the country-specific characteristics refer to the relative power of a country; the events in a bilateral relationship, in turn, relate to the news value of foreign policy (see Graber 1997) – both from a German perspective. Domestic contestation, finally, refers to the degree to which a bilateral relationship or specific issues in this relationship are the subject of controversy and debate among the German political elite.2

Beginning with country-specific characteristics, the German media should report more on the politics of powerful countries and on Germany’s relations to such countries. The more powerful a foreign country is in relation to the home country of the media under study, the more political developments in the foreign country will be judged to have immediate implications for the home country and the more newsworthy these developments will become. The relative power of a country is not only determined by its economic, diplomatic and military capabilities, but also by its degree of interdependence with the home country. The more connected the two countries are, the more do foreign affairs of one country matter for the other. The hypothesis would thus be

(1) that similar types of events will experience more media coverage and become more salient when they are linked to powerful countries than when they relate to less powerful ones.

As for specific events in a bilateral relationship, these events possess immanent characteristics that condition their visibility in the news media and the intensity of their perception in the public. These characteristics can be defined as news factors which determine whether a piece of information has a high or a low news value (Schulz 1976: 29-34). The more news factors an event displays the higher its news value to journalists, editors and publishers will be. News values specify those aspects of political information that make

2 The following paragraphs build on our account in Oppermann and Viehrig (2009).
foreign news interesting to a domestic audience. In consequence, the media is likely to publish only such information in which several news factors such as violence, unexpectedness, elite-centrism or negativism are combined. On an abstract level, the common denominator of the diverse sets of news factors consists of a sense of urgency, threat to basic values and novelty conveyed by them (see Galtung and Ruge 1965: 66-8; Kepplinger 1998). It can thus be hypothesized

(2) that upswings in media reporting and thus in the public salience of a foreign country should partly follow from the intrinsic newsworthiness of current events involving the country or the bilateral relationship with it.

Finally, the domestic salience of foreign countries should be affected by the extent of domestic political contestation over relations with these countries. Notably, it has long been established that intra-elite dissent on political issues works as a catalyst for the media coverage of these issues and thus for their salience to the general public (Baum and Groeling 2008: 29-30). Domestic political competition is often more about shifting the public’s attentiveness to certain policy areas than about changing the voters’ respective preferences. Elite actors may accentuate intra-elite cleavages on foreign affairs precisely in order to expand the arena of political conflict (Jones 1994: 181-3). In this process, they send out contradictory cues on foreign and security policy, which in turn enhance media interest in the policy and widen and polarize the domestic debate about it (Zaller 1992: 6-22). Contentious elite debates thus add to the news value of a policy and provide the media with auspicious pegs for their coverage (Knecht and Weatherford 2006: 709; Luhmann 2004: 59). By articulating dissent from government policy, therefore, political and societal elites act as fire-alarms which direct the public’s attention to the disputed issues (McCubbins and Schwartz 1984: 165-71). Thus, the hypothesis is

(3) that foreign countries will become more salient in domestic political discourse if relations to these countries are the subject of significant controversy within the political elite of the home country of the media under study.

These three drivers of the domestic salience of a foreign country and of bilateral relations with that country, moreover, can be expected to interact in a specific way (see figure 1). First, the power of the foreign country has both a direct impact on the country’s domestic salience in the home country and it works as an antecedent condition (Van Evera 1997: 9-10).
which affects the extent to which events and domestic contestation can be expected to bring about upswings in the domestic salience of the foreign country. Under the condition of a powerful country, in other words, the role of specific events in the relationship with the country and of domestic contestation over the relationship as a catalyst of the country’s domestic salience will be magnified. Second, events and domestic contestation both have a direct effect on a foreign country’s domestic salience, but they are also closely interdependent: some events are more likely to become contested in domestic politics than others; and similar events have a different impact on domestic salience depending on whether or not they become contested in the home country.

Figure 1: The Interaction between the Three Drivers of the Domestic Salience of Foreign Countries

Our model of three interrelated driving forces of the domestic salience of bilateral relationships thus covers three different levels of explanation. First, the power of another country in relation to Germany and the degree of interdependence between both countries can be seen as an international-level driver of domestic salience. It is located beyond the borders of the home country; and the power of the partner country makes information newsworthy per se. As for event-specific characteristics, it is their imminent newsworthiness that makes news fit to print. While the events may be located abroad, it is the foremost rule for journalists and editors to judge all foreign news in light of their estimated effects on the home audience. The news value of foreign events thus gets refracted by the demands of the
local media system. The extent and patterns of domestic contestation, finally, are attributes of the home country and a domestic-level driver of the salience of bilateral relations. Political controversy about foreign events among domestic elites has its roots within the country the news is made for. Whether foreign affairs news ignites political controversy or not, depends on the political culture of the country and whether its elites are prone to conflict. The following chapter describes how we have measured and collected our empirical data.

**Methods and Operationalization**

In order to infer the salience of Germany’s most important partner countries in the domestic political discourse, we use the amount of media coverage as an indicator. The media serve as an interface of the information flow between foreign policy officials and the public. Analyzing their content, thus, offers indirect insights into the public salience of foreign affairs issues which can be expected to rise with the amount of media reporting on it (Epstein and Segal 2000: 66-67). There is a strong correlation between the prominence of an issue in media coverage and the importance attached to it by general publics (McCombs and Shaw 1972; Miller and Krosnick 2000). Publics tend to attach the highest importance to those issues which figure most prominently in the media (Soroka 2003; Oppermann and Viehrig 2008). They employ the media as a cost-saving cognitive shortcut to differentiate between more and less significant issues in foreign affairs, and those issues which are most extensively reported in the media become primed in the minds of the members of the public (Iyengar and Kinder 1987: 63-72; Miller and Krosnick 1997: 258-260). At the same time, media reporting on foreign policy is also an important source of governments to learn about the foreign policy priorities of their constituents (Powlick 1995:432-439).

Another reason for resorting to media coverage is that bilateral relations can be salient although they are not perceived as a problem by the electorate (Wlezien 2005). In such a case, using public opinion polls that ask for the “most important problem” would not yield the kind of data we are interested in. Hence, we have conducted a quantitative content analysis of the German media in order to measure the domestic salience of Germany’s bilateral relations with the United States, the United Kingdom, and France.
In doing so, we have selected the German daily Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (FAZ) as our news source. The FAZ is the leading German quality newspaper and has a moderately conservative orientation (Eilders and Lüter 2000). With its circulation of roughly 380,000 copies per day in the fourth quarter of 2011 (IVW 2012), the FAZ is Germany’s second most-read quality newspaper after the Süddeutsche Zeitung. However, the FAZ is better suited to inquire about foreign affairs, since it covers that topic more than comparable publications (Schmidt and Wilke 1998: 171; Nafroth 2002: 102-104) and aims at informing the highest-ranking elites in politics, the economy and society. We thus deem the FAZ sufficiently representative for our query on the salience of bilateral relations.

Second, we have defined our time frame. It covers a period of eleven years and includes all articles that appeared between January 2001 and December 2011. Thus our aim was to cover the events of the past decade, including 9/11. Third, we had to find adequate search terms in order to measure the salience of Germany’s bilateral relations. To capture bilateral relations as an issue in foreign policy (and avoiding measuring the media salience of a country as such), we focused on reporting on the heads of state, heads of government and/or foreign ministers of the United States, the United Kingdom, and France. Given the journalistic orientation of linking foreign affairs to persons, we consider the mentioning of the full name of these political representatives of the selected country in a German newspaper to be a strong indicator for foreign news on the politics of the respective country (Gans 2004: 9-13).

In the case of France, the two most important foreign policy officials are the President and the Prime Minister; for Great Britain it is the Prime Minister and the Foreign Minister, and for the United States, we chose the President and the Secretary of State. We searched for their full names, e. g. “George W. Bush OR Condoleezza Rice” (see table 1), and recorded the monthly number of articles that contained either of the two names. Although our search terms retrieved some stories of private interest, those were marginal and ultimately complete the coverage of another country. In sum, our method yields highly comparable results across countries; it restricts the search to political news without limiting the range of foreign affairs issues and it produces the number of articles, in which the country in question plays a considerable role (Oppermann 2011).
Table 1: Names and incumbencies of foreign policy leaders 2001-2011

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>US</th>
<th>France</th>
<th>UK</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Jan 2001-</td>
<td>Bill Clinton</td>
<td>Jacques Chirac</td>
<td>Tony Blair</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19 Jan 2001</td>
<td>Madeline Albright</td>
<td>Lionel Jospin</td>
<td>Robin Cook</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20 Jan 2001-</td>
<td>George W. Bush</td>
<td>1 Jun 2005-</td>
<td>Tony Blair</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27 Jan 2005</td>
<td>Colin Powell</td>
<td>16 May 2007</td>
<td>Jack Straw</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28 Jan 2005-</td>
<td>George W. Bush</td>
<td>Jacques Chirac</td>
<td>Tony Blair</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19 Jan 2009</td>
<td>Condoleezza Rice</td>
<td>Dominique de Villepin</td>
<td>Margaret Beckett</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31 Dec 2011</td>
<td>Hillary Clinton</td>
<td>31 Dec 2011</td>
<td>David Miliband</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Nicolas Sarkozy</td>
<td>29 Jun 2007-</td>
<td>David Cameron</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>François Fillon</td>
<td>11 May 2010</td>
<td>William Hague</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Authors’ table.

To collect our empirical data, we used the digital archive of the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (FAZ BiblioNet 2012). It contains all articles that appeared in the printed newspaper version or were tailored specifically for the webpage faz.net. Since most of the printed articles are published online and since only a small part of articles are designed exclusively for the online version (20% in 2010), we did not count any articles twice, but included all stories that appeared either online or printed. We recorded the monthly number of articles for all three countries, changing the search terms for each country on the day when incumbencies started or ended.

Our first hypothesis requires differentiating media salience for similar types of events. We therefore focused on national elections in Britain, France and the United States. General elections are comparable events that have certain newsworthiness. According to liberal IR theory, societies interact with each other according to the configuration of their interdependent state preferences (Moravcsik 1997). An election that brings in a new chief executive can thus be interpreted as a cue for foreign nations that the constellation of domestic preferences has changed. Thus, when individuals get replaced at a nation’s top hierarchy, newsmakers pay close attention because every bit of information might signal a shift in the bilateral relations. Hence, it is the news factors of surprise, uncertainty and power that make such news valuable. Reports on foreign elections, therefore, are for the most part based on the question: ‘what does it mean for our relations with country X?’ Subsequently, the reporting starts even before elections are held, screening candidates and their foreign policy positions. Thus, the event “election” comprises not only the single day when votes are cast, but the pre-election race between different candidates as well as the post-electoral shape of the future government until its inauguration. The time frame of
these administrative processes differs across countries: the French constitution allows for snap elections two weeks after Election Day; in the US, there are around ten weeks from election till inauguration; and in case of the UK, it is the incumbent prime minister who decides the date for the next elections at least until the current coalition government introduced fixed-term parliaments. Therefore, we decided to gauge the salience of elections not only during the month when elections were held, but also two months prior and two months after these elections. Our results may therefore be flatter than genuine election reporting; and they may interfere with other events that occurred at the same time. However, we consider the average salience over five months a valid indicator in order to compare the effects of general elections on the media salience of the selected countries.

Our second hypothesis refers to the news value of current events that are linked to its country of origin. By comparing media coverage across time and countries, we are able to identify which events were related to which country. To test our third hypothesis, we searched for a means to measure elite contestation of foreign policy issues. Elite contestation refers to an open foreign policy dispute among national elites and may become manifest as a quarrel between the governing coalition and the opposition, within the governing coalition, or within one party (intra-party dissent) (see Baum and Groeling 2010). Possible avenues to gauge elite contestation could be based on either content analyses (of media coverage, parliamentary debates, and party manifestos) or polls (with elite members, experts). Groeling and Baum (2010) used Congressional comments for their analysis of US foreign policy discourse, but referred to the limitations and challenges of this approach (2010: 48, fn 2). In our view, the German Bundestag is less suited to infer political contestation. Highly ritualized debates within a rigid set of political factions inhibit real, spontaneous contestation. Currently, we are not aware of any database or previous study that focused on foreign policy contestation in Germany. We therefore resort to a plausibility probe of select instances of foreign policy contestation in Germany.

**Results and Discussion**

The salience of British, French and American foreign policy in the German FAZ differs considerably across countries and over time periods (see fig. 2). First and foremost, the US presence in the German media is much stronger, compared to that of Great Britain or France. This confirms that country-specific characteristics are the key driving force for long-
term trends in the media salience of bilateral relations. Second, a number of specific events produced noteworthy peaks, most notably at the start of Barack Obama’s presidency in 2009 which accounts for the highest level in media salience of the US within eleven years. This highlights the importance of persons and events for media coverage, especially when they are related to a powerful country. Third, French foreign policy became more salient from 2007 onwards, when Nicolas Sarkozy was elected President and from then on clearly topped the salience of British foreign policy in the German media. Since Franco-German relations are generally seen to be more significant for Germany than Anglo-German relations, this finding is again in line with the assumption that the power of a partner country and the extent of interdependence with the country are important drivers of long-term media attention for the politics of this country.

**Figure 2: Salience of Partner Countries in the FAZ**

![Graph showing media salience of Germany's partner countries](image)

Source: FAZ BiblioNet (2012), search terms specified in table 1; authors’ figure.

**Country-specific drivers of media salience**

Our first hypothesis focused on the salience of similar events in different countries and has been operationalized by comparing the media salience of national elections (see table 2). The FAZ indeed paid significant attention to each of the seven elections in the three countries during our period of study, but US presidential elections clearly received most media attention. In comparison, French and British elections were covered much less. Specifically, Obama’s November 2008 electoral triumph accounted for the largest single
increase in media salience, followed by the Bush reelection in 2004. With respect to the French presidential elections, Nicolas Sarkozy’s victory in 2007 produced more news in Germany than the reelection of his predecessor Jacques Chirac five years earlier. As for British general elections, it was Tony Blair’s narrow victory over Michael Howard which drove salience up most; Blair’s relatively uncontested first reelection in 2001 received far less attention in comparison, which is also true for David Cameron’s rise to power in 2010. Comparing the media salience of similar events such as elections, thus, confirms our first hypothesis and emphasizes the importance of country-specific characteristics as drivers of media salience.

Table 2: Salience of American, French, and British Elections in Germany

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Elections</th>
<th>Winner (R= by Reelection)</th>
<th>Average no. of articles (+/- 2 months)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>USA</td>
<td>2 Nov 2004</td>
<td>Bush 2004 (R)</td>
<td>110,8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USA</td>
<td>4 Nov 2008</td>
<td>Obama 2008</td>
<td>126,0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fra</td>
<td>5 May 2002</td>
<td>Chirac 2002 (R)</td>
<td>42,6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fra</td>
<td>6 May 2007</td>
<td>Sarkozy 2007</td>
<td>55,2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UK</td>
<td>7 Jun 2001</td>
<td>Blair 2001 (R)</td>
<td>36,8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UK</td>
<td>5 May 2005</td>
<td>Blair 2005 (R)</td>
<td>53,2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UK</td>
<td>6 May 2010</td>
<td>Cameron 2010</td>
<td>29,8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Authors’ table.

To assess the flow of media salience in the long run, moreover, we have employed some average statistical measures. We deem it appropriate to look at the average salience of a country in three different ways: First, the average value over all eleven years; second, two average values for roughly half of the time span each (see table 3); and third, a moving average over 12 months to look at more structural conditions that underlie the monthly ups and downs. The average values show that American Presidents and Secretaries of State receive the most attention in the German news (88.3 articles per month). Their French and British counterparts receive much less attention, i.e. roughly one half (France) or one third (UK) of the amount of US-coverage (see table 3). Our finding is consistent with the research on the German Nachrichtengeographie, which shows that events in the US get reported more frequently than events in some of Germany’s neighbor countries (Kamps 1998). Among these European neighbors, France is clearly the most important country for Germany – in terms of foreign trade as well as in terms of politics. In our analysis, the relative salience of France reflects this importance. With an average of 40.2 articles per month, French foreign policy gets clearly more attention than British policy (29.5 articles per month).
In a second step, we divided our time frame and produced separate averages for the first six and the last five years (2001-2006 and 2007-2011, respectively, see table 3). These averages show that during the first period, Great Britain enjoyed slightly more attention in the German media than France (32 vs. 29.5 articles per month). From 2007 on, however, the salience of French foreign policy soared to 53.1 articles per month and clearly outranked the British presence in the German media (26.5 articles per month). Likewise, the US receives almost 35 percent more coverage during the second time period than during the first (76.2 vs. 102.7) which we attribute to the Obama peak after 2009.

**Table 3: Mean Frequencies of Salience**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mean frequencies</th>
<th>USA</th>
<th>UK</th>
<th>France</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2001-2011</td>
<td>88.3</td>
<td>29.5</td>
<td>40.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001-2006</td>
<td>76.2</td>
<td>32.0</td>
<td>29.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007-2011</td>
<td>102.7</td>
<td>26.5</td>
<td>53.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Authors’ table.

The years from 2007 to 2011, therefore, have seen much more foreign news coverage from all three countries than the first half of our period under study. Given the relational concept of issue salience, such an increase must be accompanied by a downturn in other issue areas. However, our research design does not permit us to specify which issues got less attention from 2007 on. Supposedly, either other (minor) countries or other (domestic) issues could have received less attention; or (technically) the overall number of articles in the FAZ could have increased which would imply that the rise in the absolute amount of foreign news coverage does not imply a relative increase in the media salience of the countries under study. Of these three possible explanations, we can discard the third one, however: the overall number of FAZ articles did not increase over the time span of our investigation; instead, it diminished over the years, making the absolute increase in foreign news even more pronounced than our figures already indicate.³

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³ The number of articles containing “der” – the most frequently used word of the German language – shrank from 163,856 in 2001 to 122,192 in 2005 and 118,177 in 2011.
To inquire about the structures underlying the ups and downs of media coverage, we have calculated the moving average of twelve months (see fig. 3). The moving average is a more dynamic way to look at the long-term trends of salience instead of using mean frequencies. The peaks of the raw data tend to flatten, but the data still allow us to identify times of intense coverage and to infer a rising or declining salience at specific points in time (with a lag of twelve months). Looking at the moving average, thus, eliminates the short-term effects of events and domestic contestation and allows observing salience in the long run. We abstract from crude monthly values and look at the “waves” of salience, instead.

In doing so, we observe distinct waves of salience for different countries and at different points in time. Our first impression is that 9/11 produced no obvious wave of US salience in the FAZ. This may be because the event was reported mainly within the frame of (worldwide) international terrorism rather than in terms of US politics or bilateral relations between Germany and the US. According to our results, the first discernible wave for the US relates to the Iraq war in 2003. The media salience of the US in Germany was thus strongly affected by the newsworthiness of a possible war. The ‘Iraq wave’ is further mirrored by a parallel rise in the media salience of the UK. Although less distinct, it is one of the few upswings in the otherwise rather constant level of reporting on British-German relations.

The two largest waves of US reporting in the German news go back to US presidential elections. For one, the 2004 reelection of George W. Bush was closely followed in Germany.
The largest wave of US salience in absolute terms, however, relates to Barack Obama and his election victory in 2008. Obviously, a large number of news factors came together during this period, e.g., the surprise and suspense of an election race, the personification of foreign policy, the charisma of Barack Obama and the symbolism of change which his rise to office entailed. Those developments spurred huge public interest in Germany and lead journalists and editors to peg a number of stories to the Obama phenomenon, which further increased the salience of German-American relations. Together, the news factors explain, why coverage on the 44th President of the United States exceeded reporting on all other events during the last decade.

Finally, coverage on French politics increased with the beginning of Sarkozy’s presidency in 2007. Not only his controversial positions on domestic issues like crime and immigration, but also the uncertainty about his European policies made French politics interesting for the German press. The subsequent events on the financial and Euro-crisis contributed to the visibility of Sarkozy (and of his prime minister, François Fillon) in the German discourse and can be interpreted as a generally heightened interest in Franco-German relations ever since.

In the following, we look at each country’s media presence in the German FAZ and analyze how current events and domestic contestation have driven these countries’ media salience.

Interaction of events and domestic contestation
According to our second hypothesis, intrinsically newsworthy events contribute to a rise in salience, although the events are always reported or interpreted in relation to a country. For the US, we observe 9/11 and the 2003 Iraq war as very newsworthy events. Obviously, both events meet several criteria that account for a large news value, although 9/11 got much less attention than the Iraq war. However, we want to focus on the relationship to domestic contestation in Germany, i.e. on our third hypothesis. Regarding domestic contestation, we conclude that the two events – 9/11 and the Iraq war – reflect a different degree of political contestation in Germany. Although Chancellor Gerhard Schröder had to resort to a vote of confidence in November 2001 to ensure Germany’s participation in Operation Enduring Freedom, the debate was largely fought within the governing coalition. In contrast, the Iraq debate was further stimulated by German federal elections in September 2002, in which Germany’s position on US plans for an Iraqi military invasion was hotly disputed between the left and right political camps. The Iraq war thus enhanced the salience of German-US-
relations because the German political elite engaged in a fierce debate about how to deal with the US position in the light of the transatlantic partnership (Harnisch 2012: 58-63). To highlight the interaction between event and contestation, we see that the Iraq war led to more domestic contestation than the relatively consensual decision to participate in the Afghanistan war. Thus, one reason for why the Iraq war got more news coverage in Germany than 9/11 was that political contestation about Iraq was more intense than about the German response to 9/11.

Up to this point, the intrinsic newsworthiness of events as well as their domestic contestation in Germany both plausibly explains the evident increases in US media salience. However, other and even more pronounced peaks in our timeline are another matter: looking at the 2004 and 2008 presidential elections in the US, we record extraordinary coverage in the German media. The events in itself, however, may only in part explain that increase in coverage. What is more, we are not aware of any domestic contestation within the German political elite regarding the reelection of George W. Bush or the election of Barack Obama. In the latter case, it must have been a longing for positive coverage on the American President (see Boomgarden et al. 2012) combined with the German hope that transatlantic relations would recover from the rifts that overshadowed the Bush era which has driven media reporting on the US. In sum, the American case confirms our first two hypotheses but only partly accounts for our third factor, which is domestic contestation.

The French position on Iraq received only low salience in Germany and was not contested among the German political elite. What is more, the “event” Iraq war is closely tied to the US (and to a lesser degree to Great Britain). French foreign policy seems to become important for the German media primarily when European integration is at stake. Two events symbolize this connection: the lost French referendum on the EU Constitutional Treaty in May 2005 and the election of Nicolas Sarkozy. As regards the French referendum, it is the factors of surprise, negativity and a sense of threat that made this event and the subsequent German-led efforts at rescuing the treaty newsworthy in the eyes of German journalists. Finally, EU officials and the heads of government agreed that a final draft of the constitutional treaty should be postponed until the election of a new French president in May 2007 (Stabenow 2006). The election of Nicolas Sarkozy, newsworthy as such, became more salient because of its close link to the future of Europe, which in turn was a contested
issue in Germany. Both events and the ensuing discussion on the political future of the EU render both our hypotheses 2 and 3 plausible for the French data.

Under the Presidency of Sarkozy, coverage on France remained on a high level and increased further towards the end of 2011, when the debate on the Eurozone intensified. By the end of 2008, it was the global financial crisis that led reporting on Sarkozy in the German media. During 2011, when the Eurozone crisis unfolded, frequent meetings between Merkel and Sarkozy made Franco-German bilateral relations become salient again. In sum, France enjoys a certain amount of “basic coverage” in Germany, not the least because both countries are highly interdependent in political and economic terms. Our hypotheses 2 and 3 thus look more plausible in the French than in the US case. The close interdependence between France and Germany translates into higher levels of media salience when events are related to vital questions of the European Union.

The media salience of Britain, finally, displays considerable peaks in connection to some distinct events. First of all, the British elections of 2001 and 2005 were intensely attended to in Germany. Second, the Iraq war spurred an increase in the media salience of Britain, in parallel to our findings on the US (although on a much lower level). Third, the summer of 2005 proved especially newsworthy because of the London bombings (in July), the controversial British position on EU agricultural policy (in June) and the start of the British EU presidency (in both months). Finally, in 2011, British coverage gained some momentum in view of the air strikes on Libya, the Murdoch scandal as well as the highly controversial Eurozone bailout fund. Thus, newsworthy events cause upswings in the media salience of the UK, thus confirming our second hypothesis for Britain as well.

As regards the domestic contestation of German-British relations as a driver of media salience, Britain – as well as France – lends some plausibility to our third hypotheses. From a German perspective, the British bargaining position in European integration and the increasing influence of British euroscepticism on the Euro debate explains some of the short-term interest in British foreign policy of the German media. Apart from European issues, it is primarily the British role in military interventions that stirs domestic debate in Germany about British foreign policy.
Conclusion
Our empirical data support our contention that the interplay between country, event, and domestic contestation drives a foreign country’s media salience. The power of a country and the interdependence between two countries are the most important catalysts of the media salience of bilateral relations. Our frequency analysis of foreign policy officials in the German FAZ provides convincing evidence to this effect. Our findings are further corroborated by our comparison of the salience induced by national elections. We found that similar events yield more than twice as many articles when they originate in the United States than when they originate in France or in the UK. Apparently, geographic distance is far less important than political relevance.

Newsworthy events, however, may disrupt the effects of country effects on media salience, in particular if the event stirs a political debate in Germany. Empirically, it remains a challenge to distinguish between our different catalysts for issue salience, because many newsworthy events occurred in or are pegged to the U.S. In the end, events mostly tend to be related to a particular nation which makes country and event effects on media salience difficult to disentangle.

As regards the domestic contestation of bilateral relations, our results indicate that it is plausible to suggest that this factor has an influence on media salience as well. At the same time, several questions remain concerning the operationalization of domestic contestation. Examples for contentious issues in the German discourse include the commitment to the transatlantic partnership, the use of force in international politics and the European perspective of German foreign policy. Again, issues tend to fan out depending on the countries they are connected to: the German debate on bilateral relations with Britain and France is linked to issues of EU integration, whereas relations to the U.S. are mostly discussed in relation to the use of force.

Empirically, our results indicate a bilateral turn of German foreign policy from 2007 onwards, because we observe increased salience levels of all three bilateral relationships under study. Whether this bilateral turn goes along with an increasing domestic contestation of German foreign policy remains subject of further research. Nevertheless, domestic contestation is a relatively new factor shaping German foreign policy which puts an end to the hitherto consensual character of the German foreign policy discourse.
In sum, our article contributes to locating the media as an independent actor in the foreign policy process. With the help of the market model we first suggest that the media are more influential in defining the foreign policy agenda than in shaping the political positions of the foreign policy discourse. What is more, the driving factor “contentiousness” could be perceived as an endogenous influence on the media, because media reporting tends to reflect as well as to enhance domestic contestation (for TV news, see Mullen 1999). Second, our catalysts for media salience are located on different levels of analysis (international and domestic). Our findings indicate that the international level, that is, the power of foreign countries in the international system and their interdependence with the home country have greater explanatory leverage in the long term than domestic factors.

References


