Salience and approval in transatlantic perspective

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This paper focuses on issue salience and the approval of specific foreign policies and asks whether shifts in public attention are linked to specific political attitudes concerning the use of military force. It examines the role of salience of foreign affairs in the USA and Germany and links the cognitive dimension (what is important) with the attitudinal dimension (what is your opinion on a specific issue). Although the two countries differ in foreign policy style and military involvement, their publics tend to disapprove of military interventions when they perceive them as the country's most important problem. In times of high overall salience, however, public judgement tends to be less negative because event-induced peaks in salience work according to a different logic than problem-induced salience.

Keywords: public opinion; foreign policy; issue salience; military intervention; Germany; USA

1. Introduction

Germany and the USA differ highly in terms of foreign policy and public attitudes towards the use of force. While Germans usually favour non-military conflict resolution, multilateral solutions and UN approval for military missions, the American public shows greater inclination towards the use of military force. These differences emerged throughout the latest commitments of both countries to international military endeavours such as the wars in Kosovo and Afghanistan, in which both countries participated, and the wars in Iraq and Libya, in which Germany did not participate. Nevertheless, this paper highlights a dimension of public approval in foreign affairs in which both countries are indeed alike: the attitudes towards military interventions depending on the attention of their publics. This paper demonstrates how Americans and Germans have a more negative opinion about military interventions if they regard foreign affairs to be important than if they consider other political issues to be important.

For scholars of public opinion, the use of military force and troop deployments is probably the most intriguing foreign policy issue to explore because (1) it is considered to be a complex issue, i.e., judgement demands some degree of information and (2) the deployment of troops remains a heatedly debated and highly visible part of foreign policy-making. Despite their apparent outcome, most foreign policy decisions are made behind closed doors without taking public opinion into account. Therefore, this research focuses on decisions of troop deployments and the average approval of foreign

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policy handling. In particular, this paper deals with public issue salience and how it relates to approval for foreign affairs.

Salience is the urgency or importance of an issue, a topic or an opinion. It can be assessed for diverse actors,[1] such as political decision-makers, parties, parliaments or – regarding the focus of this article – for the public. Like every actor in the political process, the public has specific and sometimes diverging priorities that form a particular set of salient issues. These issues may change over time, reflecting the public's attentiveness to the flow of news on the one hand, and the public's concerns about specific policy fields on the other hand. Thus, changing salience may reflect a changing media agenda as well as a changing perception of political problems.

Generally, scholars have asked for the effects of salience on a variety of political aspects, among them approval for particular policies.[2] Despite a lack of formal models, they hypothesised that agenda-setting by the media may not only influence the public's agenda, but enhance the government's standing in general, thus resulting in higher approval rates for governmental policies. More recent salience literature covers a set of hypotheses taking into account the role of cues and additional information when explaining opinion formation.[3] While agenda-setting literature has extensively dealt with the effects of changing agendas,[4] this paper focuses on the implications of issue salience for the approval of specific foreign policies. It argues that salience is important because – depending on what issues become salient – attitudes towards these issues may change and alter policy outcomes. Taking this salience–approval link into account, this paper examines the role of salience of foreign affairs, and in particular its causes and effects regarding military interventions. It links the cognitive dimension (what is important) with the attitudinal dimension (what is your opinion on a specific issue). In sum, this paper asks whether shifts in public attention are linked to specific political attitudes concerning foreign policy and the use of force.

Comparatively, both the USA and Germany apply different logics behind their use of force. However, they should not differ in the way their leaders' decisions are judged by the public, since both are democratic countries where the public has considerable influence on the policy process. In this regard, this paper examines the link between salience and approval in the USA and Germany. Drawing from existing studies on salience and approval,[5] theoretical work on issue salience,[6] and a qualitative, descriptive analysis of public opinion data from both countries, this paper seeks theoretical as well as empirical evidence to disentangle the relationship between issue salience and the content of public opinion. Although strong in the USA, the field lacks comparative studies and theoretical development going beyond the US-centred approach. Therefore, it is necessary to make use of a transatlantic comparative research design that includes the USA and the German public.

This paper proceeds as follows: First, it presents existing hypotheses about the link between salience and approval and proposes a relationship between both factors. Second, it presents salience and approval data about foreign affairs and military interventions since 1999 that differ from existing research and – in a third step – demand a distinction between differently attentive publics in order to explain the diverging effects of the salience–approval nexus. The study does not include military interventions before 1999 because Germany did not actively participate in foreign interventions before that date. In sum, this paper shows that a deliberate and

attentive public assesses military interventions more negatively and that research on salience and approval has so far overlooked how negativity is driving salience.

2. Literature on salience and approval

The literature on public salience differs considerably regarding the conception of salience (or importance) and the subsequent results when salience is linked to approval. Concerning the diverse salience concepts, we can distinguish between three approaches: First, studies that conceive of salience as an unspecific political interest in current issues[7] and use poll data like the *Transatlantic Trends*.[8] Second, studies which inquire about correlates of a particular problem's importance and use the 'most important problem-question' – oftentimes as a secondary analysis of pre-grouped categories.[9] A third approach directly asks whether people consider a particular problem to be relevant. The latter is dealing with specific problem importance and has been applied by Everts, Lecheler et al. and Weaver.[10] Each of the three approaches represents a different avenue towards salience and importance and thus operationalises a different concept of issue salience.[11] Consequently, the empirical results and theoretical explanations of linking importance and approval tend to vary. With reference to available data, this paper focuses on the second approach: measuring salience by using the most important problem-question and thus opting for a form of national importance or issue salience.[12]

What accounts for the diverse links between salience and approval? Carter[13] points out that salience touches very particular aspects of a topic. Each individual may have different reasons to find an issue important or to identify it as the country's most important problem. Troop deployments, for example, may range as a top priority for the public either because people worry about the outcome of the endeavour or because they heavily oppose or fervently support it. When one of these aspects becomes salient, it can influence attitudes on that issue into different directions.[14] Hence, some characteristics of an issue may become more prominent or outstanding than others. News reports about foreign affairs may therefore enhance aspects like threat or patriotic identity, which not only leads to increased salience levels but may also alter attitudes towards military interventions.[15] Therefore, the covering law for the salience–approval nexus is the link between information gain and opinion change. It works via selected aspects of an issue (e.g., violence, identity, threat) and activates underlying attitudes towards these aspects. In sum, by highlighting certain aspects and lessening others in comparison, attitudes towards a specific issue may change.

Unquestionably, the news media play a large role in shaping the ups and downs of the public salience of foreign affairs.[16] However, there is always a consistent proportion of the population that identifies foreign affairs as their most important issue, regardless of media coverage. This group processes information in a different way, which has been labelled 'deliberative' (as opposed to 'automatic').[17] Deliberative information processing means that the personal importance of a topic prompts people to seek additional information. Consequently, superficial media cues such as headlines or photographs fail to influence those respondents. Meanwhile, automatic information processing occurs in a more peripheral way: This proportion of respondents is susceptible to media cues which explains why peaks in issue salience go hand in hand with increasing media coverage.

Other explanations for a link between salience and approval focus on scope conditions such as information levels or elite cues. On the one hand, the more salient an issue is, the less likely people are to be neutral about it.[18] On the other hand, high political awareness may lead to more consent with mainstream policies, especially with non-polarising policies that elites agree upon.[19] Although the US public and decision-makers have been increasingly split regarding the Iraq war, most military interventions are carried out in the light of elite consensus. The same is true for Germany, where in spite of intensive debates about Kosovo and Afghanistan, most interventions enjoyed broad elite support.[20]

This paper argues that people who consider foreign affairs to be an important policy issue display different opinions on troop deployments compared to people who consider other issues to be important. According to the existing literature, the nature of this difference is either unclear[21] or tends to be a *positive* one[22] because respondents who perceive foreign affairs to be important supposedly align with the prevailing elite consensus in foreign affairs. However, the following data section shows that Germans and Americans who name foreign affairs as one of their most important issue do indeed articulate different opinions about troop deployments, but that the difference is a *negative* one. Accordingly, the remainder of this paper reflects on these findings and offers alternative explanations to disentangle the salience–approval puzzle.

3. Issue salience in the USA and Germany

Public issue salience is usually measured at the beginning of a public opinion poll. Asked what they perceive to be the most important problem of the country today, respondents answer an open-ended question to which interviewers record verbatim any answer – free of concurring influences of other questions. Afterwards, analysts group these answers into meaningful coded categories. By selecting the share of respondents who name a particular category, e.g., military interventions, it is possible to calculate the salience of particular issues for the public over time. In the following, I resort to German and American poll data that allow for detailed analyses of foreign affairs' salience (cf. Figure 1).

While the German *Politbarometer* permits a continuous analysis based on monthly values between 1998 and 2010, the data from *Gallup Brain* and *CBS News/NYT Poll* deliver only select and discrete data on issue salience for the years 2001–2009. With regard to overall comparability, both the German and the American surveys ask for the respondents' individual judgement of their country's most important problem – although the German poll includes answers for a question about an additional important problem, which the American surveys do not. However, I consider both surveys comparable, most notably in the long run, when they display the ups and downs of foreign policy importance.[23]

From *Gallup Brain* I chose the predefined categories 'terrorism' and 'fear of war' which account for the US per cent values between 2001 and March 2003. The *Politbarometer* allowed for a more fine-grained use of its subcategories, such as 'terrorism', 'attacks', 'Bundeswehr deployments abroad', 'Iraq', 'Afghanistan', 'Iran', 'Balkan', 'Congo', 'Kosovo' and 'former Yugoslavia'. This categorisation is broad enough to capture all references that point to troop deployments, which is the factor that will be analysed for Germany regarding its public approval. At the same
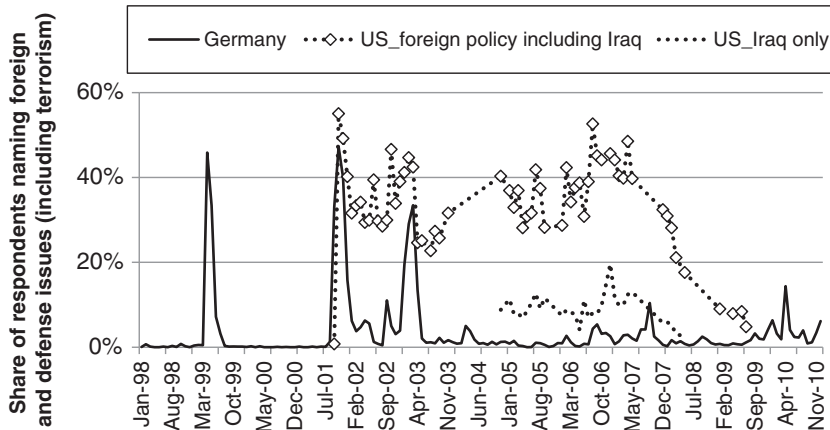
Figure 1.   Salience of foreign affairs in Germany and the USA.
Source: Politbarometer 1998–2010, provided by GESIS, Q: Was ist Ihrer Meinung nach gegenwärtig das wichtigste Problem in Deutschland? Und was ist ein weiteres wichtiges Problem?; Gallup Brain (September 2001 to March 2003) and CBS News/NYT Poll (April 2003 to July 2009, provided by ICPSR) Q: What do you think is the most important problem facing this country today?;[42] Author's figure.

time, the category is sufficiently narrow to exclude non-related foreign policy issues like European affairs or environmental issues. For the *CBS News/NYT Poll* data between 2003 and 2009, I used the available subcategories 'foreign policy', 'nuclear', 'defence/military', 'war', 'terrorism', 'Osama Bin Laden', 'war/peace/war in Afghanistan' and 'specific country/person/Iraq', among others. A third line (cf. Figure 1) depicts those American responses that explicitly referred to Iraq as the most important problem (only polled between November 2004 and May 2008). The data thus add a specific issue importance within the broad field of foreign policy because the American data allow distinguishing between a broad and a narrow concept of issue salience.

   The salience of foreign affairs usually rises in case of extraordinary events. These events can occur elsewhere in the world, as long as they are covered by the mass media in the countries under study.[24] The salience data confirm this finding and indicate a considerable variance in the public salience of foreign affairs, with Germany having the more erratic chart. Starting in 1998, Germany has so far witnessed three moments of high salience: the first one being the Kosovo War 1999, in which German soldiers participated in a military mission abroad for the first time since the Second World War, the second moment occurring after 9/11, when Chancellor Gerhard Schröder had to resort to a vote of confidence to ensure Germany's participation in the Afghanistan mission, and a third moment taking place during the debate about the Iraq intervention, when Germany chose not to participate. Other, albeit minor, peaks in salience occurred in 2004 (Madrid terror attacks), September 2007 (German citizens taken hostage in Afghanistan) and April 2010 (four dead German soldiers in Afghanistan, debates about the new counter-insurgency strategy by American commander General Stanley McChrystal). Apart from such sudden peaks, the German salience of foreign affairs is quite low, ranging

near zero in the years before the Iraq war, and around 2% afterwards. Although the Iraq controversy may have sparked the overall interest for foreign affairs, Germans are far from being inclined to troop deployments and placing terrorism high on their nation's political agenda. The salience data thus show the fading effects of news media reports in the long run.

The American public, in contrast, has a much larger share of respondents who perceive foreign affairs as the nation's most important problem. The peak after 9/11 from 1% to 55% is the biggest rise in salience ever measured. After 9/11, terrorism and the fear of war remained the most important problem for 30–50% of all respondents.[25] The salience dropped somewhat after the start of the Iraq war because economic issues became more important, but resumed its earlier levels of importance between 2005 and 2007, when the controversy about the conduct of the Iraq war dominated the political agenda in the USA. Differing from the German data, the US public reveals a continuously high preoccupation with foreign policy issues. Apart from 9/11, the US salience peaked in August 2006 when George W. Bush's second mid-term election campaign gained momentum. The elections finally resulted in large-scale losses for the Republican Congressional majority of the second Bush term. These losses were largely attributed to the dire situation in Iraq, giving way to some voter migration – from Republicans to Independents and from Independents to Democrats – because of the importance of the Iraq issue.[26]

The share of respondents who explicitly mentioned Iraq as the nation's most important problem normally ranged between 7% and 15%, peaking with 19.6% at the end of 2006 and corresponding with the fact that the debate on Iraq intensified during 2006 and nearly a fifth of all respondents declared it to be the nation's most important problem. Other most important foreign policy issues during that time were the Afghanistan conflict, terrorism, as well as wars, military interventions and foreign policy in general. In 2007, Bush announced his 'surge' strategy on Iraq. That new approach finally showed some positive effects on the ground and dried out the stream of negative news from Iraq. The lack of dramatic news plus the start of the financial crisis shifted America's focus towards other issues and took attention away from foreign affairs.

4. Salience and approval data

To link the salience dimension to meaningful approval questions, I apply two sets of variables for each country: For the USA, it is approval of George W. Bush's foreign policy, which suits a broad conception of foreign policy (cf. Figure 2), and a retrospective assessment of the Iraq war, which suits a narrow conception of foreign policy (cf. Figure 3). These were the most continuously available foreign policy questions throughout the evaluation period, allowing for a longitudinal scope of analysis in the USA data. For Germany, I assembled several polls about German troop deployments abroad and matched the respondents' agreement with the respondents' answer about the most important problem. In order to make a distinction between the types of troop deployment, German data were subdivided into 'ongoing' troop deployments that refer to military missions that are already under way (cf. Figure 4), and into 'potential' troop deployments, which asks for planned operations that have not yet started (cf. Figure 5). Specifically, people react differently when judging the options of an unknown, potential endeavour because
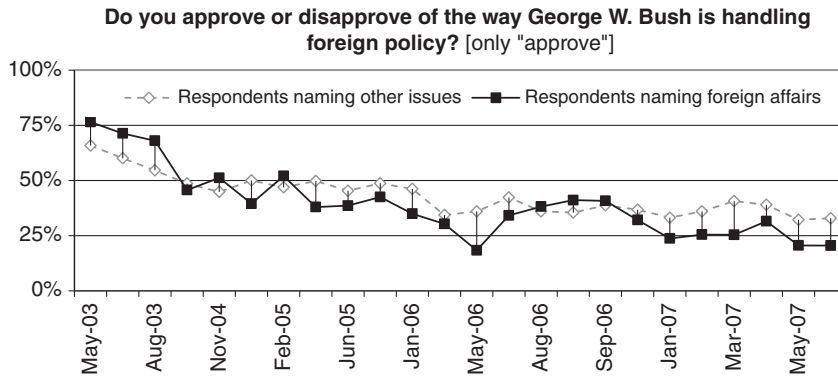
Figure 2.   US salience and approval for foreign policy: 2003–2007.
Source: CBS News/NYT Poll, provided by ICPSR. Note: Slightly different question wording
from May to August 2003 ('Do you approve or disapprove of the way George W. Bush is
handling other foreign policy issues?'); Author's figure.

the debate about a potential military mission increases respondents' uncertainty,
even when they are usually risk-averse.[27]

US polling institutes routinely ask for the overall approval of a president's
foreign policy. Taking the *CBS News/NYT Poll* as a starting point and selecting
those data-sets that provide the most-important-problem question additionally,
I established a 24-point time series between May 2003 and December 2007
(cf. Figure 2). To compare foreign policy approval rates with individual salience of
foreign policy, respondents were divided into two groups: those naming foreign
affairs to be most important and those who considered other problems to be most
important. The overall approval for George W. Bush's foreign policy was very high
in 2003 (78.8% at the beginning of the Iraq war) and decreased considerably towards
the end of his second term (27.5%; the remaining percentage points to add up to 100
belong to the 'disapprove' and 'Don't know/No answer' category, but are not taken
into account for the purpose of this paper). When looking at the difference between
those who name foreign affairs to be most important and those who do not, it is
obvious that approval for Bush's foreign policy differed by 4.2 percentage points on
average. The difference is small, but significant[28] and means that respondents who
name other issues to be most important approved *more* of Bush's foreign policy than
respondents who identified foreign policy as the country's most important problem
(43.4% vs. 39.2% on average).

Despite the robust and significant relationship between salience and approval,
there are a few exceptions that merit a closer examination. Between May and August
2003 as well as in November 2004, February 2005 and between August and
September 2006, the relation between salience and approval is reversed: People
naming foreign affairs to be most important claim to be more content with George
W. Bush's foreign policy, whereas those who name other issues show less approval.
Methodologically, the 2003 anomaly can be accorded to a slightly different question
wording, when pollsters asked for the 'handling of *other* foreign policy issues' – after
first having inquired about Bush's 'handling the situation with Iraq'. The 2006
anomaly, however, relates to the overall salience level which was unusually high

during that time: shortly before the mid-term elections of 2006, the salience of foreign affairs in the USA rose to unprecedented levels; peaking at 52% during August 2006. These periods of high salience subsume more respondents within the high salience group than ever before. Obviously, it is their impact that makes the assessment of foreign policy slightly more positive than during normal times, when only those respondents fall into the high salience group that seem to have rather negative views on the subject.

To explain how respondents who consider foreign issues to be most important show *more* approval of governmental policies during times of high aggregate salience, one may resort to the concepts of information gap[29] and rally effect.[30] First, the information gap concept states that at the beginning of a conflict, elites and political leaders enjoy an informational advantage over the public, which gives way to sufficiently high approval for the planned policy. During the course of a military conflict, however, the public becomes increasingly knowledgeable about the conditions on the ground and may judge with more certainty whether initial policy objectives have been reached or not. Subsequently, the leaders' ability to frame the prospects of success and to influence portrayal of the conditions on the ground dwindles and the public becomes more critical when its expectations are not met. Thus, the observed irregularity at the beginning of the Iraq war can also be explained with an exceptionally uncritical public, high aggregate salience numbers, and therefore more supporters of Bush's foreign policy in the high salience group than during less exceptional times.

The information gap concept resembles the war fatigue syndrome,[31] but both concepts should not be confused, since they are based on a different public salience. War fatigue explains how media coverage about one and the same conflict causes less and less interest in the long run. A short attention span as well as repetitively voiced concerns, conflict lines and threat scenarios attract less and less audience as the conflict and its media coverage drag on. The shrinking information gap, in contrast, assumes that the audience remains as interested in the long run as it did in the beginning and that by virtue of that interest the public, as well as the media increase their knowledge and give political decision-makers less leeway to frame their foreign policies in a favourable way.

The rally effect offers a similar explanation for the high approval among those respondents who name foreign affairs to be their most important issue. The rally effect is measured in increasing approval numbers for the US president at the beginning of a military intervention.[32] Due to a triggered sense of patriotism by the start of the Iraq war, people approved more of the government than they usually did. In such a situation, approval rates are higher within the group of respondents who perceive foreign affairs to be most important because aggregate salience numbers are high as well. There are simply more respondents in the high salience group, which makes it less exceptional and finally results in higher approval rates. When aggregate salience declines, the two groups of respondents resume their regular approval behaviour – the high salience group continues to be more critical than the low salience group. The next step sheds light on the US public's retrospective assessment of the Iraq war in terms of whether respondents named it their most important problem or not (cf. Figure 3).

Was it the right decision to take military action against Iraq? Between 2004 and 2008, the percentage of respondents who answered that question affirmatively

Looking back, do you think the United States did the right thing in taking military action against Iraq, or should the U.S. have stayed out?
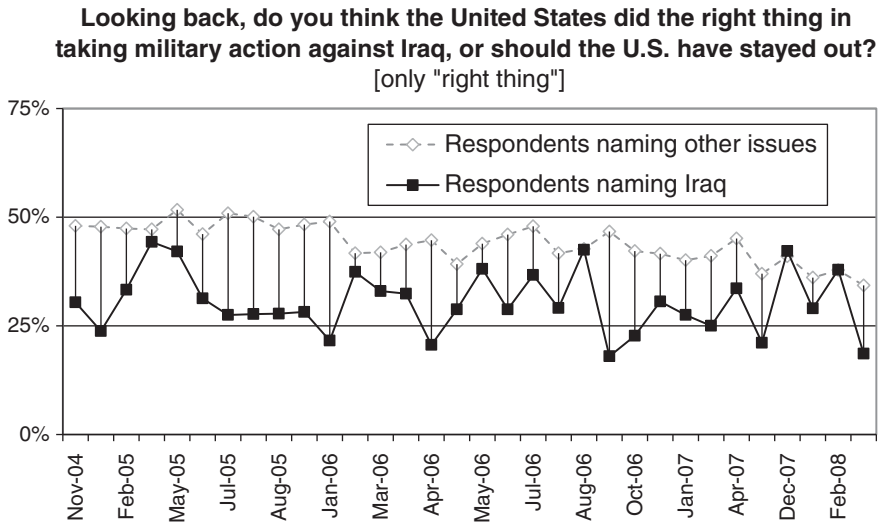
[only "right thing"]

Figure 3.   US salience and approval of Iraq war: 2004–2008.
Source: CBS News/NYT Poll, provided by ICPSR; Author's figure.

declined from 47% to 34%, averaging 42.8%. Simultaneously, the polls provide information about the respondents' most important problem from November 2004 through March 2008, which enables us to divide the share of respondents giving a positive Iraq assessment into two groups – those who named it as the country's most important problem and those who named other issues, accordingly. Most of the time, people assess the Iraq war more positively when they name non-Iraq issues as their most important problem (average approval of 44.1%). Respondents who perceive Iraq to be the most important problem, in contrast, are less frequently convinced that the military intervention there has been the right thing to do (average approval only 30.4%). Overall, the two groups differ from each other by 13.7 percentage points and account for a robust and significant[33] negative relationship between salience and approval.

In sum, the US public opinion data show that negativity about an issue and perceiving it as the most important problem are related. It is not that people who display a high interest in Iraq necessarily have a different opinion but that people, whose views on Iraq are very intense and extreme, seem to name that conflict as the most important problem more often than respondents who hold moderate views on the issue. Unquestionably, the devastating involvement of the American military in Iraq contributed to that picture. In terms of theoretical specifications, the salience–approval nexus should therefore be accorded an additional dimension: When people have negative feelings towards an issue they are more prone to name it as the country's most important problem. The data so far illustrate how salience and approval might interact in a hitherto unspecified way.

A look at the German data shows an equally small, but significant negative relation between salience and approval, which so far mirrors the findings for the US public. Because the polling institutes lack continuous surveys about one and the same military conflict with the same question wording, the German analysis bundles

different troop deployments and differentiates between current or ongoing troop deployments and future or potential troop deployments. Thus, both graphics (Figures 4 and 5) include deployments to Kosovo, Macedonia and Afghanistan as well as questions about Iraq and about the general intensity of Germany's involvement in military missions abroad. Consequently, the relevant data accumulate in the years 1999, 2001–2003 and 2008, when major debates about the German foreign and security policy and its troop deployments took place. In between, there are hardly any polls that cover public approval of foreign policy decisions.

The data for *ongoing* troop deployments reveal very volatile overall support for Germany's military missions. The lowest aggregate approval is measured for the Iraq intervention (21%; no. 12 in Figure 4), whereas the Afghanistan mission was initially approved of by a majority (62–66%; nos 8–11; 13) and lost support as the conflict
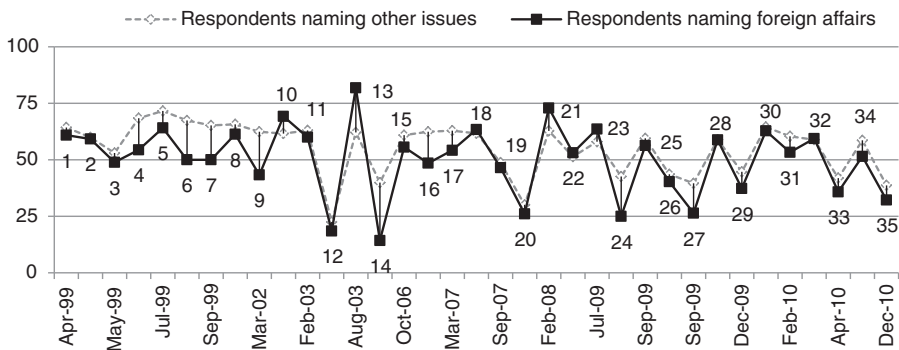

Figure 4. German approval for ongoing troop deployments: 1999–2010.
Source: Politbarometer 1999–2010; Approval for Kosovo (1–7), Afghanistan (8–11, 13, 19–20, 22, 24, 26, 27, 29, 33, 35), Iraq (12), Congo (14), Germany's general participation in peace missions (15–18, 21, 23, 25, 28, 30–32, 34); Author's figure.
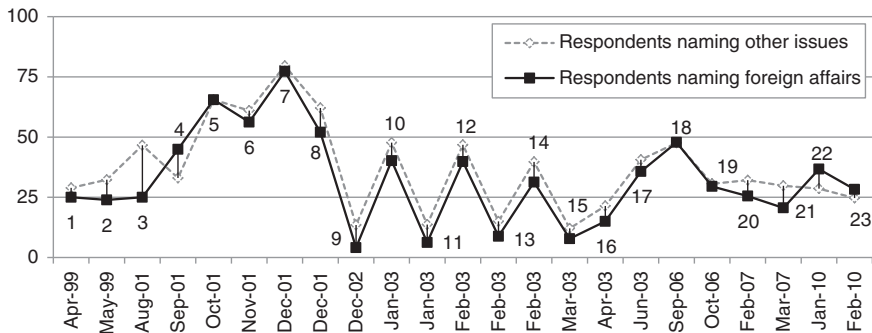

Figure 5. German approval for potential troop deployments: 1999–2012.
Source: Politbarometer 1999–2010; Approval for Kosovo (1, 2), Macedonia (3), US Retaliation strikes after 9/11 (4–6, 8), Afghanistan (7, 20–23), Iraq (9, 11, 13–16), Turkey (as a part of Iraq mission; 10, 12), Congo (17), Lebanon (18), Germany's general participation in peace missions (19), Author's figure.

went on. On average, approval for ongoing troop deployments is at 54.7% (the remaining percentage points to add up to 100 belong to the categories 'disapprove/do not agree' and 'Don't know/No answer', which are not regarded in this study). Notwithstanding the conflict area or constellation, the subgroup data that differentiate between respondents who name foreign affairs as their most important problem and those who name other issues reflect a rather consistent pattern: respondents naming foreign affairs tend to agree *less* with governmental troop deployment decisions (average approval of 50.3%). In comparison, people who enumerate other policy fields usually agree *more* with military deployments and are more likely to favour military involvement (average approval of 55.4%).[34] Both groups differ significantly by 5.1 percentage points and in 28 out of 35 cases.[35] The exceptions occurred in times when sharp rises in salience had just ceded, e.g., after 9/11, Iraq and the German debates over Afghanistan in 2007 and 2010.

Looking at the *potential* troop deployments, which either have not begun yet or are still part of the political debate, results differ in details but not in substance. Generally, potential deployments generate less approval than ongoing missions (36.3% on average), suggesting either that the German government only deploys troops when approval is sufficiently high, or that Germans, too, react with a small kind of rally effect when the *Bundeswehr* goes abroad. As soon as military interventions are in fact carried out, support for them tends to rise. Nevertheless, the distance between respondents who name foreign affairs to be important and those who name other issues remains the same: Respondents who name foreign affairs approved of potential deployments with 32.5%, whereas respondents naming other issues approved of them with 37.1%. Consequently, people who consider foreign policy and defence issues as most important tend to have a more negative view on potential military interventions. The average difference between both groups of respondents is 4.6 percentage points;[36] this negative relationship applies to 18 out of 23 cases. The exceptions occurred at times of high or temporarily high salience (nos. 4, 5, 18, 22 and 23, respectively). In this vein, the German data resemble the findings for the US public as they not only show a similar pattern but also the same exceptions to the rule. Before discussing the findings, I detail several control variables.

To rule out third variable effects, I examined party identification, degree of education, gender, age and religion (for the US data) and left-right positioning, party identification, education, gender and age (for Germany). Then I compared how these factors co-vary with approval and salience. The US salience and approval data co-vary with gender and party identification In detail, American women perceive foreign affairs to be more important while at the same time they approve less of Bush's job performance and the way the Iraq war is going, supporting the conclusion that the negative relationship between salience and approval could be caused by female respondents. However, the sample of respondents is representative regarding gender distribution, making it unlikely that women's responses caused the observed salience effects. US party identification, in contrast, may account for parts of the negative relationship, most notably after September 2006. From the mid-term elections 2006 onwards, Democratic identifiers clearly excelled over Republican and Independent identifiers in naming foreign policy as the most important problem. Simultaneously, Democrats continually approved less of Bush's foreign policy performance, so that their negative bias could be regarded as influential after

September 2006. Nevertheless, the salience–approval nexus bears no visible change after 2006. What is more, the period around the mid-term elections reflects a rather positive relationship between salience and Bush's foreign policy approval (cf. Figure 2), rendering the explanatory power of party identification ineffective.

In the German case, both age and party identification with the PDS/Left Party[37] co-vary with salience and approval, but neither of the qualitative analyses proved strong enough to justify dismissing the salience–approval nexus. In detail, elderly people (of 70 years and more) disproportionately often name troop deployments as Germany's most important problem while at the same time approving least of them. However, the data do not indicate that 70-year olds are overrepresented in the samples of the *Politbarometer*. The same is true for respondents who identify themselves as voters of the PDS/Left Party, which mention troop deployments more frequently as the most important problem and approve least of them. Nevertheless, their share among voters is around 8% and not strong enough to outweigh the salience–approval nexus. The phenomenon rather illustrates how the PDS/Left Party emphasises its unique foreign policy position – to oppose any military intervention – successfully among its followers.[38] Although the PDS/Left Party is the most leftist fraction in the German Bundestag, the political continuum between left-leaning and right-leaning voters does not relate with either salience or approval. Third variables, thus, may not account for the negative relationship between salience and approval – neither for the US nor for Germany.

In summary, respondents who consider a foreign policy problem to be most important tend to judge military missions, presidential performance and the outcomes of the Iraq war more negatively than respondents who consider other policy fields to be important. In particular, the differences between the two groups of respondents are between 4.2 and 13.7 percentage points and hence above the margin of error. The difference is most pronounced for American respondents judging the Iraq war. High individual salience obviously co-varies with stronger individual attitudes making these individuals less likely to be persuaded by elite or media frames[39] and to assess governmental foreign policy more negatively.

5. Discussion and conclusion

Despite the different public attitudes towards the use of force, the German and the American poll data about salience and approval of military interventions correlate in the same manner. There is a weak, but significant *negative* relationship between salience and approval in the policy field of foreign affairs in general and for troop deployments in particular. Thus, the findings clearly contradict the assumption that salience and approval correlate positively and they equally rebut the notion that mere caring for a particular issue spurs approval for it. Alternatively, the data suggest that intense disapproval for a certain policy leads people to name it as the country's most important issue. Subsequently, it is negativity in form of disapproval that drives public issue salience.

However, in select cases respondents who name foreign affairs as their most important issue do approve *more* of their government's foreign policy than respondents who mention other issues, most notably when the aggregate salience of foreign policy is high. Hence, under certain circumstances, high aggregate salience leads to more approval among those who deem foreign policy to be important. These

diverging findings – together with the insights about deliberative vs. automatic information processing – call for a differentiated approach towards 'the public'. Rather than subsuming all respondents who perceive foreign affairs to be important into one category, they should be split into two subsets:

(1) the permanently attentive, disapproving public (e.g., military service members, peace activists);
(2) the temporarily attentive, approving public (prompted by media coverage about a military intervention without greater personal involvement).

All other respondents remain in a third group, which is the non-attentive public.

When the composition of the public is systematised with this specific focus on their foreign policy attention, the ambiguous findings about salience and approval make more sense: First, they show that the first group of the public predominated in the salience–approval nexus for the chosen time frame (1999–2010), resulting in an overall negative correlation between salience and approval. Second, they help to explain why people sometimes tend to show a reverse pattern, i.e. approving more in times of high salience. In that case, the second group grows and therefore enhances the positive salience effects. Third, the time dimension helps to explain the puzzle of the salience–approval nexus in a unique way: Depending on whether group (a) or (b) caused the momentary degree of salience at a particular point in time, the effects on the approval of particular foreign policy may be either negative or positive. And fourth, it now becomes possible to assess the role of news media reporting for public issue salience, i.e. whether changes in public salience can be explained with the flow of news or whether they stem from changes in individual permanent attention and involvement.

Apart from this differentiation, this study shows specific salience–approval links with regard to particular interventions: In the case of the Iraq war, the share of permanently attentive and disapproving respondents is highest because the approval differences between respondents naming foreign affairs as their most important issue and respondents naming other issues are most pronounced at the same time. US respondents held negative feelings about the intervention which affected the tendency to name that issue as the country's most important problem. The Iraq war polarised large parts of the US public[40] and therefore increased the individual salience of the topic for those who were especially dissatisfied with the situation.

The German debate about the Kosovo war parallels the American Iraq discussion in terms of elite dissent and levels of public approval. Rather than being a conflict between governing and opposition fractions in the Bundestag, the Kosovo debate took place within the governing coalition, specifically within the Green Party, thus rendering it salient for the larger public. At its peak, in April 1999, approval differences between attentive and non-attentive respondents were minor (2.7 percentage points). However, after fading from the news media, people who still deemed the Kosovo conflict salient disapproved more of it than people who cared for other issues (approval difference of 11.1 percentage points). Hence, the permanently attentive, disapproving public such as military service members or peace activists differs from other respondents because their disapproval is likely to drive their individual problem importance of foreign policy issues.

The results of this paper add new findings to the study of nationwide problem importance. Measured by the most-important-problem question, this type of salience consistently shows a negative correlation with approval of foreign policy, although both the USA and Germany differ considerably in their foreign policy style and military involvement abroad. Therefore, it seems plausible to assume that negative feelings about governmental foreign policy are a driving factor for individual salience, unless aggregate salience is exceptionally high. During high salience periods, i.e. after rallies around the flag or after sudden foreign policy crises, the approval for foreign policy measures rises within this group because the composition of the high salience group changes and consists of more respondents who are temporarily attentive and more approving of foreign policy. Accordingly, the high salience group loses its 'special status' and is more similar to the overall respondents' approval than the otherwise more negative view that the high salience group conveys.

This comparative public opinion study examined the salience–approval nexus in foreign policy as a factor that works similarly in otherwise different countries such as the USA and Germany. Both publics, thus, tend to disapprove of military interventions when they perceive them as the country's most important problem. In times of high overall salience, however, public judgement tends to be less negative, which leads to the conclusion that event-induced peaks in salience work according to a different logic than problem-induced salience. Such a difference makes it harder to subsume all ups and downs in salience under one and the same class of effects and calls for more research about the driving forces for foreign policy salience.

Elevating salience studies to a more complex level helps to connect the different strands of research that have focused on different types of issue salience. Whereas this paper focused on a nationwide problem's importance – measured through the most important problem question – and concluded a negative relationship between salience and approval, studies asking for specific problem importance[41] – measured on a scale of importance – found predominantly positive relationships between salience and approval. What is more, including other countries into a comparative research design could prove to be helpful in order to investigate whether the salience–approval nexus serves as an avenue to discover more similarities between different Western publics.

Notes
1. Kai Oppermann and Henrike Viehrig, 'The Public Salience of Foreign and Security Policy in Britain, Germany and France', *West European Politics* 32, no. 5 (2009): 925–42.
2. David H. Weaver, 'Issue Salience and Public Opinion: Are There Consequences of Agenda-Setting?', *International Journal of Public Opinion Research* 3, no. 1 (1991): 53–68.
3. John R. Zaller, *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion* (Cambridge: University Press, 1992).
4. Maxwell E. McCombs and Donald L. Shaw, 'The Agenda-Setting Function of Mass Media', *Public Opinion Quarterly* 36, no. 2 (1972): 176–87; and David H. Weaver, *Media Agenda-Setting in a Presidential Election: Issues, Images, and Interest* (New York, NY: Praeger, 1981).

5. Philip P. Everts, 'Familiarity Breeds Consent: Issue Salience and Support for the Use of Military Force', in *Issue Salience in International Politics*, ed. Kai Oppermann and Henrike Viehrig (London: Routledge, 2011), 39–53; and Weaver, 'Issue Salience and Public Opinion'.

6. Kai Oppermann and Alexander Spencer, 'Thinking Alike? Salience and Metaphor Analysis as Cognitive Approaches to Foreign Policy Analysis', *Foreign Policy Analysis* 9, no. 1 (2013): 39–56.

7. Everts, 'Familiarity Breeds Consent'; and Jörg Jacobs, 'Issue Salience, Political Affiliation and the Use of Force: Germany in Comparative Perspective', in *Issue Salience in International Politics*, ed. Kai Oppermann and Henrike Viehrig (London: Routledge, 2011), 54–64.

8. The comparative Transatlantic Trends Study annually polls a very broad spectrum of foreign and security policy in 14 countries; cf. Transatlantic Trends, 'About the Survey', Transatlantic Trends, http://trends.gmfus.org/transatlantic-trends/about/ (accessed July 4, 2012). The survey's initial question asks for political interest and the respondent's willingness to convince other people in political discussions, thus inquiring about the general political interest but avoiding asking for specific foreign policy awareness. When the scores from these questions are correlated with attitudes and opinions on foreign policy issues, they yield no clear relationship between levels of political interest and levels of approval; cf. Everts, 'Familiarity Breeds Consent'; and Jacobs, 'Issue Salience'.

9. Harald Schoen, 'Two Indicators, One Conclusion: On the Public Salience of Foreign Affairs in Germany Before and After Reunification', in *Issue Salience in International Politics*, ed. Kai Oppermann and Henrike Viehrig (London: Routledge, 2011), 23–38; Stuart N. Soroka, 'Media, Public Opinion, and Foreign Policy', *The Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics* 8, no. 1 (2003): 27–48; Oppermann and Viehrig, 'Public Salience'; and Hans Rattinger and Petra Heinlein, *Sicherheitspolitik in der öffentlichen Meinung: Umfrageergebnisse für die Bundesrepublik Deutschland bis zum 'heißen Herbst 1983'* [Security Policy in Public Opinion: Survey Results for the Federal Republic of Germany until the 'hot autumn 1983'] (Berlin: Wissenschaftlicher Autoren-Verlag, 1986).

10. Everts, 'Familiarity Breeds Consent'; Sophie Lecheler, Claes de Vreese, and Rune Slothuus, 'Issue Importance as a Moderator of Framing Effects', *Communication Research* 36, no. 3 (2009): 400–25; and Weaver, 'Issue Salience and Public Opinion'.

11. A middle course between the second and the third way is the German Bundestag survey. Here, members of parliament are asked what foreign policy issue they consider to be the most important. This is a viable alternative to channel the area of inquiry but giving the respondents enough leeway to name their personal top-of-the-head issue; cf. Thomas Jäger et al., 'The Salience of Foreign Affairs Issues in the German Bundestag', *Parliamentary Affairs* 62, no. 3 (2009): 418–37.

12. Lecheler, de Vreese, and Slothuus, 'Issue Importance', 404. The authors refer to 'object salience'.

13. Cit. in: Weaver, 'Issue Salience and Public Opinion', 55.

14. Iyengar and Simon called this phenomenon 'priming', but their analysis is restricted to measuring the approval of candidates that run for office and does not cover attitude formation on a specific issue; cf. Shanto Iyengar and Adam Simon, 'News Coverage of the Gulf Crisis and Public Opinion: A Study of Agenda-Setting, Priming, and Framing', *Communication Research* 20, no. 3 (1993): 365–83.

15. Scott L. Althaus and Kevin Coe, 'Social Identity Processes and the Dynamics of Public Support for War', *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 75, no. 1 (2011): 65–88.

16. Soroka, 'Media, Public Opinion, and Foreign Policy'; and Oppermann and Viehrig, 'Public Salience'.

17. Kristin Bulkow, Juliane Urban, and Wolfgang Schweiger, 'The Duality of Agenda-Setting. The Role of Information Processing', *International Journal of Public Opinion Research* 25, no. 1 (2013): 43–63.

18. Everts, 'Familiarity Breeds Consent'; and Weaver, 'Issue Salience and Public Opinion'.

19. Zaller, *Nature and Origins*.

20. For Germany see: Regina Karp, 'The New German Foreign Policy Consensus', *The Washington Quarterly* 29, no. 1 (2005): 61–82; for the USA see: Richard A. Melanson,

American Foreign Policy Since the Vietnam War: The Search for Consensus from Richard Nixon to George W. Bush. 4th ed. (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2005).

21. Everts, 'Familiarity Breeds Consent', 44–9; and Schoen, 'Two Indicators'.
22. Althaus and Coe, 'Social Identity Processes'; and Everts, 'Familiarity Breeds Consent', 49–51.
23. Yet, recent literature about the effects of asking for the most important problem explains how the question mingles two dimensions: that of 'importance' and that of describing a 'problem'. Christopher Wlezien shows that when responding to the most important-problem question, people are more likely to be driven by the problem status of the issue in question than by its overall importance: 'An issue is a problem if we are not getting the policy we want' (Christopher Wlezien, 'On the Salience of Political Issues: The Problem with "Most Important Problem"', *Electoral Studies* 24, no. 4 (2005): 555–79, 559). An often proposed alternative – the use of the question for the most important *issue* and thus avoiding that responses reflect only the problem status of an issue – does not seem to alleviate the problem, as a comparative study about 'issue' and 'problem' questions in the United Kingdom revealed (Will Jennings and Christopher Wlezien, 'Distinguishing Between Most Important Problems and Issues?', *Public Opinion Quarterly* 75, no. 3 (2011): 545–55). In fact, one of the arguments against the most important *issue* question is precisely that its answers reflect the problem status instead of the significance of a political issue. Both questions, then, capture a certain degree of public attentiveness to political issues, which in turn is affected by the issue's problem character more than by its intrinsic importance. Insofar, changing my methodology towards the most important-issue question presumably would not change the core findings.
24. Soroka, 'Media, Public Opinion and Foreign Policy'.
25. Taking into account that German data include the share of respondents that name foreign policy as their first or their second most important problem, and that US data only note the very respondents' first answer, the difference of priorities becomes even more pronounced.
26. Gary C. Jacobson, 'Referendum: The 2006 Midterm Congressional Elections', *Political Science Quarterly* 122, no. 1 (2007): 1–24.
27. David L. Eckles and Brian F. Schaffner, 'Risk Tolerance and Support for Potential Military Interventions', *Public Opinion Quarterly* 75, no. 3 (2011): 533–44; For analytical purposes, I did not include the fact whether Germany participates in the particular mission or not, since pollsters tend to cover only those deployments that Germany takes part in, or in which participation could become likely.
28. A Mann-Whitney-U test showed that approval for Bush's foreign policy among the low salience group (mean 43.4) differs significantly from the approval among the high salience group (mean 39.2), $U = 64,661,947.5$; $Z = -3.929$; $p = 0.000$; and $r = -0.026$ indicate a minimal effect size that is highly significant ($N = 23,725$).
29. Matthew A. Baum and Philip B. Potter, 'The Relationships Between Mass Media, Public Opinion, and Foreign Policy: Toward a Theoretical Synthesis', *Annual Review of Political Science* 11, no. 1 (2008): 39–65.
30. John E. Mueller, *War, Presidents, and Public Opinion* (New York, NY: Wiley, 1973).
31. Susan D. Moeller, *Compassion Fatigue: How the Media Sells Disease, Famine, War and Death* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1999); and Birgitta Höijer, 'The Discourse of Global Compassion. The Audience and Media Reporting of Human Suffering', *Media, Culture & Society* 26, no. 4 (2004): 513–31.
32. Marc J. Hetherington and Michael Nelson, 'Anatomy of a Rally Effect: George W. Bush and the War on Terrorism', *PS: Political Science & Politics* 36, no. 1 (2003): 37–42.
33. The Mann–Whitney U test results are: $U = 40,182,588.0$; $Z = -14.581$; $p = 0.000$; and $r = -0.08$, which indicates a minimal effect size that is highly significant ($N = 33,415$).
34. The Mann–Whitney U test indicates a minimal effect size ($r = -0.04$) that is highly significant ($p = 0.000$; with $N = 61,257$; $U = 155,532,190.5$; and $Z = -8.597$).
35. The number of cases is determined through the number of approval questions in the Politbarometer 1999–2010.
36. Mann–Whitney U test results: $r = -0.02$; $p = 0.004$ with $N = 29,480$; $U = 69,688,027$; and $Z = -2.901$.

37. The party changed its name into 'Die Linke' ('The Left') in 2007.
38. Torsten Oppelland, 'Parteien' ['Parties'], in *Handbuch zur deutschen Außenpolitik* [Handbook on German foreign policy], ed. Siegmar Schmidt, Gunther Hellmann, and Reinhard Wolf, 1st ed. (Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2007), 269–79, 273–4.
39. Lecheler, de Vrees, and Slothuus, 'Issue Importance', 403–4; and Julia R. Zuwerink and Patricia G. Devine, 'Attitude Importance and Resistance to Persuasion: It's Not Just the Thought that Counts', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 70, no. 5 (1996): 931–44.
40. Marc J. Hetherington, 'Review Article: Putting Polarization in Perspective', *British Journal of Political Science* 39, no. 2 (2009): 413–48, 437.
41. Everts, 'Familiarity Breeds Consent'; and Weaver, 'Issue Salience and Public Opinion'.
42. CBS News/NYT Poll (2011), Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research (ICPSR), http://www.icpsr.umich.edu/icpsrweb/ICPSR/access/index.jsp (accessed May 24, 2012); Gallup Brain, 'Most Important Problem', Gallup Brain http://brain.gallup.com (accessed September 10, 2003); Politbarometer (1999–2010), GESIS, http://zacat.gesis.org/webview/main.jsp?object=http://zacat.gesis.org/obj/fCatalog/Catalog9 (accessed May 24, 2012).

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