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Publication date

01-10-2016

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Document Version

Accepted version

Citation for this work (American Psychological Association 7th edition)

Oppermann, K., & Viehrig, H. (2016). *The media salience of Germany's bilateral relations to the United States, France and Britain* (Version 1). University of Sussex. <https://hdl.handle.net/10779/uos.23431937.v1>

Published in

German Politics

Link to external publisher version

<https://doi.org/10.1080/09644008.2016.1174695>

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TITLE PAGE

The Media Salience of Germany's Bilateral Relations to the United States, France and Britain

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May 2016

Word Count: 8365 Words (not including the abstract)

Abstract

This article provides a comparative analysis of the salience of Germany's bilateral relations to the United States, France and Britain in the German media since the end of the Cold War. It offers a media content frequency analysis which identifies long-term similarities and differences in media reporting across the three relationships as well as short-term upswings of media interest in each of them individually. This is relevant because the media salience of bilateral relations is a measure of their underpinnings in public discourse and speaks to the significance of domestic drivers in conducting such relationships. The article finds that media reporting on Germany's three bilateral relations under study has significantly increased in the post-9/11 period and that US-German and Franco-German relations attract far more attention in the German media than Anglo-German relations. Short-term upswings in media coverage are triggered by specific types of events, in particular crises in European integration and international military missions.

The Media Salience of Germany's Bilateral Relations to the United States, France and Britain

Introduction

The article compares the salience of Germany's bilateral relations to its three foremost international partners in the Western alliance – the US, France and the UK – in the German media since the end of the Cold War. This stands in the context of the ongoing political and academic debate about change and continuity in post-unification German foreign policy and about possible shifts in Germany's domestic foreign policy debate.¹ Bilateral relationships are a key dimension of a country's foreign policy as well as important building blocks of international politics and global governance.² The media salience of such relationships, in turn, speaks to the significance attached to them in domestic political debates. Comparative analyses tracing the salience of a country's bilateral relations in the media over time promise to shed light on the priority given to these relations in the domestic arena and to identify possible shifts in the attention that is paid to foreign policy issues within these bilateral relations. We would expect such analyses to uncover both long-term similarities, differences and trends across different bilateral relationships pointing to structural differences between them and to systematic patterns in domestic debate as well as short-term fluctuations within bilateral relationships reflecting particularly newsworthy events and developments.

Along these lines, the main objectives of this article are to offer a comparative study of the selected bilateral relationships of post-unification Germany and to advance our understanding of the domestic foundations of bilateral relations. Specifically, the article will make two contributions to scholarship in foreign policy and international politics. One, it provides the first comparative data on the salience of Germany's bilateral relations to the US, France and Britain in the German news media and identifies patterns both over time and across the three relationships. The article finds that media coverage of the three bilateral relations has greatly increased since 9/11, that US-German and Franco-German relations are much more prominent in German media reporting than Anglo-German

relations and that specific events which have a high news value can trigger significant short-term upswings in media attention to bilateral relationships. Two, the article introduces a methodological framework for studying the media salience of bilateral relationships. This framework can be applied beyond Germany and opens up new opportunities for comparative research into the media salience of foreign affairs which contributes to scholarship on the domestic politics of foreign policy more broadly. The empirical findings of the article confirm that the proposed methods can indeed capture meaningful long-term and short-term patterns in the amount of media reporting on bilateral relations.

The article develops its argument in three steps. First, it introduces the concept of media salience and explores the significance of studying the prominence of bilateral relationships in media reporting. Second, the article spells out its methodological framework and the media content frequency analysis on which the study relies. The next section presents and discusses the main empirical results of our analysis both in terms of long-term similarities, differences and trends across the three bilateral relations and with regard to short-term upswings in media attention to each of the relationships individually. The conclusion wraps up the main argument and points to promising avenues for further research.

Analysing the Media Salience of Bilateral Relations

The concept of media salience refers to the relative importance or significance which the media ascribe to a given issue on the political agenda.³ It can be operationalised through the frequency of media reporting on an issue, in particular since such reporting necessarily involves choices between potentially infinite numbers of political issues competing for a finite amount of media coverage at any point in time. What is more, a rich history of research into the effects of media reporting on public opinion has shown that the media salience of political issues has a strong impact on which issues the general public ranks as their primary concerns.⁴ Not only do the media set the agenda of public debate, they also exert a strong 'priming effect' which makes members of the general public attach particular importance in their overall evaluation of government policy to those issues which are most extensively covered in the news.⁵ Numerous studies have confirmed that there is a strong correlation between the frequency of media reporting and the salience of political issues in public opinion.⁶ At the same time, the media salience of political issues also stands out as an

important cue for decision-makers to identify the priorities of their constituents.⁷ It is a key part of the domestic political environment in which foreign policy is formulated and to which it has to respond.⁸ Media salience is thus both a measure of the priority the media attach to an issue and a good indicator of its overall prominence in public opinion and the broader domestic debate. While this article focuses on the media salience of bilateral relations, the well-established connection between media salience and public issue salience forms a key theoretical starting point for our analysis.

Against this background, the significance of studying the media salience of bilateral relations is twofold. First, it yields insights into the attention put to a bilateral relationship in public debate and thus into the anchoring of the relationship in domestic society. While bilateral relations are mostly analysed in terms of elite-level interactions between governments, they are underpinned by mutual sentiments on the level of general publics. In particular, the long-term shape and stability of bilateral relations cannot be reduced to complementary interests between decision-makers, but also depend on their embeddedness in public opinion.⁹ Although the media salience of a bilateral relationship is not clearly related to how it is evaluated in public debate,¹⁰ high media salience would indicate that a relationship has a strong presence in the domestic debate and that constituents are attentive to how it is conducted.

Second, the media salience of bilateral relations speaks to the significance of domestic drivers and constraints in such relationships. Domestic constituents, in particular electorates, but also members of parliaments, will be more likely to make their preferences and priorities on a bilateral relationship known to governments, the more the media have directed their attention to this relationship. Government decision-makers, in consequence, will more likely face possible domestic audience costs and can no longer safely ignore the views of their constituents, the more news coverage a bilateral relation attracts.¹¹ As long as such relationships are not much taken up by the media, in contrast, governments can expect their foreign policies in this regard to go largely unscrutinised by the public. The media salience of bilateral relations therefore delimits the extent to which domestic politics, and public opinion in particular, will likely become a relevant parameter of these relations.¹²

Studying the media salience of bilateral relations thus promises insights into their domestic foundations and into the role of domestic politics in conducting such relationships. A useful

analytical perspective to conceptualize the dynamics and drivers of media salience, moreover, is in terms of a market analogy.¹³ Specifically, the market analogy describes the simultaneous adaptation processes between the main actors of the public-foreign policy nexus, i.e. foreign policy decision makers, the media, and the general public. On the market for foreign policy information, these three groups of actors exchange information and are mutually dependent. Political decision makers and the general public seek to realise their policy preferences and stand in a competitive relationship should their preferences collide. The media, in contrast, do not necessarily pursue a political agenda of their own¹⁴ but are conceived of as economic actors who strive for profit. The media affect the relationship between decision makers and the public by shaping its information environment, in particular the salience of political issues in public debate. For their part, the media are subject to conflicting pressures of supply and demand. On one hand, they depend on external sources to supply them with information, most notably political elites themselves who are interested in favourable media coverage. On the other hand, the media have to meet the public demand for newsworthy information to maximise their circulation or rating figures. Given the economic imperative to increase market shares, journalists and editors are selecting “news that’s fit to print”.

According to the market analogy, the salience of bilateral relationships on the media agenda¹⁵ can thus be conceived of as the equilibrium between the demand for and supply of information about these relationships. In interpreting the data on the salience of Germany’s bilateral relations in the German media, we utilise the analogy as a useful heuristic that portrays patterns and shifts across relationships and over time in terms of an equilibrium of supply and demand.¹⁶ Specifically, we distinguish three patterns of media salience which reflect how the demand for and supply of news on these bilateral relations have developed over time. First, the observation of *systematic differences* in media salience between Germany’s three bilateral relationships under study would point towards attributes of these relationships themselves driving the demand for information. Such attributes can include, for example, the historical intertwining of a relationship¹⁷, its degree of institutionalisation¹⁸ or the international power position of the partner country¹⁹. Second, *similar trends* in media salience across the three bilateral relations over time would indicate general shifts in the domestic demand for information about Germany’s international relationships which can,

for example, reflect broader changes in German foreign policy discourse or in Germany's perceived role in international politics.²⁰ Such differences and similarities between the bilateral relationships are both patterns which emerge from *long-term* observation. A third pattern, in contrast, relates to evidence for significant *short-term fluctuations* in the media salience of individual relationships. Such fluctuations would suggest that the equilibrium between demand and supply is being shaped by events and developments particular to a specific bilateral relation. According to the theory of news values²¹, high-profile bilateral events which display many news factors should increase both the demand for and the supply of information about a bilateral relationship and thus drive notable upswings in its media salience.

Along these lines, the empirical analysis will explore three patterns of media salience – differences between bilateral relationships, similar trends across these relationships, fluctuations over time within individual relationships – and in how far they can be discerned in post-unification Germany's bilateral relations to the US, France and the UK.

Methods and Operationalisation

In order to measure the media salience of Germany's bilateral relations under study we have conducted a media content frequency analysis. As our news source, we selected the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (FAZ). The FAZ is the leading German daily quality newspaper and has a moderately conservative orientation.²² With its circulation of roughly 320.000 copies per day (including e-paper)²³, the FAZ is Germany's second most-read broadsheet, after the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*.

What makes the FAZ particularly well-suited for our purpose is that it has the most comprehensive and elaborate foreign affairs coverage of all German quality newspapers.²⁴ Also, it is traditionally the most-trusted and most frequently consulted news source of Germany's political and economic elites.²⁵ Given its extensive network of international correspondents and excellent reputation, the FAZ is a "prestige medium" in the German news landscape.²⁶ We would not expect other newspapers with a different political orientation than the FAZ to differ substantially in how much they report on bilateral issues relative to other issues. Still, we analyzed a sample of reporting on the selected bilateral

relations in the center-left leaning *Süddeutsche Zeitung* for the first and last years of our period of study and found the same patterns and upswings as in the more conservative FAZ.²⁷ We are confident, therefore, that our findings can be generalised across the German media more broadly. National quality newspapers such as the FAZ continue to play a major role in the daily flow of news²⁸, especially by shaping the political agenda and serving as a reference for other news outlets.²⁹ It is not the least this process of inter-media agenda-setting³⁰ which explains why it is still worthwhile for decision-makers and scholars alike to explore the news that are produced by traditional print outlets.

The time frame of our study spans a period of 22 years and covers all articles that appeared in the FAZ between January 1993 and December 2014. In particular, our rationale was to provide a comprehensive assessment of post-unification Germany's bilateral relations to its closest Western allies that includes the watershed event of the 9/11 terrorist attacks as well as recent negotiations about the Euro crisis. In order to capture the media coverage of *political* issues and events related to Germany's bilateral relations and to avoid measuring the salience of the US, UK and France in the German media *as such*, we selected only FAZ articles which simultaneously mention leading foreign policy representatives of both Germany and the partner country in question. Specifically, we searched for the last name of the President (USA, France)³¹ or Prime Minister (UK)³² or Secretary of State/Foreign Minister *and* for the last name of the German Chancellor or the German Foreign Minister (see table 1).³³ For our analysis, we recorded the monthly number of articles meeting these conditions. To collect our empirical data, we used the digital archive of the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*³⁴ which contains all articles that appeared in the paper's print or online edition. We recorded the monthly number of articles for all three bilateral relations, changing the search terms for each relationship on the day when new incumbents in any of the bilateral partners came into office. Thus, our analysis provides continuous salience data for Germany's most important bilateral relations over the course of 22 years.

The reasoning behind our proposed method and our choice of search terms is that references to leading foreign policy decision-makers from both bilateral partners in the same article are a strong indicator that the article is indeed about issues that relate to the *political relationship* between the two countries. This rationale is reinforced by the strong tendency in journalistic accounts towards the personalization of foreign affairs reporting.³⁵

While the proposed method thus focuses our analysis on political news on the respective bilateral relationships, it does not limit the possible range of foreign affairs to any pre-selected set of issues. We acknowledge that a potential downside of this method is that it may not always filter out all articles that focus primarily on human interest stories. However, we hand-checked samples of the retrieved material which showed that the number of such articles was very low and did not have a significant effect on our results. We are thus confident that our method yields reliable and valid results that are highly comparable across countries.

[Table 1: ABOUT HERE]

The Media Salience of Germany's Bilateral Relations: Results and Discussion

Following the market analogy about the demand and supply of foreign news, this section will present and discuss our findings on long- and short-term patterns in German news reporting on Germany's bilateral relations to the US, France and the UK. The long-term perspective will serve to identify systematic differences and similar trends across all three bilateral relations, while the short-term perspective will look at fluctuations and upswings in media salience within each bilateral relationship.

Comparisons Across Germany's Bilateral Relations: Long-term Similarities and Differences

The long-term comparative perspective on the media salience of post-unification Germany's bilateral relations yields two key results. First, the average level of media attention to Germany's relations with the US and France is roughly similar and significantly higher than the media salience of Anglo-German relations. Second, the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the US stand out as a watershed event for the amount of media reporting on the selected bilateral relationships in two respects. One, overall media attention to the three bilateral relations has increased significantly since 9/11. Two, the differences in media salience between Germany's relations to the US and France as compared to its relations to the UK are driven primarily by the post-9/11 period.

[Table 2: ABOUT HERE]

On average, the FAZ has published 28.4 articles per month on US-German relations and 25.5 on Franco-German relations over the entire period under study (see table 2). While relations to the US receive slightly more media attention than relations to France, the main finding is the striking similarity of the media salience of the two relationships in post-unification Germany. This similarity becomes even more notable in comparison to the much lower media salience of the Anglo-German relationship which has been covered by only 14.7 FAZ articles on average per month which is little more than half the rate of media reporting on Germany's relations to the US and France. In other words, Germany's bilateral relations to the US and France are much more visible in German public debate than its relations to the UK.

These results confirm that media reporting on Germany's bilateral relations is closely aligned with the importance traditionally attached to these relationships in German foreign policy. In particular, the high media salience of US-German and Franco-German relations reflects a core principle in Germany's external relations since the founding of the Federal Republic to prioritise close bilateral relations to the US and France.³⁶ The question of which of the two relations should take precedence if they appear to be at cross-purposes led to the debate between 'Atlanticists'³⁷ and 'Gaullists'³⁸ which is still one of the formative divisions in the German foreign policy debate. Our findings are also in line with survey results on the foreign policy priorities of members of the German Bundestag who rank the relations to the US and France as Germany's two most important bilateral relationships by a distance.³⁹ In contrast, the low media salience of Anglo-German relations encapsulates the classic characterisation of this relationship as a "silent alliance"⁴⁰ which most of the time remains under the radar of public attention.

These results thus confirm what would have been expected from the broader literature on German foreign policy, and, what is more, they are highly relevant methodologically. In particular, the congruence of our findings with established portrayals and assessments of the three relationships in existing scholarship and by political elites provides an initial

validation that the suggested methodological approach is indeed able to pick up on meaningful patterns in the media salience of bilateral relations. Also, the findings appear to corroborate the close nexus and mutual adaptation between foreign policy practice and media reporting.

The analysis also serves as a cautionary reminder that power considerations cannot fully account for the long-term similarities and differences in the media salience of the three bilateral relationships under study. According to a theoretical perspective that builds on the 'power indexing' argument⁴¹, the amount of media attention to Germany's bilateral relations should largely be driven by the international power position of the partner country. While this expectation is clearly in line with the high salience of the US-German relationship in the German media, it would not have predicted the (almost) identical level of media interest in the Franco-German relationship. The 'power indexing' perspective also cannot make sense of the pronounced differences in media attention to Germany's relations with France and the UK which share a broadly similar power position in the international system. The high salience of Franco-German relations in the German media does therefore not so much reflect power considerations, but rather appears to be driven by conceptualisations of the 'specialness'⁴² of the relationship in terms of historical memory, political and economic interdependence as well as an unparalleled degree of institutionalised bilateral cooperation.⁴³ Along these lines, one would expect, for example, German-Israeli relations, which are generally described as Germany's second 'special relationship'⁴⁴ on a par with Franco-German relations, to equally stand out in terms of its media salience in comparison to Germany's relations to other countries in a similar power position to Israel.

As for the second key finding that comes out of our long-term comparative perspective, the coverage of Germany's bilateral relations to its main international partners in the German media has almost doubled in the post-9/11 period.⁴⁵ Whereas the FAZ on average published 45.3 articles per month on all three relationships under study before 9/11, this number increased to 83.6 after the terrorist attacks (see table 2). While each of the three relations received more attention in the German media after 9/11 than before, the rise in media salience was for the most part focused on Germany's relations to the US and France. In both cases, the post-9/11 average monthly rate of media coverage was more than twice as high

as in the period before. This finding is relevant, in particular, for the debate about the changing foreign policy discourse in post-unification Germany.

On the most general level, the results suggest that external relations and foreign affairs have become a more important parameter of the German domestic political debate than they used to be. In terms of our analytical model, the data imply both rising public demand for information about Germany's bilateral relationships as well as increasing elite supply of such information. This can be seen as a domestic repercussion of Germany's more active involvement in international affairs and reflects trends towards a broader domestic contestation of foreign policy.⁴⁶

More specifically, the analysis identifies the events surrounding the 9/11 terrorist attacks as the critical turning point in Germany's political debate about its changing role in the international arena. In particular, 9/11 and the following debates about Afghanistan, Iraq and the 'war on terror' have done more than any other international development since German unification to drive home both the increasing international demands and expectations on German foreign policy as well as the greater scope for disagreement and conflict between Germany and its international partners. This has become a recurrent pattern in German foreign policy which has manifested itself, most notably, in the debates about German contributions to multilateral military missions⁴⁷ and Germany's leadership role in European integration.⁴⁸ In other words, German foreign policy has altogether become higher profile, often involving cooperation or disagreements with its main international partners, which sustains a higher level of media interest in Germany's foremost bilateral relations.

Finally, the increase in media attention specifically to Germany's relations to the US and France since 9/11 reflects the centrality of these relations to many key issues for German foreign policy on the post-9/11 international agenda. Significant cases in point are the debate about Germany's participation in the war on terror which was intimately linked to US-German relations and the controversy about the Iraq war which was framed in large part as a decision of the German government to side with France against the US.⁴⁹ Since 2008, the international financial crisis and then the Eurozone crisis have further primed Germany's relations to the US and, in particular, France in the German political debate.⁵⁰ The close connection of US-German and Franco-German relations to such high-profile international

issues and conflicts, many of which have triggered substantial contestation in the German domestic political arena, will have sustained a high news value of the two relationships and thus significant media reporting on them.⁵¹ In contrast, Germany's relations with the UK, while also affected by many post-9/11 issues, did only rarely move to the forefront of these debates and were for the most part overshadowed by conflicts and cooperation with the US and France. The next section will zoom in on more short-term fluctuations in the media salience of each of the three bilateral relationships.

Comparisons Within Individual Relationships Over Time: Short-term Fluctuations and Upswings

In order to establish what types of events or issues drive fluctuations in the media salience of individual bilateral relationships, we identified the most significant month-to-month upswings in the number of articles on each of Germany's three bilateral relations under study. Specifically, we included such upswings in our analysis which rise above the average number of articles published on a relationship over the preceding six months to an extent that is higher than the long-term monthly average of news articles on this relationship.⁵² This approach allowed us to single out the most distinctive increases in media attention to the three bilateral relationships in comparison to the average flow of news. Such peaks are of particular interest for our purposes, because they show at which points in time the normal pattern of media reporting is interrupted by a higher demand for and supply of information on a bilateral relationship.

Using this method, we identified a total of 44 upswings over the course of 22 years (see figure 1). Only five of these upswings occurred prior to 9/11 which reinforces our finding that Germany's foreign policy discourse was at a turning point in 2001. It also shows that after 9/11, media coverage responded more to specific bilateral events or issues than previously, resulting in much more frequent peaks in the media salience of the three relationships. These peaks are crucial to our analysis because they inform us about the conditions under which Germany's bilateral relations attract particular media attention.

As the next step, we manually checked the content of media coverage behind each upswing to identify which type of issues or events have induced a rise in media coverage of

Germany's bilateral relationships. This allowed us to categorise the most salient focal points of media reporting on these relationships into general EU issues (12 upswings), questions related to the use of military force (9), official government visits (8), the Eurozone crisis (since 2011) (5) and the world financial crisis (2008-09) (4). A residual group of six cases which did not fit into either of these categories included, for example, the controversy over the spying activities of the US National Security Agency in Germany in 2013.

First, it is notable how often high profile events and negotiations in European integration have spurred upswings in media reporting on Germany's bilateral relations throughout our research period. Such upswings have mainly been occasioned by European summits (for example June 1995, March 1999, June 2007, November 2012) or disputes over the EU budget (for example March 1999, June 2005, December 2011, November 2012) which directly involve heads of state and government and which lend themselves easily to a personalisation of news reporting. Moreover, it is remarkable that nine out of the twelve general EU-related upswings concern Germany's relations to the UK. Insofar as this relationship attracts the particular attention of the German media at all, it is thus primarily in the context of European integration. This is mainly driven by cases of disagreements between the UK and its European partners and reflects the UK's long-standing reputation as an "awkward partner"⁵³ in the EU.

Second, questions related to military conflicts led to upswings in the media salience of the three bilateral relations between 9/11 and the start of the Iraq War in March 2003. During this period, issues of war and peace were high up the agenda in each of the relationships, generating particular demand for information about them among the German public. Such issues combine many news factors, primarily because they convey a sense of threat and danger. Military interventions involving close bilateral partners or debates about whether or not to participate in such interventions can thus be expected to generate particular public and media attention.⁵⁴ As for the relations to the US, media reporting was initially driven by the events of 9/11 and by uncertainty about the US response and later on reflected the US-German conflict over Iraq.⁵⁵ Germany's relations to the UK attracted increased media attention primarily with a view towards Britain's role as America's closest ally and the negative consequences this was expected to have for European integration.⁵⁶ Franco-German relations, in turn, moved centre-stage in German political debate, because French

opposition to the Iraq War was seen as critical for the ability of the German government to stand firm in its disagreement with the US.⁵⁷ In other words, bilateral disagreement and cooperation about military interventions stand out as an important catalyst of public and media interest in the bilateral relationships involved.

Third, upswings in the media salience of bilateral relationships can be occasioned by mutual government visits. Such visits are particularly visible manifestations of such relations and play a significant role in their symbolic affirmation. Also, they facilitate the personalisation of news reporting on bilateral relations and should therefore attract particular media attention. However, it is impossible to discern such an effect for the media salience of Germany's relations to France and the UK⁵⁸, primarily because the large number of regular meetings between government leaders in the EU context have normalised these meetings. In contrast, visits of US presidents to Germany (for example May 2002, February 2005, July 2006, June 2007, April 2009, June 2013) and of German Chancellors to the US (November 2009) often sparked significant upswings in media coverage. This may be put down both to the greater exceptionality of state visits in US-German relations and the greater perceived relevance of these visits given that US presidents represent the most powerful country in international politics.

Finally, the recent financial and economic crises have been another important reason for a couple of upswings in media reporting which clustered around the global financial crisis in 2008-09 and the Eurozone crisis in 2011-12. While the 2008 crisis originated in the US, it also led to a number of high-level consultations between the German government and its partners in France and the UK and thus pushed media coverage of all three bilateral relationships. In contrast, efforts at managing the Eurozone crisis in the first instance involved close Franco-German coordination and thus only caused major upswings in media reporting on this relationship. In both cases, however, it was the sense of crisis and threat that increased the demand for information and the newsworthiness of Germany's bilateral relations.

[Figure 1: ABOUT HERE]

Shifting the analytical focus more specifically to similarities and differences between the upswings in the media salience across Germany's three bilateral relations, moreover, the general finding is that the number of upswings experienced by each of these relationships (12/14/18 for the relationships to France/US/UK) over our period of study was fairly similar. The slightly larger number of cases in Anglo-German relations can be explained by the lower average level of news reporting on this relationship which makes even relatively modest increases in media attention stand out.

It is still notable, however, that each of the five pre-9/11 upswings in our data set relate to Germany's relations to the UK. The largest ever increase of German media reporting on this relationship took place in June 1999 against the backdrop of the so-called Schröder-Blair paper which resonated strongly in the German media because it appeared to indicate the advent of closer bilateral relations between the two countries and a broader ideological realignment of the centre-left in Europe.⁵⁹ As was already noted above, British-German relations otherwise come to the fore in German media reporting mainly in the context of negotiations and disagreements over issues in European integrations, not least the EU budget. That fits the characterisation of UK-German relations as a 'secondary relationship' to Germany, relative to its relations to France and the US.

US-German relations, in turn, tend to see significant upswings in their salience to the German media either at the time of official government visits or if they involve transatlantic controversies over military interventions. It was precisely at the height of transatlantic discord over Iraq in autumn 2002 when the demand for news reporting on this relationship was greatest. This reflects the critical importance of the US on issues of military security but also Germany's dependence on US support for its own security. More recently, US-German relations also became more prominent in German news reporting in the context of the global financial crisis, the NSA spying affair and the Ukraine crisis.

The by far most pronounced upswings in media salience of the Franco-German relationship, finally, have all been triggered by the Eurozone crisis. The near-permanent consultations and crisis negotiations between the two governments coupled with a widespread sense of threat and uncertainty about the future of the single currency and European integration have significantly increased the news value of this relationship and generated an extraordinary amount of German news reporting on it. Thus, the five biggest increases in

German media attention to Franco-German relations over the entire period of study fall into the narrow timeframe between 2011 and 2012. While general EU issues and questions of war and peace had previously caused a number of upswings, none of them matched the scope and magnitude of those triggered by the Eurozone crisis. 2011/12 is also the only prolonged time period during the 22 years under study when Germany's relations to France were more salient in the German media than relations to the United States. The political significance of Franco-German cooperation in resolving the Eurozone crisis was thus clearly reflected in the pattern of German media reporting.

In summary, our findings suggest that the most significant upswings in the media salience of the three bilateral relationships under study were triggered in response to issues or events which linked the relationships to major international crises, involved either conflict or particularly close cooperation between the partners or facilitated the personalisation of media reporting. Once the news value of such issues or events had declined, however, the demand for and supply of information about the bilateral relationships and their salience in German news reporting tended to move back towards the long-term average. At the same time, the reasons for upswings in media attention are not uniform across Germany's bilateral relations, but can be traced to political contexts and events that are specific to each of the three relationships. More broadly, our analysis suggests that upswings in the media salience of bilateral relations are not random, but follow real-world events and developments which affect public demand for information about such relationships.

Conclusion

This article has compared long-term trends and short-term fluctuations in the salience of post-unification Germany's bilateral relations to the United States, France, and the United Kingdom in German media reporting. It finds that the amount of media coverage of these relationships has significantly increased since 9/11 and that US-German and Franco-German relations enjoy systematically higher levels of media attention than Anglo-German relations. Moreover, the analysis suggests that short-term upswings in media attention to the bilateral relationships are mainly triggered by specific types of events, in particular conflicts and crises in European integration – in the case of Franco-German and Anglo-German relations –

and the use of military force or high-level mutual government visits in the case of US-German relations.

These findings contribute to three distinct areas of research. First, they add to the debate about post-unification Germany's foreign policy and reinforce the argument that foreign affairs have become an altogether more prominent issue in German political discourse. The data indicate a higher demand for information about foreign affairs in the German domestic debate as well as an increased responsiveness of that debate to events and developments in the international arena. This can be ascribed to the heightened stature of Germany in international politics and the growing international demands on German foreign policy which in turn have widened the scope for domestic (party) political contestation over this policy.⁶⁰ The article suggests that the increased attention among the German public to Germany's bilateral relations is indicative of these more general trends in German foreign policy. It would be for further research to establish whether our findings also hold for Germany's bilateral relationships beyond its main international partners, including more conflictual relations such as those to Russia.

Second, the article contributes to recent scholarship on special relations in international politics. In particular, the liberal and social-constructivist strands of this research would expect special relations to be embedded in patterns of exceptionally close interactions and mutual sentiments of 'we-ness' on the level of civil society and general publics.⁶¹ This societal 'anchoring' of special relationships, in turn, should be reflected in public discourse. Specifically, the article suggests that the level of mutual interest and attention to a bilateral relationship in public debate is an indicator for its 'specialness' and that the media salience of bilateral relations is a useful proxy for this indicator. Along these lines, the empirical data support the widespread characterisation of Franco-German⁶² and US-German⁶³ relations as 'special relationships' as opposed to Germany's 'secondary relationship' to the UK. It would be a promising agenda for future research to explore if other bilateral relations which are often described as special relationships in international politics, such as German-Israeli relations or, most prominently, Anglo-American relations, similarly stand out in terms of their domestic media salience. It should be noted, moreover, that the suggested measure of the 'specialness' of bilateral relations in domestic debate is not restricted to 'positive' relations which are particularly close and cooperative. Rather, it should equally be able to

identify relationships which are 'special' in the sense of being exceptionally hostile or confrontational⁶⁴, for example what has been described as 'enduring rivalries' in international politics.⁶⁵

Third, the article should be a useful point of departure for future research on issue salience in international politics.⁶⁶ Specifically, it contributes to such research by introducing a systematic method to measure the media salience of bilateral relations. What is more, the empirical findings indicate that this method can pick up on long-term trends and short-term fluctuations in media salience over time as well as on meaningful similarities and differences across different bilateral relationships. An important task for further research in this direction would be to establish that patterns in media salience do indeed reflect broader patterns in domestic political discourse and to cross-validate the suggested method by checking it against other data sources, such as public opinion polls, election surveys or party manifestos.

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