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Issue Salience and the Domestic Legitimacy Demands of European Integration. The Cases of Britain and Germany

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Abstract

The salience of European issues to the general public is a major determinant of the domestic legitimacy demands that governments face when they devise their European policies. The higher the salience of these issues, the more restrictive will be the legitimacy demands that governments have to meet on the domestic level. Whereas the domestic legitimacy of European policy can rest on a permissive consensus among the public in cases of low issue salience, it requires the electorate's explicit endorsement in cases of high issue salience. Polling data from Britain and Germany show that the salience of European issues is clearly higher in Britain than in Germany. We thus conclude that British governments face tougher domestic legitimacy demands when formulating their European policies than German governments. This may contribute to accounting for both countries' different approaches to the integration process: Germany as a role model of a pro-integrationist member state and, in contrast, Britain as the eternal "awkward partner".

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1. Introduction⁽¹⁾

In devising their European policies and engaging in European-level cooperation, the governments of EU member states are subject to domestic-level legitimacy demands. Taking recourse to an empirical or sociological – as opposed to a normative – concept of legitimacy, these demands originate from the preferences of those domestic constituents to which governments are formally accountable and which have means at their disposal to sanction a government, should its European policies contradict their preferences (Hill 2003: 297-304; Keohane 2006: 2).⁽²⁾ The political imperative to satisfy the legitimacy demands of domestic constituents stands out as a primary constraint both on a government's European policy decision-making leeway and on the viability and stability of European integration. Governments can only be assumed to engage in and uphold cooperative arrangements on the European level insofar as they do not have to anticipate prohibitively costly sanctions on part of their constituents. Failure to meet domestic legitimacy demands, on the contrary, may push governments to defect from cooperative agreements and thus to destabilise European integration (Iida 1996: 283-284; Putnam 1988: 438).

In the democratic political systems of EU member states, it is electorates that are to be conceived of as the respective government's foremost domestic constituents. They make use of democratic elections both to directly or indirectly determine the composition of governments and to issue a retrospective verdict on a government's performance, either rewarding it with re-election or sanctioning it with de-selection (Key 1966: 52-62). Electorates can thus be conceptualised as principals which have assigned to a governmental agent the authority to conduct European policy on their behalf and which are at the same time endowed with the ability to revoke this authority (Pratt/Zeckhauser 1985; Przeworski 1999: 30-36).⁽³⁾ It will be among the most immediate political exigencies of any democratic government's decision-making to prevent their electorates from applying costly sanctions against it. They will therefore seek to pursue European policies that conform to the electorate's demands regarding the substance of these policies and their efficacy in problem-solving, i.e. to ensure the policies' output-legitimacy (Risse/Kleine 2007: 72-74; Scharpf 1999: 16-28).⁽⁴⁾

The domestic legitimacy demands of European integration and their constraining effects on a government's European policies are not to be taken as a constant. Rather, they may be more restrictive in some cases than in others and will therefore exert a non-uniform impact on governments' European policies and on the viability of cooperative agreements on the European level.

Against this background, the article argues that domestic issue saliency captures a significant component of the domestic legitimacy demands that governments face when they formulate their policies with regard to the process

of European integration. This contention crucially rests upon the distinction between a cognitive and an evaluative dimension of domestic legitimacy demands (cf. section 2). First, the cognitive dimension of these legitimacy demands can be operationalised by the concept of political issue salience. Second, the cognitive dimension is to be conceived of as a necessary condition for the evaluative dimension to constrain a government's European policies and thus as a major determinant of the legitimacy demands' overall restrictiveness: the higher the salience of a government's European policies to an electorate, the more restrictive will be the evaluative legitimacy demands which the government has to meet on the domestic level and the less autonomous leeway it will enjoy in its decision-making, other things being equal. The article thus points to the major role of European integration's public salience for assessing the extent to which legitimacy demands of electorates can be said to restrict a government's domestic European policy decision-making leeway.

In order to develop our argument, the next section will introduce the distinction between the evaluative and cognitive dimensions of domestic legitimacy. Building upon this distinction, section three will propose two ideal types of domestic legitimacy demands of European integration. These ideal types are employed as a methodological means to shed light on the interrelationship between the two dimensions of domestic legitimacy demands and on the varying restrictiveness of the two types of legitimacy demands with respect to a government's domestic room for manoeuvre in devising its European policy (Weber 2005 [1921]: 14-15). In order to empirically substantiate our theoretical contention, the article will then probe into the cognitive dimension of domestic legitimacy demands in regard to European policy in Germany and Britain, i.e. into European integration's public salience in these countries. Germany and Britain can be shown to resemble the two ideal types of domestic legitimacy demands pertaining to European policy, and the different trajectories of these countries' approaches to the process of European integration come along with marked differences in the salience of European integration to the respective publics.

2. The Evaluative and Cognitive Dimensions of Domestic Legitimacy[↑]

There is an *evaluative* and a *cognitive* dimension to the legitimacy demands that governmental European policy decisions are exposed to by electorates. By way of a comprehensive analysis, the overall scope and restrictiveness of such demands are to be assessed along both dimensions. The *evaluative* dimension of domestic legitimacy demands refers to normative judgments of electorates on a government's European policy. On this dimension, the legitimacy of European integration and of a government's stances in this regard depends on whether public opinion is positively or negatively disposed towards these stances. From an evaluative perspective, therefore, European integration and the governmental European policies underpinning it are to be accorded domestic legitimacy to the extent that they are favourably viewed and supported by majorities of the respective electorates. The overwhelming majority of public opinion polls – including most parts of the semi-annual Eurobarometer polls – exclusively focus on this evaluative dimension of European policies.

It would be erroneous, however, to conclude that the evaluative dimension were all there is to the analysis of the domestic legitimacy demands of European integration. Rather, such an analysis must also capture the *cognitive* dimension of these legitimacy demands. This dimension refers to the electorate's level of awareness with respect to their agent's European policies and to its attentiveness to political decisions and developments in this field. Given the limited capacity of the human mind to process external stimuli, such alertness to incoming information is a very scarce cognitive resource (Simon 1985: 301-302). The general public will therefore have to focus these scarce resources on a tightly circumscribed subset of political issues. In their role as principals, electorates will primarily evaluate their agent's performance in light of those few issues that have attracted their particular attention (Hastie 1986: 17-30; Tversky/Kahneman 1982: 11-14). In what has been described as the 'top-of-the-head' phenomenon (Taylor/Fiske 1978), general publics will evaluate a government against the benchmark of those issues which are most strongly represented in memory and which can most easily be brought to mind.

Along this line of reasoning, the cognitive dimension of the domestic legitimacy demands of European integration is analytically more fundamental than their evaluative dimension. Electorates will only be able to develop meaningful evaluations of a government's European policies and to act upon such evaluations insofar as they are cognisant of these policies in the first place (Easton 1975: 439-443). An electorate's awareness of and attention to its agent's European policy stances is thus a precondition for that electorate's ability to sanction a government's

policies in view of its evaluative judgments. The domestic legitimacy demands of European-level cooperation in terms of evaluative support for this cooperation will become more constraining for a government's European policies the more these policies have grabbed the attention of the electorate.

The cognitive dimension of domestic legitimacy demands is thus a necessary condition for these demands to constrain a government's European policy decision-making. Regardless of public opinion's evaluative content, the general public will only become the source of restrictive legitimacy demands with respect to a government's policies insofar as these policies have come to the general public's attention. At the same time, however, the cognitive dimension of domestic legitimacy demands in and of itself is only a necessary, not a sufficient condition for the restrictiveness of these demands (Ragin 2000: 90-99). Given the public's awareness of a European integration issue, a government's policy in this regard will be subject to more restrictive legitimacy demands the more the evaluative content of public opinion displays a clear-cut majority in favour or against some course of policy. On the contrary, even if European policy is at the forefront of the general public's attention, the constraining effects of the public's legitimacy demands will remain vague, diffuse and ambiguous as long as the evaluative content of public opinion on the policy is weakly embedded or more or less balanced (Graham 1994: 195-197).

An all-encompassing assessment of domestic legitimacy demands as a constraint on a government's European policy would therefore require an analytical two-step: first, it would have to account for the cognitive dimension of domestic legitimacy demands; and second, it could then move on to probe into these demands' evaluative dimension. The research interest of the present study, however, is restricted to the first step of that analytical two-step. This focus on the necessary condition for the electorate's legitimacy demands to constrain the European policy-making of governments can be justified on two closely interrelated grounds.

First, any attempt to obtain meaningful insights into the extent to which a government's European policy is constrained by legitimacy demands of the general public must fail as long as it does not build on an assessment of these demands' cognitive dimension. According to the article's theoretical contentions, the second step of the proposed two-step must ultimately remain futile without the first step. To carry through the first step without moving on to the second step, on the contrary, still allows for valuable findings on whether or not the electorate's legitimacy demands have the potential to constrain a government's European policies irrespective of public opinion's evaluative content. Thus, the article's emphasis on the cognitive dimension of domestic legitimacy demands should make for a conceptual and empirical foundation on which studies on the evaluative dimension of these legitimacy demands can fruitfully build.

Second, it is not to the evaluative dimension but to the cognitive dimension of domestic legitimacy demands that the research deficit on public opinion's role as a constraint on European policy decision-making pertains. While the field abounds in analyses of the evaluative content of public opinion on European integration (Brettschneider et al. 2003; Kernic et al. 2002; de Vreese 2007), research into the cognitive preconditions for electorates to restrict a government's room for manoeuvre in devising European policy is sparse. In that the article explicitly focuses on these cognitive preconditions, it seeks to contribute to filling the respective void in the literature.

For the purpose of empirical analysis, the cognitive dimension of domestic legitimacy demands can be operationalised by the concept of *political issue salience*. This concept is to be defined as the significance and importance that an actor ascribes to a certain issue on the political agenda in relation to other political issues (Rabinowitz et al. 1982: 41-44; Wlezien 2005: 556-561). The higher the salience of a government's European policies to its electorate is and the more attention the electorate therefore pays to the government's approach to European integration, the more a government's decision-making is constrained by the requirement to obtain the electorate's evaluative support for its European policies in order to satisfy the demands of domestic legitimacy.

Furthermore, the salience of a government's European policies can be assumed to vary, firstly, with the amount of coverage these policies enjoy in the media. The media is a crucial gatekeeper between the process of European integration and the electorate's awareness of their agent's contribution to this process. They serve as an agenda-setter for domestic debates about European policy issues and shape the relative importance that is attributed to those issues by the electorate. Due to its priming effect, the intensity of media reporting on a government's

policies in the realm of European integration also impacts upon the priority that the principals assign to these policies in their evaluation of the government's overall performance (Miller/Krosnick 1997: 259-260; Soroka 2003: 25-30). Secondly, the salience of European policy issues to an electorate will be enhanced insofar as these issues are subject to an open dissent within government or between government and opposition. Dissent within the political elite on a given issue enhances media interest in this issue and widens and polarises the domestic debate about it (Zaller 1992: 6-22). What is more, impending general elections or forthcoming referenda on European issues may both serve to accentuate existing dissent on these issues and enhance the corresponding coverage of the media thereby adding to the respective issues' salience.

It is important to clarify, however, that the concept of political issue salience does not presuppose a highly malleable, incoherent and irrational public opinion on foreign policy as it has become epitomised by the so-called *Almond-Lippmann Consensus* (Holsti 1992: 441-445). Rather, the concept rests on the assumption of boundedly rational individuals which are limited in their computational capacities and which therefore have to resort to cognitive shortcuts when forming an opinion on foreign policy issues (Simon 1997: 291-294). One of these shortcuts is indicated by the 'top-of-the-head' phenomenon which is constitutive to the cognitive dimension of domestic legitimacy demands and which enables members of the general public to minimise the costs of information gathering and to make satisfactory decisions. Therefore, the empirical finding of ups and downs in the salience of political issues to general publics does not speak to these publics irrationality but rather reflects the publics' rational response to new informational inputs on the issues' relative importance. What is more, the volatility of an issue's salience as measured in opinion polls does by no means imply that the attitudes of the public about that issue are equally volatile (Page/Shapiro 1992: 40-41). Rather, differences in the levels of an issue's public salience only reflect the amount of new information to which the general public is exposed by the media and by competing political elites. Whether or not that new information is likely to change the evaluative content of public opinion crucially depends on the extent to which it differs from pre-existing information. Thus, the effects of media reporting both on the public salience of political issues and on the public's evaluations of these issues should be most pronounced when the media transmit news that significantly differ from already familiar news and when the reporting is structured by political cleavages so that it contains dissenting and contradictory information (Page et al. 1987: 39).

Furthermore, it has to be noted that the causal relationship between the amount of an issue's coverage in the media and the existence of elite dissent on the issue on the one hand and the salience of that issue to the general public on the other hand is not unidirectional but reciprocal. It is not only that the former causes the latter, but also that the latter induces the former. Thus, the reporting of an issue in the media will on the one hand enhance that issue's public salience. On the other hand, the media tend to select those issues for coverage which they assume to have some salience within the public and among their customers in the first place (Schulz 1976). Along the same lines, it is not only that the existence of intra-elite dissent on an issue will spur that issue's salience for the general public. It is also that the dynamics of political competition tend to produce elite dissent on those issues which the elites deem to be salient within the electorate and which are therefore assumed to promise electoral rewards. Thus, the media reporting on European integration and the existence of an intra-elite dissent on European policy have to be considered both as *catalysts* and as *indicators* for the domestic salience of European issues: as catalysts for an issue's salience they help to arouse an electorate's attention for its agent's policies on the issue in question; as indicators for the salience of European issues they reflect an electorate's pre-existing attention to the policies on the respective issues. Regardless of which of these mutually reinforcing processes is predominant, the empirical observation of intense media reporting and of intra-elite dissent on European policy should in both cases point to an increased level of that policy's salience to the general public.

For the purpose of empirical analysis, the salience of political issues to electorates can be measured by the means of opinion polling and by media content analyses (Sinnott 1997: 6-7). With regard to opinion polls, the most valid indicator of issue salience is provided by aggregate data on the respondents' denomination of the most important issues on the overall political agenda. A second means to measure the salience of political issues would be to analyse the frequency and intensity of media reporting on these issues. As the salience of an issue will rise with the coverage it enjoys in the media, such analyses should allow for indirect inferences on the respective issues' salience that may compensate for the sometimes patchy and unsystematic data provided by opinion research so far (Epstein/Segal 2000: 66-67). Since our analysis could take advantage of two encompassing data sets on the

importance attached to European issues by the British and German publics, however, we confined ourselves to opinion poll data in order to infer the salience of European issues to the respective electorates.

3. Permissive Consensus vs. Explicit Endorsement: Two Ideal Types of Legitimacy Demands [↑]

Starting out from the analytic distinction between the evaluative and cognitive dimensions of domestic legitimacy, the demands for legitimacy that a government's engagement in European integration faces on the domestic level will bear closer resemblance to one of two ideal types: depending on the salience of governmental European policies to the electorate, the domestic legitimacy of these policies will rest either on a *permissive consensus* or on the *explicit endorsement* on part of the general public.

These ideal types are constituted by those combinations of different values on the cognitive and evaluative dimensions of domestic legitimacy demands which are feasible in view of the theoretical relationship between these dimensions. They thus represent theoretically consistent configurations of the two dimensions of domestic legitimacy demands and serve to highlight both the theoretical link between these dimensions and the differential impact of the two types of legitimacy demands on a government's domestic European policy decision-making leeway and its European-level negotiation strategies (George/Bennett 2005: 233-239).

It is important to note, however, that the following discussion is not meant to offer an exhaustive causal analysis of cross-national differences in the scope of governments' domestic European policy decision-making autonomy or in their European-level bargaining strategies. Beyond doubt, these differences cannot be solely attributed to the varying restrictiveness of an electorate's legitimacy demands but may also stem from a multitude of variables which are highlighted by different integration theories and which include, for example, domestic institutional set-ups, preferences of powerful societal groups, historical path-dependencies, or predominant societal ideas and norms as embedded in a country's political culture (Rosamond 2000). Therefore, the objective of the article is more modest: it makes the case that – *ceteris paribus* – different configurations of the cognitive and evaluative dimensions of an electorate's legitimacy demands have systematic and predictable effects on a government's domestic room for manoeuvre in devising its European-level negotiation positions and strategies. The article's research strategy is thus not to establish the *causes* of a social phenomenon (i.e. the scope of a government's European policy decision-making leeway and its bargaining strategies on the European level) but rather to investigate into the *effects* of a selected variable (i.e. the configuration of domestic legitimacy demands) on that phenomenon (King et al. 1994: 119-121). In view of this research interest, the article is also agnostic as to the causes that may account for differences in the public salience and evaluative support of European integration. Rather than to probe into the causes of specific values on the two dimensions of domestic legitimacy demands, the analysis takes these values as given starting points and seeks to shed light on the extent to which an electorate's legitimacy demands can be said to constrain a government's European policy decision-making leeway.

With these caveats in mind, the two ideal types of domestic legitimacy demands can be characterised as follows. On condition of *low* issue salience, a government's contribution to European integration can be accorded domestic legitimacy by way of a *permissive consensus* (Lindberg/Scheingold 1970) among the electorate. In such cases the cognitive basis for a principal evaluating its agent's policies on a given European issue is weak. The domestic legitimacy demands in terms of evaluative support which these policies have to meet are therefore low. The notion of permissive consensus encapsulates this reasoning and essentially refers to a form of legitimacy that presumes the low salience of a policy and that rests not on a principal's explicit endorsement of this policy but on its passive acquiescence with it and its willingness to let its governmental agent do as it sees fit. The existence of a permissive consensus on a government's engagement in European integration is thus relatively independent from the specific content and output of the integration process, but rather builds upon a reservoir of diffuse support for European integration in and of itself (Easton 1975: 444-446).

Insofar as a government's decision-making on its contribution to European integration is covered by a permissive consensus and as long as it remains sheltered from close evaluative scrutiny by virtue of its low domestic salience, the domestic legitimacy demands of European integration leave governments with an extensive domestic room for

manoeuvre. They thus enjoy broad domestic leeway to immerse themselves in the nuts and bolts of European-level cooperation, i.e. to wind up package-deals, to exchange mutual bargaining concessions, to engage in coalition-building and consensus-seeking and to rely on the diffuse reciprocity of institutionalised cooperation. Other things being equal, governments whose European policies are subject to a domestic permissive consensus can be assumed to pursue their preferences by the means of more flexible and pragmatic negotiation strategies than governments whose European policies face more restrictive domestic legitimacy demands. Patterns of intergovernmental cooperation which are of low domestic salience within its constituent member-states will therefore be less prone to involuntary defections and will display larger overlaps between governmental bargaining positions, rendering cooperative agreements both more likely and more stable (Lehman/McCoy 1992: 608-610; Putnam 1988: 437-439).

In cases of *high* issue salience, in contrast, a government's policies in the realm of European integration can only obtain domestic legitimacy by way of its electorate's *explicit endorsement*. On this condition, the electorate will not only pay close attention to its agent's policies and form meaningful evaluations on them, but it will also be willing to impose sanctions against the government should it come to a negative assessment of the latter's policies. In order to forestall such sanctions and to legitimatise their engagement in the process of European integration, governments are compelled in their decision-making to permanently secure sufficient specific support for their policies. What is more, it is the propensity of a government's European policies to become salient concerns of the electorate that speaks to their lack of unquestioned, generalised diffuse support on part of the general public (Easton 1975: 436-453). The only means available to governments to meet the high domestic legitimacy demands on the evaluative dimension that come with an issue's high salience is thus to bid for the electorate's specific support for their policies.

The higher the salience of European issues becomes, the closer this government's domestic decision-making leeway will be circumscribed by the imperative of securing the electorate's specific support for their engagement in the process of European integration. As a corollary of these restrictive legitimacy demands, governments will tend towards hard-line bargaining strategies on the European level. Other things being equal, they can be expected to refrain from making concessions and to be reluctant to accept compromise solutions. They should also be particularly disposed to playing to their domestic audiences by emphasising their credentials as effective guardians of the national interest (Lehman/McCoy 1992: 608-610; Moravcsik 1993: 27-31). Consequently, patterns of intergovernmental cooperation which are of high domestic salience within its constituent member states should be marked by a relatively small scope for negotiation agreements and should be prone to involuntary defections from cooperative accords.

4. The Domestic Salience of European Integration in Britain and Germany [↑]

In order to empirically illustrate our theoretical contentions, this section probes into the salience of European integration to electorates in Germany and Britain. We have thus selected two countries which are traditionally seen as polar opposites in the process of European integration: Germany as one of the EC's founding members and as a role model for a pro-integrationist member state that tends to adopt consensus-seeking and compromise-oriented bargaining strategies on the European level (Anderson 2006; Schmalz 2001); Britain, in contrast, as the eternal 'awkward partner' (George 1998) and laggard of the integration process that has proven to be prone to hard-line and obstructionist bargaining strategies in European negotiations. We can therefore assess whether these well-established differences in the overall German and British approaches to European integration come along with systematic differences in the salience of European integration to electorates in these countries that expose the respective governments to more or less restrictive domestic legitimacy demands.

This is not to argue, however, that the distinct trajectories of German and British European policy can be solely accounted for by differences in the configuration and restrictiveness of the respective public's legitimacy demands. Rather, a comprehensive account of these trajectories would certainly have to consider the rich insights of – among others – the established institutional, liberal, social-constructivist, transactional or geopolitical explanations for the two countries' different stances on the integration process (see for example Aspinwall 2004;

Katzenstein 1996; Moravcsik 1998).(5) Again, our empirical illustrations assert a more modest claim: they are employed as a ‘plausibility probe’ which is meant to establish that the hypothesized role of issue salience as a necessary condition for an electorate’s legitimacy demands to constrain governmental European policies is sufficiently plausible to warrant further empirical studies (Eckstein 1975: 108-113). For this purpose, we have selected Germany and Britain as ‘easy cases’ which display marked differences both in the public salience of European policy and in the countries’ overall approach to European integration so that they lend themselves to a congruence test between the restrictiveness of an electorate’s legitimacy demands and a government’s policies on the European level (George/Bennett 2005: 181-204).

In view of these objectives, the analysis is based on two data sets covering the years 1992 to 2005. To measure the domestic salience of European integration we used data from the poll questions: ‘What would you say is the most important issue facing Britain today?’ and ‘According to your opinion, what are currently the three major problems in Germany?’(6) Both questions are open-ended, allowing respondents to express themselves without a given range of answers and irrespective of their actual knowledge of European integration issues. Crucially, these questions are better suited to infer the salience of political issues than data obtained from respondents’ scale judgments on the importance of different issues given on a predefined list. In particular, the latter data fail to capture the relative nature of issue salience that reflects the selectivity of human attentiveness to some political issues or problems at the expense of others. Moreover, unprompted, open-ended questions are generally to be preferred over prompted, closed questions when it comes to assessing issue salience since they are better suited to reproduce the ‘top-of-the-head’ phenomenon that is central to the concept of salience.

Notwithstanding the advantages of open questions, they also pose considerable coding problems. Because questions may be perceived and understood in different ways, answers may vary widely, making the coding of answers all the more difficult. In order to minimize these problems, the questions must be phrased in such a way that they are likely to elicit comparable answers (Foddy 1993: 138). We contend that the question wordings ‘most important issue facing Britain today’ and ‘actually the three major problems in Germany’ meet this criterion in that they determine similar local spaces (*nation-wide* problems or issues) as well as similar temporal spaces (*current* problems or issues).

However, the question wording is not entirely similar.(7) Asking for the ‘most important issue’ is to some extent different from asking for a ‘major problem’, because the notions of ‘importance’ and ‘problem’ do not refer to the same thing: ‘important issues’ capture issues that enjoy a relative contentedness among the public, whereas a ‘problem’ specifically refers to something negative or something that arouses public discontent (Wlezien 2005: 556-561). The widely employed survey question on the interviewees’ designation of the ‘most important political problem’ therefore provides only a second-best indicator of salience because it mingles an issue’s perceived *importance* with its perceived *problem status*. Furthermore, Wlezien points to a potential bias in our data by concluding that the *importance* of issues remains relatively stable, whereas the *problem status* attached to these issues varies greatly over time. Along these lines, the British data (question wording: ‘most important issue’) should elicit a relatively low degree of volatility, whereas the German data (question wording: ‘major problems’) should exhibit a higher level of volatility. Allowing for these sources of potential distortions, we nonetheless consider the two data sets broadly comparable and employ them as the best available measures of issue salience to publics in Germany and Britain.

As for the British data, the Ipsos Mori institute puts all answers to its polls into 40 main issue categories, whereas the German data consist of up to 416 more specific issue categories. Since our research interest is focused on European issues, we used the accumulated Ipsos Mori category ‘Common Market, EU, Europe, Single European Currency’ and sampled all European issue categories from Forsa. As a result, our German data include all denominations referring to ‘Euro in general, Euro Exchange Rate, Euro Introduction, Admission of Turkey, Europe in general, European Unity, EU Summits, EU Enlargement, European Elections, European Election Campaigns’.

Given these differences between the British and German data, our analysis could be challenged on the grounds that the German category sample might comprise a wider range of topics than those captured in the British case. That objection cannot be dismissed completely since we do not possess the British raw data. We thus cannot rule

out the possibility that the German data represent more entries due to the multitude of included categories. Another problem may result from the unequal number of answers that were coded for the open-ended questions. In the German case, we limited our measurement to the first three entries because respondents were asked for ‘the three major problems’. Even though the Forsa codebook listed up to ten entries, we decided to drop all references after the third one. In the British case there was a two-step question wording, asking for ‘the most important issue’ and ‘other important issues’. The Ipsos Mori data do not tell us how many answers were coded for each respondent, nor do we know at which position European integration was named. So we decided not to weigh the *position* of references to European issue either in the British or in the German data set. To check the average number of answers per respondent, we calculated the overall percentage sum from all Ipsos Mori categories and obtained 257.4 answers per 100 respondents. On average, therefore, each respondent gave 2.6 answers to the combined question ‘What [...] is the most important issue’ and ‘What do you see as other important issues’. Against that background, the British findings should systematically be slightly lower than the values in the German case, where we coded three answers per respondent. Another challenge to the comparability of our data arises from the fact that our analysis resorts to two different polling institutes – Ipsos Mori and Forsa – which may operate with different sampling procedures. Some of the differences between our two data sets may thus be due to such “house effects” (Erikson/Tedin 2007: 47).⁽⁸⁾

Notwithstanding the potential methodological problems of our endeavour, we compared both data sets with regard to the *level* and the *volatility* of the salience of European integration to the respective electorates. Whereas the level of salience indicates the overall relative importance of European integration to publics in both countries, the volatility of salience captures the degree of public responsiveness to information about issues or events related to European integration. We compiled the percentages of respondents naming European integration as an important political issue. [Figure 1](#) charts the importance of European topics to the German and British publics from 1992 to 2005.

Figure 1

The first finding of our study shows that European topics are clearly of higher salience to the British electorate than to the German electorate. On average over the whole period, 16.6% of respondents in Britain ranked European integration among the most important political issues of the day, while only 3.7% of German respondents named European topics as one of the three major political problems. The average *level* of salience of European issues in Britain is thus about four times higher than in Germany. What is more, the salience of European integration in Britain is also more *volatile* than in Germany: low and high values on the UK chart alternate within short intervals, whereas the German data do not display equally pronounced differences. Both standards – average level and volatility – indicate that the British public assigns European integration much more importance than the German public and that the former is also far more responsive to major events or governmental decisions in regard to European integration than the latter. Taking into account the above mentioned biases caused by question wording and the number of coded answers which should both work in favour of higher values for Germany, we can assume that without those biases the difference between both series would be even more pronounced.

Without explaining each and every peak in our chart, we now move on to point to some of the most prominent features of our analysis. In regard to variation over time, the salience of European topics in Germany came close to zero during the 1990s. Contrary to the widespread assertion that the permissive consensus on part of the German public had already ceased to exist in the course of ratifying the Maastricht Treaty or in the mid 1990s (Göler/Jopp 2007) it was not until the introduction of the Euro in January 1999 that the German electorate did pay more attention to the notion of European integration. Issue salience reached a temporary climax in the year 2002: the highest salience of European issues in Germany – 20 per cent – was measured at the beginning of 2002, when 12 countries introduced the Euro coins and notes and again in May/June 2002. In this period, rising prices coincided with the introduction of the Euro so that the relation between the single European currency and inflationary pressures were widely discussed. The coverage of the media further fuelled the debate by coining the term “Teuro” – a play on words that caricatures the new currency’s inflationary effects. The ensuing media campaign instigated the political elite and the retail industry to convene ‘anti-teuro-summits’ which did not produce tangible political results but which were nonetheless intensely reported in the media. The “Teuro” debate

abated at the time of the general elections in September 2002 when the public salience of other issues such as the Iraq war increased. Ever since late 2002, European issues were again considered less important by the German public but their salience remained on a higher average level than during the 1990s.

In the case of Britain, we can distinguish three phases of different salience regarding EU issues: the first is marked by an increasing salience of European integration since the 1993 Maastricht Treaty up to the 1997 British general elections, which New Labour won by a landslide. Within this period, the salience of European integration increased considerably and reached its all-time high – 43 per cent – shortly before the British elections on May 1st, 1997. These data signal the end of the passive acquiescence regarding Britain's contribution to the process of European integration that the British public displayed up and until the Maastricht ratification crisis (Franklin et al. 1994). By the time of the 1997 general election, European integration had become a key dimension of inter-party competition and it was among the three issues that were accorded the highest priority by voters in these elections (Denver 2003: 102). During the last stages of the election campaign, European policy was subject to more intensive media reporting than any other policy field (Turner 2000: 209).

The second phase, which roughly covers the first half of the Blair government's tenure, is marked by very high salience values. The intense public interest in European policy in this period can be primarily attributed to the domestic debate about an introduction of the Euro. This debate culminated in two economic assessments of the government's five economic tests in 1997 and 2003 which led to marked peaks in the public salience of European integration in general (Baker/Sherrington 2004: 348-355; Howarth 2004). Prior to the 2001 general election, the conservative party put their opposition to the single European currency at the heart of their election campaign and thereby induced another conspicuous upswing in the salience of European integration to the British public (Collings/Seldon 2001: 70-71; Geddes 2002: 149-151). As a determinant of individual voting decisions, the electoral significance of European policy in 2001 was second only following the health policy (Clarke et al. 2004: 90). This period serves to exemplify the reciprocal relationship between the existence of elite dissent on European policy and the policy's salience to the public. On the one hand, the conservative opposition made the Euro the foremost theme of its campaign precisely because it deemed the issue to be sufficiently salient within the general public to reap electoral rewards from its popular stance against introducing the single European currency (Cowley/Quayle 2002: 52-58). On the other hand, the conservative party's strategy of accentuating the European policy dissent between government and opposition has reinforced the electorate's attention on this issue area in the run-up to the 2001 elections.

The third phase began after the second assessment of the five tests in 2003 and continues up to today. It exhibits a lower *level* of European issues' salience while the chart is still marked by a high *volatility*: there are some peaks in issue salience sparked by the debate about the European constitution, but the general importance of European issues has declined. For one, this finding speaks to the effects of New Labour's policy of 'delayism' (Aspinwall 2003: 363) with regard to the Euro which prevented this issue from moving to the top of the agenda of British politics after 2003 (Smith 2006: 166-167). For another, the decreased salience of European issues for the British public reflects the lower priority attached to European policy by the conservative opposition's electoral strategy after the 2001 general elections (Bale 2006: 388-391; Geddes 2005: 290-291). Another factor contributing to the downward trend of the European issue's salience to the British electorate might be a crowding-out effect that stems from the starkly increased importance attached to defence and terrorism issues by the British public in the course of 9/11 (Oppermann/Höse 2007: 163-164).

The differential importance attached to European issues by electorates in Germany and Britain can also be inferred from an analysis of these issues' salience at the time of European and national elections. European elections qualify as Europe-wide events that occurred in both countries at the same time and that are accorded the status of national second-order elections in both countries. Nevertheless, there are large differences in the overall salience of European issues at the time of the three European elections during our period of study. In 1994, there was a difference of 11 percentage points, in 1999 of 32 percentage points and in 2004 the British respondents put 10 percentage points more importance on European issues than the German respondents.⁽⁹⁾ Not only is the level of salience of European issues at the time of European elections higher in the UK than in Germany. These elections also induce far more pronounced upswings in these issues' salience in Britain than in Germany which indicates a greater responsiveness to European election campaigns on part of the British electorate.

Turning to national elections, it is evident that European topics have been a more prominent campaign issue in the UK than in Germany. The largest difference emerged in 1997/98: while European policy was among the most important electoral issues in the 1997 British election, it did not figure as a noteworthy campaign issue in the German general elections of 1998 in which the Social Democratic Party of Gerhard Schröder prevailed over the longstanding chancellor Helmut Kohl and his Christian Democratic Union (Bulmer et al. 2000: 96). What is more, German elections tend to crowd European issues off the agenda, replacing them with domestic themes such as the state of the economy and unemployment. In the UK, on the contrary, the 1997 and 2001 election campaigns served to heighten the electorate's awareness of European issues. This is not the least due to the fact that European issues such as the Euro tend to be far less contested between major political parties in Germany than in the British system of adversarial politics. In contrast to the starkly anti-integrationist campaigns of the British conservative party in the 1997 and 2001 elections, no major German party has ever campaigned on a comparably eurosceptic platform. The only current European issue that entails an outspoken dissent among the German political elite is the question of Turkey's admission to the EU (Bulmer et al. 2000: 10; Göler/Jopp 2007: 464).

5. Conclusion [↑]

The article's main contention is that the restrictiveness of an electorate's legitimacy demands with respect to a government's European policy decision-making crucially depends on the cognitive dimension of these legitimacy demands, i.e. on the salience of European policy to the general public. Building on the distinction between a cognitive and an evaluative dimension to domestic legitimacy demands, we have argued that the cognitive dimension captures a necessary condition for the evaluative content of public opinion to constrain a government's European policy decision-making leeway and thus for the overall restrictiveness of an electorate's legitimacy demands. In order to clarify the relationship between these two dimensions of legitimacy demands and to highlight the varying impact of different configurations of domestic legitimacy demands on a government's domestic room for manoeuvre in its European policy-making, the article has then devised two ideal types of domestic legitimacy demands: depending on the salience of European policy to the general public, these ideal types can be referred to as legitimacy by *permissive consensus* and as legitimacy by *explicit endorsement*.

In order to empirically substantiate the article's theoretical contentions, we have analysed the cognitive dimension of domestic legitimacy demands in Britain and Germany. These cases approximate the two ideal types and feature marked differences regarding the respective electorate's ability to constrain their governmental agent's European policy decision-making leeway.

For the British public, the data reveal a relatively strong attention to European policy and a pronounced responsiveness to events and developments related to European integration. Thus, the necessary condition for the electorate to be able to sanction the government's European policy is fulfilled in the British case. In order to forestall such sanctions and to obtain sufficient domestic legitimacy for their European policies, British governments have to actively seek the electorate's *explicit endorsement* of these policies. This kind of endorsement requires the specific support of the electorate for governmental European policies, which in turn limits the government's domestic decision-making leeway. Such restrictive legitimacy demands entail a relatively small scope for negotiation agreements and induce hard-line bargaining strategies and involuntary defections from cooperative accords. The cognitive dimension of domestic legitimacy demands thus adds to an account of Britain's reluctance from making bargaining concessions on the European level and its indisposition to accepting compromise solutions in European negotiations.

In contrast, the German electorate attributes a relatively low salience to European integration issues, in particular prior to the introduction of the Euro. The cognitive basis for evaluating the German government's European policies is therefore weak and the domestic legitimacy demands that these policies have to meet in terms of evaluative support are low. The pro-integrationist stances of past German governments could rely on the passive acquiescence of the electorate and build upon a reservoir of diffuse support within the German public for the integration process in itself. The domestic legitimacy of German European policy therefore largely rests on a *permissive consensus* on part of the electorate leaving German governments with a relatively large domestic decision-making leeway in regard to European integration. This broad room for manoeuvre of German governments may add to an explanation of Germany's role as a pro-integrationist member state that tends to adopt

consensus-seeking and compromise-oriented bargaining strategies on the European level.

As opposed to the low salience of European issues to the German electorate, however, these issues' salience to members of the German Bundestag is relatively high (Göler/Jopp 2007; Jäger et al. 2006). According to a 2005/2006 survey among German MPs, European integration ranks as the most salient foreign policy issue within the German Bundestag. What is more, almost 80% of MPs considered the EU to be the most important international organisation for German foreign policy (Jäger et al. 2006). Since much of a parliament's legislative activities have a European dimension to them, its members are compelled to pay closer attention to European issues than is the general public. This twofold finding – low salience of European issues among the German electorate but high salience of these issues among the members of the German parliament – speaks to a 'parliamentarisation' of European integration in German politics (Janning 2007: 759). Taking account of the cognitive dimension of domestic legitimacy demands, the main domestic constraints on the German government's European policies may stem less from the evaluation of these policies on part of the electorate but rather from the respective preferences of the government's second principal, its parliamentary support coalition.

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Endnotes

(1) The article builds on a paper presented at the Nordic International Studies Association (NISA) Conference 'Power, Vision, and Order in World Politics', University of Southern Denmark, Odense, 23-25 May 2007. We would like to thank Christoph Hagen, Anna Holzscheiter, Alexander Höse, Jörg Jacobs, Thomas Jäger, Werner Wouters and two anonymous reviewers for their most useful comments and suggestions.

(2) The article exclusively focuses on the legitimacy demands that European policies face on the domestic level. It does not extend to the international-level legitimacy of European integration which may accrue from a consensus perception of this cooperation as legitimate among the principal state and non-state actors in international politics (Schneider 2005: 2-9).

(3) In parliamentary democracies, the second principal of governmental agents is the latter's parliamentary support coalition. Governments in parliamentary systems not only emanate from a majority in parliament but they can also at any time be unseated by votes of no-confidence (Laver/Shepsle 1996: 3-42).

(4) At the same time, the input-legitimacy of European integration also rests on the democratic accountability of governments on the domestic level. Political decisions possess input-legitimacy to the extent that they can be traced back via democratic processes to the preferences of the members of a political community. Even formally democratic procedures will only supply political decisions with this kind of legitimacy, if they can build upon a sense of community or a collective identity among those individuals that are to be bound by these decisions. As this combination of democratic process and sense of political community does not (yet) exist beyond the nation-state, it is only via the democratic scrutiny of governments on the domestic level that European-level cooperation between governments can obtain legitimacy at the input stages of decision-making (Scharpf 1999: 16-28).

(5) Some of these explanatory factors, however, are indirectly reflected in the cognitive and/or evaluative dimensions of an electorate's legitimacy demands. For example, the German 'consensus model' of democracy

should be less prone to the politicization of European integration than the British ‘Westminster model’ (Lijphart 1999: 9-47). The German type of democracy should thus be less likely to induce high levels of European policy’s public salience than the British type of democracy.

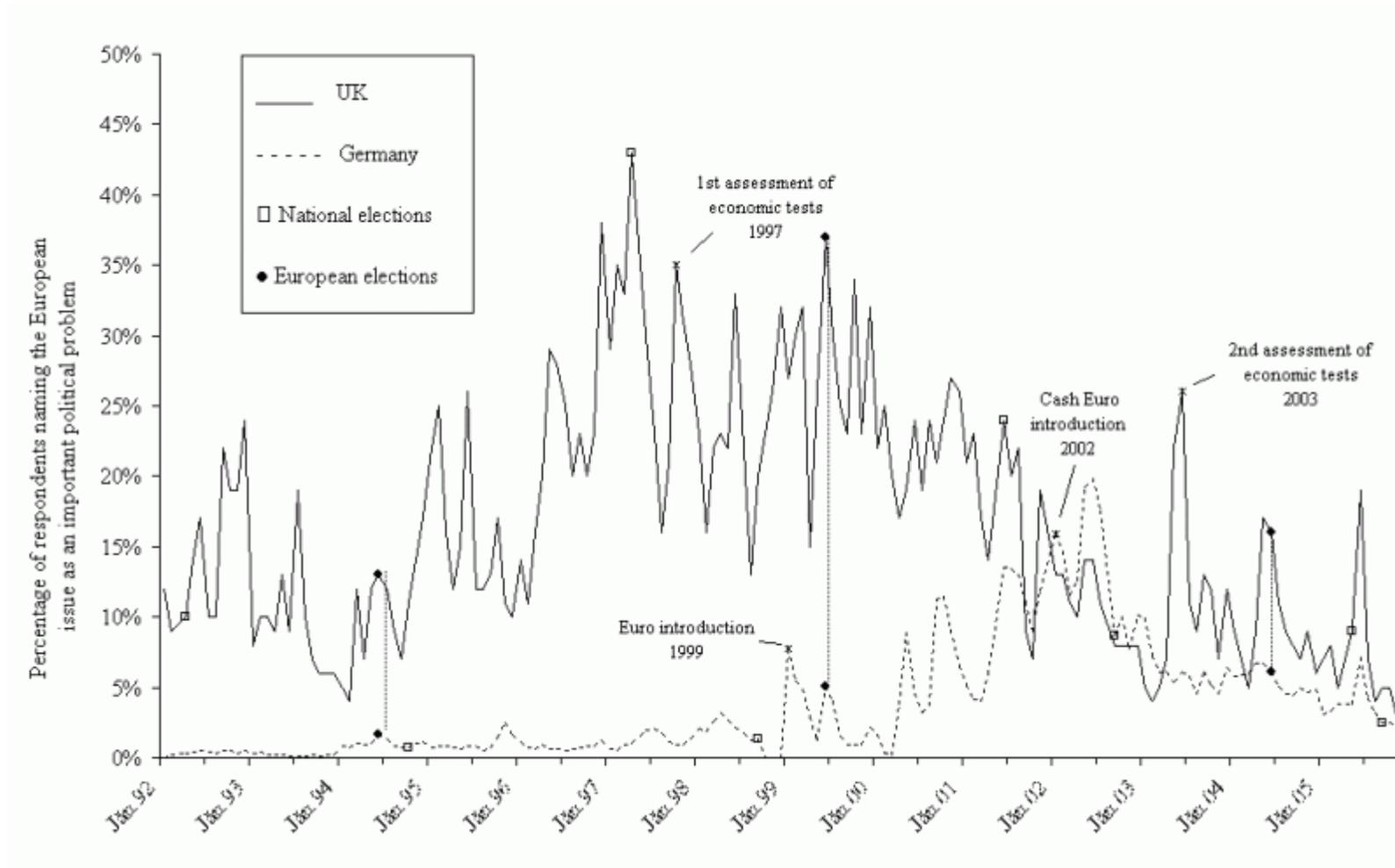
(6) UK data from Ipsos Mori Political Monitor (2007); Unprompted, combined answers to the questions: ‘What would you say is the most important issue facing Britain today?’ and ‘What do you see as other important issues facing Britain today?’; German data from Forsa Bus (1992-2005): ‘*Was sind Ihrer Meinung nach in Deutschland zur Zeit die drei größten Probleme?*’ The Forsa data used in this analysis have been documented and formatted by the *Zentralarchiv für empirische Sozialforschung*, Cologne, Germany.

(7) This shortcoming could have been avoided by using multinational surveys such as the Eurobarometer. Unfortunately, the Eurobarometer covers the question ‘What do you think are the two most important issues facing (our country) at the moment?’ only from Spring 2003 (Standard EB 59) onwards and thus does not allow for adequate longitudinal analyses.

(8) Further measurement problems from which our data sets may have suffered include sampling errors, the limitations inherent to survey responses and the „trade-off between preserving the informational value of [...] each respondent’s opportunities for multiple responses, and the presentation of simple summary statistics“ (Zaller/Feldman 2001: 169).

(9) This is visualised by vertical lines [Figure 1](#).

Figure 1



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