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## **Abstract**

This chapter explores the effect of the interplay of personal characteristics and news coverage on issue salience during the 2009 to 2015 period and during the election campaign in 2013. We selected four topics that played a considerable role during this period: the labor market, pensions and healthcare, immigration, and the financial crisis. The evidence from pooled cross-sectional data and panel data supports the notion that news coverage affects citizens' issue salience. For obtrusive issues, news coverage does not play as large a role as for rather remote topics like the financial crisis and immigration. The results also lend credence to the idea that political predilections and other individual differences are related to issue salience and constrain the impact of news coverage on voters' issue salience. However, the evidence for the interplay of individual differences and media coverage proved mild at best.

Keywords: agenda-setting; political predispositions; panel survey; multilevel analysis; media effects; public agenda

# **Just Like Leaves in the Wind? Exploring the Effect of the Interplay of Media Coverage and Personal Characteristics on Issue Salience**

Agatha Kratz and Harald Schoen

## **Introduction**

After the 2009 federal election, a series of international events and crises captured the attention of the German media, politicians, and the public. Soon after the election, the European financial and sovereign debt crisis became the overriding issue. Although a continuous crisis, it varied considerably in intensity. For example, each time an EMU member state ran into difficulties servicing its debt, European summits had to decide on measures to cope with these problems. These summits received a large amount of attention in the media (e.g., Picard 2015). At the beginning of 2011, the nuclear disaster in Fukushima caught the public's attention for a short while (e.g., Meyer and Schoen 2015). Four years later, the exodus of refugees from the Middle East, their flight to Europe, and their influx into Germany and other countries became the overriding topic. According to the agenda-setting hypothesis (McCombs and Shaw 1972), heightened media attention translates into an increase in the proportion of voters deeming the respective issue salient. Based on this line of reasoning, the conclusion that these heavily covered events attracted the attention of numerous voters is straightforward. Provided issue ownership (Budge and Farlie 1983a; Petrocik 1996) works, media coverage of these events may also affect individual-level vote choice and aggregate-level distributions of party preferences.

However, this pattern of thought might overstate the role of media coverage in affecting voting behavior. Leaving aside the strong but not overwhelming effect of party affiliation on the attribution of issue competency to political parties, endogeneity problems may set in at an even earlier stage (e.g., Bellucci 2006; Stubager and Slothuus 2013). The agenda-setting hypothesis claims that the mass media increase the importance of certain issues for citizens by

facilitating their accessibility in the working memory (Kim et al. 2002). Yet voters differ in their self-interest, values, social identity, and other personal characteristics that might condition the susceptibility to agenda-setting effects in the first place. Consider the case of immigration. Depending on their predispositions to other cultures, people may differ in their inclination to consider the influx of immigration a problem. Therefore, individual-level characteristics might affect issue salience by serving as a moderator variable conditioning the impact of media coverage on perceptions of issue salience (Erbring et al. 1980; Rössler 1997). In some cases, voters may even continue to consider certain topics important and others less important regardless of media coverage. In a nutshell, media coverage could be less powerful in affecting public opinion and voting behavior than implied by the original agenda-setting hypothesis.

This chapter aims at illuminating the interplay of agenda-setting and personal characteristics. First, we discuss the agenda-setting hypothesis and the effect of the interplay of personal characteristics and media coverage on issue salience in more depth. Building on this reasoning, we propose testable hypotheses. After a brief description of the data used to infer the salience of political issues in the media and in public opinion from 2009 to 2015, we present the results from analyses using pooled cross-sectional data as well as panel data. Our results show that voter characteristics do indeed influence the perception of political problems to a considerable degree. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the implications and limitations of our findings.

## **Theory**

The agenda-setting hypothesis relies on a set of related assumptions. Due to an “accessibility bias” in information processing, information that can be easily retrieved from memory tends to dominate our judgments (Kahneman et al. 1982; Iyengar 1990). Therefore, when asked for a judgment, individuals use only a tiny sample of the information stored in their memory (Zaller

1992). As cognitive misers, citizens will usually base their decisions on the easily accessible memories that have been activated often and recently. By extensive news coverage the mass media can facilitate retrieval from memory and increase the weight of certain issues in comparison to others. Hence, highly accessible information is perceived as more important (Bizer and Krosnick 2001). As a result, when asked about the most important national problem, respondents will have those issues foremost in their mind that have the highest news coverage rate at the moment. Since news stories tend to be framed as problems and are negative in tone (Soroka 2014: ch. 5), they seem to be a convenient source to look for an answer.

The empirical results so far are ambiguous, however. The strong agenda-setting effects found in the groundbreaking studies could only be replicated when using aggregate-level data (McCombs and Shaw 1972; Funkhouser 1973; Gonzenbach 1992; Quiring 2004). In contrast, empirical studies focusing on the micro level showed small, if any, effects (e.g., Erbring et al. 1980; Iyengar and Kinder 1987; Rössler 1997). This difference in findings could reflect problems stemming from ecological fallacy (Rössler 2008). At the same time, it lends credence to the notion that the causal relationship between news coverage and issue salience is much more complex than prior research suggested.

Based on a “mirror-image assumption” (Erbring et al. 1980), the initial studies compared rank-ordered sets of issues from the public and the media agenda. Critics quickly voiced the objection that agenda setting could vary across issues. In particular, agenda-setting effects might be limited if citizens know issues from everyday life and are personally affected by them. By contrast, the amount and intensity of news coverage might be powerful for unobtrusive issues. However, empirical evidence indicates that even for these issues the results are ambivalent rather than clear-cut (e.g., Zucker 1978; Demers et al. 1989; Soroka 2002b). Looked at from a theoretical perspective, the inconclusiveness of the existing findings suggests that susceptibility to media coverage of certain issues varies across individuals (Rössler 1997). One

way of including this idea is to bring the notion of ‘issue publics’ (Converse 1964; Krosnick 1990b; Glasgow 1999) into the analysis of agenda-setting effects.

Issue salience refers to the importance and weight individuals attach to certain information (Wlezien 2005: 557–9). People differ in the degree they care about specific topics. Boninger et al. (1995) suggest that three factors may drive these individual differences: self-interest, identification with a social group, and core values. Due to a strong connection to central concepts of the self, individuals think about salient issues more often and attach strong feelings to them. Therefore, personally salient issues are inert and highly accessible in memory (Higgins and King 1981; Lavine et al. 1996; Bizer and Krosnick 2001).

Being a member of an issue public could affect an individual’s perception of important national problems and agenda-setting effects via several paths. First, there is an above-average likelihood that people will receive information about personally important issues in the media and will consume them with increased attention (Lavine et al. 2000). Second, personal characteristics affect the perception of issues as important and as problems. The widely used question wording “What is the most important problem facing the country at the moment?” activates chronically as well as temporarily accessible issues (Wlezien 2005; Min et al. 2007; Johns 2010). The latter part of the question stresses national issues recently covered by the media. The opening part asks for an evaluation of importance and problem status of these issues. The assessment of importance is based on the personal salience of the temporarily accessible issues recently mentioned in the news. Depending on whether the news displays a state of affairs that an individual deems desirable, she or he will perceive a problem. What is desirable and which issue is the most important depends in turn on core values, self-interest, and the group an individual identifies with. The definition of problems thus results from the interplay of contextual and individual-level factors.

Against this backdrop, it is straightforward to expect that individual-level characteristics play a role in conditioning susceptibility to agenda-setting effects. In cases of limited

susceptibility, predispositions and other voter characteristics may make people unresponsive to media coverage and inclined to stick to their long-held concerns. Moreover, individual-level factors could make some people eager to consider a problem quite early on, whereas others become late adopters, and still others disregard it completely. By implication, individual-level characteristics should be related to issue salience from a cross-sectional perspective. Additional complexities arise from the notion that relevant individual-level characteristics vary across substantive policies and their impact might depend on the topics. Furthermore, the amount of coverage dealing with political problems might make a difference.

Based on the arguments stated above, we will explore the role of media coverage and individual-level characteristics in affecting German voters' perceptions of political problems during the 2009 to 2015 period and during the 2013 federal election campaign. We selected four topics that played a considerable role during this period: the labor market, pensions and healthcare, immigration, and the financial crisis. The former two issues are obtrusive for many people, whereas the latter two are rather remote from citizens' day-to-day lives. Therefore, media coverage is expected to play a larger role in the salience of the latter issues than the former. During campaigns, media coverage competes with parties' campaign efforts for voters' attention (see Chapter 2). More specifically, the 2013 campaign focused on candidates and party politics, while debates about issues other than the financial crisis played only a minor role (Krewel 2014). Accordingly, except for the financial crisis, we expect rather small agenda-setting effects during the 2013 campaign.

In addition, individual-level characteristics may affect issue salience. To begin with, labor market issues like precarious employment, wages, and unemployment have been shown to be of higher personal salience for temporarily unemployed, low-educated persons as well as for union members (Erbring et al. 1980; Iyengar and Kinder 1987). Moreover, adherents of the SPD and the Left Party might pay more attention to labor market issues since this policy dimension is associated with these parties. Pension policy should be salient for older people

who are currently receiving retirement pensions, as well as for less educated individuals and women, since both of these groups are at a higher risk of poverty in old age. In the public debate in Germany, healthcare, nursing care, and pensions are strongly interconnected, hence we consider them jointly in our analysis.

In the case of immigration, we expect persons who judge another culture solely by the standards of his or her own culture, i.e., who are ethnocentric, to be more susceptible to news about migration and asylum policy. Younger people especially have been found to be less concerned about immigration and to place greater value on cultural diversity in society (Hainmueller and Hiscox 2007). The Green Party campaigns for a diverse and tolerant society and emphasizes the positive aspects of immigration. Accordingly, persons identifying with the Green Party should name immigration less often as an important national problem.

Turning to the financial and sovereign debt crisis, a weak identification with the European Union and disapproval of public debt and redistribution have been found to influence attitudes related to this topic, as well as probably increasing its issue salience (Rudnik and Schoen 2015). Because German news coverage regarding the financial crisis focused on Greece, ethnocentrism might play a role as well. The rescue packages for Greece and other indebted EMU member countries were especially disputed among the rank and file of the CDU and CSU. Thus, we expect a higher sensitivity to news about the financial crisis among CDU/CSU identifiers. We proceed by testing these hypotheses.

## **Data and Methodology**

For our analyses of the interplay of personal characteristics and news coverage as an influence on voters' perceptions of political problems, we relied on two individual-level datasets which we merged with information about media coverage. To begin with, we utilized data from GLES Long-Term Online Trackings (Rattinger et al. 2015b, 2015c, 2015d; Roßteutscher et al. 2015,

2016a, 2016b, 2016c) and merged them with the GLES Long-Term Media Content Dataset (Roßteutscher et al. 2016d). We analyzed twenty-three tracks conducted between December 2009 and December 2015 (T8–T30: N=25,687). The Media Content Data cover news content of three national newspapers and two weekly news magazines in Germany four weeks before the start of a track. This research design enables us to control the causal order of media discourse and issue salience. The relative media salience of an issue was measured by the share of articles (including more than 100 words) that mention the respective issue at least twice.

Pooled cross-section data, however, raise endogeneity issues. To address these, we additionally employed GLES panel data collected during the German federal election campaigns in 2009 and 2013 (Rattinger et al. 2014). The panel was conducted in seven waves, where six waves took place before and one took place after the 2013 federal election. We considered only those respondents that also participated in the panel survey in 2009 (N=1,025), because this strategy enabled us to measure voter characteristics exogenously to the 2013 campaign period. The corresponding media content was extracted from the GLES Campaign Media Content Analysis Data 2013 for television (Rattinger et al. 2015a), capturing news coverage of major public and commercial TV stations. We merged the panel survey data with the average news coverage of an issue ten days prior to the date of the interview, allowing a greater accuracy of assignment than in the tracking dataset.<sup>1</sup>

These data enable us to examine the effect of the interplay of media coverage and individual-level factors on issue salience in two different settings and with two different research designs. The panel data permit us to capitalize on within-subject variation over time during a campaign period comprising sixteen weeks. The pooled cross-section data covers a period of six years and provides more variation, but suffers from endogeneity problems. We

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<sup>1</sup> The objection that using TV and newspaper coverage may lead to differences in results does not prove valid for the panel analysis. After all, news coverage in both channels of communication relies virtually on the same sources.



are thus in a position to tackle the substantive question from two different angles and have to keep in mind the specifics of the data and research design when interpreting the results.

In order to measure issue salience within the electorate, we utilized the well-known survey question: “What is the most important problem facing the country at the moment?” Unlike many previous studies we also included issues named as the second most important problem. To be sure, in some cases the first issue that comes to mind is likely to be more chronically accessible than the issues named thereafter. When asked about the most important problem, however, some people named more than one issue. Accordingly, to take only one mention into consideration might be too restricting a criterion and might run the risk of underestimating agenda-setting effects in the electorate. For each topic, we created a dummy variable indicating whether the respective issue was named by the respondent as most important or second most important problem.<sup>2</sup> While this strategy has been widely used in prior research, this binary measure limits variation in perceived issue salience to a dichotomous variable, even though issue salience might be a continuous variable for many voters. By limiting the variation in issue salience, this procedure may undermine the potential for finding strong effects of media coverage and personal characteristics on issue salience.

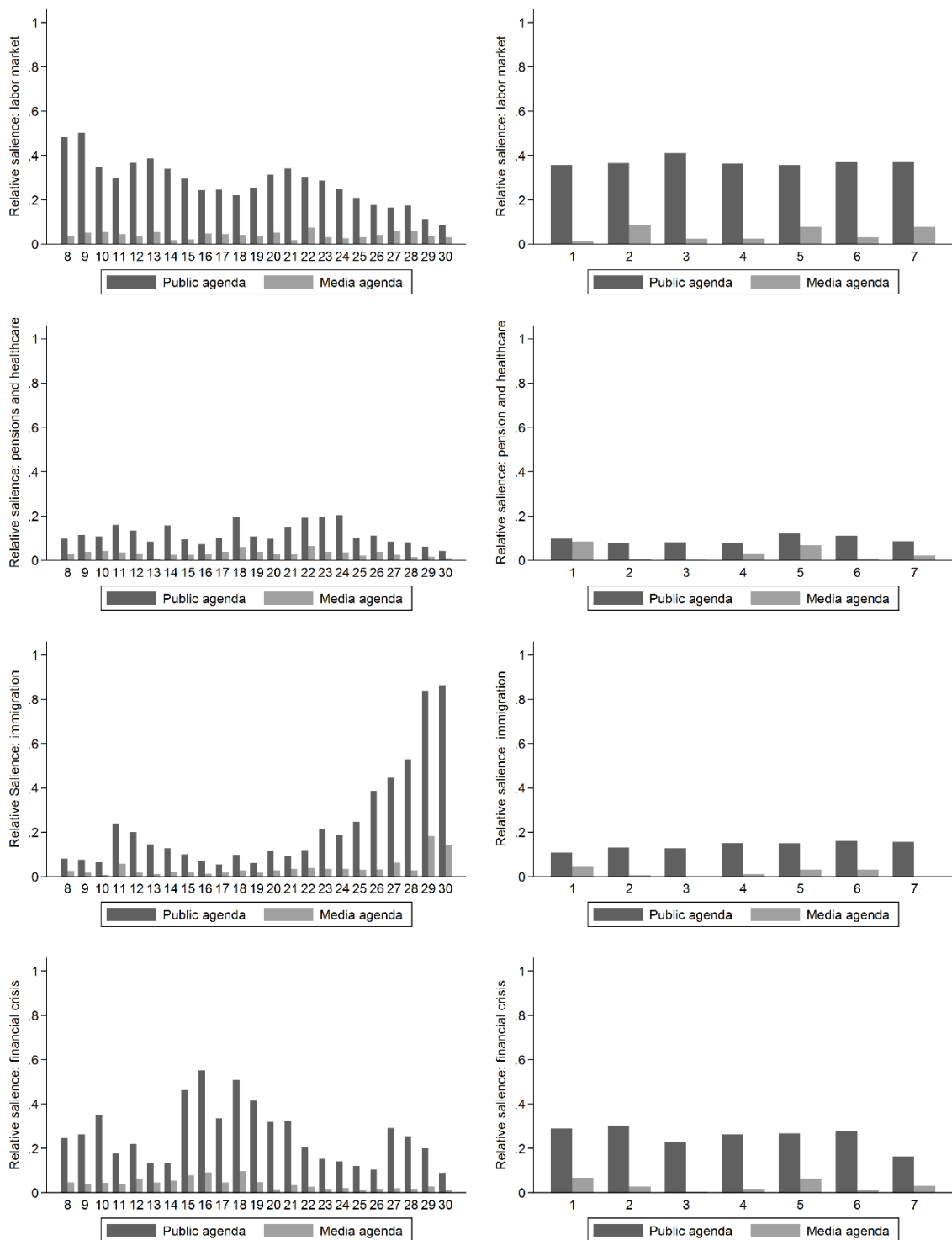
The four bar plots on the left-hand side of Figure 3.1 report the public agenda and the news coverage for the tracking surveys 8 through 30 concerning the four selected topics, whereas the bar plots on the right-hand side include the respective information for the 2013 campaign period. The evidence suggests that the European debt crisis and labor market issues were the most heavily covered topics during the 2009 to 2014 period. With regard to the European debt crisis there seems to be a correspondence between changes in the public agenda and in the news coverage. However, the change in frequency of labor market issues named by the electorate

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<sup>2</sup> In order to avoid substantive conclusions that hinge upon contestable assumptions, we ran alternative models. Results do not critically depend on whether the most important problem, the second most important problem, or both are considered. One notable exception is immigration, as described below.

does not appear to be linked to its coverage in the media. Although the financial crisis had only a limited effect on the labor market in Germany, the peaks of relative salience of labor market issues at the end of 2009 and in spring 2010 suggest that many citizens feared that the crisis might affect the German employment situation. For pensions and healthcare, the relative salience is lower but the correspondence between changes in the public agenda and media coverage is higher. This is also the case for immigration until fall 2014 (Tracking 25). In the following tracking surveys, relative salience of immigration issues in the public showed a continuous increase while the media coverage remained unchanged at first. The amount of news coverage followed suit in summer 2015 when the German government decided to open the borders for refugees. Since over 80 percent of the respondents perceived immigration as salient in the last tracking surveys and the issue changed its symbolic meaning during 2015, we expect to find only a minor moderating influence of predispositions for this issue.

Figure 3.1 Relative salience of issues in public opinion and in the media (left-hand side: Online Trackings: 2009 – 2015; right-hand side: Online Election Campaign Panel 2013)



Notes: Public agenda=issue has been named as most or second most important problem. x-axis displays the number of tracking and the number of wave in 2013, respectively.

A closer look at the bar plots for the distribution during the election campaign in 2013 on the right-hand side of Figure 3.1 reveals a similar pattern. Labor market issues and the financial crisis have been deemed most important by the electorate. At the same time, the evidence hints at a considerable discrepancy in the variation in issue salience between media coverage and voters during the campaign in 2013. As noted above, this may reflect peculiarities of political communication during campaign periods in general. Likewise, differences in the collection of survey data using cross-sectional and panel data might make a difference.

The data from the 2013 campaign survey enable us to take a look at intra-subject variation in issue salience. Table 3.1 reports the distribution of panel respondents in terms of the number of mentions of the four topics covered in our analysis. In order to further explore the stability of issue salience over time, Table 3.1 also includes the respective information for respondents who mentioned the respective issue at least two times in the 2009 panel survey. The evidence demonstrates that roughly three quarters of respondents never mentioned pensions and healthcare or immigration as an important problem during the seven panel waves. Things look different for the remaining two topics. To begin with, some 50 percent of the 2013 respondents mentioned the financial crisis at least once. Labor market issues were perceived as important by over 60 percent. More than 70 percent of the respondents who mentioned the labor market at least twice in 2009 also mentioned it in 2013. Immigration was named by some 25 percent of the 2013 respondents, over 50 percent of which deemed this topic problematic in 2009. Similar patterns apply to pensions and healthcare: more than 40 percent of the respondents who had mentioned the topic more than once in 2009 named it again in 2013. These results hint at considerable stability within individuals in the short and medium term.

Table 3.1 Frequency of naming an issue as an important problem in the seven waves in the Online Election Campaign Panel 2013

Labor market		0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Total
I	n	367	154	94	83	63	52	64	72	949
	%	39	16	10	9	7	5	7	8	100
II	n	156	98	64	59	53	44	56	64	594
	%	26	17	11	10	9	7	9	11	100
Pensions and healthcare		0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Total
I	n	736	107	38	20	17	9	14	8	949
	%	78	11	4	2	2	1	1	1	100
II	n	91	25	8	4	4	4	9	7	152
	%	60	16	5	3	3	3	6	5	100
Immigration		0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Total
I	n	710	73	50	26	27	14	29	20	949
	%	75	8	5	3	3	1	3	2	100
II	N	47	10	10	5	8	6	13	12	111
	%	42	9	9	5	7	5	12	11	100
Financial crisis		0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Total
I	n	478	185	72	51	40	41	46	36	949
	%	50	19	8	5	4	4	5	4	100

Note: Row II displays frequency for panelists who have named the issue more than once in 2009.

Turning to independent variables, the Online Tracking Dataset provides only a limited selection of variables suitable to capture political predispositions (for the independent variables and their coding in the two datasets, see Table 3.A1 in the Appendix).<sup>3</sup> We thus employ left–right self-placement as a proxy to measure ethnocentrism and attitudes toward redistribution regardless of its shortcomings. Attitudes toward public debt and identification with the European Union are only available in the panel dataset. To create independent variables that are exogenous to the 2013 panel survey, we rely on information about predispositions and voter characteristics from the first panel carried out in 2009. The only voter characteristic in the panel analysis that has been measured in 2013 is the binary coded variable for unemployment. If they are not part of an interaction anyway, we include the control variables sex, formal education, age, and party identification in all regressions.

<sup>3</sup> For descriptive statistics, see Table 3.A2 and Table 3.A3 in the Appendix.

## **The Impact of Media Coverage and Voter Characteristics on Issue Salience**

In order to explore the effect of the interplay of media coverage and voter characteristics on issue salience, we conducted logistic regression analyses. Using the pooled tracking data, we ran multilevel models with relative news coverage of the respective topic as the only level II variable. We centered these macro-level variables at their grand mean. A unit is thus defined as a change of ten percentage points in news coverage. In order to ease interpretation of the cross-level interaction effects the continuous independent variables on level I are centered at their within-cluster mean (see Enders and Tofighi 2007). In addition, we conducted three kinds of analyses using panel data. We ran fixed-effects panel regressions to gauge the impact of changes in news coverage on intra-subject changes in issue salience and the conditioning role of voter characteristics. Fixed-effects panel regression draws only on individuals exhibiting at least one change in the dependent variable. Leaving aside the considerable decrease in the number of observations, this specification implies that we cannot examine whether voter characteristics play a role in making a topic continuously salient or non-salient. To explore these possibilities, we regressed a dummy variable capturing whether respondents mentioned a topic at least once or not at all throughout the panel waves on voter characteristics. Likewise, we ran a logistic regression with a dependent variable indicating whether respondents mentioned a topic in all seven panel waves as (second) most important problem.

Table 3.2 Direct effects of predispositions and agenda-setting effects on national issue salience (multilevel logistic regressions)

Most important problem:	Labor market		Pensions and healthcare		Immigration		Financial crisis	
Level I								
Strength of party identification:								
CDU/CSU	-0.01	(0.01)	0.03**	(0.01)	-0.01	(0.01)	0.06**	(0.01)
SPD	0.05**	(0.01)	0.03**	(0.01)	-0.02	(0.01)	0.05**	(0.01)
FDP	-0.06**	(0.03)	0.01	(0.02)	-0.04	(0.02)	0.09**	(0.02)
Green Party	-0.03*	(0.01)	0.00	(0.01)	-0.05**	(0.01)	-0.02	(0.02)
Left Party	0.09**	(0.02)	0.01	(0.01)	-0.03	(0.02)	-0.10**	(0.02)
Age	-0.03	(0.02)	0.06**	(0.01)	-0.02	(0.01)	0.04**	(0.02)
Female	0.09**	(0.01)	0.02**	(0.00)	0.03**	(0.01)	-0.03**	(0.01)
Education:								
Intermediate	-0.03**	(0.01)	-0.01*	(0.01)	-0.01*	(0.01)	0.01	(0.01)
High	-0.09**	(0.01)	-0.03**	(0.01)	-0.04**	(0.01)	0.02**	(0.01)
Unemployed	0.12**	(0.01)						
Union membership	0.02*	(0.01)						
Left–right self-placement					0.21**	(0.02)	0.09**	(0.02)
Level II								
News coverage	-0.04	(0.15)	0.24**	(0.05)	0.34**	(0.04)	0.36**	(0.08)
ICC in Random Intercept Only Model	0.08	(0.02)	0.05	(0.02)	0.33	(0.07)	0.13	(0.03)
ICC in Random Intercept Fixed Slope Model	0.08	(0.02)	0.02	(0.01)	0.13	(0.03)	0.07	(0.02)
N individuals	20,568		20,933		19,152		19,152	
N groups	23		23		23		23	

Notes: \* p < 0.05; \*\* p < 0.01. Random Intercept and Fixed Slope Models. Entries are average marginal effects with standard errors in parentheses.

Table 3.3 Direct effects of personal characteristics on national issue salience (average marginal effects from binary logistic regressions)

	Labor market		Pensions and healthcare		Immigration		Financial crisis	
	Model I	Model II	Model I	Model II	Model I	Model II	Model I	Model II
Strength of party ID								
CDU/CSU	0.09 (0.06)	-0.01 (0.05)	0.01 (0.05)	0.02 (0.02)	0.01 (0.05)	-0.03 (0.03)	0.17* (0.08)	0.03 (0.03)
SPD	0.06 (0.07)	-0.05 (0.05)	0.09 (0.06)	0.01 (0.03)	-0.04 (0.06)	-0.02 (0.03)	0.01 (0.08)	-0.05 (0.05)
FDP	-0.00 (0.09)	-0.12 (0.09)	-0.10 (0.10)	0.01 (0.03)	0.06 (0.08)	0.01 (0.04)	0.21 (0.12)	0.04 (0.05)
Green Party	-0.10 (0.08)	-0.09 (0.07)	-0.02 (0.07)	0.03 (0.03)	0.00 (0.09)	-0.01 (0.06)	-0.02 (0.10)	-0.08 (0.07)
Left Party	0.22* (0.10)	0.05 (0.07)	-0.08 (0.10)	0.01 (0.04)	-0.09 (0.10)	-0.11 (0.07)	-0.29* (0.13)	-0.18 (0.13)
Age	0.18* (0.07)	-0.01 (0.06)	0.18** (0.07)	-0.01 (0.02)	0.21** (0.06)	0.02 (0.03)	-0.04 (0.09)	-0.03 (0.05)
Female	0.16** (0.03)	0.11** (0.02)	0.07* (0.03)	0.01 (0.01)	0.06* (0.03)	0.02 (0.01)	-0.07 (0.04)	-0.00 (0.02)
Education:								
Intermediate	-0.09 (0.05)	-0.06 (0.05)	-0.03 (0.05)	0.01 (0.01)	0.01 (0.04)	0.04* (0.02)	-0.01 (0.06)	-0.00 (0.04)
High	-1.14** (0.05)	-0.09 (0.05)	-0.00 (0.05)	0.01 (0.01)	-0.03 (0.05)	0.01 (0.02)	-0.03 (0.06)	-0.02 (0.04)
Unemployed	0.02 (0.09)	0.10* (0.05)						
Union member	0.07 (0.05)	0.04 (0.03)						
Ethnocentrism					0.60** (0.07)	0.27** (0.07)	-0.03 (0.10)	0.11** (0.04)
EU identification							-0.00 (0.08)	-0.10 (0.06)
Public debt							-0.09 (0.09)	0.02 (0.04)
Redistribution							-0.12 (0.09)	0.04 (0.05)
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>	0.05**	0.05**	0.02*	0.02	0.12**	0.19**	0.03**	0.07*
N	872	872	875	875	873	873	671	671

Notes: \* p < 0.05; \*\* p < 0.01. Entries are average marginal effects with robust standard errors in parentheses. N=only individuals who gave answers in at least two waves in 2013. Dependent variable in Model I: 1=issue named at least once; 0=issue never named. Dependent variable in Model II: 1=issue seven times named; 0=issue named less often.

Starting with labor market issues, Table 3.2 reports the results from the multilevel analysis (see Table 3.A4 in the Appendix for the corresponding logit coefficients to the displayed



average marginal effects). The intra-class correlation (ICC) in the random intercept only model suggests that there is a modest proportion of variation at level II. To test the hypotheses, we focus on regressions with a random intercept and a fixed slope. In order to ease the interpretation of the logit coefficients Table 3.3 displays marginal effects. To explore moderating effects of personal characteristics on the impact of news coverage we included cross-level interactions (Tables 3.A5 through 3.A8 in the Appendix). Yet none of these interactions proved statistically and substantively significant. We thus report only the evidence from the more parsimonious model.

In line with the notion that the labor market is an obtrusive topic, the results suggest that news coverage of labor market issues had no effect on the salience of these issues. As expected, unemployment, low education, and identification with the Left or with the SPD were conducive to paying greater attention to labor market issues, while union membership shows only a weak positive effect. By contrast, identifying with the Greens or with the FDP made voters less likely to evaluate the labor market as posing an important problem.

Turning to the 2013 campaign panel data, the results reported in Table 3.3 (see Table 3.A9 in the Appendix for the corresponding logit coefficients to the displayed average marginal effects) indicate that some voter characteristics account for chronic salience and non-salience of labor market issues. Being unemployed or being female increase the likelihood of mentioning labor market issues as important throughout all panel waves. In addition, young and highly educated males not identifying with the Left Party were less likely to consider the labor market an important problem. Therefore, there is some evidence that voter characteristics played a role in the evaluation of the labor market during the 2013 campaign. The results from the fixed-effects panel regression displayed in Table 3.4 suggest that changes in news coverage did not lead to changes in issue salience. In addition, the evidence does not lend support to the notion that voter characteristics condition the role of news coverage in affecting the issue salience of

the labor market. Accordingly, voter characteristics appear to affect the chronic salience and non-salience of labor market issues but do not condition the influence of media coverage.

Table 3.4 Moderating effects of predispositions on agenda-setting effects for labor market issues (fixed-effects panel analysis)

	I	II	III	IV	V	VI
News coverage of labor market	0.87 (0.64–1.17)	0.93 (0.67–1.28)	0.87 (0.65–1.19)	0.56 (0.24–1.31)	0.79 (0.56–1.13)	0.83 (0.60–1.13)
News coverage*union membership		0.61 (0.26–1.47)				
News coverage*unemployed			0.58 (0.12–2.93)			
News coverage*intermediate education				2.08 (0.80–5.45)		
News coverage*high education				1.34 (0.51–3.54)		
News coverage*strength of party ID SPD					1.61 (0.60–4.31)	
News coverage*strength of pi with the Left Party						2.36 (0.45–12.43)
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
-2 log likelihood	1491.15	1489.94	1483.47	1463.03	1490.26	1490.11
N Observations	1957	1957	1950	1929	1957	1957
N Individuals	356	356	355	351	356	356

Notes: # p < 0.1; \* p < 0.05; \*\* p < 0.01. Entries are odds ratios with 95 percent confidence intervals in parentheses.

Turning to pensions and healthcare, the results from the multilevel analysis suggest that the issue salience of this topic is strongly affected by the media agenda (Table 3.2). An increase by ten percentage points in news coverage of pension and healthcare issues results in a 24 percent higher probability of naming this issue as the most important problem facing the country. Regarding voter characteristics, only age has a somewhat stronger and significant direct impact (average marginal effect of 0.06). None of the three cross-level interactions shows substantial effects. Contrary to our hypotheses, females and older citizens are not more susceptible to news about pensions and healthcare than males and younger citizens.

Furthermore, persons with a lower level of education are not more susceptible to news about pensions and healthcare than persons who are more highly educated.

Table 3.5 Moderating effects of predispositions on agenda-setting effects for pensions and healthcare (fixed-effects panel regression)

	I	II	III	IV
News coverage of pensions and healthcare	2.27** (1.29–3.99)	2.31# (0.96–5.57)	4.09# (0.86–19.53)	2.15 (0.56–8.23)
News coverage*female		0.97 (0.31–3.06)		
News coverage*intermediate education			0.79 (0.13–4.73)	
News coverage*high education			0.31 (0.05–1.89)	
News coverage*age				1.12 (0.09–14.69)
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>	0.01	0.01	0.02	0.01
-2 log likelihood	588.48	588.48	576.92	588.46
N Observations	788	788	776	788
N Individuals	145	145	143	145

Notes: # p < 0.1; \* p < 0.05; \*\* p < 0.01. Entries are odds ratios with 95 percent confidence intervals in parentheses.

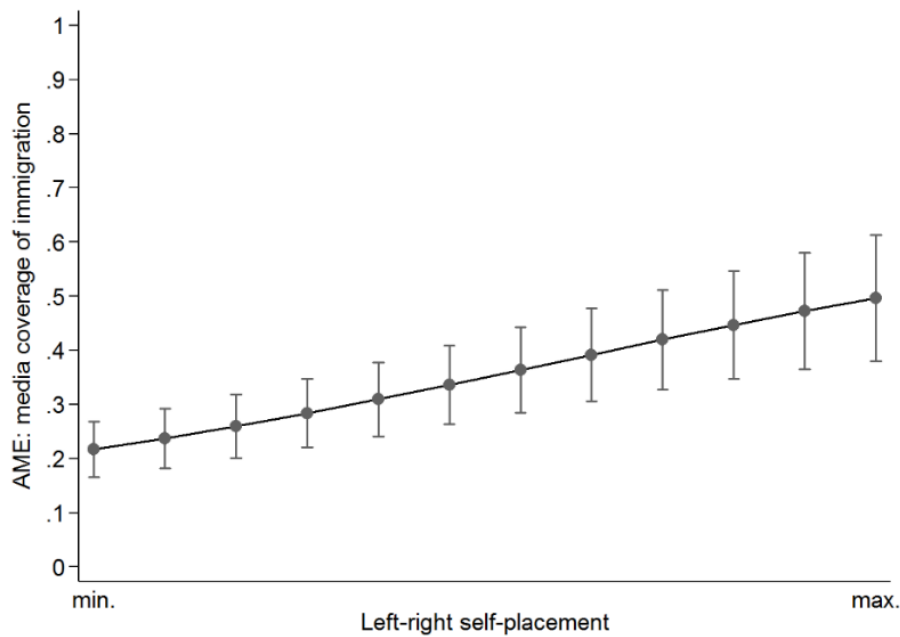
The results from binary logistic regressions confirm our expectations that being a young male is conducive to never considering healthcare and pensions important during the 2013 campaign (Table 3.3). By contrast, the selected voter characteristics do not make a difference in mentioning this issue in all seven panel waves (which is a very rare event). The results from the fixed-effects panel regression with a low number of observations indicate a strong direct effect of news coverage on issue salience (Table 3.5). However, the evidence does not lend much credence to the hypothesis that individual characteristics condition this effect. The results suggest that high levels of education make voters less likely to adopt pensions and healthcare as an issue from the media agenda. Yet the differences are small and do not pass conventional levels of statistical significance. In summary, issue salience of healthcare and pensions appears to be driven by both stable voter characteristics and media coverage, but we are not able to pin down their interplay during the 2013 campaign.

In the case of immigration, results from multilevel analysis suggest a strong direct agenda-setting effect (Table 3.2). An increase in news coverage of ten percentage points results in a 34 percent higher probability of mentioning immigration as the most important problem facing the country. In line with our hypothesis, an attachment to the Green Party decreased the probability of perceiving immigration as a problem. This is also true for high levels of education and being female. The strongest individual-level predictor, however, is ideological self-placement. Compared to an average placement on the left–right scale, a more rightist position of one unit increases the likelihood of seeing immigration as a problem by 20 percent. While controlling for the other variables, age exhibited no negative effect on the probability of perceiving immigration as an important problem. Furthermore, older citizens are not significantly more susceptible to news about immigration issues than younger ones. Our hypothesis that Green Party identifiers have a lower susceptibility to immigration-related news is also not confirmed. But in line with our expectations, the agenda-setting effect is stronger for individuals who hold a rightist position on the left–right scale (see Figure 3.2).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> When limiting the analysis to the period before the rapid increase in the number of asylum seekers in summer 2015, even stronger effects of left–right self-placement as well as strong and significant moderating effects of age and an attachment to the Green Party emerge. In the ensuing period, ideological self-placement conditions agenda-setting effects in a nuanced way, with persons at the right and left poles of the ideological continuum exhibiting a disproportionately low susceptibility to agenda-setting effects. These changes hint at changes in the meaning of this topic over time.

Figure 3.2 Average marginal effects (AME) for media coverage of immigration depending on left-right self-placement (cross-level interaction)



The results from the binary regression models indicate that voter characteristics had a considerable impact on the chronic issue salience of immigration during the 2013 campaign (Table 3.3). Young males were less likely to consider immigration an important issue in this period. Likewise, low levels of ethnocentrism made voters quite unlikely to evaluate immigration as an important problem. At the same time, high levels of ethnocentrism are conducive to mentioning immigration in all seven waves of the panel survey (which is a rare outcome). The evidence from the fixed-effects panel regressions lends slight, if any, support to the notion that during the 2013 campaign news coverage affected how strongly individuals perceived immigration as the most important issue (Table 3.6). Moreover, none of the specified interactions passes conventional levels of statistical significance.<sup>2</sup> The evidence hints at slight

<sup>2</sup> Immigration is the only issue for which we find different agenda-setting effects when distinguishing between most and second most important problem in the panel analysis. News coverage has a strong effect on the most important problem named but not on the second most important problem. Regardless of how issue salience is measured, the results do not clearly support the idea that voter characteristics served as conditioning factors.

tendencies suggesting that high levels of ethnocentrism and attachments to the Green Party increased the likelihood of responding to news coverage of immigration by deeming it a national problem. In summary, the evidence from the diverse analyses demonstrates that political predispositions and other voter characteristics affect the issue salience of immigration above and beyond media coverage.

Table 3.6 Moderating effects of predispositions on agenda-setting effects for immigration (fixed-effects panel regression)

	I	II	III	IV
News coverage of immigration	2.38# (0.90–6.34)	0.98 (0.03–28.18)	2.27 (0.24–21.08)	2.22 (0.80–6.15)
News coverage*ethnocentrism		3.28 (0.05–236.71)		
News coverage*age			1.11 (0.01–83.97)	
News coverage*strength of pi with the Green Party				4.05 (0.01–1098.47)
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
-2 log likelihood	663.50	663.20	663.50	663.26
N Observations	868	868	868	868
N Individuals	159	159	159	159

Notes: # p < 0.1; \* p < 0.05; \*\* p < 0.01. Entries are odds ratios with 95 percent confidence intervals in parentheses.

As with immigration, the evidence from the multilevel regression lends support to the notion that media coverage had a sizable effect on the issue salience of the financial crisis (Table 3.2). An increase of ten percentage points in news coverage leads to a 36 percent higher probability of mentioning the financial crisis as the most important problem. In addition, voter characteristics are strongly related to issue salience during the period between 2009 and 2015. The personal importance of the financial crisis was disproportionately great for CDU/CSU, FDP, and SPD identifiers, while adherents of the Left Party mentioned the crisis less often. Age and being male also had a positive effect. Holding a rightist position on the left–right continuum increased the probability of an individual perceiving the crisis as being of personal importance to them by 9 percent compared to the average position. The evidence on cross-level interactions

does not lend strong support to the notion that voter characteristics conditioned agenda-setting effects, however.

Table 3.7 Moderating effects of predispositions on agenda-setting effects for the financial crisis (fixed-effects panel regression)

	I	II	III	IV	V	VI
News coverage of the financial crisis	1.61* (1.01–2.56)	1.47 (0.60–3.59)	0.96 (0.41–2.23)	3.40* (1.22–9.47)	3.64# (0.89–15.45)	1.30 (0.75–2.26)
News coverage* identification with EU		1.34 (0.18–9.72)				
News coverage*public debt			3.50 (0.43–28.84)			
News coverage* redistribution				0.15# (0.02–1.33)		
News coverage* ethnocentrism					0.29 (0.04–2.29)	
News coverage*strength of pi with CDU/CSU						2.79 (0.67–11.65)
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.01	0.00	0.00
-2 log likelihood	1260.72	1235.04	1004.96	1186.58	1259.34	1258.75
N Observations	1730	1697	1375	1628	1730	1730
N Individuals	316	311	250	298	316	316

Notes: #  $p < 0.1$ ; \*  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.01$ . Entries are odds ratios with 95 percent confidence intervals in parentheses.

The findings from binary regression models suggest that being a Left Party identifier made voters likely to disregard the financial crisis as a problem during the 2013 campaign (Table 3.3). Identifying with the CDU/CSU is conducive to considering this issue important in at least one interview. However, it does not make voters more likely to mention this topic all of the time. Rather, high levels of ethnocentrism and, as a tendency, weak EU attachments are drivers of this rare outcome. Turning to the dynamics of issue salience during the 2013 campaign, the results from fixed-effects regression demonstrate that changes in news coverage affected intra-individual changes in the salience of the financial crisis during the 2013 campaign (Table 3.7).

As expected, citizens who oppose redistribution tend to be disproportionately susceptible to news about the financial crisis. The same applies to low levels of ethnocentrism and CDU/CSU identification. Though we cannot figure out the specific mechanisms, voter characteristics are related differently to the campaign dynamics of issue salience than to chronic salience and non-salience of the financial crisis.

In summary, the findings from pooled cross-sectional and panel data on the four topics suggest that in addition to media coverage voter characteristics played a role in issue salience. Issue salience of the labor market appears to be strongly driven by voter characteristics but not responsive to media coverage. In the remaining three cases, media coverage had a sizable impact. Likewise, voter characteristics made a difference. Where healthcare and pensions are concerned, demographics rather than political predispositions were of some importance. By contrast, political predilections were more powerful in shaping the issue salience of immigration and the financial crisis. While the results lend support to the notion that media coverage and individual-level characteristics affect voters' issue salience, we found limited evidence that the interplay of these factors is what drives the evolution of issue salience.

## **Conclusion**

The aim of this chapter was to explore the effect of the interplay of personal characteristics and news coverage on issue salience during the 2009 to 2015 period and during the election campaign in 2013. The evidence from pooled cross-sectional data and panel data supports the notion that news coverage affects citizens' issue salience, thereby substantiating the assumption of agenda-setting. This relationship varies by topic. For obtrusive topics news coverage does not play as large a role as for rather remote topics like the financial crisis and immigration (in the period before the massive influx of immigrants starting in fall 2015). The results also lend credence to the idea that political predilections and other individual differences are related to



issue salience and constrain the impact of news coverage on voters' issue salience. The latter finding supports the role of issue publics in the perception of political problems, even for unobtrusive issues. It also implies that individual-level characteristics shape exposure, reception, and processing of information about what is going on in society. However, the evidence for the interplay of individual differences and media coverage proved mild at best. To sum up, individual-level characteristics are an important ingredient to the perceptions of political problems but there is much room to improve our understanding of how they come into play and interact with streams of communication.

When interpreting the results, we have to keep in mind the limitations this analysis is subject to. By focusing on the interplay of news coverage and individual characteristics, we have ignored some potential explanatory factors affecting issue salience like interpersonal communication and real-world conditions. In addition, quantitative measures of news coverage, e.g., the share of news articles, do not capture the symbolic value of an item that might change over time. Thus, a linear relationship between news coverage and issue salience is only an insufficient representation of reality (Kepplinger et al. 1989; Neuman 1990). Moreover, news coverage of a topic might affect the salience of related issues, usually ignored by agenda-setting studies. For instance, news coverage of labor market issues like precarious employment or the minimum wage might have no influence on the salience of labor market issues but may increase the perceived importance of distributive justice. On a related point, the coding of topics raised some problems, while the indicators of voter characteristics also left room for improvement. Furthermore, as we relied on data from online panelists, additional analyses are required to examine whether the findings also apply to random samples from the electorate. By using data from a seven-wave panel, we made some progress in exploring causal effects of changes in media coverage on individual-level issue salience. Still, the panel intervals may limit the potential to capture the full variation in media coverage and issue salience and to identify effects. Moreover, our focus on the 2009–15 period in Germany restricts the possibility of

generalization. It is thus warranted to examine the joint impact of media coverage and voter characteristics on issue salience in diverse settings which permit us to explore whether the nature of topics and of the political discourse, the characteristics of the party and of the media system, or the nature of a campaign make a difference in the interplay of media coverage and voter characteristics. Finally, in-depth analyses of selected cases may allow scholars to study the evolution of national problems and voter responses in different phases.

These kinds of comparative analyses will prove useful to better understand the conditional nature of the processes underlying issue salience. Yet we are quite confident that they will confirm the main contribution of this analysis: individual-level characteristics affect issue salience. The media agenda can change the perceived salience of issues. Voter characteristics may condition these effects. Moreover, regardless of media coverage, for some subgroups certain issues appear to be of higher importance than others, also in affecting voting behavior. Media coverage thus does not sway all voters alike because they have certain predilections. Put differently, in politics some leaves are more susceptible to wind from the north, while others are more susceptible to wind from the east, the south, or the west.

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