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Government polling in times of crises: when capacity meets incentives

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ABSTRACT

How do governments mobilise public opinion in times of crises? While recent research examines the factors that determine the intensity of government polling at different points in the electoral cycle and the different representational logics behind this activity, empirical evidence on the more qualitative aspect of government polling is still lacking. What types of policy issues are covered in government polls? Understanding governments as actors in the production of public opinion, not just passive consumers, we examine the selection of issues in government polls. We present evidence from Germany, mobilising an original database of all poll questions directly commissioned by the German federal government during the 18th and 19th legislative periods (2013–2021). Using a conditional logit approach, we analyse how the character of the policy domain to which an issue belongs affects the likelihood that some issues are covered by government polls. Our results show that while motivations to ask questions about a particular issue are shaped by constraints (institutional, financial and political) on the government's ability to act in this area, incentives related to the salience of the issue can shift the focus of government polls to issues where they have less room for manoeuvre.


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Introduction

How do governments mobilise public opinion in times of uncertainty? Are they interested in citizens' opinions on all issues? Do governments seek information about citizen's preferences systematically across all policy areas, or selectively depending on the issue at stake? If the latter, what explains these variations?

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A rich and growing literature examines how governments engage with public opinion, both in responding to and shaping citizens' preferences (Belot & Schnatterer, 2021). Building on the conceptualisation of representation as a continuous process with multiple stages (Becher & Stegmüller, 2023; Burgoon et al., 2022), recent research on democratic responsiveness has moved beyond policy outcomes to examine earlier stages of the process (Butler & Vis, 2023; Zhelyazkova et al., 2019). While existing research on democratic responsiveness has predominantly focussed on whether and how public preferences shape policy outcomes (Burstein, 2003, 2020; Soroka & Wlezien, 2009), our analysis suggests that a fuller understanding also requires attention to earlier stages of the representation process—specifically, how public opinion is constructed and made accessible to decision-makers. In this sense, our study encourages scholars to move upstream in the representation process, to the informational stage where the foundations for later responsiveness are laid. In line with de Wilde and Rauh (2019), who advocate a shift in focus from outcomes to the processes of responsiveness, our contribution lies in examining one of the earliest steps: how governments seek to gauge public opinion, and whether they do so systematically across policy domains or unevenly depending on the issue.

The question of how governments decide on which issues to consult public opinion has taken on particular importance in light of the growing number of political crises that Western governments have faced in recent decades. Examples include the Eurozone crises, the so-called refugee crises, the Covid pandemic, the war in Ukraine, record inflation and an increasing number of natural disasters as a result of climate change. Governments have to respond to these crises in the face of a 'combination of threat, uncertainty and urgency' (Boin et al., 2021) that disrupts the routines of political decision-making and creates challenges for governance. It generates intense media attention and high public expectations, while simultaneously forcing governments to act under time pressure – an explosive mix for politicians in office.

At the same time, the public's assessment of what is the most important policy issue has become more volatile in recent decades. Throughout the 1990s and the first decade of the 21st century, public perceptions of the most important problem facing the country remained relatively stable in both the US and European countries, with the economy being either the most important issue or one of the most important issues, depending on the country.¹ Historically, only rare and exceptional events, such as German reunification in 1990, have momentarily disrupted this stability, with these shifts typically being short-lived. However, this stability has gradually eroded, giving way to greater volatility (Breunig et al., 2023; Kratz et al., 2022). Assuming that salience influences government interest in public opinion on a given issue, this changing landscape poses new challenges for policymakers – challenges that we aim to explore.

While recent research has examined the factors shaping the intensity of government polling across the electoral cycle and the different logics of representation underpinning this activity (Durovic & Schnatterer, 2025), there is still very little research on the qualitative dimensions of government polling. Which policy issues are included in government surveys, and why are some topics overrepresented compared to others? For Spain, Chaqués-Bonafont *et al.* (2022) have demonstrated that there are differences in polling practices for different policy issues, which can be attributed to factors such as parties' ownership of issues and the influence of real-world events.

By focussing on government-commissioned polling and recognising governments not just as passive recipients of public opinion but as active participants in shaping it, we can examine the factors that influence why and how governments engage with public opinion. This perspective also helps uncover the dynamics that determine whether and why certain policy issues are prioritised in government polling while others are overlooked.

We add to the debate on political representation, more precisely to the debate on 'quiet' and 'noisy' politics, as defined by Culpepper (2011), by proposing to extend it from policy making to the management of public opinion. We argue that quiet politics involves more than avoiding debate; it also involves the strategic management of how public opinion is solicited and framed. This perspective enriches our understanding of the place that governments give to public opinion in the process of representation.

We do so empirically by presenting evidence from Germany, mobilising an original database of all survey questions directly commissioned by the German federal government during the 18th and 19th legislative periods (2013–2021). Using a conditional logit approach, we analyse how the character of the policy domain to which an issue belongs affects the likelihood that different policy issues are covered by government polls. Our findings show that, while motivations to ask questions about a particular issue are shaped by constraints (institutional, financial and political) on the government's ability to act in that area, incentives related to the salience of the issue in the eyes of citizens can shift the focus of government surveys to issues where governments have less room to manoeuvre.

Germany is a compelling case for examining government polling practices, thanks to its combination of frequent polling, institutional transparency and a federal structure that allows us to see how divisions of responsibility affect polling priorities during multiple crises, all within a stable political environment.

Government polling between capacity to act and incentives

Democratic responsiveness studies continue to face challenges in determining the extent to which citizens' preferences are reflected in public policy.

While there is a general consensus that public opinion influences policymaking, the extent of this influence varies significantly, ranging from minor to substantial (Burstein, 2010; Manza & Cook, 2002; Page, 2002; Stimson, 2007). One reason for this variation may be the limited attention given to how public opinion is constructed in the first place. Understanding democratic responsiveness requires closer examination of how public preferences are captured. Traditionally, political science has relied on survey measures such as the 'most important problem' (Binzer Hobolt & Klemmensen, 2008), attitudes towards spending (Soroka & Wlezien, 2009) or a combination of survey indicators about specific policy preferences (Manza & Cook, 2002; Page, 2002). However, the availability of survey data can shape the scope of research, potentially distorting our understanding of responsiveness as long as the processes behind the selection of survey questions remain under-explored (Barabas, 2016).

Opinion polls serve multiple functions and can be conducted at different stages of the policy cycle (Belot, 2019). At the agenda-setting stage, they help identify which issues should be prioritised, identify potential red lines that could trigger public backlash or electoral costs, and test different arguments. Once an issue is on the agenda, polls can be used to assess policy components and framing. Even after policies are enacted, they play a role in assessing public reception and policy effectiveness (Belot & Schnatterer, *forthcoming*; Druckman & Jacobs, 2015). In addition to informing the policy-making process, government polls can play an important role in informing government rhetoric (Hager & Hilbig, 2020; Jacobs & Shapiro, 2000; Page, 2006) and serve as a 'bargaining chip' in international negotiations (Kegley & Wittkopf, 1996). Recent research has also demonstrated that polls follow different representational logics, showing that government polls reflect both government priorities (logic of promissory representation) and issues that are salient in the eyes of the population (anticipatory representation). Which of the two logics dominates depends on the specific point in the electoral cycle (Durovic & Schnatterer, 2025).

It is therefore beyond the scope of this article to determine the function of government polls, which we must acknowledge are many and varied. Rather, it is to determine whether some policy areas are in the spotlight of public opinion produced directly by governments and others are in the shadows. In doing so, we recognise that governments can commission surveys based on two fundamentally different strategies. On the one hand, surveys can serve as a rational, capacity-driven response to societal demands, helping governments to understand and address public concerns. On the other hand, polls can be used selectively to shape the political agenda, justify existing positions or reinforce a particular narrative. To address both perspectives, we draw on two important strands of literature – research on democratic responsiveness and the concept of 'quiet' versus 'noisy' politics – to identify

factors that are likely to influence the extent to which governments actively seek public opinion on particular issues. Public opinion polls are expensive to commission and governments have to make choices about which issues to include in the surveys. In other words: the size of the agenda of government polls is limited.

Research on democratic responsiveness focuses on the ability and willingness of political actors to incorporate shifts in public opinion into policymaking (Soroka & Wlezien, 2009; Stimson, 1991, 2015). In the European context, a growing body of research shows that governments are at least moderately responsive to public opinion (Binzer Hobolt & Klemmensen, 2005, 2008; Hakhverdian, 2012; Rasmussen *et al.*, 2019). However, responsiveness has been shown to be selective: governments tend to be less responsive on some issues, while showing greater responsiveness on others (Chaqués-Bonafont & Palau, 2011; Lax *et al.*, 2019). Walgrave *et al.* (2022) also found that the capacity of policy-makers to correctly predict citizens preferences depends on the issue. But does this pattern emerge even at the preliminary stage of deciding which issues warrant public consultation? And what can explain the differences in attention to issues?

To address these questions, we build on the concept of 'quiet' and 'noisy' politics, as defined by Culpepper (2011). This concept suggests that there are 'noisy' policy areas with strong public scrutiny where politicians have to respond to public opinion if they want to be re-elected and organised business actually suffers many defeats. 'Quiet' policy areas correspond to areas shielded from public scrutiny where highly organised interest groups dominate the political process.

This distinction closely aligns with the framework of negative and positive feedback proposed by Baumgartner and Jones (2002). 'Quiet politics' are reinforced by negative feedback mechanisms, such as expert consensus, procedural complexity or issue framing, that stabilise institutions and keep issues off the public agenda. Conversely, noisy politics align with positive feedback dynamics, where surges of attention and framing battles can destabilise existing arrangements and produce disproportionate shifts in agenda-setting and policy outcomes. Thus, transitions from quiet to noisy politics indicate shifts in the feedback equilibrium, where accumulating pressures disrupt established policy monopolies.

Recognising that government surveys serve not only as tools for gathering information but also as instruments of persuasion – and, more fundamentally, that governments actively shape the very public opinion they seek to measure – we propose to reframe the debate on quiet and noisy politics to include not only policy making, but also the management of public opinion. We argue that quiet politics is not just about avoiding debate, but also about strategically managing how public opinion is solicited and framed. For example, it can be assumed that governments have an interest

in commissioning polls and thus generating public opinion on issues where it is easier for them to show responsiveness to citizens' preferences than on issues where it would be more politically or financially costly to do so, and they therefore have no interest in bringing the issue out of the shadows of quiet politics. As Schattschneider (1960, p. 71) famously put it, a central aspect of politics is the process by which 'some issues are organised into politics while others are organised out'. Irrespective of the intended use, therefore, we believe that governments' commissioning of polls can be understood by considering in parallel their capacity to act in the relevant policy area and their incentives to engage with public opinion. If the government wants to respond to public opinion, it can only do so in areas where it has the capacity to act. Similarly, if governments want to influence public opinion or mobilise it strategically, for example to put an issue on the political agenda, they can be expected to do so in policy areas where they want to be active and have the ability to do so.

At the same time, we can expect that governments will not always have the same interest in public opinion when it comes to taking action. It is therefore important to consider the government's incentives for commissioning polls. Incentives are shaped by the payoffs that the government can get from gauging or shaping public opinion on a given issue. And these payoffs are likely to vary according to the attention citizens pay to the said issue or with the words of Culpepper (2011, p. xvi): 'politicians will indeed listen to the voters but only when the volume of debate is dialed up to its loudest levels'. We can thus expect that governments are more likely to commission survey questions on issues which are important in the eyes of the population. Finally, taking into account both the factors that constrain the ability of governments to act and the incentives associated with salience, we can ask whether the salience of an issue shifts the focus of government polls to issues over where they have less room for manoeuvre. In summary, we expect that the character of the policy domain to which an issue belongs influences the choice of issues in government surveys, because the commissioning of opinion polls by governments takes place in a competitive environment, and governments are torn between (institutional) constraints and citizen priorities.

Issue selection in government polls is driven by the capacity to act

While the academic literature offers a large number of different definitions of political capacity, highlighting different dimensions of the issue (Wu *et al.*, 2015), our focus is specifically on the government's capacity to act and implement policies – distinct across policy areas and relatively stable over time, excluding, for example, capacity that varies with the political climate in the country. Two sets of factors affecting the ability of governments to act in particular areas have been particularly highlighted in public and

political debate in recent years and decades: One is the impact of institutional constraints or ‘frictions’ on the ability of governments to respond to crises (Jones & Baumgartner, 2005; Jones *et al.*, 2003; Tsebelis, 2002), which has been widely discussed, especially during the Covid crises (Hegele & Schnabel, 2021; Lipsy, 2020; Toshkov *et al.*, 2022). Second, the limited scope for government action has been a recurring theme in public discourse at least since the eurozone crisis, when all developed democracies entered a period of budgetary consolidation, typically implying a policy of austerity that at the same time limited their capacity to expand social spending (van Kersbergen *et al.*, 2014).

Policy-making capacities related to the division of competencies in federal states

In terms of institutional factors influencing the ability of governments to act on different policy issues, one of the most obvious features is related to the division of responsibilities between the national government and the state governments in federal states (Hegele & Schnabel, 2021). Federalism refers to a spatial or territorial division of power between two (or more) levels of government. Both levels have to hold some autonomous decision-making powers which they can exercise independently of each other (Börzel, 2005). Hacker *et al.* (2023) use the term filters to describe mechanisms that refract, redirect, or block the expression of citizens’ interests as they move through the representative process, effectively shaping which issues receive political attention. They argue that unequal representation in the United States results from the territorial distribution of inequality and the way in which the American political system filters out territorial interests at the national level. This filtering occurs because political structures and institutions selectively determine which policies and policy areas are addressed in national politics. Applied to other countries, this concept highlights how the division of powers between the national government and the states influences issue representation at the national level. Institutional arrangements can filter out issues that are primarily the responsibility of the states, preventing them from becoming central to national political discourse. We can thus assume that issue attention in polls commissioned by a governing body is influenced by the policy-making authority it holds.

Since we know that the agenda of public opinion polls is limited and that issues have to compete to get on it, we can assume that when responsibilities are divided between different levels of government, this has an impact on the way in which governments seek public opinion.

Haverland *et al.* (2018) show that at the European Union level, the European Commission seeks citizen input primarily in policy issue areas where it has neither full nor zero power to set the agenda, that is, areas where its responsibilities are shared rather than exclusive or absent, and where it is

in clear competition with the federal government for attention and credibility. However, there is an important difference between the European Union and national states: while the argument of national sovereignty is often used in debates about the legitimacy of the European Union, national states are not under constant pressure to prove their legitimacy (Beetham & Lord, 2014). In the case of national governments, consistent with our capacity assumption, we expect them therefore to be more likely to commission surveys on issues that fall within their area of responsibility.

H1 – Federalism hypothesis: National governments are more likely to commission survey questions on issues that fall within their area of responsibility than on topics that fall within the responsibility of the regional state governments or for which there is competing legislation.

Policy-making capacities related to (re)distributive or regulatory policies

As already mentioned, the last decades have been marked by a discourse of austerity and limited room for budgetary manoeuvre. The reasons commonly cited are rising debt and budget deficits, growing demands on the welfare state (unemployment, ageing populations), EU agreements and international financial market pressures. This led van Kersbergen *et al.* (2014) to conclude that retrenchment at the expense of social investment is increasingly becoming ‘the only game left in town’. As Streeck and Schäfer (2013) show, the need to consolidate budgets and satisfy financial markets reduces the responsiveness of governments to voters on (re)distributive issues. Consistent with our assumption that governments are more likely to commission surveys on issues where they have the capacity to act, we therefore expect that they are more likely to commission surveys on regulatory issues than on issues with a strong budgetary dimension.

To test this assumption, we build on Lowi’s classification of policy domains (1964), distinguishing between regulatory issues and (re)distributive issues. Regulatory issues aim to control or regulate the behaviour of individuals, organisations, or industries. In contrast, redistributive issues involve government efforts to shift wealth, income, property, or rights among clearly defined groups, while distributive policies allocate benefits to specific groups or sectors without significantly affecting others, both of which have a strong budgetary dimension.

As a consequence, governments have more leeway to change regulatory policies (such as environmental or civil rights policies) that do not systematically involve public expenditures. As this, in turn makes it easier to take public opinion into account in the decision-making process, we expect governments to commission more survey questions on regulatory issues than on (re)distributive issues.

H2 – Regulatory issue hypothesis: Governments are more likely to commission survey questions on regulatory issues than on distributive and redistributive issues.

Issue selection and the incentives to overcome constraints linked to governments' capacity

While we argue that the choice of issues in government polls is influenced by the government's capacity to act in the given area, we also assume that it is important to consider the government's incentives to commission polls. Incentives are shaped by the payoffs that the government can obtain from measuring or shaping public opinion on a given issue. And these payoffs are likely to vary according to the attention that citizens pay to that issue.

The concept of issue salience refers to 'the relative significance that an actor ascribes to a given issue' (Wlezien, 2005, pp. 556–61). We focus here on the importance that citizens attach to particular issues, i.e. the public – as opposed to elite – salience of issues. The political responsiveness literature has shown that the salience of political issues in the eyes of the population enhances – albeit to different degrees – the responsiveness of those who govern (Bromley-Trujillo & Poe, 2020; Burstein, 2003; Lax & Phillips, 2012; Soroka & Wlezien, 2009). Research into agenda-setting and political responsiveness in the United States has also revealed a strong correlation between public issue priorities and the agenda of Congress members (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993): Changes in public issue salience correlate at high levels with changes in political attention measured as the proportion of congressional hearings on the same issue (Jones & Baumgartner, 2004).

Following Dennison (2019) we consider issue salience as a political attitude, rather than a behavioural weight an individual gives to an issue when making behavioural choices. Research shows that citizens are more likely to have strong opinions on salient policies and to hold their representatives accountable (Page & Shapiro, 1983) and public opinion is known to be less volatile for salient issues (Weaver, 1991).² Consequently, there should be major differences between salient and non-salient issues. And salience is particularly important in times of multiple crises, as external events often lead to shifts in public opinion (Soroka & Wlezien, 2009), and as perceptions of issue salience have become more volatile in recent decades, as discussed above. Increased awareness of issues in turn puts pressure on policymakers to implement policy changes that reflect new priorities (Boin *et al.*, 2021).

We can therefore expect governments to be more likely to commission surveys on issues that are important in the eyes of the population.

H3 – Salience hypothesis: Governments are more likely to commission survey questions on salient issues than on non-salient issues.

The conditional effects of issue salience

Taking into account both the factors that constrain the ability of governments to act and the incentives associated with salience, we can ask how they interact and whether the salience of an issue shifts the focus of government polling towards issues where they have less room for manoeuvre.

The division of powers in the federal states generally means that, in addition to tasks that are the exclusive responsibility of the federal government and tasks that are the exclusive responsibility of the federal states, there are also areas in which powers are shared. Concurrent powers occur when federal and state governments can or do operate in the same policy areas. In most federal systems, key areas of governance, such as economic development and social policy, are subject to the concurrent jurisdiction of the federal government and the states (Steytler, 2017).

While as a baseline we expect the federal government to be more likely to commission survey questions on issues that fall within its jurisdiction, we expect issue salience to have a stronger impact on issues where there is competing legislation between the federal and state levels, increasing the likelihood of questions on these issues. In areas of concurrent legislation, the federal government retains some room for manoeuvre. By commissioning polls on these issues, the government can justify federal intervention, pressure states to align with national policy, and gauge public expectations. We can assume that salience is one of the mechanisms that draws federal attention to these areas and raises the question of federal intervention, thus increasing the incentives for the government to survey on these issues.

Federal governments further have an incentive to track public opinion on salient issues that fell into areas of shared responsibilities with the states, because in these areas it is difficult for citizens to judge who is responsible and the national government risks being seen as accountable. When an issue becomes prominent on the public agenda, particularly during crises, citizens often expect the federal government to take the lead and perceived failures are generally attributed to the federal level rather than to state governments, regardless of the actual distribution of powers (Birkland & Waterman, 2008; Hegele & Schnabel, 2021). Similarly, pressure from international and supranational organisations (Kincaid *et al.*, 2010; Wilson *et al.*, 2006), tends to support centralised decision-making, as international agreements are typically addressed to federal authorities.

We therefore expect salience to have a stronger impact on issues of shared responsibilities than on issues that fall exclusively within the competence of the national state (and which are already highly likely to be covered by government polls) or the federal states (where there is no realistic prospect of federal intervention).

H4 – Federalism and salience hypothesis: The influence of salience on the likelihood of commissioning survey questions is higher for issues where there is competing legislation than for issues that fall within the jurisdiction of the federal or state governments.

What about the way in which salience affects the selection of questions for different types of policy, as identified by Lowi? As discussed above, we expect that governments are generally more likely to commission survey questions on regulatory issues than on (re)distributive issues. At the same time, we expect salience to have a greater effect on the likelihood of questions on (re)distributive issues than on regulatory issues.

This assumption is based on the observation that, while budgetary leeway is limited, social policy remains an issue on which citizens have relatively clear and coherent views, and as a result public opinion continues to influence government policy and action in this area. Governments are therefore likely to respond by increasing support for the welfare state where possible (Brooks & Manza, 2006). We therefore expect domain-specific trade-offs, where certain domains receive additional support at the expense of less salient domains, despite the fact that increases in welfare generosity are limited by budgetary constraints (Vis *et al.*, 2011).

H5 – Lowi policy type and salience hypothesis: The influence of salience on the likelihood to commission survey questions is higher for (re)distributive issues than for regulatory issues.

Case selection, data, and methods

Case selection

Like her European counterparts, former German Chancellor Angela Merkel faced several crises during her time in office: the Eurozone crises, the so-called refugee crises, the Covid pandemic and an increasing number of natural disasters as a result of climate change. The media went so far as to call her the 'crisis chancellor'.³ Despite these turbulent times, her government was extremely stable and long-lasting (she worked with four US presidents, five British prime ministers and four French presidents). What was her recipe for success? Angela Merkel, Germany's former Chancellor, was often credited with having a sixth sense for capturing the political mood of her population. She was responsible for some of the most important political U-turns in post-war Germany such as the nuclear phase out, the legal recognition of same-sex marriage and the end of compulsory military service. Most of the time, these policy changes were in phase with public opinion. But in fact, during the 19th legislative period (2013–2017) alone, the Chancellor's office conducted around 374 polls. Of course, conducting so many polls

allows a government to be well informed about its population's mood. It makes Germany an interesting country to study.

Expanding the focus beyond the US to a European country provides at the same time a more comprehensive understanding of how different democratic systems integrate public opinion into policymaking. Existing research has largely focussed on the U.S., particularly on polls commissioned by American presidents (Druckman & Jacobs, 2015; Edwards, 2016; Rottinghaus, 2003), while studies of government-commissioned polls in other democracies remain scarce.

Another reason why Germany is an appealing case to study is data availability. Systematically analysing the factors that determine why an issue enters the agenda of government polls requires access to all questions asked by a government during a given period. Access to data is an obvious barrier to studying government polling since in most countries government-commissioned surveys are neither published nor even cited.⁴ As far as we know, the only other country that has committed to publishing all surveys commissioned by government bodies is Canada.⁵

Moreover, focussing on a single country to study the mechanisms of issue selection in the political agenda of government polls allows us to hold the general context, i.e. the particularities of the political system, constant. The case of Germany as a federal country makes it possible to examine the influence of the distribution of powers between different levels of government on issue attention in government polls. The Germany federal state is composed of 16 states, the *Länder*, which have important opportunities to shape policy-making not only on the state-level (e.g. Stecker, 2013) but also in the national sphere. The German Basic Law divides the federal and state governments' legislative responsibilities into exclusive federal powers (Articles 71 and 73), competing powers (Articles 72, 74) and exclusive state powers (Article 70). Ultimately, given that we concentrate our analyses on two legislative periods that brought together exactly the same parties in a governing coalition allows us to hold constant the dimension of the political nature of the government.

Regarding the choice of the time period: since the 2010s, if not earlier, governments of most Western democracies have been confronted with crises of all kinds; in addition to the Covid pandemic and the so-called immigration crises, we can mention the banking and debt crisis since 2008, the war in Ukraine, the energy crisis, and inflation. In addition to these short-term or unpredictable crises, there are also long-term problems such as climate change. With two major crises, the so-called refugee crisis and Covid-19, the period analysed is therefore well suited to provide a better understanding of the government's strategy towards public opinion in times of multiple crises. Looking at the *European Index of Political Economic Uncertainty* (Baker et al., 2016), we see that the feeling of uncertainty in Germany has

risen particularly sharply over the last two decades compared to other European countries (see Figure A.1, Appendix). This makes Germany a good case for studying government polls in the context of crises.

A comprehensive dataset on government polling

Since the 1950s, German Chancellors have been using opinion polls in order to make political decisions (Kaase, 1977). According to the 1977 organisational decree, the task of opinion research in the Federal Press Office (FPO) is to research and present public opinion as a decision-making aid for the political work of the Federal Government.⁶ Since January 2016, surveys commissioned by the FPO are available online (after an embargo period of a few month).⁷ Surveys up to 2013 were provided by Malte Spitz who obtained access to the data following his 2014 request under the Freedom of Information Act. Surveys for the period from 2013 to 2016 were sent to us directly by the FPO on request.⁸

We constructed an original data set on government polling, containing all survey questions commissioned by the FPO on behalf of the German Federal Government during the 18th and 19th legislative period (22nd of October 2013 – 26th October 2021).⁹ For the purposes of this study, we excluded the following individual survey questions from our database: survey items concerning the socio-demographic profile of respondents, questions assessing the salience of issues (see endnote 9 for a detailed explanation), and all items on non-political issues. We therefore built a data set where each observation corresponds to one survey question (see Table B.1 and Figure B.1 in the Appendix for an overview of the data and Tables B.2 and B.3 for a description of the explanatory variables).

Dependent variable

Our dependent variable is based on the manual thematic coding of all survey questions from German government polls between October 2013 and September 2017 (18th legislative period) and October 2017 and September 2021 (19th legislative period) according to the *Comparative Agendas Project* (CAP) coding scheme (Breunig *et al.*, 2023; Breunig & Schnatterer, 2020).¹⁰ All survey questions were coded into a single *Major Topic* and *Subtopic*. For the sake of parsimony, we collapsed the topics into 21 major policy issue areas (see also Bertelli & John, 2013; Chaqués-Bonafont *et al.*, 2015). Some codes were grouped together, and three new categories were created for issues that were particularly important in Germany during the period under study but were not represented in the CAP Codes: EU Affairs, Family Issues and Immigration (see Figure 1). The dependent variable of this study is a binary variable indicating the selected issue for each question. More specifically, it indicates whether one out of 21 policy issues is selected for a survey question commissioned by the German government (1) or not (0).

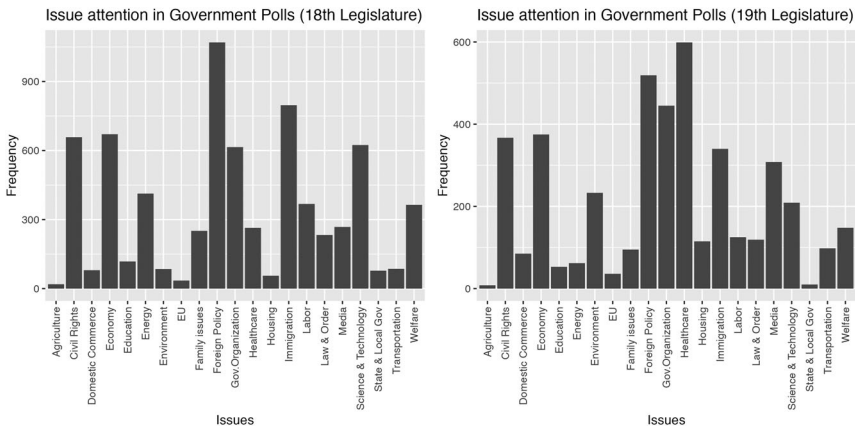


Figure 1. Issue attention in German government polls (18th and 19th legislature).

Explanatory variables

Our first explanatory variable distinguishes between the policy issues according to the *area of responsibility under which they fall in the German federal system*. Germany is composed of 16 states, the *Länder*, which have important opportunities to shape policy-making not only on the state-level but also in the national sphere. The German Basic Law divides the federal and state governments' legislative responsibilities into exclusive federal powers (Articles 71 and 73), competing powers (Articles 72, 74) and exclusive state powers (Article 70). We coded 115 policy areas, which were classified as either federal, state, or issues with competing legislation, according to the coding scheme of the *Comparative Agendas Project*.¹¹ We therefore measure legislative competence with a categorical variable that indicates whether we are having a federal (0), shared (1) or state-specific (2) legislative competence in the policy area.

For each of the 21 major policy issues, we then determined whether the survey questions coded in this category corresponded primarily to regulatory or (red)istributive policies. While for some topics this attribution is straightforward (e.g., education or transportation, which can be clearly attributed to distributive issues), for others (e.g. labour or the EU) it requires a close look at the content of the coded questions. Some of our 21 topic categories are so broadly defined that they group together items belonging to different policy types as defined by Lowi (1964). For example, the topic of 'Labour' might include regulatory questions about the organisation of training, job security, etc., and redistributive questions about wage bargaining. For these topic categories, we thoroughly analysed the existing subtopics, which ultimately allowed us to classify our categories not in an absolute way (we do not claim that this association of CAP codes and Lowi policy

types works for all types of data), but for our data. This allowed us to classify the 21 policy issue as mainly regulatory or with a strong (re)distributive dimension.¹²

Our last explanatory variable measures *issue salience* through an indicator of personal salience. Most studies measuring the effect of public opinion on public policy incorporate salience through an indicator of national salience like questions on the ‘most important problem’ (MIP) or the ‘most important issues’ a country is currently facing. However, issues may be salient because of their perceived importance on the national agenda or because of their personal importance to the individual (Lavine et al., 1996). According to Moniz and Wlezien (2020), most MIP-questions represent a measure of ‘national salience’ because the question wording refers explicitly to the country as a whole and not to individuals, and responses therefore invoke national concerns rather than personal ones. Giger and Lefkofridi (2014) advocate the inclusion of personal salience in political representation models given that citizens tend to vote for political parties that are close to issues which are personally important to them. Including salience as an individual-level concept is crucial since accessibility is more strongly linked to personal salience of attitudes than to nationally salient issues (Lavine et al., 1996). Moreover, Johns (2010) finds that on matters of national importance, as opposed to personal importance, citizens are less knowledgeable, their opinions are less stable, and their preferences have a reduced impact on their voting choice. Another major reason why we use an indicator of personal rather than national salience is that this is the only indicator documented in the so called ‘weekly reports’ where the most important results of different polls are summarised for the German Chancellor every Friday.

Therefore, to measure personal salience we use data from the ‘Themenmonitor’ which is a weekly survey commissioned by the German government that asks respondents the following question: ‘if you think back over the last few days, what political, economic and social issue has been of most concern to you personally?’¹³ The answers to the open question were summarised and assigned to the thematic codes of the CAP scheme by human coders.

Control variables

We control for media attention, government priorities and issue ownership as these might confound our theorised main effects.

Media salience. We control for *media salience* by using a novel news indicator. The topics addressed in the *Tagesschau*, the prime-time broadcast of public service broadcaster ARD, were manually coded according to the *Comparative Agendas Project* coding scheme on the basis of the daily summary provided on the television channel’s website. The main edition of *Tagesschau* at 8 p.m. is the most-watched news program in all age groups in Germany,

with an average of 10.13 million people watching the Tagesschau in 2021.¹⁴ Furthermore, the ARD is frequently regarded as the most reliable television station in opinion polls.¹⁵

Government's priorities. We use a measure of government priorities based on the government program for the third and fourth Merkel government. We operationalise the government program by using Angela Merkel's major speech at the beginning of each legislative period, in which she outlined the government's priorities for the coming year. These speeches were also coded thematically according to the CAP scheme.¹⁶

Issue ownership. Following Seeberg (2017), we operationalise issue ownership of political parties drawing on data on competence attribution obtained from election studies, which is a commonly used measure in the literature (Bélanger & Meguid, 2008; Green & Hobolt, 2008). More precisely, we combine two questions included in the German election studies. First, we use the most important problem question included in election studies to identify the issue priorities of German citizens. Second, we use a follow-up question which asks respondents to report which party is most competent in dealing with the most important issue in their view. We rely on the percentage of respondents who indicated that a political party is competent in dealing with a given issue area as a measure for issue ownership of political parties. We then measure issue ownership by the chancellor's party (the CDU-CSU) by creating a dummy indicator for each legislative period. This indicator shows which of the 21 policy issues were 'owned' or not 'owned' by the CDU-CSU.¹⁷ The data for this comes from the GLES post-election studies of 2013¹⁸ and 2017.¹⁹

We were able to collect most of our data at a weekly or monthly level. However, for the purpose of our statistical analyses, we recoded all variables to quarterly level. Two reasons influenced this decision: first, initial qualitative interviews in our project showed that very short-term changes in opinion have little potential to influence policy decisions or reflections due to time constraints and the time demanding requirements in the process of the commissioning of opinion polls. Second, we had to decide whether to run the analyses on a monthly basis or to maintain the 21-policy-question differentiation. Running the analyses on a monthly rather than a quarterly basis, while maintaining the 21 policy issue differentiation, would generate too many zero observations and reduce the statistical noise in our analyses.

Method

Understanding governments as actors in the production of public opinion, not just as passive consumers, we aim to study governments' qualitative choice behaviour regarding the selection of policy issues for survey questions of polls they commission. We thus model the selection of 21 policy issues for

survey questions of government polls as an unordered discrete choice problem, with a dichotomous dependent variable indicating whether one out of 21 policy issues is selected for a survey question commissioned by the German government (1) or not (0).

The most appropriate method for the objectives of this paper and the structure of our data is the conditional logit model (McFadden, 1974). Conditional logit models are mainly used in the literature on government formation (Glasgow *et al.*, 2012; Schleiter & Bucur, 2024), but can be applied to various research questions related to qualitative choice behaviour. Studies with similar data structure often use fixed-effects conditional logit models (Chiru, 2020; Ennser-Jedenastik *et al.*, 2022), but this model is not appropriate in the case of this study because our independent variables only vary at the level of alternatives and each choice-set identifier (survey question) is only asked once (not at multiple time points).

Discussion of results

Table 1 reports the results of the conditional logit regression models that predict for each survey question, whether one of the 21 policy issues was selected for German government polls. We first model the effect of ‘capacity’ by testing how varying legislative competences across policy issues affect issue selection in government polls (model 1) and how distinct policy types influence issue selection in government polls (model 2). Model 3 further adds the direct effect of issue salience, while models 4–5 then test the conditional effects of issue salience with different measures of ‘capacity’ on the selection of policy issues in government polls.

In a conditional logit model, the regression coefficients represent changes in the log-odds of the outcome for a one-unit increase in a predictor variable. To make interpretation easier, we exponentiate these coefficients to obtain odds ratios. The odds ratio tells us how much more likely (or less likely) the outcome (policy issues getting selected in government poll survey questions) is for a one-unit increase in the predictor. For example, an odds ratio of 2 means that a one-unit increase in the predictor doubles the odds of the outcome occurring. An odds ratio of less than 1 indicates a decrease in odds with an increase in the predictor variable. If the odds ratio is equal to 1 this means that the predictor variable does not have any effect on the selection of policy issues in the survey questions of government polls (see our exponentiated coefficients in the Table C.2, Appendix).

Model 1 of Table 1 shows a negative and significant direct effect of legislative responsibilities at state level on issue selection in survey questions of government polls. This means that, if a policy issue represents a state-level legislative responsibility rather than a purely federal legislative responsibility, its odds of being covered by government polls survey questions decrease by

Table 1. Issue selection in German government polls (conditional logit regression models).

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
Legislative responsibility (<i>ref. federal</i>)					
Shared	−0.01 (0.02)	−0.05* (0.02)	−0.25*** (0.02)	−0.46*** (0.03)	−0.29*** (0.02)
State	−0.59*** (0.04)	−0.57*** (0.04)	−0.57*** (0.04)	−0.56*** (0.04)	−0.50*** (0.04)
Policy type (<i>ref. regulatory</i>)					
(Re)distributive		−0.23*** (0.02)	−0.45*** (0.02)	−0.50*** (0.02)	−0.70*** (0.03)
Personal issue salience			4.42*** (0.09)	1.49*** (0.16)	3.17*** (0.11)
Media salience	1.34*** (0.11)	0.88*** (0.12)	−4.57*** (0.17)	−2.53*** (0.19)	−4.12*** (0.18)
Government's priorities	4.83*** (0.20)	5.18*** (0.20)	7.43*** (0.21)	8.32*** (0.21)	7.76*** (0.21)
Issue ownership (<i>ref. unowned</i>)	−0.12*** (0.02)	−0.13*** (0.02)	−0.30*** (0.02)	−0.26*** (0.02)	−0.15*** (0.02)
Conditional effects					
Legislative responsibility*salience (<i>ref. federal</i>)					
Shared*salience				3.58*** (0.16)	
State*salience				2.31 (4.86)	
Policy type*salience (<i>ref. regulatory</i>)					
(Re)distributive*salience					3.00*** (0.14)
AIC	66500.06	66394.95	64396.81	63874.35	63938.74
Log Likelihood	−33245.03	−33191.47	−32191.40	−31928.18	−31961.37
Num. obs.	11502	11502	11502	11502	11502
K	21	21	21	21	21

Note: Standard errors in parantheses; *** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$

44 %.²⁰ This effect is quite robust and stays significant even when controlling for 'policy types' following Lowi and issue salience. At the same time, shared legislative responsibilities do also reduce the likelihood of policy issues to be selected in government polls. Their negative effect is much smaller and only becomes bigger and statistically significant when controlling for policy types and issue salience. In other words, at similar levels of public issue salience, media salience, government priorities and issue ownership, policy issues of the same policy type that represent shared legislative responsibilities have 22 % lower odds of being covered in government polls than policy issues that represent federal legislative responsibilities. We thus cannot reject our federalism hypothesis (H1).

The results of regression models 2 and 3 suggest that the nature of public policies – regulatory or redistributive – significantly influences the selection of issues for government polls. At similar levels of public issue salience, media salience, government priorities, issue ownership as well as similar legislative responsibilities, switching from regulatory to redistributive policy issues decreases the odds of policy issues to be selected in government polls by 36 %. Hence, this confirms our regulatory issue hypothesis (H2).

As expected, issue salience has a statistically significant and substantial positive effect on the selection of policy issues in government polls (H3). At similar levels of media salience, government priorities, issue ownership as well as similar legislative responsibilities and policy type, a one-unit increase in the public salience of a policy issue increases the odds of a policy issue being covered in government polls by more than 82 times. In terms of the effects of our control variables, it is worth highlighting the large positive effect of government priorities on the likelihood of policy issues being covered by questions in government surveys. However, media salience has similarly strong but negative significant effects on the selection of issues in government surveys. This suggests that the more prominent an issue becomes in the media, the less the government includes it in its commissioned survey questions. The same is true for issues that are owned by the party in government. In line with the results of Durovic and Schnatterer (2025) and of Chaqués-Bonafont *et al.* (2022) for Spain, we find that the German government is less likely to commission survey questions on issues that are owned by the government. This finding underlines once again that the government is less interested in public opinion on issues it 'owns'. Overall, this could indicate that the government asks fewer questions on issues where it feels it already has sufficient information.

We further examine the hypothesised conditional effects between our main explanatory variables. To do so, we added two interaction terms (see models 4 and 5 in Table 1). First of all, we study whether the German government asks more survey questions about highly salient issues for which there

is competing legislative powers (H4). This is indeed the case (see the coefficients of the interaction terms in model 4, [Table 1](#)).

However, it should be emphasised that the perceived importance of policy issues by citizens has no influence whatsoever on the selection of issues in government polls if they do not fall into the areas of the federal government's legislative powers.

Finally, we test whether the federal government is more likely to ask questions about highly salient (re)distribution policy issues than about highly salient regulatory policy issues (H5). The associated coefficient of the interaction term is positive and statistically significant which means that this hypothesis clearly cannot be rejected. Put differently, the more important a (re)distributive policy issue is in the eyes of citizens, compared to a regulatory one, the greater its chances of being included in government polls.

Robustness

In order to assess the robustness of these results we test an alternative model specification. The conditional logit model assumes that outcomes are independent of irrelevant alternatives (IIA), which implies that the probability of choosing one policy specific question does not depend on other alternatives in the choice set. Mixed logit models make it possible to relax the IIA assumption. They can accommodate random coefficients that make it possible to take account of unobserved heterogeneity in the policy issue selection process for survey questions. We follow (Glasgow *et al.*, 2012) and determine which variables should enter the mixed logit model as random coefficients by applying a Lagrange multiplier equivalent test. However, we did not use mixed logit models as the main models because our explanatory variables only vary at the level of the alternatives, not across individual survey questions. Furthermore, as each individual survey question makes only a 'single choice' about the issue it asks about, there is no need to account for repeated observations. The results of the mixed logit models are reported in Table D.1 in the Appendix. Overall, none of the random coefficients are statistically significant and both pairs of models estimate substantively similar results. More importantly, these robustness checks indicate that the IIA assumption is not globally violated in our application of the conditional logit model.

Conclusion

We provide evidence that helps to better understand the conditions under which certain policy issues emerge in government polls in times of crises. Our results show that the parallel consideration of governments' ability to act on a given issue as well as the salience of an issue allows for a better understanding of issue selection in government polls. Regarding the division

of responsibilities between the federal government and the states in German federalism, the results are consistent with our hypotheses: The federal government is more likely to commission survey questions on issues that fall under its jurisdiction (compared to issues where the states have jurisdiction or jurisdiction is shared). Issue salience has a greater impact on the likelihood of the selection of additional questions in areas of shared competence with the states. This observation is interesting in the context of recent reforms of German federalism, which have increased joint decision-making between the federal and state levels (Benz & Sonnicksen, 2017; Kropp & Behnke, 2016). These findings call for further research to look more closely at the circumstances under which issues of shared competence are placed on the agenda of polls commissioned by federal governments. While existing research has mainly focussed on how political bodies at the subnational level take up issues beyond their areas of competence (e.g., examining how state and local governments take up issues in coalition agreements (Gross & Krauss, 2021)), this adds the other part of the story: how the national government takes up issues of shared competence.

And this is a highly topical issue, as the COVID-19 pandemic has shown, which served as a stress test for the German federal system (Siewert et al., 2020). Many of the issues emerging from the crisis, including policies on schools, kindergartens, and universities, fell under the jurisdiction of the Länder. Additionally, as the German states bear primary responsibility for implementing laws, they were also tasked with enforcing most measures under the *Protection Against Infection Act*, rather than the federal government. Notably, a significant step toward centralisation occurred as the Federal Ministry of Health temporarily gained enhanced operational authority within the typically decentralised pandemic management framework of Germany's administrative federalism. At the same time, our findings add a relatively understudied topic to studies of federalism in Germany: the way public opinion is mobilised at different levels.

When it comes to the different types of policy as defined by Lowi, our hypotheses are again confirmed. We observe that the government is more likely to commission survey questions on regulatory issues than on (re)distributive issues. Salience has a stronger positive effect on the likelihood of the selection of survey questions on (re)distributive issues than on regulatory issues. This indicates that while the government is generally more inclined to commission surveys on regulatory issues without important financial dimension, its likelihood of asking questions on other issues increases when the issue is salient.

In summary, while previous temporal studies have shown that the Merkel government uses opinion polls strategically and differently at different moments of the electoral cycle (Durovic & Schnatterer, 2025), the results of the present study point to the limits of the government's ability to act in

the context of shared responsibilities in a federal system and budgetary and financial constraints.

The variation in polling by policy issue echoes at the same time Baumgartner and Jones' (1993) insight that governments selectively manage attention in response to both external pressures (salience) and internal constraints (institutional capacity). The fact that, responding to the salience of issues, the German government shifts the focus of public opinion polls to issues where they have less room for manoeuvre underlines the important role of public opinion polls in responding to upcoming events and citizens' concerns, making them a valuable tool for governing in times of crisis.

Based on our current results, we see several avenues for future research. First of all, more comparative studies are necessary in order to establish general patterns. The fact that hitherto there is so little knowledge of research into the practice of governmental polling makes it difficult to make statements about the generalizability of our results beyond the Merkel governments. Germany is characterised by very strong institutionalisation of poll commissioning by its governments. We believe that this leads to a certain path dependency and should result in smaller differences in polling practices between different German chancellors than is the case for leaders of countries with less institutionalised practices, but future work will have to verify this. Even though our findings are based on the German context, we have good reason to believe that the broader theoretical insights, especially those concerning the interplay between issue salience, governmental competence and institutional constraints, are also relevant to other Western democracies with federal structures.

Another important extension of the questions examined in this article concerns the polling practices of governments at the level of state or local governments. Since we have shown that the German federal governments is more likely to commission polls on issues that fell into its area of competences it would be interesting to see whether the same is true for the governments at other levels. And of course, governments are not acting in a vacuum when they commission polls. Kaciaf (2011) explained that in France, the government pays the main polling organisations to receive the results of all polls commissioned by other actors (e.g. the media) before they are published. Future studies should therefore find a way to compare the issue agendas of government polls and polls by other social actors to investigate whether they subsequently influence the former.

As outlined above, our study contributes to a growing literature on democratic responsiveness that goes beyond policy outcomes to examine earlier stages of the representational process. We focus on one of the very first steps: how governments seek to understand public opinion – in particular, whether these efforts are consistent across policy areas or whether certain issues receive less attention. The next step is to look at how these initial

findings translate into the wider process of representation. Are governments more responsive in the area of regulatory policy? Does the division of powers in federal systems shape patterns of responsiveness? While our findings cannot be directly equated with political responsiveness – as surveys can serve multiple purposes – it is plausible that governments ask more questions about (re)distributive issues when they are salient, not necessarily to respond to public preferences, but perhaps to frame or justify (in)action. As polling is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for responsiveness, and polls can also be used for persuasive purposes, as outlined earlier, an increase in polling activity on salient issues where governments have less leeway to act can also indicate an attempt to manage perceptions by appearing engaged, even in areas where meaningful policy change is unlikely. This aligns with the concept of ‘symbolic responsiveness’, where the aim is to project attentiveness rather than deliver substantive outcomes (Esaïasson & Narud, 2013; Soroka & Wlezien, 2009). To deepen our understanding of the functions of government polls, qualitative research—such as interviews with key actors involved in commissioning government polls—will be essential.

Having taken a first step in mapping this early stage of responsiveness, future research can build on our findings to trace how citizens’ preferences move through the political system.

Notes

1. In Germany, for example, the economy was consistently seen as the most important issue by a significant proportion of the population – up to 80% in the 1990s (Breunig & Schnatterer, 2020). In the US and Turkey, economic and defence issues dominated, while in Spain the economy and, to a lesser extent, legal issues were seen as key concerns (Bevan & Jennings, 2019; Bulut & Yildirim, 2019).
2. A common question is whether issue salience is endogenous or exogenous to policy making. We argue that while governors can influence salience through their actions and the information they provide, variation in issue salience also responds to other factors, such as actual events, both via the positive effect they have on news coverage and directly, or to social movements (Dennison, 2019). Thus, drawing on Segura (1995), we believe that public issue salience is both endogenous in that it is influenced by, among other things, the actions and information provided by elected officials, and that public issue salience is an important and independent force with which governments must reckon.
3. See for instance: D. Creutzburg, C. Geinitz, H. Göbel, W. Mussler, M. Schäfers und N. Zaboji, ‘Merkel, Kanzlerin der Krisen’, *Frankfurter Allgemeine*, 23 September 2021: <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/wirtschaft/angela-merkel-bilanz-der-kanzlerin-der-krisen-17550099.html>.
4. The fact that the polls commissioned by American presidents have been at the center of some studies (Druckman & Jacobs, 2015; Edwards, 2016; Eisinger, 2003; Heith, 1998; Rottinghaus, 2003) is due in particular to the existence of

the presidential libraries which provide access to the reports produced on the basis of government surveys.

5. All government-commissioned surveys must result in a report that must be filed with the government archives. These data are then made available after a varying period of time: <https://www.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/porr/Pages/porr.aspx>.
6. See: http://www.bgbl.de/xaver/bgbl/start.xav?startbk=Bundesanzeiger_BGBI&jumpTo=bgbl177s0128.pdf.
7. Surveys from 2016 onwards are published either on the website of GESIS (Leibniz-Institut für Sozialwissenschaften) or of SSOAR20 (Social Science Open Access Repository).
8. The federal government's responses (Drucksache 19/23341 and Drucksache 19/10794) to the AfD's minor inquiries regarding government surveys allowed us to verify the completeness of our data set.
9. We excluded several regular collected items from our analysis. We consider that the answers to the questions 'Importance of political tasks', 'assessment of the federal government's work on these tasks', 'perception of the federal government policies' and 'assessment of the world' are potential control variables for future analysis. Questions assessing the salience of issues (whether in the form of independent studies such as the *Themenmonitor* or in the form of individual questions in broader surveys) were also excluded, as salience in the eyes of the population is one of our main variables of interest. These questions are easily identifiable and are either formulated as open-ended questions or ask the respondent to indicate the salience of a set of suggested issues.
10. All survey questions were coded by at least two well-trained coders. Their coding decisions were then reviewed by a third person. Finally, all observations were evaluated together. In case of disagreement, they were discussed by all coders and then exclusively assigned to a category.
11. In order to obtain as complete a list as possible, we collected information from Sturm (2006), and from the *Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung* (<https://www.bpb.de/medien/189018/Foederalismus.pdf>, last accessed on 1th of July 2024), which also provides an overview of the areas of competence; we then compared the two.
12. We coded as regulatory issues: Law & Order, Energy, Environment, Foreign Policy, Civil Rights, Science & Technology, Immigration, State Affairs, State-Local Affairs, Domestic Commerce, EU, Government Organisation, Labour. And as issues with strong (re)distributive dimension: Transportation, Health, Education, Agriculture, Family Issues, Welfare, Housing, Economy.
13. Translated by the authors; original question: '*Wenn Sie jetzt einmal an die letzten Tage zurückdenken, welches Thema aus Politik, Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft hat Sie da persönlich am meisten beschäftigt?*', Respondents could give two answers, both of which were taken into account. We added up the number of mentions of a particular topic and divided it by the total number of responses. The decision to consider the first and second answers was guided by the fact that an initial data set for the years 2013–15, which was provided to us by the FPO, was structured in this way. This leads us to assume that the FPO considered this information to be the most important.
14. According to the official website of the ARD: <https://www.ard.de/die-ard/02-09-tagesschau-Deutschlands-Nummer-1-fuer-Nachrichten-100/> last accessed on 15th July 2024.

15. See for instance: the ARD trend, representative survey of 3,032 individuals aged 14 between 3 October and 12 December 2022: <https://www.ard.de/die-ard/02-09-tagesschau-Deutschlands-Nummer-1-fuer-Nachrichten-100/> last accessed on 15th July 2024.
16. We thank Christian Breunig and his team for sharing the German CAP data on government speeches.
17. Therefore, we consider the CDU/CSU to 'own' an issue if it has a ten percentage point lead over the party with the next highest score. Issues 'owned' by the CDU-CSU for the 18th legislative period: Domestic Commerce, Economy, EU, Family issues, Foreign Policy, Government Organisation, Immigration, Law and Order and Transportation. Issues 'owned' by the CDU-CSU for the 19th legislative period: Civil Rights, EU, Family issues, Foreign Policy, Government Organisation, Immigration, Labor, Law and Order, State and Local Government and Transportation.
18. GLES (2019). Post-election Cross Section (GLES 2013). GESIS Data Archive, Cologne. ZA5701 Data file Version 3.0.1, <https://doi.org/10.4232/1.13232>.
19. GLES (2019). Post-election Cross Section (GLES 2017). GESIS Data Archive, Cologne. ZA6801 Data file Version 4.0.1, <https://doi.org/10.4232/1.13235>.
20. We obtain this result through the following calculation: $(1-OR)*100$, more precisely $:(1-0,56)*100$.

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Data availability statement

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