

**The Concept of Issue Salience in Foreign Policy Analysis:
Delineating the Scope Conditions of Theoretical Approaches in the Field**

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FPA would more likely benefit from efforts at theoretical synthesis if it had better instruments to judge the comparative explanatory strengths and weaknesses of its theories. The paper contends that the concept of issue salience provides such an instrument. The concept captures the cognitive preconditions for domestic actors to sanction the foreign policies of governments by imposing domestic audience costs on them. Thus, it can be employed as a scope condition for theories of FPA which focus on the domestic political constraints of foreign policy decision-making. In particular, the poliheuristic theory of foreign policy is seen to be of greater explanatory promise when it is applied to issues which are highly salient to a government's domestic constituents than in relation to issues which are of low domestic salience. More generally, the paper tentatively distinguishes between selected FPA-theories on the basis of whether they should be more powerful in high-salience or in low-salience environments.

1. Introduction

Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA) has been dubbed “the most radically integrative theoretical enterprise” (Hudson 2002: 427) of all subfields in International Relations. Calls for integrating different explanatory variables into a synthetic approach for analyzing foreign policy are as old as the discipline itself. In particular, the work of Harold and Margaret Sprout on the “psycho-milieu” of foreign policy decision-makers (1956) and James Rosenau’s endeavor to “pre-theorize” foreign policy (1966) served as early and highly influential reminders that foreign policy has to be analyzed in a multilevel and multifactorial fashion. The commitment of FPA to actor-specific theorizing, which refuses to bracket the agents of

foreign policy-making, and the location of its explanandum, i.e. purposive foreign policy behavior that is the outcome of processes of decision-making, at the interface between domestic politics and the international environment make efforts at devising integrative frameworks in the discipline all the more compelling (Carlsnaes 2008: 86-91). Indeed, the goal of theoretical integration has been singled out as “an essential task” and the “true promise” of FPA – albeit a promise as yet “unfulfilled” (Hudson 2007: 184, 165). If anything, the 2003 FPA symposium on the pages of the *International Studies Review* (see Garrison 2003) as well as recent articles in *Foreign Policy Analysis* (e.g. James and Özdamar 2009; Mitchell and Massoud 2009) testify to the unabated commitment of scholars to the goal of theoretical integration in the field.

Despite the undertaking’s undeniable complexity, it has, in principle, been judged feasible to arrive at a synthetic framework for analyzing foreign policy at least on a high level of abstraction (Carlsnaes 2002: 342-343). Broadly speaking, integrative efforts in the field have approached this task from three distinct points of departure. First, a number of proposals have been made to integrate different levels of analysis in FPA – from the level of the individual actor via various elements of domestic politics up to the level of the international system. The classic work in this regard has clearly been Robert Putnam’s metaphor of “two-level games”, which has modeled foreign policy decisions as strategic responses of governments to simultaneous and interdependent incentives on the levels of international negotiations and domestic political competition (Putnam 1988). A major and largely unresolved problem of scholarship in this tradition, however, has been with delineating the scope conditions or scope statements (see Walker and Cohen 1985: 291-296) under which variables on the different levels of analysis can be expected to have more or less explanatory power (Hudson 2007: 186-187). Second, there have been efforts at linking up agency-centered and structural accounts of foreign policy. Most notable in this respect is Walter Carlsnaes’ tripartite framework that combines an intentional, a dispositional and a structural dimension of explanation in FPA (Carlsnaes 1993: 18-21). Third, considerable progress has been made towards bridging the gap between rationalist, cognitive and constructivist perspectives on the making of foreign policy. Some scholars have spelled out the areas of agreement and the complementarities between rationalism and constructivism in IR in general (Fearon and Wendt 2002), while others have pointed to the common ground shared by social constructivism and cognitive approaches to FPA calling for a stronger engagement between the two (Houghton 2007: 31-39). The most sustained integrative effort has been devoted to the cognitive-rationalist divide: in particular, poliheuristic theory has proposed a two-stage

model of foreign policy decision-making which combines a heuristic-based decision strategy that accords with cognitive approaches and a subsequent stage of analytic processing of remaining alternatives that corresponds to the rational choice model of decision-making (Mintz and Geva 1997; Mintz 2004; Danilovic 2003).

Against the background of this multi-faceted integrative agenda, the paper contends that the concept of issue salience can make a valuable contribution to that agenda which has so far not been made full use of. Specifically, the concept may further this cause in two closely related respects. One, it can help to clarify the scope conditions under which domestic-level political constraints will exert the greatest influence on the making of foreign policy. It can thus provide a yardstick against which to measure whether theories which focus on such constraints in explaining foreign policy behavior hold more or less promise in a given context than theories which invoke international-level or individual-level variables, refer to small group dynamics, or emphasize domestic bureaucratic and organizational factors. Being clearer about the scope conditions of different theories of FPA, in turn, would be expected to prepare the ground for efforts at linking these theories up in an integrative framework of analysis. Two, the concept of issue salience can complement the poliheuristic theory of foreign policy decision-making. In particular, it provides a criterion for assessing the extent to which the non-compensatory principle on the first stage of the model can be expected to restrict the choice set on the second stage and thus for evaluating the relative importance of heuristic-based and analytic processing for a given foreign policy decision.

In order to substantiate these propositions, the paper is organized as follows. The following section will introduce the concept of issue salience and elaborate on its theoretical and methodological underpinnings. Section three will move on to present the case for the concept's potential to further the goal of theoretical integration in FPA: it will elaborate on the link between the domestic salience of foreign policy issues and the scope of possible domestic audience costs which governments may suffer when devising their policy on these issues, and it will relate the concept of issue salience to the poliheuristic theory of foreign policy decision-making. Section four will then discuss some implications of studying the salience of foreign policy for the explanatory promise of selected theoretical approaches in the field. The conclusion will briefly wrap up the main argument and suggest desiderata for future research.

2. The Concept of Issue Salience

The concept of issue salience refers to the relative importance and significance that an actor ascribes to a given issue on the political agenda (Wlezien 2005: 556-561; Soroka 2003: 28-

29). It is a measure of the attention actors devote to the issue in question and of the issue's overall prominence in the minds of decision-makers. In analyzing foreign policy, the concept can be employed to take account of the cognitive short-cuts of human actors to select which information they process before deciding on a course of action. Following the basic tenets of cognitive psychology, decision-makers can be conceived of as "cognitive misers" (Fiske and Taylor 1984: 11-12) who have to economize on their scarce capacity to process information. That cognitive scarcity concerns not the availability of information per se but rather the actor's attentiveness to information. In order to cope with the "bottleneck of attention" (Jones 1994: 65) human actors resort to heuristics which produce simplified subjective representations of their decision-making environment and thereby delimit the amount of information they need to take up. In consequence, their attentiveness is highly selective and they use but a tiny fraction of available information when making choices (Simon 1985: 301-302; Vertzberger 1990: 7-10).

A foremost cognitive short-cut of actors to reduce the informational burden of decision-making is the availability heuristic (Tversky and Kahnemann 1982: 11-14). In what has been referred to as the "top-of-the-head" phenomenon (Taylor and Fiske 1978), decision-makers will primarily base their choices on information which is most readily accessible in their memory and which they can most easily bring to mind. For the purpose of analyzing foreign policy decision-making, this heuristic, in turn, can be operationalised by the concept of issue salience. The concept is strictly relational and reproduces the trade-offs that human actors in the arena of foreign policy face when they focus their attention on some issues at the expense of others. Of the countless political issues that compete for their attention at any point in time, these actors will concentrate their cognitive capacity primarily on issues which are amongst their uppermost concerns, i.e. which they consider most salient. When they form their opinion on different foreign policy options or on a particular foreign policy behavior and when they decide how to make use of their institutional competences to devise or influence foreign policy, therefore, these actors will above all consult information on those foreign policy issues to which they attach the highest salience.

By way of empirical analysis, the salience of foreign policy issues can be investigated both for the ultimate decision-makers in the foreign policy executive and for the policy's constituents in the domestic arena (see Hill 2003: 61-66, 250-278). As regards the former, the analysis will mostly have to rely on indirect measures of issue salience since high-level governmental decision-makers will only rarely be available for interviews or surveys. Chief among the methodological approaches which offer themselves to this purpose are analyses of

information gathering activities of decision-makers (Black and Johnson 2008), expert surveys (Benoit and Wiesehomeier 2009) or quantitative analyses of government agendas, including speeches of decision-makers and state documents.

By far more common and methodologically more established, however, are studies that assess the salience of foreign policy issues for the policy's domestic constituents. These studies have put the greatest emphasis on public opinion and – to a lesser extent – on political parties. With respect to the latter, existing scholarship has primarily focused on the issue of European integration (Marks et al. 2002; Steenbergen and Scott 2004; Kriesi 2007). The methods employed in this research have included the comparative analysis of party manifestos, expert surveys and surveys among sympathizers of political parties (see Netjes and Binnema 2007). On the level of members of parliament, moreover, a regular survey has been established that biennially polls the salience of foreign policy issues in the German Bundestag (Jäger et al. 2009).

Turning to public opinion, a long history of research has investigated the link between issue salience and voting behaviour (see RePass 1971; Rabinowitz et al. 1982; Niemi and Bartels 1985; Krosnick 1988, 1990; Fournier et al. 2003). The higher the salience of foreign policy is, the more responsive voters are to information about it and the stronger the policy's impact as a benchmark for individual voting decisions is likely to be (Franklin and Wlezien 1997: 348-51). In addition, a rich literature exists on the mediating role of public issue salience in democratic politics, which explores other aspects of the relationship between public opinion and policy-making. For one, numerous studies have shown that policy outcomes are more consistent with public preferences in cases of high issue salience than in cases of low issue salience (Page and Shapiro 1983; Monroe 1998; Petry and Mendelsohn 2004). Such consistency, moreover, is more likely to result from a bottom-up rather than a top-down process when the salience of the issue in question is high (Hill and Hurley 1999). In a similar vein, a distinguished line of research on the public responsiveness to policy outputs suggests that publics will only take note of policy decisions and adjust its preferences in a 'thermostatic' fashion when the respective policy area is sufficiently salient to them (Wlezien 1995, 2004). The extent to which publics respond to policy outputs in a given domain is thus indicative of that domain's public salience.

More specific empirical insights on the patterns of the public salience of foreign policy, moreover, have been accumulated by a substantial body of work which has tracked changes in the public salience of foreign affairs in single countries – above all in the US (see Asher 1992; Persily et al. 2008) – as well as similarities and differences across countries and specific

issues (Oppermann and Viehrig 2009). Most notably, there is evidence for systematic cross-country differences in the public salience of defence issues, which appears to be higher in the US and the United Kingdom than in Canada and Sweden, for example (Wlezien 1996; Soroka and Wlezien 2004, 2005; Eichenberg and Stoll 2003). In addition, some pertinent works have probed into the salience of European integration to European publics, which displays strong variations across countries and over time (Franklin and Wlezien 1997; De Vries 2007; Oppermann 2008a; Oppermann and Viehrig 2008).

Methodologically, analyses of the public salience of foreign policy rest on opinion polls, media content analyses or a combination of the two. With respect to public opinion surveys the most valid indicator of issue salience is aggregate data on the respondents' denomination of the 'most important issues' on the political agenda. Crucially, this indicator is better suited to capture an issue's salience than the widely employed survey question on the 'most important political problems'. The latter question wording mingles an issue's perceived importance with its perceived problem status and therefore only imperfectly reflects on the concept of issue salience which is agnostic as to whether or not an issue is negatively evaluated as a problem (Wlezien 2005: 556-561). Moreover, unprompted and open-ended questions are best suited to reproduce the 'top-of-the-head' phenomenon that is at the heart of the salience concept and are thus preferable to closed and prompted survey designs.

Since suitable polling data that meet these standards are in short supply especially when it comes to comparative long-term data, however, studies of public issue salience often turn to quantitative media content analyses, which make for a valid and cost-effective method to indirectly infer the salience of foreign affairs in public opinion (Epstein and Segal 2000: 72-77; Knecht and Weatherford 2006: 713).¹ Given the close theoretical and empirical correspondence between media reporting on foreign affairs and their salience to general publics, the amount of media coverage on foreign policy is a good indicator for the policy's salience in public opinion. General publics for the most part cannot directly observe or experience foreign affairs, and most of the time they exclusively rely on the mass media for information on the state of their countries' external relations (Page et al. 1987: 23-25; Schmitt-Beck 2003: 233-238). Thus, there is a strong correlation between the amount of reporting on a foreign affairs issue in the media and its salience in public opinion (McCombs and Shaw 1972; Soroka 2003: 42-44). Publics tend to attach the highest importance to those issues which figure most prominently in the media. They employ the media as a cost-saving cognitive shortcut to differentiate between more and less significant issues in foreign affairs,

¹ For a critical appraisal of recent scholarship which has employed media content data to measure the salience of political issues see: Black and Johnson (2008: 3-4).

and those issues which are most extensively reported in the media become primed in the minds of the members of the public (Iyengar and Kinder 1987: 63-72; Miller and Krosnick 1997: 258-260).²

In light of this review of existing research on the salience of foreign affairs in the domestic arena, three overall conclusions are particularly noteworthy for the purposes of this paper. First, the domestic salience of foreign policy strongly varies across different decision-making contexts. There is thus no reason to expect a priori that foreign affairs are systematically more or less salient to domestic constituents than domestic political issues. Second, there exist a number of tried and tested methodological approaches to measuring the domestic salience of foreign policy – above all regarding general publics and political parties. Third, the salience of foreign affairs in the domestic arena is linked to foreign policy decision-making. From the bottom up, the domestic constituents of foreign policy have been shown to signal their priorities to decision-makers. From the top down, governments are likely to be responsive to these signals. Although it has been argued that decision-makers may be less informed about the domestic salience of policy issues than about the popularity of different policy options (Knecht and Weatherford 2006: 708-709), it is nonetheless plausible to assume that they have both a political interest and the adequate means to obtain a fairly accurate assessment of the salience which their domestic constituents attach to different foreign policy issues. The increasing reliance of governments on opinion research, focus groups and political advisers and their preoccupation with media management as well as their close symbiosis with political parties and their parliamentary support coalitions at least in parliamentary systems all support that assumption. This state of the art in the field forms the bedrock of the deliberations in the next section on the possible contribution of the concept of issue salience to the goal of theoretical integration in FPA.

3. Issue Salience and Theoretical Integration in FPA

Foreign policy decision-making can be expected to follow an entirely different path in high-salience environments than in low-salience environments. When foreign policy decision-makers presume that an issue is considered highly salient by their domestic constituents,

² It has to be noted, however, that the relationship between the amount of media coverage on a foreign policy issue and the public salience of that issue is not strictly unidirectional. While general publics are fundamentally dependent on the reporting of the media when they assess the relative importance of foreign affairs issues, the content of media coverage may at the same time reflect the media's desire to meet the anticipated expectations of their audience (Serfaty 1990: 13-14). The media will thus be likely to report more on those issues which they assume to have some salience within the public in the first place. Irrespective of which of these mutually reinforcing processes is predominant, the empirical observation of intense media reporting on a foreign affairs issue should in any case indicate that the respective public considers the issue highly salient.

domestic-level political incentives will weigh more heavily on their decision calculus than when they act on the assumption that the domestic salience of the issue in question is low. In terms of Walter Carlsnaes' tripartite framework (1993: 18-21), the domestic salience of foreign policy issues as perceived by the foreign policy decision-makers can be construed of as a cognitive filter on the dispositional dimension of explanation that mediates the impact of structural factors in domestic politics on the decision-makers' intentional foreign policy behavior. In order to flesh out these basic propositions, it is useful to consider the relationship between decision-makers in the foreign policy executive and their foremost domestic constituents from a principal-agent perspective.

3.1 Principals and Agents in Foreign Policy Decision Making

The defining feature of principal-agent relations is the delegation by a principal of a task or responsibility to an agent. Such relations rest upon the expectation on the part of the principal that the employed agent will use its authority according to the principal's interests. At the same time, however, it is a corollary to the inherent logic of delegation that agents inevitably enjoy a certain leeway to act independently from their assigned brief and their principals' wishes (Pratt and Zeckhauser 1985: 2-8). From a principal's perspective, therefore, the perennial challenge of principal-agent relations is to devise suitable control mechanisms which constrain an agent's slack and prevent him from violating the principal's interests (Lupia 2003: 33-36; Kiewit and Mc Cubbins 1991: 24-26).

Broadly speaking, governments – including the ultimate foreign policy decision-makers – can be conceived of as collective agents that have been assigned the task of formulating and implementing foreign policies on behalf of their domestic principals.³ In parliamentary democracies⁴, these principals are the government's parliamentary support coalition and the electorate. Directly or indirectly, they delegate the authority to conduct the foreign policies of a country to a government of their choosing (Strøm 2003: 64-66). Most important, the parliamentary majority and the electorate also have means at their disposal to revoke this authority and to deselect their governmental agent. The former can at any time unseat a government, and the latter may use democratic elections to punish the government by voting it out of office. In terms of Roger Hilsman's concentric circles model of different power

³ The foreign policy decision-making process in democracies can be construed as a chain of principal-agent relationships. Being bound up in this chain, governments are not only the agents of domestic principals. At the same time, they take on the role of principals who delegate some authority in preparing and implementing foreign policy decisions to bureaucratic agents (Przeworski 1999: 25-36).

⁴ This depiction of principal-agent relations only applies to parliamentary systems. Extending the theoretical argument to the analysis of (semi)presidential systems would require terminological and conceptual adjustments.

centers in the foreign policy process (Hilsman 1987: 68-78), the two principals distinguish themselves from other actors in the domestic environment by having the power to impose the most consequential sanctions against the foreign policy executive and ultimately to threaten the very survival of governments. They are thus the two foremost sources of audience costs (see Fearon 1994; Pahre 2003: 15-24) which may accrue to foreign policy decision-makers in the domestic arena.

However, the institutional power of principals to credibly threaten their agents with costly sanctions is only a necessary, not a sufficient, condition for their ability to control the agents' behavior. Rather, the principals will only be able to bring in sanctions against an action of their agent insofar as that action has come to their attention in the first place. In order to learn about the behavior of their agents, moreover, principals engage in monitoring activities which may take on one of two forms: either of 'police-patrol oversight', i.e. a proactive, direct and continuous type of monitoring carried out by the principal itself, or of 'fire-alarm oversight', i.e. a reactive, indirect and selective type of monitoring. The latter form of oversight allows the principal to externalise the bulk of its monitoring costs and to focus its attention on those activities of its agent that third parties consider significant enough to prompt a fire-alarm. It is primarily its superior cost-effectiveness which makes 'fire-alarm oversight' the form of monitoring generally relied upon by principals (McCubbins and Schwartz 1984: 165-171).

This pattern also holds true for parliamentary majorities and general publics in their relations with their governmental agents, which largely depend on 'fire-alarms' when they monitor the making of foreign policy. It follows that their attention to foreign affairs and their oversight of the respective decision-making is not all-embracing and steady but highly selective and volatile: foreign policy issues will become salient concerns for them to the extent that their attention has been focused on these issues by the triggering of fire-alarms. The most significant and closely interrelated sources of such fire-alarms are the media, interest groups, and the political opposition. These actors have in common that they hold an interest in monitoring a government's foreign policies and in bringing such policies to the principals' attention if deemed appropriate on journalistic or political grounds.⁵

From the perspective of principal-agent theory, therefore, parliamentary majorities and general publics will be more likely to employ their institutional powers to sanction their governmental agent should it engage in foreign policies that run counter to their interests, the

⁵ The causal relationship between fire-alarms and the salience of foreign policy issues to the domestic principals of governments is not entirely unidirectional, however. Not only does the triggering of fire-alarms enhance an issue's salience to the principals, but a fire-alarm is also more likely to be set off the more an issue has already become a focal point of the principals' attention. The three sources of fire-alarms can therefore be conceived of as both catalysts for and indicators of an issue's salience to the principals.

more these policies have come to their attention, i.e. the more salient the policies are to them. Foreign policy decision-makers, in consequence, will only have to reckon with suffering domestic audience costs for going against the wishes of their principals if the issue in question has crossed a domestic “salience threshold” (Van Belle 1993: 172): as long as a foreign policy issue ranks below this threshold, decision-makers can expect their policies to remain unsanctioned by their domestic constituents and they do thus not need to factor in domestic audience costs when deciding between different courses of action. The higher the decision-makers’ estimate of an issue’s salience to their domestic principals is, in contrast, the more prominent the prospect of potential audience costs will loom in the decision-making process. This link between the domestic salience of foreign policy and the extent to which decision-makers must expect their choices to carry eventual domestic political costs has important implications for the poliheuristic theory of foreign policy decision-making.

3.2 Issue Salience and Poliheuristic Theory

At its core, poliheuristic theory posits a two-stage model of foreign policy decision-making: in the first stage, actors apply a non-compensatory strategy of decision-making, which serves as a cognitive shortcut to simplify the decision problem by eliminating unacceptable alternatives and by reducing the decision matrix; in the second stage, actors switch to a compensatory mode of information processing and opt for that choice among the remaining alternatives which promises to minimize risks and maximize benefits (Mintz 2004: 6-7). In building a theoretical bridge between the cognitive and rationalist schools of analyzing foreign policy, the most innovative feature of poliheuristic theory clearly is its transfer of the non-compensatory principle of decision-making to FPA in the first stage of the proposed model (Redd 2002: 340-341).

The defining characteristic of the non-compensatory principle is that decision-makers do not make trade-offs across different dimensions or attributes of a given policy alternative: if an alternative scores low on one dimension, a high score on another dimension will not compensate for it. The non-compensatory principle thus posits that the decision-makers’ processing of information is dimension-based rather than alternative-based. They do not sift information on all dimensions of a given alternative and then do the same for the next alternative, but they focus on one dimension at a time and evaluate their options on that dimension alone before they move on to the next dimension. If an alternative fails to meet the cutoff-value on the dimension that is reviewed first in that sequence, decision-makers will not consider any further dimension but reject the alternative outright. Foreign policy decision-

making is thus non-holistic, non-additive and order-sensitive. Decision-makers begin with defining the key dimension on which they first judge their options and then eliminate any option which they consider unacceptable on this key dimension, i.e. which ranks below their predetermined 'satisficing' threshold on the attribute in question (Mintz 1993: 598-603; Mintz and Geva 1997: 84-87).

Critically, poliheuristic theory then goes on to specify that the paramount dimension for assessing alternative courses of action in the process of foreign policy decision-making concerns the alternatives' domestic political ramifications. The theory is unambiguous in that it "sees domestic politics as 'the essence of decision'" (Mintz 2004: 7). Thus, it stipulates that the domestic political attributes of a foreign policy choice will trump all other attributes of the choice and that decision-makers consider the domestic audience costs of their foreign policies to be non-compensatory: they will reject any alternative which they judge unacceptable in terms of their domestic political repercussions and they will include only those alternatives in their choice-set for the second stage of the decision-making process to which they ascribe a satisfactory score on the dimension of domestic politics. Decision-makers are assumed to be loss-averse and driven not so much by a quest for domestic political gains than by a desire to avoid domestic audience costs (Mintz and Geva 1997: 83-84). Political advisers, in turn, are seen to play a central role in the making of foreign policy by sensitizing decision-makers to the potential domestic costs of their choices invoking criteria such as opinion polls, media reporting or patterns of political opposition (Redd 2002: 352-357; Mintz 1993: 600-601). These basic tenets of poliheuristic theory have been substantiated by an impressive array of case studies, quantitative analyses and experimental studies (for an overview, see Mintz 2003: 4-6).

Nonetheless, the specification of the non-compensatory principle in poliheuristic theory's two-stage model of foreign policy decision-making has come in for two closely related criticisms. First, it has been accused of overstating the role of domestic audience costs as an almost absolute constraint on foreign policy making. Instead of postulating the unconditional primacy of domestic politics as a general feature of foreign policy decision-making, the extent to which actors are preoccupied with the domestic political costs of alternative foreign policy options should be seen as contingent on the specific context of decision-making (Stern 2004: 110-111). Second, poliheuristic theory has been challenged to elaborate on when decision-makers are likely to find foreign policy alternatives unacceptable for their domestic political costs and thus to specify the conditions under which the non-compensatory status of domestic

audience costs will prove more or less restrictive (Dacey and Carlson 2004: 53-54; Danilovic 2003: 135-136).

The concept of issue salience, in turn, speaks to both of these criticisms. First, it helps to delineate the conditions under which the avoidance of domestic audience costs should figure most prominently in the decision-making calculus of the foreign policy executive. On issues which are highly salient to their domestic principals, the domestic costs of foreign policy choices can indeed be expected to become a predominant concern of decision-makers as stipulated by poliheuristic theory. In these cases, political advisors which alert decision-makers to the potential domestic costs of their choices are likely to enjoy privileged influence on the making of foreign policy. When the domestic salience of foreign policy issues is low, in contrast, other considerations than domestic audience costs are likely to come to the fore and the relative influence of political advisors on the decision-making process can be expected to recede.

Two, the concept of issue salience provides a measure for assessing the restrictiveness of the non-compensatory strategy of decision-making in the first stage of the poliheuristic model: the higher the domestic salience of a foreign policy issue is, the more the non-compensatory principle will constrain the set of choices to be considered in the second stage of the model, other things being equal. When the domestic salience of an issue is very low, on the contrary, the non-compensatory principle should largely be ineffective. In a low-salience environment, the choices available to decision-makers will not tend to come along with significant domestic audience costs and they will therefore be unlikely to be eliminated in the first stage of decision-making but will rather move on to the second stage. Foreign policy decision-makers will switch more readily from non-compensatory to compensatory information processing when they deal with low-salience issues than in the case of high-salience issues.

Thus, issue salience makes for a cognitive concept which can be employed to assess the explanatory power of the cognitivist component of poliheuristic theory relative to its rationalist component. On issues of high domestic salience, the cognitive shortcut of the non-compensatory principle posited in the first stage of the theory contributes more to explaining foreign policy choices than it does on issues of low domestic salience, in case of which the explanatory burden is mainly borne by the theory's rationalist stage. Since the analytic value-added of poliheuristic theory, however, to a large extent rests on having introduced the non-compensatory principle of decision-making to FPA, the concept of issue salience can be construed as a scope condition of that theory: poliheuristic theory holds more explanatory

promise when it is applied to foreign policy issues which are highly salient to a government's domestic principals than in relation to issues which are of low domestic salience.

4. Discussion: Issue Salience and the Explanatory Promise of Selected FPA-Theories

The previous section has made the case that the concept of issue salience can help clarify the scope conditions of theories which focus on domestic political audience costs in explaining foreign policy and in particular of the poliheuristic model of foreign policy decision-making. Building upon that argument, the following discussion will briefly sketch some implications of differences in the domestic salience of foreign policy issues for the analytic promise of other prominent theories of FPA.

First, the neorealist approach to explaining foreign policy – insofar as neorealism is accepted as a theory of foreign policy at all (see Elman 1996; Waltz 1996) – appears to be most plausible in regard to foreign policy issues that have not become highly salient to a government's domestic constituents. The chief explanatory variable in neorealist theorizing about foreign policy is the relative power position of a state in the international system, which shapes the scope and ambitions of its foreign policy and which determines whether the state is more likely to engage in an autonomy-seeking or an influence-seeking form of power politics (Baumann et al. 2001: 37-48). In essence, neorealism puts forward a systemic argument which relies on governments rationally reading off and responding to incentives and pressures in the international system and which thus allows for treating states 'as if' they were unitary actors (Elman 1996: 19-21).

The 'black-boxing' of domestic politics in the neorealist analysis, however, will compromise the theory's explanatory power if domestic-level incentives lead governments to opt for different foreign policy choices than international-level incentives would suggest. This, in turn, is more likely to happen when the domestic salience of a foreign policy issue is high than when it is low, because governments will be under greater compulsion to trade off the utility of a policy on the international level against its potential domestic audience costs in the former than in the latter case. In high-salience environments, the preferences and power of domestic actors are more likely to constrain the ability of governments to rationally act upon international incentives and pressures than in low-salience environments. In particular when it comes to explaining foreign policy decisions that are highly salient to a government's domestic principals, therefore, neorealist analyses might be well-advised to integrate domestic-level variables. This is precisely what has been proposed by 'neoclassical' or 'modified' realism: while being true to the neorealist core assumption that a country's foreign

policy is primarily driven by its relative power position in the international system, this variant of realist theorizing presumes that systemic pressures are refracted by intervening variables on the domestic level, and it thus attends to domestic attributes of states such as the relative strength of state and society in their domestic structures (Rose 1998; Schweller 2003: 315-320; Schmidt 2007: 57-60). Against this background, the concept of issue salience can contribute to the debate within the realist camp about the conditions under which analyses of foreign policy can restrict themselves to systemic variables or rather have to integrate variables on the domestic level (Elman 1996: 40-42).

Second, liberal analyses of foreign policy should generally flourish when the domestic principals of a government consider the issues in question highly salient. At its core, liberal theory rests on a bottom-up view of preference formation: societal groups articulate their foreign policy preferences, and governments, acting as transmission belts of society's wishes, translate them into state preferences which they then pursue on the international level. Foreign policy decisions are thus explained as a function of the preferences of the most powerful groups in society (Moravcsik 2003: 161-167). However, liberal analyses will be of no avail when actors in society are not sufficiently mobilized to articulate their preferences in the first place, which thus remain latent (Wincott 1995: 600-601; Powlick and Katz 1998: 29-39). If a foreign policy issue is of low salience to societal groups, in turn, this is precisely what is to be expected. In the case of issues that are highly salient to general publics, the media, political parties or interest groups, in contrast, governments will receive strong bottom-up signals about societal foreign policy preferences, and the prospects for liberal analyses of the foreign policy decisions in question should be particularly favorable.

Along these lines, the concept of issues salience has been employed, for example, to establish the boundaries of governmental win-sets in two-level games: when the domestic salience for foreign policy issues is high, other things equal, the win-sets of governments and their leeway as gatekeepers between the international and the domestic levels are more closely circumscribed than when the issues' domestic salience is low (Oppermann 2008b: 181-185). In high-salience environments, the two-level approach can therefore yield more determinate explanations of foreign policy decisions than in low salience environments. In addition, the analysis of asymmetries in the salience of foreign policy issues to different groups in society can help assessing the explanatory promise of different variants of liberal theorizing. Societal actors which attach higher salience to an issue than others will be more mobilized to make their views heard and will be more likely to succeed in having their preferences taken up by the government (Freund and Rittberger 2001: 90-95). Most notably, the variant of commercial

liberalism (see Moravcsik 1997: 528-530) should be particularly powerful in cases of foreign policy issues which are highly salient to well-organized, homogenous economic actors but remain of low salience to society at large. In such cases, the lobbying efforts of the economic actors in question go unchallenged in the societal arena and governments are under no pressure to make trade-offs between conflicting inputs from society.

Third, the explanatory power of the bureaucratic politics model of foreign policy decision-making is likely to be compromised when it is applied to issues that are highly salient to the domestic constituents of governments and it holds the greatest promise when it is used to account for the making of policies on low-salience issues. According to the bureaucratic politics model, foreign policy decisions emerge as resultants of bargaining processes between bureaucratic actors within the executive. The foreign policy preferences of these actors depend on their bureaucratic position and their overall objective is to maximize the interests of the organization within the government to which they are assigned. Also by virtue of their bureaucratic position, these actors have more or less power to prevail in intra-governmental bargaining processes and to shape the content of foreign policy decisions (Allison and Zelikow 1999: 294-313; Allison and Halperin 1972: 43-56).

Most important in the context of this paper, the bureaucratic politics model ascribes to bureaucratic actors the ability to influence foreign policy although it acknowledges that these actors are hierarchically subordinated to political leaders at the top of the foreign policy executive which retain the formal decision-making authority: as agents of their political principals, bureaucratic actors dispose of various resources, not the least including informational advantages and superior technical expertise, to evade complete control by the political leadership and to secure themselves some agency slack vis-à-vis their principals (Bendor and Hammond 1992: 314-315). However, the scope of the agency slack enjoyed by bureaucratic actors is not a constant but varies – among other things – with the ability and willingness of their political principals to engage in supervising them. In particular, political leaders can be expected to make the greatest efforts at minimizing the discretion of their bureaucratic agents on those issues which are at the top of their political agenda. The more important the ultimate decision-makers in the foreign policy executive consider an issue to be and the more attention they devote to it, the less leeway will remain for bureaucratic actors to shape the decision at hand and the less promising the bureaucratic politics model will therefore be in explaining the decision (Rosati 1981: 245-247; Ball 1974: 92).

Foreign policy issues which are highly salient to the domestic principals of a government, in turn, are set to turn into a priority of that government because of the high domestic political

audience costs that may potentially follow from taking a decision on them. In cases of high domestic issue salience, political leaders can be expected to put special emphasis on minimizing the agency slack of bureaucratic actors, and the bureaucratic politics model will therefore be of limited analytic value under such conditions. The model is likely to have most explanatory power, in contrast, on foreign policy issues which are only weakly politicized in the domestic arena and which are thus under little domestic political scrutiny, but which are prominent concerns of bureaucratic actors themselves because they have a strong bearing on their resources and competences. Along these lines, the concept of issue salience can contribute to the debate between the bureaucratic politics model and poliheuristic theory on the influence of bureaucratic and political advisers on decision-makers (see Christensen and Redd 2004): in high-salience environments, political advice should have a stronger impact on foreign policy decisions relative to bureaucratic advice than in low-salience environments and vice versa.

Fourth and rather similar to the bureaucratic politics model, the organizational process model of foreign policy decision making is more attuned to issues of low domestic salience than to high-salience issues. At its core, organizational theory explains foreign policy as the output of organizations within governments that work according to intra-organizational routines (Allison and Zelikow 1999: 163-185; Williamson 1979). While the theory would predict that the foreign policy output of organizations is governed by such routines both in low- and in high-salience environments, these outputs should more easily translate into the foreign policy behavior of governments in the former than in the latter case. When the domestic salience of a foreign policy issue is high, in contrast, there is a greater likelihood that the output of organizations will conflict with the domestic political priorities of political leaders. In such cases, the leaders of the foreign policy executive can be expected to question the advice of governmental organizations and to signal their dissatisfaction back to them. They may thus trigger feedback loops that initiate processes of organizational learning and lead organizations to adapt their repertoire of routines (see Levitt and March 1988; March and Olsen 1976: 54-59).

Finally, the concept of salience can also be related to social-constructivist analyses of foreign policy (see Checkel 2008). Essentially, social constructivism conceives of foreign policy as norm-guided behavior: in a given decision-making context, foreign policy actors are expected to select a course of action which they consider appropriate in light of the prevailing norms in the international environment and in the domestic arena. Thus, social constructivist analyses hold most promise in regard to decision problems which are governed by strong norms that

make unambiguous behavioral claims on decision-makers. In case of conflicting norms, weaker norms are dominated by stronger norms. One of the foremost challenges of social constructivist analyses of foreign policy, therefore, is to infer the relative strength of norms which are pertinent to a decision problem.

To this purpose, a number of criteria have been proposed, most notably the specificity of norms, their communality, their relationship to other norms and the degree of their institutionalization (Legro 1997: 33-35; Boekle et al. 2001: 109-110; Finnemore and Sikkink 1998: 889-909). This list of criteria could be fruitfully complemented with the salience of norms in a decision-making environment (see Florini 1996: 374-375). Like the salience of political issues, the salience of norms can be analyzed for the decision-makers themselves and for their domestic constituents, but also for relevant actors in the international environment. Methodologically, the most promising ways to do so appear to be media content analyses and the analysis of domestic and international-level discourse. Highly salient norms, in turn, will likely figure as more powerful standards of appropriate behavior than norms which are less salient. The concept of norm salience would thus assist constructivist analyses of foreign policy in determining the strength of norms and in delineating the conditions under which these analyses have the greatest explanatory promise.

5. Conclusion

The task of theoretical integration in FPA would benefit from more rigorous efforts at delineating the scope conditions of different theories in the field. Systematic knowledge about the explanatory reach and limitations of these theories is a prerequisite for fruitfully linking up insights from them in an integrative framework or for amending a theory with elements taken from other theories. Against this background, the paper has contended that the concept of issue salience can add to such knowledge. Most notably, the salience of foreign policy issues to the domestic principals of governments can be employed as a scope condition of theories that focus on the role of domestic audience costs in explaining foreign policy choices and in particular of the poliheuristic theory of foreign policy decision-making: these theories hold more explanatory promise when the domestic salience of the foreign policy issues under study is high than when it is low. Along similar lines, the paper has tentatively distinguished some of the foremost theoretical approaches in FPA as to whether they should be more powerful in high-salience or in low-salience environments.

Table 1: The Concept of Issue Salience and the Scope Conditions of FPA-Theories

Theories which are best suited to explain foreign policy choices in ...	
... low-salience environments:	... high-salience environments:
Neorealism Bureaucratic Theory Organizational Theory	Poliheuristic Theory Liberalism Constructivism (norm salience)

In order to make the most of the insights which the concept of issue salience can contribute to efforts at theoretical integration in FPA and with a view towards elaborating and refining the propositions of this paper, more sustained research is called for in at least two respects. First, there is a need for more systematic, cross-country and long-term data on the salience of foreign affairs to general publics, members of parliament and political parties. Although there clearly exist important works in this regard, such data are still in short supply because scholarship on the domestic constituents of foreign policy often tends to focus on the foreign policy preferences of domestic actors rather than on the salience they attach to the policy. Second, case studies on foreign policy decisions employing different theoretical perspectives should routinely take an interest in the salience of the issues (or norms) under study. Also, existing analyses could in retrospect be linked to findings on the salience of the issues in question. By way of integrating the concept of issue salience into theory-guided explanations of foreign policy, the contentions of this paper on the link between the domestic salience of foreign policy issues and the analytic promise of different theories of FPA would have to be tested and further substantiated, for example by the means of comparative case studies or experimental designs.

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