



A vote at the opera? The political economy of public theaters and orchestras in the German states



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ABSTRACT

Policymakers generally have powerful incentives to attract votes by strategically manipulating public policies, for instance by increasing public spending during election periods or by implementing ideologically valued policies for their electoral base. At first sight, public theaters and orchestras appear an unlikely domain for such tactics. Highbrow culture is elitist and provides few jobs to artists as voters (patronage). However, we argue that policymakers indirectly target a larger highbrow culture-consuming voting public, as this public is more likely to go voting, to actively engage in politics, and to influence other voters' political behavior through political and sociological multiplier effects. We find evidence of such manipulation tactics in Germany, 1993–2010. Artist numbers increase during state-level, and even more during municipal-level, election years (electioneering). More tentatively, leftwing party power increases cultural subsidies and jobs in Eastern states.

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1. Introduction

Since Baumol and Bowen's (1966) seminal contribution, the performing arts sector has received much scholarly interest from economists and political scientists. One strand of this literature focuses on the specificities of art markets; another on whether and how politics matters in cultural policy (Frey and Pommerehne, 1989; Heilbrun and Gray, 2001). This article aims to contribute to the latter strand in three ways. First, it extends the growing literature on partisanship and electoral cycles in cultural spending (Potrafke, 2011; Dalle Nogare and Galizzi, 2011; Getzner, 2002).¹ Vote-seeking policymakers have powerful incentives to attract votes by manipulating the public policies at their disposal, for instance by timing fiscal decisions during election periods (electioneering) or by implementing ideologically valued policies for their electoral base (partisanship). Applying this premise to highbrow culture, we analyze the political determinants of state subsidies for public theaters and orchestras in the context of Germany's federal framework. More than in most other European countries, the larger part of public funding for culture in Germany focuses on preserving *highbrow* culture specifically (Katz Gerro, 2004). Existing research on cultural spending tends to focus on the municipal level (Benito et al., 2013; Schulze and Rose, 1998). Yet, in Germany state-level subsidies account on average

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¹ For general reviews on political cycles, see Franzese and Jusko (2006), Potrafke (2012a, 2012b).

for 50% of spending on public theaters and orchestras. This institutionalized entanglement provides both state-level and local-level politicians with the “opportunity” and the “means” for manipulating cultural policies.

Second, we posit that budgetary rules and better-informed voters may lead vote-seeking incumbents to *shift* the use of political manipulation mechanisms to policy domains that are most easily targetable and timeable (Tepe and Vanhuysse, 2009, 2013). Manipulating employment numbers may then become a politically efficient way to signal cultural competence. Both quality and scope of highbrow culture such as plays, concerts and ballet are inherently linked to the number of artists (Baumol and Bowen, 1966). We therefore consider the number of artistic employees – actors, singers, dancers, and choir and orchestra members – as a second dependent variable, in addition to public subsidies to theaters and orchestras.

Third, at first sight, culture generally and public theaters and orchestras specifically may not seem to be a politically salient policy domain. Manipulating cultural policies might provide some additional electoral support from artists *as voters* (patronage), but artist numbers are small and incumbents also run the risk of getting blamed by voters for boosting a bourgeois or elitist policy (Potrafke, 2013). However, we argue that state-level politicians choose to strategically manipulate culture because they also use artists *as conduits* of indirect competence signals aimed at *audiences* (highbrow culture consuming voters), as these audiences tend to be highly active politically and well-connected socially. Specifically, we posit that highbrow culture consumers are likely to be valuable targets for political signaling due to two direct and two indirect political sociology mechanisms. Highbrow culture consumers are more likely themselves to (a) go voting (a direct electoral effect), and (b) actively participate in politics in their leisure time (a direct political activity effect). Moreover, they are also more likely to discuss politics with others, because they (c) are more interested in politics (a political multiplier effect), and (d) have more social ties with whom they might discuss politics (a sociological multiplier effect).

The article proceeds as follows. The next section discusses the institutional context of cultural employment in German federalism. The third section discusses the theoretical and empirical literatures used to derive hypotheses on state-level and municipal-level electioneering and partisanship. The fourth section presents our empirical analysis based on data from the German *Theaterstatistik* (1993–2010) and the ALLBUS (2012). The fifth section discusses our main findings. The last section concludes.

2. Macro-institutional framework: German federalism

Federalism in unified Germany is characterized by a relatively strong federal government with legislative power in most major policy areas. Just three exceptions to this general tendency towards centralization have developed over time: education, inner security, and culture (Benz, 1999: 55). The legislative authority for culture remains exclusively at the State level (Basic Law, articles 30 and 70), whereas the political responsibility to provide cultural goods and services is shared with the municipal council (*kommunale Selbstverwaltung*, Art. 28 Abs. 2 Satz 1 Basic Law). Public theaters and orchestras are central to the provision of culture in Germany. They are mid-sized cultural enterprises (*mittelständischer Kulturbetrieb*), with deliverables, stakeholders and financial fundamentals that are codified in a legal statute or agreement (Schmidt, 2012a, 2012b: 19).

The functioning of these theaters and orchestras in Germany is noteworthy in a number of ways. First, highbrow culture is highly subsidized. About 2.8% of the total workforce is employed in this sector, compared to 2% in neighboring France and 2.4% on average in Europe (van Hek and Kraaykamp, 2013: 333). For an average German public theater or orchestra, revenues from ticket sales account for only 8 to 20% of its total budget (Schmidt, 2012a, 2012b: 14). Highbrow culture is highly politicized and its legitimacy repeatedly questioned. The sector is faced with a multitude of reform pressures, notably growing personnel costs, maintenance of buildings, and rivaling fiscal pressures (Haselbach et al., 2012). Second, in Germany the gross budget for theaters and orchestras comes from both the states and the municipalities. Prior research has focused on the political determinants of municipal-level subsidies (Schulze and Rose, 1998; Schulze and Ursprung, 2000). However, on average state and municipal subsidies for this sector are equally large. The interweaving of the state and municipal level is a distinctive feature of German “*Kulturföderalismus*”. As a result, local and state politicians are both relevant decision-makers. Third, German public theaters are ‘repertoire theaters’ providing a rather wide range of cultural performances with permanently employed artists (*Ensemble*). Even though not all of these are tenured positions, German public theaters and orchestras provide artists with more employment stability than does the construct of ‘artist-companies,’ which is more frequently found in the Anglo-American context.²

The sub-federal distribution of political competences in cultural affairs offers multiple paths through which state-level politicians can influence and even overrule local-level provision of highbrow culture above and beyond subsidies. Depending on the specific legal ownership (*Rechtssträger*) and legal form (*Rechtsform*) chosen for the theater or orchestra, state-level politicians may have direct input in local-level culture provision. The most important legal forms in numerical terms are publicly owned enterprises (*Regiebetrieb*), owner-operated municipal enterprises (*Eigenbetrieb*) and limited liability companies (*GmbH*). The legal ownership and legal form are partially overlapping but not necessarily dependent on each other. The competences and voting power of the stakeholders within the supervisory body can depend on a multitude of historical and political factors. In the case of State theaters, for instance, state

² At publicly funded theaters there are two different employment agreements for artists: for a normal contract (NV) and for musicians in orchestras (TVK). These are usually temporary contracts: among the five types of artistic employees we studied, only orchestra musicians tend to get a permanent employment contract (Bolwin, 2011: 9). Nevertheless, the NV contracts differ from Anglo-Saxon company-style theaters as they are not fixed for a single play but rather cover the entire season. In Germany, artists thus tend to work permanently together for one or two playtimes (Spielzeiten), typically from September/October to June/July followed by the theater holidays (Theaterferien). Hence, a contract for a playtime is equivalent to a one-year contract. In recent years, though, there have been drastic increases in the number of so-called “*unständig Beschäftigte*” (temporary or stand-in employees), including artists hired for a fixed number of performances or in some cases only for a single performance (Bolwin, 2011: 9).

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