One discourse to rule them all? Narrating the agenda for labor market policies in France and Germany

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ABSTRACT
Despite different institutional and situational conditions, the recent French labor market reforms bear a strong resemblance to the labor market reforms in Germany in the early 2000s. Governments at both points in time turned away from the conservative welfare state model and failed to appropriately legitimize their reforms toward the public as well as their originally partly social-democratic electorate. Given the diverging conditions which are expected to lead to different strategies of legitimization, this contribution inquires after the narrative stories with which the corresponding acting government framed its reforms publicly. Surprisingly, despite the large differences that the two governments faced, the analysis shows that the respective narratives stories were not only similar but can be assigned to certain programmatic groups that used the narratives to push their own policy program and place themselves in power positions. In doing so, the contribution establishes a yet missing link between the recently established Programmatic Action Framework (PAF) and the concept of narrative stories and discourse in policy analysis, thereby adding to both research strands. This link lies in the observation that programmatic groups use narratives to strengthen in-group identification and thus improve their chances of success, which makes dominant narratives an important indicator of programmatic groups. However, when legitimizing reforms – even if these are transferred from other country experiences – it is imperatively important to embed the strategies of legitimization in the national context.

KEYWORDS
Narrative stories; Programmatic Action Framework (PAF); Discourse Network Analysis (DNA); labor market policy

1. Introduction

Labor market policy belongs to one of the most contentious issues in policy-making and is traditionally much-noticed by the public. This is especially true for fundamental changes of the normative and structural organization in labor market policy, which require the generation of public consent and touch upon other welfare policies (van Gerven & Nygård, 2017). Consequently, the strategies of legitimizing these reforms are of particular importance to the political communication of governments with the public. Taking the example of France and Germany as two originally conservative welfare states (Esping-Andersen, 1990), reforms in both countries aimed at conceiving
employment policy not anymore predominantly as transfer policy according to the principle of equivalence that maintains a certain status once attained. Instead, both governments aspired after a stronger orientation toward the Anglo-Saxon principle of genuine need by at the same time developing measures that intended to strengthen the employability of those groups affected or threatened by unemployment and to deregulate the labor market (Palier & Thelen, 2010). Both reforms effect a departure from the conservative welfare state that opposes traditional status demands of demographic groups which partly belong to the very politicians that promoted these reforms and originally have been social-democratic.

While the policies in both countries are alike, the conditions under which these policies were effected are opposed. Germany is a federal consensus democracy that implemented the labor market reforms of 2003 without holding a governmental majority in the Bundesrat. France’s centralized majoritarian democracy theoretically enables the government to rapidly push through its propositions through acts or ordinances (Lijphart, 2012). Germany passed this policy in 2003 under the social-democratic/green government of then-chancellor Gerhard Schröder (1998–2005), France did so only under the recent French social-liberal governments led by presidents François Hollande (2012–2017) and Emmanuel Macron (since 2017). Germany imposed its labor market reforms under the impression of the German reunification 1990 and the resulting economic and social challenges, whereas today’s situation in France is particularly characterized by the economic consequences of the financial crisis and the political challenge of a reinvigorated right-wing populism (Fleckenstein & Lee, 2016; Vlandas, 2017a).

This also should have had an influence on the respective narratives used to legitimize reforms, as German governments would direct their legitimizing arguments rather to the apparatus of state and self-governance whereas French governments would need to sell the policies towards the public due to the lack of blame avoidance which is less possible than in German coalition governments. However, governments in both countries apparently followed the same unsuccessful strategies of legitimization, in terms of acceptance by the public, which presents a puzzle to solve. We, therefore, follow in our argument the method of a Most Dissimilar Systems Design (MDSD) (Landman, 2008; Przeworski & Teune, 1970) and inquire after the reasons and effects regarding potential similarities in the legitimizing narrative stories that prepared these welfare state reforming policies under different circumstances. Regarding the reasons, we hypothesize that programmatic groups (Hassenteufel & Lartigot-Hervier, 2015) acted in both countries despite different conditions, and that the programmatic groups’ potentially similar narratives on employment and labor market policy were meant to strengthen group identification and enable successful policy change. Regarding the effects, narrative stories have been hypothesized and found to be particularly pertinent to effective and successful political communication in social policy, especially – but not limited to – the discussion of new and old social risks (Blum & Kuhlmann, 2018; Orsini & Scala, 2006). Thereby, the article adds to policy process research by analyzing which narratives have been used by programmatic groups promoting policy change and dominating the policy discourse, and whether this led to the desired policy output and outcome. Connecting to the literature on narrative stories, the analysis reveals the role that narratives play in legitimizing reforms and the factors that favor or hinder such successful legitimization. Given the only recent developments in French labor market policy and the already
mentioned characteristics of labor market policy in general, the question presents a research interest of current importance, with the additional aim of drawing lessons for the future legitimization of labor market reforms, and yet lacking acknowledgment in policy research.

Whether and in what way did the process of agenda setting and the formulation of reform alternatives in labor market policy follow compliant narrative elements in both countries? In how far can these be traced back to programmatic groups? What does this tell us about effective strategies of legitimization to reach public consent? The contribution starts by developing a possibly open analytical concept for the analysis of narrative stories to answer the first question. This concept looks at a common structure of narratives according to open categories rather than specifically pre-defined potential content to allow for an inductive investigation of the programmatic groups’ narratives. Following the definition of the analytical concept, the third section elaborates the research design leading up to the presentation of results per country and separate discussion on how programmatic groups surrounded the legitimizing narratives found in leading media. We employ discourse network analysis (Leifeld, 2018) to visualize these results. After the fifth section outlines cross-country similarities, a conclusion elucidates the insights that this analysis offers and discusses further implications for the effects of strategies of legitimization.

2. Theoretical perspectives and analytical categories of narrative stories

In policy process research, the analysis of narratives emanates from different ontological and epistemological perspectives. Besides the analysis of narratives from a scientistic perspective like the Narrative Policy Framework (NPF) (McBeth, Shanahan, & Arnell et al., 2007; Shanahan, Jones, & McBeth et al., 2017), a great part of narrative analysis originates in critical and interpretative perspectives (Atkinson, 2000; Yanow, 2010). These latter perspectives assume that the process of analyzing narratives needs critical reflection itself as this analysis is not able to objectively depict reality but is equally subject to a process of reality construction. Both approaches refer to the prominent work by Deborah Stone (2012). Borrowing an empirical-analytical procedure, it is, therefore, useful to relate to the categories of narrative elements that Stone develops and distinguishes. Examples of pre-defined narrative elements both in the NPF and narrative stories are heroes, villains, and victims (Whittle, Mueller, & Mangan, 2009) which can be connected to for instance different holistic narrative stories that address expansion or retrenchment as well as old and new social risks (Blum & Kuhlmann, 2018). These general categories are open and can be employed by different conflicting parties in political disputes, as they can be used for divergent substantial argumentation. Consequently, they allow for a systematic investigation of narratives used in public discourse. Nonetheless, reflecting these categories and inductively seizing narratives that repeatedly occur in a given discourse is important to acquire a fundamental understanding of discourse dynamics. What presents the core idea of both strategies is that the framing of policy programs follows the structure of narrations, in which repeating patterns can be identified.

Related to the concept of narrative stories, scholarship in policy process research has turned attention to the role of framing for policy outcomes with a particular focus on the role of the media (Crow & Lawlor, 2016). Though framing is placed on a broader, less explicit level of analysis, its importance to policy change has been acknowledged
with regard to the way that policy actors perceive information and which role this plays for policy change (Béland, 2009). For instance, narrative frames can support the perception of certain events as crises and consequently determine the articulation of crisis implications (Gonzalez Hernando, 2018). In political conflicts, policy actors will generally try to place their own frame as the dominant one, as winning framing contests have both implications for political and policy consequences (Boin, 't Hart, & McConnell, 2009). As a result, the framing of problems and solutions is expected to follow a consistent pattern that serves the interests of the dominant political group. This assumption is in line with the view of Hajer that ‘policy discourse can be constitutive of political identities’ (Hajer, 2003, p. 89), suggesting that the way in which the policy discourse – the frames and narratives surrounding labor market reform policies and instruments – was constructed is indicative of a programmatic group identity. Thereby, it is not only naming problems and solutions but rather combining them in a storyline of observations, situation descriptions, problem derivation, identification of victims and the responsible parties, professed dramatic future scenarios and the calls for action and adoption of policy instruments that constitutes a policy discourse. Hence, it is the way in which these elements are put together and communicated in a combination that presents the policy rationale (Zittoun, 2014).

Dominant collective policy actors may employ narratives to their benefit, e.g. when advocacy coalitions instrumentalize narratives to achieve their goals (Radaelli, 2002; Shanahan, Jones, & McBeth, 2011). The interplay between narratives and collective actors then potentially influences policy change and outcomes. Staying on a meso level of analysis, this contribution focuses on the notion of programmatic groups. Programmatic groups are conceptualized as part of the larger Programmatic Action Framework (PAF) (Genieys & Smyrl, 2008; Hassenteufel, Smyrl, & Genieys et al., 2010; Hornung & Bandelow, 2018). It postulates the process of policy making as essentially characterized by social groups that are based on biographical ties (particularly career trajectories) and bound by a policy program. As opposed to the Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF) (Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1993; Weible, Ingold, Nohrstedt, Henry, & Jenkins-Smith, 2019), the PAF does not refer to advocacy coalitions linked by shared policy core beliefs by collective or individual actors. On the contrary, it relies on the career-related interest and professional biographies. Programmatic identities are a specific type of social identity referring to a policy program that binds its members and coins each individual over a long period of time (Hogg, Abrams, & Brewer, 2017). A programmatic group contains programmatic actors, which at the core are actors with direct influence on the decision-making process. Among these are civil servants (Aubin & Brans, 2018), politicians in the legislative and executive branches of government, as well as actors that come together in decisive bodies of decision-making or policy formulation, e.g. in commissions that prepare programs that are to be implemented. As such, specialists from a given policy sector, such as economists, can have a direct influence on public policy through their membership in commissions and thereby be labeled programmatic actors. Even if not member of such a commission or not occupying a central position in the policy-making process, actors such as those in advisory systems can join the narrative of a programmatic group to support the policy program in hope of a reciprocal relationship that generates benefits for themselves in terms of financing, reputation, or posts (Craft & Howlett, 2017).

An important factor of success both concerning the policy program and the long-term stability of the programmatic group has been ascribed to the existence of a shared
narrative (Genieys & Smyrl, 2008). Such a narrative serves to reinforce the group identity and to distinguish the group from outside groups and the environment (Hornung, Bandelow, & Vogeler, 2019). It is argued throughout this article that the more widely this narrative is articulated across different audiences and the stronger the narrative is connected to the programmatic group, the more likely the long-term authority of the programmatic group and the social identification of each individual policy actor with the group membership will be. This argumentation fits in with recent research insights that advocate a combination of power resource and ideational approaches to explain structural reforms (Kangas, Niemelä, & Varjonen, 2014).

Following these theoretical considerations, we can derive concrete hypotheses for empirical testing. The hypotheses are based on the expectation that the public discourse on labor market policy, and the narratives as one element of this discourse, mirrors the struggle between competing programmatic groups (Genieys, 2010) or at least follows a dominant programmatic group’s joint program. On the one hand, proponents of the reform are expected to derive new interpretations of problems and related solutions which they narrate in storylines. These proponents then provide stories of decline according to Stone (2012, p. 160) and the introduction to this special issue. Following the central elements of the ‘third way’ perspective that governments in both countries under consideration share in general, the interpretation of problems should include traditional rights of employees and the too high levels of decommodification (Giddens, 1998; Le Grand, 2003). They are furthermore expected to construct the custodians (Genieys, 2010) of the status quo as villains because these oppose progress and the proponents of the reform as heroes because of these advocate progresses. Additionally, programmatic groups in the tradition of policy transfer and diffusion models (Dolowitz & Marsh, 2000; Zohnhöfer & Ostheim, 2007) might refer to other country examples to borrow narratives that display them as modernizers and great reformers. On the other hand, opponents of the reform are hypothesized to reject the reform due to a different perspective on the welfare state: They might follow Keynesian views that see high levels of unemployment as a problem of conjuncture. Therefore, they would propose higher levels of decommodification to strengthen demand-side economics and their narrative includes inverse pictures of heroes and villains compared to the proponents. Consequently, they would advocate an expansionary welfare state to answer the emerging challenges (Salas-Porras, 2018). However, it is an open question whether these reform-opposing actors indeed exist as a cohesive programmatic group.

To empirically test these hypotheses, our analysis takes up the general patterns of narrative stories and complements them in view of the subject to be investigated. In concrete terms, this means that the analysis of official narratives surrounding employment and labor market policy refers to universal but general categories to ensure comparability of the findings. Thus, it does not predetermine the content of the narratives, i. e. the concrete problem definitions, solutions, and connecting storylines, to be identified but leaves the content as an empirical question of the research findings.

3. Research design

This contribution’s comparison of narratives in the agenda-setting process surrounding employment and labor market reforms in Germany under Gerhard Schröder and in France under François Hollande and Emmanuel Macron is guided by the prominent Most
Dissimilar Systems Design (Landman, 2008; Przeworski & Teune, 1970). It aims at similarly explaining similar findings in different contexts to eventually argue that these findings are independent of these very outside conditions. Transferred to our investigation, this means that the comparison between Germany and France with a time difference of 15 years and under two most distinct political and economic circumstances – which should have been decisive for strategies of legitimization in labor market reforms – fulfills the purpose to show that specific narrations on the legitimization of a substantial restructuring of labor market institutions and policies exist independent of the respective political systems and the respective concrete economic and political problem situations. These similarities in narrative stories can in both cases be traced back to programmatic groups which put forward these narratives to strengthen in-group identification and demonstrate coherence toward their outside environment.

The empirical basis of this analysis is the interpretation of selected newspaper articles in both countries. Newspaper articles present but one of the many media in mass communication. The reason for their selection, in this case, is their ability to withstand a comparison of reforms with a large time difference by promising the greatest stability within its type of media. Today’s media communication experiences an increasing and fast-moving importance of digital communication, which however will not be the central interest in this contribution. Print media are much more comparable across countries also compared to official government documents or formalized political debates, e.g. in parliament, given that there exist different rules in accessing these debates depending on the national political system. For example, France and Germany differ a lot with the French rationalized parliamentarism and the strong German working parliament, which hinders an adequate comparison of these. Since this analysis centers on the strategies of legitimization put forward by programmatic groups towards the public, it is necessary to get hold of the public discourse, which is best displayed by highly consumed print media. Following the idea of narratives as binding element of programmatic groups that are not analogous to ideological lines of conflict, the essential question is in what way the communication of narratives during the agenda-setting process of employment and labor market policy has transcended or divided media of different political colors, which is most visible when looking at newspapers of opposed political camps. In line with the argument that programmatic groups are characterized by a variety of key positions and resources that enables an encompassing establishment of their joint storyline including problems definitions and solutions, we would expect narratives to not differ across newspapers. To answer this question adequately, this analysis draws on a selection of quality media with the highest circulation that represents the respective leading political camps. In both countries, the data for analysis thus contain newspaper articles of a rather social-democratic and a rather civic-liberal newspaper. In Germany, these are the Süddeutsche Zeitung (SZ, rather social-democratic/liberal) and the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (FAZ, rather conservative). In France, these are Le Monde (rather social-democratic/liberal) and Le Figaro (rather conservative). As our contribution circles around the process of agenda setting and the formulation of reform alternatives by a programmatic group, the selection of newspaper articles was done in a time span of four years before the adoption of the most important substantial reform elements. The time span of four years allows for grasping the phase of agenda setting and formulation of reform alternatives until their adoption – all phases in which programmatic groups are supposed to be active. Selecting this period of time also enables to identify the formation of
a programmatic group around the narrative that was publicly distributed and aimed at shaping the programmatic group’s identity. In detail, we regard the period from 2000 to 2003 in Germany and from 2014 to 2017 in France. Although in France, this includes the terms of two presidents, the labor market policies of both presidents followed the same lines and involved also intersections of personnel (e.g. with Macron serving as a minister during Hollande’s term), which is why they are summarized under one period of analysis.

In all four newspapers, relevant articles and the final sample were identified in several steps. The first step selected articles according to the usage of pertinent keywords, which were searched for in the respective languages and encompassed ‘labor market policy’ (German: Arbeitsmarktpolitik; French: politique du marché du travail), ‘employment policy’ (German: Beschäftigungspolitik; French: politique de l’emploi), ‘labor market reform’ (German: Arbeitsmarktreform; French: réforme du marché du travail), ‘unemployment’ (German: Arbeitslosigkeit; French: chômage, ‘unemployment rate’ (German: Arbeitslosenquote; French: taux de chômage), ‘workforce’ (German: Arbeitskräfte; French: force de travail). It is with intensive consideration that we chose these keywords, as they allowed for a possibly neutral non-directed search for articles on the relevant topic. After the identification of this first sample, we checked the single articles to control for the respective impacts with regard to the distribution of narratives regarding employment and labor market policy. The narratives finally present elements of the discourse that is qualitatively analyzed and assigned to programmatic groups. This procedure ensured that only those articles that contributed to the discourse on preparing the reforms would be considered in the analysis. Proceeding this way, we finally identified for each newspaper some 50 articles, summing up to a total of 200 analyzed articles. The analysis of the articles equally followed a two-step process. Firstly, the categories that we derived from the theoretical foundation enabled an assignment of the narrative’s elements in a standardized way. In practice, the standardized categories – or concepts – were ‘hero’, ‘villain’, ‘victim’, ‘problem’, and ‘solution’. These are particularly derived from theoretical contributions on narratives that identify them as crucial categories in communicating public policy (Crow & Jones, 2018; Hartz & Steger, 2010). For each case, the categories were concretized in the course of the coding procedure. This means that if one article advocates that the problem is long-term unemployment, we established a category ‘problem: long-term unemployment’ which could be used subsequently in the analysis when coding further articles. Additionally, we coded whether the narrative contained a country comparison, e.g. by quoting an example or reference to another country’s situation. Finally, to check for the universal narrative hypothesis, we assess whether the article is generally in favor of or opposed to a restructuring welfare state reform.

Before proceeding with the coding according to the established categories, we conducted a pretest to ensure coding reliability during which two coders for each country independently made assignments of narrative elements in the newspaper articles to the respective categories. The test followed the criteria to observe according to Peter and Lauf (2002) regarding the language skills, political knowledge, and experience of coder trainer and coder, which were high in all cases. As a consequence of the 95% reliability result of this test, the guidelines for analysis were again concretized in critical cases, although these only referred to the unambiguous spelling and designation of categories (such as the problem of ‘long-term unemployment’). In addition to the narrative, we, respectively, coded which actor put forward this
narrative (if no actor was quoted in the article, we coded the article’s author as actor) to identify the programmatic groups. To shed light on potential biographical intersections, we obtained information on each actor by searching databases and personal websites and coded organizations and bodies to which the actor belongs. All assignments were made jointly by the two authors of this contribution to prevent a personalized bias. For example, one statement in the French ‘Le Figaro’ was ‘après avoir vanté les mesures « courageuses » de l’ancien chancelier social-démocrate, lors du congrès du SPD à Leipzig l’année dernière, et avant d’amorcer son tournant économique, salué par l’actuel gouvernement d’Angela Merkel, le chef de l’État a rencontré, il y a deux mois, l’architecte des réformes sociales du gouvernement de Gerhard Schröder: Peter Hartz.’ (transl.: after having praised the ‘courageous’ measures of the former Social Democratic Chancellor at the SPD Congress in Leipzig last year, and before starting its economic turnaround, which was welcomed by Angela Merkel’s current government, the Head of State (authors’ note: president Hollande) met two months ago with Gerhard Schröder’s government’s social reform architect: Peter Hartz). François Hollande was an incumbent president so the statement was coded as follows: person (François Hollande), organization (Parti Socialiste), concept (external hero: Germany), agreement (yes), body (government). To analyze and code the data, we used the program Discourse Network Analyzer (DNA) provided by Philip Leifeld (2018). Discourse Network Analyzer enables to import text documents (in our case newspaper articles) as an entire file. Coding is done by highlighting certain sequence in these texts and adding for each the person whose opinion the sequence presents, agreement or disagreement by the person to the narrative element that this highlighted statement implies (e. g. hero: Peter Hartz), as well as his/her personal characteristics (such as partisan affiliation). We coded statements as indicated above and later visualized the discourse coalitions (in our case the programmatic groups) via a network graph. This network graph is produced by DNA, taking into account which individual actor agreed or disagreed with certain narratives of heroes, villains, problems, and solutions.

4. German ‘Hartz’ reforms: long-term unemployment, low-wage sector, and employment service problems

When the German red-green government of chancellor Gerhard Schröder came into power in 1998, employment policy was at the top of the agenda. As the number of unemployed exceeded 4 million, reflecting approximately 11% unemployment rate, the promise of Gerhard Schröder to halve the unemployment rate essentially coined the electoral campaign preceding the general elections in 1998. However, at the beginning of the red-green government, there was a struggle between the left-wing social democrats around the then party leader Oskar Lafontaine and the advocates of a third-way policy supporting Gerhard Schröder. The original strategy of Schröder, therefore, was to establish a new corporatist body labeled the Alliance for Jobs, Education, and Competitiveness (Bündnis für Arbeit) from 1998 to 2002 to produce legitimacy for later reforms. Within this body, unions still played a strong role and were thus able to prevent a realization of the fundamental reform plans of restructuring. It was not until the end of 2001 that Schröder’s government finally managed to push through a first reform that restructured the labor market (‘job aqtiv’ law). This reform already contained measures to foster temporary employment.
Parallel to the electoral campaign, which resulted in the surprising re-election of the red-green government in 2002, a scandal around the accused manipulation of job placement numbers by the Federal Labor Office (Bundesanstalt für Arbeit, BfA) enabled a first window of opportunity for the preparation of major structural reforms. Using this scandal, the government already in February 2002 constituted the Hartz-Commission (Commission for Modern Services of the Labor Market) (Zohlnhöfer & Herweg, 2014). Peter Hartz, social democrat and unionist, chaired this commission, who as a board member for human resources at Volkswagen, a company in Schröder’s home of Lower Saxony, had negotiated agreements with the industrial council, which were supposed to contribute to flexibility and wage sacrifice to ensure and create workplaces. Besides Peter Hartz, five members were representatives of business interests, two came from consultancies, two were independent scientists, and three represented the public branch of politics and administration. Only two members were sent by unions (Sieffen, 2006, p. 376). In August 2002, the Commission presented its results that were used by the government to legitimize the whole extent of their labor market reforms, which came into effect shortly afterward. Accordingly, the name of the subsequent four Acts for Modern Services of the Labor Market, commonly known as the Hartz Acts I-IV, was borrowed from the commission’s title. Hartz I and II passed legislation in December 2002 and Hartz III and IV followed in December 2003. Hartz I and II – among other things – fostered temporary employment and low-wage sector employment (midi and mini jobs), thus placing the importance of employability over the importance of unemployment benefit. The external circumstances of these labor market reforms changed when states led by the Christian Democrats (CDU – Christian Democratic Union and CSU – Christian Social Union) step by step increased their dominance in the Federal Council, for instance by winning the general elections in Lower Saxony in February 2003. Hartz III finally transformed the former Federal Labor Office to the Federal Agency of Employment (institutional reform) before Hartz IV merged social assistance and unemployment assistance on the lower level of social assistance. Although the Hartz reforms came rather unexpectedly (Cox, 2002b) and at first has been ascribed only marginal effects (Schmid, 2007), they do present a paradigmatic change (Zohlnhöfer & Herweg, 2014).

Both the discussion and the reform realization were embedded in the Agenda 2010, announced by Gerhard Schröder in March 2003. His strategy included several other reforms, like the health reform of 2003 and the creation of a commission that finally led to decentralization in the course of a federalism reform (Egle & Zohlnhöfer, 2007). All Hartz reforms were extremely contested in the public discussion. Besides the unions, leftist social democrats strongly opposed the reforms, particularly the fourth. Among other things, the reforms led to regular weekly demonstrations and the emergence of today’s Left Party as permanent parliamentary force (Schmid, 2007, p. 271). Regarding content, the reforms depict a partial departure from the conservative welfare state model according to Esping-Andersen (1990) and an approximation to the liberal welfare state.

Given this massive potential of political conflict, the question arises how the publicly communicated narratives portrayed the different perspectives on the reforms. One expectation could be that proponents and opponents of the labor market reforms each formulated own definitions of problem and solutions and articulated these with
contrary assignments of heroes and villains. One would at least expect the narrative that raises criticism with respect to the reform to be present in a rather left-wing newspaper, like the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*. Regarding the reform proponents, one would hypothesize that the narrative aims at generating public consent for the reform plans. However, existing research shows that this hardly succeeded (Nullmeier, 2008).

Our analysis reveals that neither assumption can be confirmed (see Figure 1). In both newspapers in all years of investigation, almost always proponents of the reform get a chance to speak. They are depicted as those nodes that have green links (agreement) with concepts of welfare state retrenchment. The presented narrative only partly takes up the arguments that are frequently observed when addressing the public (Stone, 2012). Very rarely do the newspapers use the instrument of naming individual heroes, villains, or victims to report on the reform. Instead, all actors that have their say in the newspapers mirror a clear picture and dominant frame of what the problem and the corresponding solution is. The core of this group lies in the Hartz Commission and all actors that feel associated with the corresponding program in the hope of pushing their own respective political or administrative careers. This is visible in Figure 1 as those actors with positions in the administration or state apparatus share the discursive narratives as a social group and advocate the reforms in a similar manner. As an example, Wilhelm Schickler moved from the Hessian employment office to the regional direction of the federal agency Berlin-Brandenburg and thus was promoted in the administrative trajectory following the reforms. Wolfgang Tiefensee – as another example – was mayor of the city of Leipzig at the time of the Hartz Commission and became a member of cabinet in 2005. For this group, overregulation, lacking motivation, high level of wages and wage-related costs, are the central causes of long-term unemployment, which they see as the central problem in German labor market policy. Relatedly, all analyzed articles unanimously advocate the solutions proposed by the Hartz Commission: deregulation, cut in wages, decreasing labor costs, strengthening the low-wage sector, merging social aid and unemployment benefits.

![Discourse Network on German Labor Market Policy, 2000–2003, Süddeutsche Zeitung und Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung.](image)

*Source: Own depiction with Visone; for reasons of readability, only nodes with more than three links are included. Green lines depict agreement of a person on a concept, red lines depict disagreement.*
In the discourse, only marginal aspects are contested (Hegelich, Knollmann, & Kuhlmann, 2011). Substantially, this is particularly the evaluation of job-creating measures and – politically – the assessment of single parts of the red-green government. Strikingly, the narrative strongly emphasizes external heroes. Besides the UK and the USA, especially the Netherlands serve as a positive comparative example, being one of the idols in restructuring labor markets ‘from safety net to trampoline’ (Cox, 2002a). In view of the actors, only a diffuse group is addressed as a villain, which indicates that there is no coherent competing programmatic group that opposes the visible programmatic group but only ‘natural’ enemies of liberal reforms like unions and employer associations as well as so-called ‘custodians’ (Genieys, 2010), which fight for the status quo. These opposing actors exist in the narrative of the proponents – but not as a cohesive programmatic group. They are rather constructed for the purpose of the programmatic group. In detail, any reform proposal publicly communicated by a dominant programmatic group and its members will have opponents that opposed the reform suggestions. However, in the sense of the PAF, these opponents do not always present a competing programmatic group, which is characterized equally by shared biographies, collective action, and a social identity. Instead, these opponents can be referred to in vague terms by the dominant programmatic group determining the policy discourse, in which case the dominant programmatic group merely uses the fight against the reforms’ opponents as a communicative strategy to generate support for its own idea and strengthen in-group identification of the programmatic group via out-group discrimination.

Zeroing in on the sources of the narratives, both newspapers besides journalists include a great number of economists. A great part of the journalists and the economists is biographically tied to each other, which for instance is visible because they are members of the prize jury of the Ludwig-Erhard-Stiftung or have been awarded with this prize themselves. Lobbyists of the employer associations and politicians of the Free Democratic Party (FDP) and the right wing of the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and the CDU, too, author articles for the newspapers without explicit placement of their affiliation. Also in the CDU, this concerns the right wing of the party, which even includes Alexander Gauland, today’s party leader of the far right-wing party Alternative for Germany (Alternative für Deutschland, AfD). The very few statements against the reform nearly all are traced back to one unionist, Ursula Engelen-Kefer.

5. French reforms under Hollande and Macron: EU pressure, qualification, and supply-side economics

The French labor market reforms since 2014 can be characterized by two main political developments. Firstly, when François Hollande came into office in 2012, he made the decrease of the unemployment rate a priority and later even declared his political future as dependent on his success in this matter. Secondly, while Emmanuel Macron as minister of the economy, industry and digital affairs (2014–2016) substantially influenced the labor market policy together with ministers of employment François Rebsamen (2014–2015) and Myriam El Khomri (2015–2017) under Hollande, he later became French president himself. The following paragraphs present a short overview of the most central reforms in the French labor market policy before turning to the narratives with which these reforms are reported in the media. To connect to the thesis that the narratives indicate underlying
programmatic groups, specific authors are named which present a programmatic group emerging from joint organizational affiliations.

Shortly after entering the office, François Hollande passed first measures to fight the rising unemployment rate, which was perceived as one of the central problems dominating the country. So-called ‘generation contracts’ since 1 March 2013 subsidized the simultaneous continued employment of senior employees and the recruiting of young employees. Connecting to this measure, the ‘Responsibility and Solidarity Pact’ in late 2013 decreased the labor and wage-related costs of companies and deregulated existing constraints to foster employment. Both measures connected to the initiative under Hollande and his prime minister Jean-Marc Ayrault, who with the ‘Pact of Growth, Competitiveness, and Employment’ put into practice the ideas put forward by Louis Gallois to increase the international competitiveness of the French industry. Consequently, measures taken in relation to this report aimed at decreasing labor costs and taxes and giving financial means for fostering research and innovation in business enterprises. Since then, a committee regularly evaluates the effect especially of the ‘Crédit d’impôt pour la compétitivité et l’emploi’ (a tax credit to foster competitiveness and employment).

While these reforms present the most important developments in the French labor market policy until 2014, they did not have a major short-term effect on unemployment. The unemployment rate dropped from 10.2% in 2012 to 10% in 2014. Following this absent success, the consequent Acts Macron and Rebsamen (Loi sur le Dialogue Social, Act on the Social Dialogue) (Minister of the Economy and Minister of Employment, respectively) in 2015 further deregulated large parts of the labor market, e.g. by easing the protection against dismissal, relieving small and medium-sized businesses, and deregulating legal professions. What is more, the bargaining power of unions and employee associations was diminished (Batyra, de la Croix, & Pierrard et al., 2017). Lastly, the reform by Myriam El Khomri who succeeded labor minister Rebsamen went in the same direction. Passed in 2016, the reform raised the upper limit of working hours and limited payments to be received in case of unfair dismissal. Furthermore, it created the Personal Activity Account (Compte Personnel d’Activité), in which every information on work, unemployment, training, and other work-related data is stored. However, none of the reforms managed to substantially improve the employment rate (Vlandas, 2017b), although each envisioned to do so, which was why François Hollande took the announced action to not represent himself as president in the elections of 2017. Even in the last half of our period of investigation, which regards the discourse on labor market policy under newly elected president Emmanuel Macron, the reforms unsurprisingly think along the same lines as the previous reforms, also because he himself coined labor market policy since 2012.

The discourse surrounding these reforms that was displayed in the analyzed media also did not change after the election but is remarkably similar throughout the years 2013 to 2017. In spite of partly strict opposition on the side of the unions, employee associations, and left-wing politicians, counter-arguments on the reforms were almost never articulated in the media (see Figure 2). Just as in Germany, the discourse in both analyzed newspapers did not differ. All measures undertaken were framed as being necessary responses to the unchanging unemployment rate, and negative statements only regarded single aspects of these reforms or concretely attacked the incumbent or previous government(s) to have not
gone far enough in reforming the labor market to prevent the problem of unemployment. While the problem definitions change over time – at the beginning of our period of analysis, lacking economic growth and, relatedly, overregulation and too high levels of taxes and wage-related costs are considered the greatest problem whereas in the subsequent years, the problem perception rather concerns lacking training, motivation, and external pressure from international organizations that require a restrictive fiscal policy – the targeted solutions remain the same: Consensus exists regarding the need to structurally reform the labor market, to deregulate, decrease labor costs, and generally provide incentives to companies in the sense of supply-side economics for employing people. Only since 2016, the increasingly articulated problem of mismatch and employability elicits solutions of market-oriented education policy.

As in Germany, villains, victims and heroes are not often explicitly named and if they are, they are almost never individual persons. The French media discourse regards as villains only the current or previous government (or the party presenting the government, respectively) that did not manage to lower the unemployment rate. While victims de facto do not appear in the articles apart from single referrals to the young unemployed, the notion of heroes is frequently brought up with reference to other countries. Interestingly, Germany serves as the by far most frequent positive example of successful labor market reforms that aimed at restructuring the labor market and decrease unemployment. Similar to the German case, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, and the USA as well as Sweden and Denmark are also regularly mentioned as external heroes. Only later, when first long-term reports on the effectiveness and consequences

Figure 2. Discourse Network on French Labor Market Policy, 2014–2017, Le Figaro and Le Monde. Source: Own depiction with Visone; for reasons of readability, only nodes with more than three links are included. Green lines depict agreement of a person on a concept, red lines depict disagreement.
of the Hartz reforms are published, the affirmative image of Germany crumbles – and this is also only put forward by scattered actors.

In both newspapers, there is a strong tendency towards economists’ quotes and authorship. Economists regularly write or are cited by journalists who in turn are rarely commenting from both perspectives but often take on the perspectives communicated by the economists or politicians. The ensemble of journalists and economists is unified in their common narrative on the labor market reforms, both in terms of problems and solutions. Furthermore, they are partly linked in what concerns their career trajectories at certain bodies, most importantly thinks tanks such as the Centre for Economic Policy Research (CEPR) or the Council of Economic Analysis (CEA). This is true for Philippe Aghion, Guiseppe Bertola, Olivier Blanchard, Pierre Cahuc, Daniel Cohen, David Thesmar, Jean Tirole (CEPR) and Philippe Aghion, Patrick Artus, Philippe Askenazy, Olivier Blanchard, Pierre Cahuc, Stéphane Carcillo, Gilbert Cetee, Daniel Cohen, Henri Guaino, Francis Kamarz, Augustin Landier, Yannick L’Horty, Jean-Hervé Lorenzi, Jean Pisani-Ferry, David Thesmar (CEA). Thus, there is a clearly identifiable group of actors (or programmatic group) who independent of the newspaper’s ideological orientation in these find a platform to present their views and policy visions.

6. One narrative to rule them all: discourses on labor market reforms in France and Germany

Despite the different circumstances of our analyzed cases Germany and France – in terms of timing, political and institutional environment, different party governments and different challenges – the narratives with which the agenda is set to structurally reform the labor markets are noticeably alike. All media articles report on the policy agenda by arguing with a macro story, that is labor market statistics and the general state of the country, instead of portraying the individual fates of selected citizens that experience the consequences of the labor market situation. In doing so, the media suggest that if the overall situation of the country improves, this will also benefit each individual citizen. Contingent on this macro orientation, some articles across countries and newspapers raise criticism accusing the government to use certain measures with the aim of whitewashing the unemployment statistics, e.g. by compelling the unemployed to accept further training or internships and thus counting them as a different and less desperate category of unemployment.

Figures 1 and 2 depict the two discourse networks that show the approval and disagreement of actors on specifically defined narrative elements.

6.1. Heroes, villains and victims: country comparisons as heroic narratives

The narrative element of the victim is absent in large parts of the analyzed articles. If at all, some authors refer to the unemployed youth that suffers from an insufficient labor market policy of the government. However, this indicates rather the government – in Germany the red-green government under Schröder’s SPD and the Greens and in France the socialist government under Hollande and (sometimes) the previous governments addressing the problem of unemployment – as the main villain that does not solve the ubiquitous problem of unemployment. Alternatively, the governments are described as villains because their policies are too modest to have an effect. In some articles, unions (or tariff partners, which
implicitly means the same) are named as villains because they are said to be blocking necessary reforms and defending a traditionalist status quo against progress, presenting a reassertion of the capitalist power (Peters, 2017). Strikingly, the narrative of an external hero that is represented by a country which previously passed legislation in labor market policy and subsequently witnessed a massive improvement of the labor market situation is particularly visible. In Germany, the positive examples are the ‘Dutch miracle’ as well as the USA and Denmark. In France, the ensemble of countries ranges from South-European countries like Spain and Italy, yet mentioned rather seldom, to Germany as a big role model together with the UK and the US, as well as Sweden and Denmark.

6.2. Problems and solutions: regulation, costs, qualification

With respect to problems and solutions, we also find strong parallels when comparing the two countries. In both countries, the narrative of third-way economics and mostly similarly of supply-side economics prevail. This includes the focus on long-term unemployment, seen as a structural problem resulting from overregulation, high levels of wages, wage-related costs and taxes, and the associated narrative of lacking motivation of (long-term) unemployed. The only significant difference of both narratives comprises the focus on lacking economic growth in the French case. While the narrative on the German labor market reform focused nearly solely on the aim to get people with qualifications into jobs, the French narratives have had a broader macro-economic aim. This could be a consequence of the special short-term influence of the crisis that led to a decrease of the GDP in most Western countries in 2008 and 2009.

Similarly, the proposed solutions in the narratives of both countries widely match. They focus on decreasing wages, wage-related costs and taxes and on deregulation. Additionally, we find some special policies addressed to the very specific national circumstances. In Germany, solutions contain the institutional reform of the Federal Labor Office (BfA), which resulted from the scandal and the strong position of the Unions within this body of self-government. They also address the merging of social and unemployment benefits, which became the most disputed issue of the later Hartz IV reform. In France, the newspaper reports on specific solutions provide narratives on subsidized contracts of (young) unemployed and the responsibility and solidarity pact. Resulting packages of measures aimed at financially relieving particularly small and medium-sized businesses to foster employment.

However, in both countries, we find overwhelming support for the idea of structural reform in both newspapers with very little variance, thereby identifying one shared narrative in both countries to communicate policies. Contrary to our expectations, comprehensive narratives including the whole plot and characters in one article could very seldom be identified. Instead, all newspapers give economics from universities and research institutes a chance to express their views very often. This may result from the focus on quality newspapers. Related to the scientists, members of programmatic groups played a central role in all stories. The proponents of the reform include social groups of politicians, civil servants and experts with shared biographies like membership in commissions and the reception of similar prices. They were largely able to frame the discourse to their favor by repeating the same narrative elements over and over
again. Thereby they framed the reform as an unpolitical economically reasoned step without alternative.

7. Conclusion

Though at different points in time and under different circumstances, labor market policy in France and Germany has undergone substantial structural reforms that have been legitimized by a shared and exclusive narrative in established mass media. The narratives that prepared the agenda for structural reforms took on similar forms independent of political, institutional, and economic circumstances. Tracing back these narratives to specific policy actors, this article identified programmatic discursive groups that are bound by biographical career ties and often find themselves in the same loci of intellectual discussion. In spite of using narrative stories to establish a ‘meta-narrative’ that brings together political decision-makers and the public (Hampton, 2009), narratives in the preparation of labor market reforms in France and Germany did not seize public preferences that were articulated through demonstrations or public opposition. Given how widely the dominant narrative was articulated across newspapers and institutions, the respective programmatic group around a substantial reform program generated support particularly among its own members with the narrative serving as a legitimizing and enforcing strategy to strengthen in-group identification and their group power.

As a consequence, this contribution puts forward the argument that the narrative with which each labor market reform in France and Germany was justified serves rather as a strengthening of group identity than it aims at generating public consent for the reform. This becomes particularly visible as the problems and solutions that are discussed in the articles are following a line of argumentation that concentrates on supply-side economics and sees the deregulation and relief of businesses as the adequate means to reduce unemployment. An exertion of dominance is generally supposed to work out for conservative as opposed to liberal (in the European sense left) think tanks because the former advocate their ideology more aggressively and openly while the latter feel forced to be neutral (Rich, 2011). According to the categorization by Blum and Kuhlmann (2018), the identified stories can be designated as retrenching old-social-risk policies and taking-to-control stories, as they placed the individual in a position of self-responsibility and undeserving of benefits they are not showing effort for. Surprisingly, this was the only and dominant narrative of the programmatic group ruling the public discourse. No alternative programmatic group was existent that promoted alternative stories or alternative reform ideas with adequate narrative stories in a coherent way or no alternative programmatic group had resources to do so. Research in this direction allows for outlining whether the media are depicting a struggle between competing policy actors or whether they serve as a mouthpiece for one group of actors. In this context, there exist several tying knots to political communication research, particularly indexing (Bennett, 1990). Although this analysis did not find any comprehensive narrative consisting of a plot and characters (villains, victims, heroes), such narrative stories can sure be found in Germany and France, in different policy areas but also in labor market policy. At this point, it would enhance our knowledge to research when and under which conditions narratives are designed in such a way and not in another (Crespy & Szabó, 2018).
What is addressed by this article is furthermore how these strategies in using narratives and frames link to policy outcomes, not limited to the adoption but also with regard to the legitimization of reforms. Showing that a common narrative promoted by an identifiable group consisting of programmatic actors in key positions and with key resources adds to the literature on the NPF and narrative stories by revealing a mechanism on how narratives interrelate with policy outcomes. In both cases, the reforms were effective but the legitimization was not successful. While the analysis does not include a positive example—a role model on how to legitimize the reform of conservative welfare states—it shows that taking the main identification of target groups (which was an organizational, unionist identity related to their employment) without providing a further, positive social identification by the reformed welfare state leads to electoral reorientation of protest and extremism, like the yellow vests in France or the Monday demonstrations in Germany and electoral success of extremist parties that provide a new social or nationalist identification. Surprisingly, strategies of legitimization that make use of scientific evidence and effectiveness or role models from abroad (like the Dutch miracle or the German prototype in the case of France) and thereby focus on adoption of the reform alternatives do not have the desired impact on legitimization—indeed, independent of the political system and institutional or economic conditions. This is particularly the case when there are subjective individual ‘losers’ of the reform who need respect, recognition and empathy rather than scientific facts. Scientific facts might work better in less subjective policy sectors like climate change policy (Irepoglu Carreras, 2019).

In the case at hand, the programmatic group failed to provide a social identity not within its group but for the public to feel attached to. The evidence confirms one of the PAF hypotheses which sees one factor of success of a programmatic group and its policy program in the provision of a shared narrative that fits into the national mood. While in both cases we observed a shared narrative by a programmatic group, this did not correspond to the national mood in the sense that it did not match the social identities of the target groups—there is not one discourse at hand to ‘rule them all’. Fitting a reform into the national mood is pertinent not only to PAF but also other frameworks like the Multiple Streams Framework (MSF) (Zohlnhöfer, 2016). The findings of this analysis are thereby transferable to other policy process frameworks and suggest that the provision of a social group to identify with can generate public support for reforms when people feel included and therefore share ideas.

For governments, this means that they must much more reflect on how successfully legitimizing their reforms by also taking account their leeway and the lines of conflict in their respective situations. If they are learning and transferring successful reforms from other countries, this does not mean that they can easily transfer the legitimizing frame. The same is true for processes of European harmonization and top-down regulation, in which a transfer of storylines to the national levels needs attention (Radaelli, 2003). For example, the French majoritarian democracy is less in need of focusing on how to implement a reform than how to legitimize it. The German discourse of Schröder was important to persuade the veto players of German consensus democracy—which succeeded—but it did not persuade those concerned by the reform. Further research should investigate which strategies of legitimization in contested policy sectors actually work. One of the suggestions of the theoretical perspective of social identity is the concentration on the formation of new
types of social identities as the belonging, evaluation and emotional attachment regarding social groups is a crucial factor for individual wellbeing and recognition. In short, this article showed that a programmatic group that dominates the policy discourse with a coherent narrative story likely achieves policy change, but that this does not lead to long-term success of the programmatic group – for this to happen, it is important to fit the narrative in the national mood, for which one possibility is the provision of social identities for citizens to feel included by that are connected to specific reform ideas.

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