

Conceptualizing and Measuring the Political Salience of EU Legislative Processes

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Abstract. Salience, which can be broadly understood as the importance actors attribute to a political matter, is a key concept in political science. It has been shown to affect diverse matters such as the behaviour of interest groups and decision-makers in concrete policy-making processes as well as citizen attitudes and their voting behaviour. However, quite regularly salience is differently conceptualized and operationalized within and between different political science subfields, which raises questions of theoretical (non-) complementarity and conceptual boundaries as well as of measurement validity. In this paper we review how salience is conceptualized and measured in studies on public opinion, interest groups, political communication and EU legislative policy-making. Empirically, we probe the (non-) complementarity of different conceptualizations with original data on EU legislative policymaking. To do so, we draw on datasets developed in a large project on EU interest group politics (INTEREURO). For a sample of 125 legislative processes initiated by the European Commission (between 2008 and 2010) we combine evidence on salience collected through in-depth analyses of five media-outlets and interviews with 70 Commission experts as well as with 143 interest group representatives.

Introduction

Saliency, which can be broadly understood as the importance actors attribute to a political matter, is a key concept in political science. It has been shown to affect diverse matters such as the behaviour of interest groups, the potential impact of lobbyists, the types of interests that mobilize and the interaction among policymakers in concrete policy-making processes. In addition, it is argued that saliency affects citizen attitudes, informs their voting behaviour as well as how political parties campaign on different issues. However, quite regularly saliency is differently conceptualized and operationalized within and between different political science subfields, which leads to inconsistencies when drawing empirical and theoretical conclusions from our research. Relying on different EU literatures, this paper provides a conceptual discussion of saliency and empirically investigates to which extent and in which way the different dimensions of the concept which we will map below are empirically related.

The paper is an attempt to clarify the concept and to develop an empirically grounded approach which might help us to measure different dimensions of saliency. In the following, we first review how different EU literatures – more precisely studies of public opinion and voting, interest groups, media and decision-making in the EU – conceptualize saliency. In the second part, we build on this review to point at the complex definitional nature of the concept. We stress that it is important to disentangle between individual and collective saliency, and between saliency for citizens, saliency for interest groups and saliency for policy-makers. Moreover, we emphasize the fact that while saliency is largely a cognitive concept, most studies that have saliency as one of their key concepts rely on behavioural measures in order to operationalize this concept. Using the examples of conflict and media attention, we discuss why this is problematic. Finally, we call attention to the dynamic nature of saliency. Saliency is not only a predictor of political behaviour; it is also affected and shaped by political behaviour.

In the third part of the paper, we develop an empirical account of saliency by drawing on datasets developed in a large project on EU interest group politics (INTEREURO).¹ For a sample of 125 legislative processes initiated by the European Commission (between 2008 and 2010) we combine evidence on saliency collected through in-depth analyses of five media-outlets and interviews with 70 Commission experts as well as with 143 interest group representatives. These data allow us to explore empirically to which extent saliency for various actors are systematically related or independent of each other.

¹ See Beyers et al. 2014 and www.intereuro.eu.

Saliency in EU politics and policy-making: the state of the art

Saliency is a key concept in several distinct literatures on EU politics and policy-making. It plays a key role in studies of public opinion and voting in the EU. Early on, some studies suggested that EU policies are bound to be of low saliency to citizens (Moravcsik 2002). According to this argument, some policy areas (education, health care, pensions, taxation and so on) intrinsically are of higher saliency to citizens than other policy areas. Since EU competences for these policy areas are limited, the EU as such and its policies are thought to be of little importance to citizens. More recently, several studies challenged this static perspective on the saliency of EU policies and politics by stressing that competing elites can try to increase or limit the saliency of EU issues to citizens and in elections. De Vries (2007), for example, focuses on the role of national parties with an extreme position on the left-right dimension in increasing the saliency of the EU. Others mainly see populist right-wing parties as the drivers of the increasing saliency of the EU for citizens (Hooghe and Marks 2009; Hutter and Grande 2014). Oppermann (2008) also argues that political elites try to defuse or intensify the saliency of the EU for public opinion in the United Kingdom. The saliency that political issues have for citizens, in turn, has been seen as having broad effects for political processes. Low-saliency of EU issues, for example, may explain low turnout in European Parliament elections (Clark 2014). Hooghe and Marks (2009) argue that the increasing saliency of and increasing conflict over the European integration process has led to a slowing down of the integration process.

Saliency also plays a large role in the interest group literature. Rasmussen et al. (2014) show that interest groups are most likely to mobilize on issues that are of high saliency to citizens. Interest groups, in turn, have been shown to play a key role in shaping the public saliency of issues (Dür and Mateo 2015). While some issues may inherently be more likely to attract broad public attention, interest groups can help make a potentially salient issue into an actually salient issue. A common argument in this literature is also that on issues of high public saliency, interest groups, and in particular business actors, tend to be less influential than on issues of low public saliency (Mahoney 2007; Culpepper 2011; Woll 2012; Dür and Mateo 2014; Rasmussen 2014). Focusing on saliency to interest groups, Klüver (2011) shows that high saliency increases the influence of actors that form part of the relatively larger lobbying coalition on an issue and decreases the influence of actors that belong to the smaller coalition. Still other research on interest groups shows how these actors try to shape the public

saliency of issues, for example by making use of media-related strategies (Beyers 2004; Chalmers 2013; Dür and Mateo 2015).

The literature on media reporting on the EU also heavily relies on the concept of saliency. Much of this literature studies how important the EU is for media outlets relative to other topics. Generally, these studies indicate that the saliency of the EU for media is low (Meyer 1999; Kevin 2003: 124; Peter et al. 2003). In their analysis of newspapers, Kriesi and his colleagues find that in the 1970s, 1990s and in the 2000s the space devoted to European integration issues proper by newspapers in six countries varied between 2.3 percent and 7.8 percent with no clear trend (Kriesi et al. 2012: 110). In their analysis of media reports on the European Parliament (EP) elections 2009 in 27 EU member states Schunck et al., however, show that media attention and the public visibility of EP election go up, if parties contest on EU policies and the future direction of the integration process (2011). The reasons provided for this low EU media saliency are the underdeveloped media landscape, the complex institutional structure of the EU – which makes it difficult for journalist to locate the institutional ownership of issues – and the fact that the technically complex nature of many EU policies makes it difficult to identify the immediate human interest.

Finally, saliency is a prominent concept in the legislative and party politics literatures. It plays a particularly prominent role in accounts which model collective decision-making as exchanges, such as bargaining and log rolling models. The dynamics and outcomes of collective decision-making is driven by the varying levels of saliency which decision-makers attribute to a specific issue, since they allow actors to make compromises and to arrive at an agreement (Arregui et al. 2006; Thomson 2011: 234). It has been argued and empirically demonstrated that the effect of saliency on actors' influence on a decision outcome can work in two distinct directions. For one, policy-makers that attach high importance to an issue might be more willing to make compromises, and thus “lose” influence on its outcome, to increase the likelihood of the adoption of the decision (Schneider et al. 2010: 92, 97). Alternatively, decision-makers who attach high saliency to a specific issue will invest considerable political resources to influence it according to their own preferences and interests (Thomson 2011: 234, 248).

Warntjen (2007: 1142-1143), moreover, shows that the saliency attached to a policy area by a government, measured by the government parties' party manifestoes and political speeches, affect how it steers the Council's agenda during its presidency. Wonka (2015) shows that during their parliamentary debates of Euro crisis measures, political parties in the German Bundestag have tried to influence the dynamics of the general political debate in their

own political interest by manipulating the salience of different – economic, cultural, institutional – aspects of the crisis. In addition, Wonka and Rittberger (2014: 637) show that the level of salience which German MPs attribute to EU integration strongly affects the supranational and transnational ties they activate to engage in EU politics. Leuffen et al. (2014), finally, explain salience in EU legislative decision-making at the country level and show that the political salience of specific legislative cases is strongly related to domestic interest group politics.

Across these various strands of literature, salience has been measured in a myriad of ways. Studies dealing with EU salience to citizens mainly measure this concept via public opinion polls (e.g. De Vries 2007). De Vries (2007), for example, used questions about citizens' perceptions of the most important problems facing their countries (but see Wlezien 2005 for a critique of this approach). Oppermann (2008) relied on a question about the “most important issue facing Britain today.” Clark (2014) used data from a Eurobarometer question on why people do not participate in the elections to the European Parliament, which contained response categories such as “not interested in EU affairs” and “EP’s issues do not concern me” that are indicative of EU salience. Since public opinion data is often missing for more specific issues dealt with by the EU, Dür and Mateo (2015) used Google Trends data to examine their argument.² Google Trends provides data on the relative frequencies with which people use specific search terms on Google. Hurrelmann et al. (2013), finally, used focus groups with 8 to 10 participants to get a grasp of the salience of different EU-related issues.

Studies of interest groups, lobbying and representation used interview questions asking lobbyists about the salience they attach to specific issues (Laumann and Knoke 1987; Tatham 2012;). Alternative measures used in this literature are the amount of resources interest groups dedicate to an issue or the number of groups that mobilize on a specific issue. The media salience of an issue has been measured by counting the number of newspaper articles or news reports dealing with that issue. But also the length, positioning etcetera of the articles or news reports can say something about the salience of an issue for the media. Finally, salience to policy-makers has been measured by relying on parliamentary debates, party manifestoes, expert judgements and media reports (Green-Pedersen 2012; De Bruycker and Beyers 2015; Rauh 2014; Wonka 2015). In terms of parliamentary debates, the more time MPs dedicate to a topic, the greater its salience can be expected to be. Similarly, how much space parties dedicate to an issue in their manifestoes can be an indicator of the salience of

² www.google.com/trends.

that issue for the party. Other studies have assessed the salience of proposals via media reports, aspects of the legislative texts produced or procedural data (see Warntjen 2011: 170).

Establishing conceptual boundaries and improving measurement validity

Broad consensus exists across the various strands of literature discussed above that salience is best understood as the relative importance - i.e. in comparison to other matters – actors attribute to a specific political matter (Bueno de Mesquita and Stokman 1994; Laver 2001: 69-71; Thomson 2011: 234, Warntjen 2011). The “political matter” that is the object of salience can be broad, for example European integration as such, or very specific, as for example individual EU policies, a policy domain or a particular political event. While agreement exists on this basic definition, several aspects of the usage of the concept in these literatures are problematic. First, although the definition puts emphasis on actors, many studies do not specify for whom a specific political issue or object is salient or not. This is problematic because political salience may vary across actor types. For example, what is salient for interest groups might not be salient for the citizenry at large. Second, the definition makes clear that salience is a state of mind rather than something that may or may not matter for political behaviour. Nevertheless, most empirical measures of salience are behavioural. Third, many studies that use salience as a predictor to explain specific outcomes fail to pay attention to the fact that salience is dynamic. Actors often try to manipulate – either increase or decrease – the salience of an issue for specific audiences through their actions. Salience is thus (partly) endogenous to political practices. We discuss these issues in turn.

First, the actor-centered conceptualization of salience asks for the specification of the actor(s) whose salience assessments shall be captured. In principle we can assess salience assessments of *individual* actors or a *collective* of one type of actors or to all actors in a political territory. An issue that enjoys high salience among citizens of a country or a particular interest group community may still be of limited salience for a specific citizen or a specific interest group. Or, an issue might imply a very important problem for one single actor or a relatively small set of actors, but is hardly salient for other actors. Interest groups, for example, often lobby on niche issues that can be expected to be highly salient to a small number of actors but of little importance to most interest groups or the broader public (on lobbying on niche issues, see Baumgartner and Leech 2001).

Moreover, the salience of an issue may vary across general types of actors, namely citizens, interest groups, and policy-makers. It is plausible that most issues that are of high

salience to citizens also are of high salience to interest groups and policy-makers. Especially for policy-makers, the stakes are high on issues of high public salience, as elections may be won or lost on such issues. It is thus plausible that public salience implies salience for policy-makers. At the same time, many issues that are highly salient to (certain) interest groups may be of little importance to citizens or policy-makers. This is epitomized by the concept of “special” interests that have a high stake in specific issues. These issues are of high salience to these interest groups but exhibit low public salience and possibly also low salience for policy-makers.

In short, although the case for specifying salience for whom thus is clear-cut, the existing literature often just refers to the salience of an issue without carefully specifying for whom an issue is salient. Keeping salience for citizens, salience for interest groups and salience for policy-makers distinct not only is important for conceptual reasons, but also as doing so allows for an empirical investigation into the dynamic nature of salience (e.g. whether public opinion shapes salience among policy-makers) and how the salience of issues varies (or not) across different types of actors.

Second, it is important to recognize that salience is a cognitive concept, that is, it refers to perception rather than behaviour. Directly, one way to assess actor-based salience assessments is through interviews by asking stakeholders about the salience they attach to specific issues. Yet, interview projects are demanding and very often impractical. For example, problems of recollection if events lie far back in time or research on a large number of actors may make it impossible to rely on interviews to measure salience. Illustratively, measuring the public salience of specific issues via public opinion polls is too expensive. Very often, therefore, research relies on behavioural indicators such as the number of interest groups active on an issue or the amount of media reporting as proxy measures for salience. This is problematic because the observed behaviour might reflect, but is not conceptually equivalent to salience. Moreover, our knowledge of how salience affects behaviour and which strategic and contextual factors matter for how salience is translated into behaviour is limited. Some behavioural measures of salience thus might reflect actors’ willingness to invest political resources to influence political outcomes rather than cognition or the salience actors attribute to a policy. All behavioural measures of salience hence contain considerable (and possibly systematic) noise which needs to be taken into account in the interpretation of the results and when drawing conclusions.

Illustratively, using conflict as an indicator of salience is potentially problematic. It is plausible that a positive relationship between conflict and salience exists, but conceptually these two terms are different. While conflict captures the contestation between political actors that results from different views and positions on a subject, salience is the possibly varying importance attributed to this subject by different actors. A number of actors can all consider an issue to be of low importance, but they might not hold different views on the issue. Conflict thus can be high on issues that exhibit low salience. Alternatively, many actors can all consider an issue to be of high salience, without holding conflicting positions. A natural disaster, for example, can be of high salience without there being conflict.

In fact, the relationship between conflict and salience is complex. First, conflict may induce actors to alter their assessments of the relative importance of political objects. That is, the causal chain may go from conflict to salience. Second, the causal relationship can also work the other way round. If an issue is salient to actors, they might be willing to enter conflict with other actors during an election campaign or when a decision on a policy is taken. Third, an actor that attributes high salience to an object may have little interest in and avoid political contestation, because she expects her own political power to be negatively affected by conflict. Mainstream political parties which occupy the ideological centre are a case in point, as they tried to suppress the public salience of the EU issue in order not to allow EU-critical fringe parties advantages in electoral competition (van der Eijk and Franklin 2004). Given the potentially complex relationship between conflict and salience, more careful conceptual thinking and better empirical research is needed in order to learn under which conditions conflict can be used as proxy for salience.

A further complication that arises is that quite regularly we cannot observe behaviour or the results of it directly, but have to rely on media reports on political events and conflicts. Media outlets report observed behaviour and select those actions, statements and actors they consider to be newsworthy and important. Any salience measure for individual actors derived from media reports is therefore influenced by both the behavioural component and media selection effects. Conceptually and empirically, media measures of political activities are therefore quite different from the actor-centred and cognitive conceptualization of salience we propose here. It is therefore not so surprising that research on political parties found that actor-centred measures of salience obtained through party manifestoes, expert surveys or voter surveys are not systematically related with media measures that are meant to capture the salience that political parties attribute to different political issues and policy domains (Helbling and Tresch 2011: 180-181).

In this paper we hence reserve the concept of *media attention*, rather than (issue) salience (Hutter and Grande 2014; Helbing and Tresch 2011), for the extent to which media reports on the actions and statements of different political actors. This is conceptually and empirically closer to what is actually being measured and it helps to draw the analytically important boundary between an actor's assessment of the relative importance of different political objects and the visibility this actor's behaviour gets through media reports. Attention is also conceptually closer to what media based empirical studies investigate: the publicly visible contestation of different actors on different political issues and the relative prominence that different thematic aspects get in these. The public visibility of these conflicts, which is facilitated by media reports, also makes attention an important element in studies on the politicization of the EU, which deal with the increasing and open, i.e. publicly visible, contestation on the future course of the European Union (de Wilde and Zürn 2012; Hooghe and Marks 2009; Hutter and Grande 2014).

Finally, when using the concept of salience, it is important to recognize that the causal role of salience in public policy analysis is complex. This is so because not only salience affects behaviour, but also political practices shape salience. Illustratively, the public salience of issues has been shown to affect interest group mobilization (Rasmussen et al. 2014). At the same time, interest group mobilization can affect the public salience at least of some issues (Dür and Mateo 2014, 2015). This endogeneity of salience is also illustrated by the fact that Leuffen et al. (2014) explain variation in salience across states; and Thomson (2011) uses variation in salience across states to explain bargaining outcomes. Yet, although actor properties and contextual variables are not so easy to separate analytically as the salience experienced by an individual actor results from contextual experiences (see Klüver et al. 2015), many analyses consider salience as some exogenous explanatory factor (for voting behaviour, political mobilization, implementation).

In the empirical section of this paper we will explore the empirical plausibility of the conceptual considerations on salience which we outlined in the previous paragraphs along various lines: First, to empirically substantiate our claim that it is important to conceptually differentiate salience attributions of different types and collectives of actors, we will investigate to which extent and how decision-makers', interest groups' and citizens' salience assessments of concrete EU policies co-vary in decision-making on about 100 EU legislative proposals. Second, to investigate the relationship between indicators that are close to our cognitive conceptualization of salience and behavioural proxies of salience, we will explore

the empirical relationship between cognitive and behavioural measures of salience. Moreover, we will use media reports on the already mentioned policy-making processes to investigate how different indicators of salience are related to the concept of attention we briefly introduced above. Finally, we will look at the salience of specific EU legislative proposals to assess the dynamic nature of salience. Before we come to the empirical analyses, we will introduce the data we use for our investigation.

Research design and data

The unique contribution of this paper is that we combine a large number of measures that capture different aspects of salience in relation to 125 legislative cases. The data used for answering our research questions are part of the larger INTEREURO project, which analyses lobbying strategies and interest group influence for a stratified sample of 125 European Commission legislative proposals (directives and regulations) that were submitted between 2008 and 2010. To select politically contested EU legislative proposals, we relied on their coverage by five news sources (*Agence Europe*, *European Voice*, the *Financial Times*, the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* and *Le Monde*) (for a detailed discussion of the sampling strategy, see Beyers et al. 2014a; Beyers et al. 2014b).³

About two-thirds of all submitted proposals for directives and 60 per cent of the proposals for regulations were mentioned at least once in one media source. We use two media hits as the threshold for cases to enter our sample. In this way we randomly selected the 48 proposals for directives and 38 proposals for regulations that were mentioned. Note that this low threshold introduces large variation in media attention across proposals in our sample. To add additional variation in terms of media attention, we added a randomly selected set of 10 proposals for directives and 9 proposals for regulations that did not meet the media coverage criterion. Finally, we added all proposals for directives and regulations that had not made it into the sample following that strategy, but for which the EC held public consultations and consultation documents are available. We did this for pragmatic reasons, as we wanted to benefit from the additional data that is available for consultation cases and as this enables us to control for the extent to which lobbying through consultations can be seen as a signal of political salience.

³ Using some non-English-language media sources was important to avoid a bias in our sample towards proposals of specific interest to some countries and to identify cases that are particularly important at the national level.

We used these media sources not only at the sampling stage, but also to arrive at empirical measures of media attention for each legislative proposal in our sample. For the purpose of this paper, we focus on three EU-media sources (Agence Europe, European Voice and EurActive). We identified all articles that were written on each of the 125 proposals (between 2008 and 2010). Our first measure of media attention is the number of articles. Our next step consisted of a more fine-grained analysis of the media coverage. We used the news reports to identify all stakeholders (public and private) which were reported to be politically active in the respective decision-making process together with the statements these actors were reported to have made. Statements are quotes made by interest group officials, government officials, politicians, or other stakeholders that can be directly linked to one of the sampled proposals (see De Bruycker and Beyers 2015). For the purpose of this paper we developed four distinct variables which count the number of media statements made by 1) interest group officials, 2) Commission officials, 3) MEPs or representatives of EP party groups and 4) national government representatives. Each of these distinct measures covers the media attention in relation to a specific type of stakeholder.

We also looked at how salient the different topics covered by the 125 legislative cases were to the broader public. In the absence of a more direct measure of the salience of the proposals in our sample to citizens, we used data from the 2009 European Election Study to get an understanding of which policy areas may have been salient to the public at large (EES 2009). In that study, respondents across the EU were asked what they think the “[second, third] most important problem facing” their country was. We mapped the responses to these questions to the proposals in our sample by coding both using the codebook of the EU policy agendas project (Alexandrova et al. 2013). For each policy area, we calculated the weighted percentage of respondents across the EU that mentioned this area as the first, second or third most important problem. We then took the natural log of this value as a measure of the relative public salience of the policy areas that the various proposals form part of.

Moreover, two sets of interviews provide us with indicators of salience to interest groups. First, we interviewed 95 policy experts in the European Commission. Next, these interviews with EC experts were followed by 143 interviews with EU-level interest group officials who were closely involved in lobbying with regard to these legislative cases (for more details on these interviewing projects see Beyers et al. 2014c). These 143 interviews were conducted with officials from 111 different interest organizations; some organizations were interviewed multiple times because they were involved in more than one case. The interviews with EC-experts covered 70 proposals. Through the interviews with interest group

officials, we covered 85 proposals. The interviews were meant to map the entire range of interests that actively tried to influence the policy outcomes, to measure the divisiveness by identifying the different policy positions, and to assess the lobbying strategies these mobilized interests adopted.

The interviews were preceded by considerable research, including short telephone interviews on each case, so that the most relevant informant could be identified and contacted for an interview. One of the most important reasons why we did not interview EC experts or interest groups officials on all 125 cases is because our pre-research showed that 37 cases showed almost no lobbying activities (see below).⁴ Business associations make up the largest part (64 percent) of our interest group respondents, another 29 percent represent NGOs and the remaining 8 percent are officials from professional organizations, firms or labour unions.

Through the careful mapping of media coverage and the expert interviews with EC-officials and organized interests we could identify the set of stakeholders who actively lobbied on each legislative case. This resulted in one variable which simply measures the extent of lobbying or interest group mobilization for each piece of legislation. In addition, we have, for each proposal the number of organized interests who submitted position papers in those instances when the European Commission held public consultations. Based on the interviews with interest group officials we could develop two – one cognitive and one behavioural – actor-centred measures of salience. First, we asked in relation to 443 conflictive issues that were contained in the sampled proposals *‘Thinking about all the issues you have been engaged in during the past four years, could you say for each of the issues mentioned above whether it was: highly important (1), somewhat important (2), or not so important (3) for your organization?’* Next, we probed into the behavioural aspect by asking *‘Comparing all the issues you have engaged with during the past four years, for each issue characterizing this particular proposal, were your organisation’s efforts at shaping the legislative outcome more than average (1), about average (2), or less than average (3)?’* These are relative measures, namely each time the respondent is asked to compare a particular topic in relation to other topics that are relevant within the organization. As we have often multiple interviews and issues per proposals we created two variables which for each proposal capture the *share* of responses that the issue was more important or demanded efforts compared to the total number of issues that were at stake in one proposal. The higher the share of more important/demanding issues, the higher the actor-centred salience of a particular proposal.

⁴ Another 9 proposals were dropped because no interest groups could be convinced to cooperate on these proposals or nobody within the organization had a memory of the specific proposal they were selected for.

In the interviews with Commission officials, we asked them to indicate how frequently interest groups used a series of strategies to influence the European Commission’s policy position with regard to a specific proposal. The tactic that we rely upon as behavioural measure of salience to interest groups in this paper is directly lobbying towards the European Commission. Respondents could indicate that the strategy was not used at all (1), used less frequently than on other proposals that they were familiar with (2), used about as frequently (3), or used more frequently (4).

Table 1: Variables and salience indicators

| Variable | Type of indicator | Level of aggregation | Summary statistics | | | | | |
|--|-------------------|----------------------|--------------------|-------|-------|------|--------|------|
| | | | N | Mean | SD | Min | Median | Max |
| <i>Salience indicators for: citizens</i> | | | | | | | | |
| Awareness (logged) | cognitive | collective | 125 | 1.98 | 1.28 | 0.00 | 1.81 | 4.47 |
| <i>Salience indicators for: interest groups</i> | | | | | | | | |
| Proposal salience | cognitive | individual | 90 | 0.44 | 0.36 | 0.00 | 0.50 | 1.00 |
| Resources spent | behavioural | individual | 90 | 0.37 | 0.36 | 0.00 | 0.31 | 1.00 |
| Consultation submissions (logged) | behavioural | collective | 57 | 4.08 | 1.17 | 1.61 | 4.16 | 7.38 |
| Lobbying activity vis-à-vis COM | behavioural | collective | 67 | 3.22 | 0.79 | 1 | 3 | 4 |
| Number of groups that mobilized | behavioural | collective | 125 | 13.62 | 13.34 | 0 | 11 | 85 |
| <i>Salience indicators for: decision-makers</i> | | | | | | | | |
| Recitals – final act | behavioural | collective | 115 | 35.18 | 28.03 | 2 | 27 | 195 |
| Consultation submissions governments (logged) | behavioural | collective | 57 | 1.38 | 1.48 | 0.00 | 0.69 | 3.78 |
| Voting abstention in European Parliament | behavioural | collective | 103 | 29.60 | 28.69 | 0 | 21 | 178 |
| <i>Media “attention” indicators</i> | | | | | | | | |
| Total number of media articles | behavioural | collective | 125 | 9.02 | 9.69 | 0 | 6 | 48 |
| Media statements by interest groups | behavioural | collective | 125 | 6.63 | 9.34 | 0 | 3 | 47 |
| Media statements by Commission | behavioural | collective | 125 | 4.98 | 6.35 | 0 | 3 | 33 |
| Media statements by Members of EP | behavioural | collective | 125 | 5.73 | 11.51 | 0 | 2 | 87 |
| Media statements by governments | behavioural | collective | 125 | 6.86 | 13.02 | 0 | 3 | 88 |

Finally, we have a number of measures which account for the salience policy-makers attach to a specific piece of legislation. First, we counted the number of recitals that precedes the text of each legislative proposal in our sample to set out the main reason or justification for the act. The more recitals, so we assume in line with some studies (Warntjen 2012), the more salient an act is. Next, we counted the number of abstentions in EP voting on the final act, whereby the presumption is that in the case of salient issues, MEPs would refrain from abstentions. Finally, in addition to the media statements made by different types of decision-

makers (see above), we developed a count variable assessing the number of position papers member-state government agencies and EU institutions submitted during public consultations.

Empirical analysis

We start our analyses with an empirical exploration of the extent to and the way in which the different dimensions of the salience concept that we introduced above are empirically related. In our analytical section, we distinguished three types of actors – citizens, interest groups and decision-makers – and the media. We claimed that it is important to analytically distinguish these actors and venues for empirical as well as conceptual reasons. To empirically probe our analytical claims, we conducted an explorative factor analysis. Factor analysis is a multivariate and data reduction technique which allows discovering systematic patterns between a set of variables. The extent to which individual variables “load” on the different factors, i.e. the extent to which they are systematically related to it, provides information on the structure underlying the set of variables included in the factor analysis. If our conceptual considerations are correct, we would expect the different salience indicators for interest groups, decision-makers and citizens as well as the indicators for media attention to strongly correlate amongst each other and to load on the same factors. Yet, given the dynamic nature of salience, we do not exclude cross-loading, namely the fact that some variables possibly load on multiple factors, for instance because one could expect that media attention or citizen awareness triggers actor-centred salience among lobbyists.

We ran the factor analysis on 14 variables. Because of missing observations (in the current version of the dataset) for some variables, the N for the factor analysis is 36. The most important reasons for our large drop-out is that in the current analysis we did not consider cases where no public consultations were held as we considered it not entirely appropriate to impute some value for these ‘missing’ cases.⁵ There are a number of criteria to decide on the number of factors to extract. Based on the “Kaiser criterion”, namely the number of components with an eigenvalue greater than 1, we extracted four factors. This choice is backed up by a scree plot that shows a marked flattening of the curve at four components. We relied on orthogonal Varimax rotation, which assumes independence of factors. Oblimin rotation, which allows factors to be correlated, produces very similar results. The share of variance that we explain with the four factors is 0.61.

⁵ We also implemented some alternative models leaving out the variables on public consultations or models where we imputed a 0 for the missing consultation cases. The outcomes of these models are largely similar to what we report in this paper.

Table 2 presents the factor loadings that we receive for the various variables included in the model. The results lend considerable support to our conceptual considerations, namely that political salience on a particular set of topics has multiple dimensions that can analytically be distinguished from each other.

Table 2: Factor loadings

| Variables | Factor 1 (media attention) | Factor 2 (interest groups) | Factor 3 (policy makers) | Factor 4 |
|-----------------------------------|---|---|---|-----------------|
| <i>Media attention</i> | | | | |
| Total number of articles | 0.94 | | 0.31 | |
| Media statements IGs | 0.49 | | | 0.58 |
| Media statements MEPs | 0.53 | | 0.73 | |
| Media statements Council | 0.53 | | 0.84 | |
| Media statements Commission | 0.97 | | | |
| <i>Interest group salience</i> | | | | |
| Proposal salience | | 0.88 | | |
| Resources spent | | 0.90 | | 0.30 |
| Number of groups mobilized | 0.48 | 0.41 | | |
| Lobbying of Commission | | 0.61 | | |
| Consultation submissions | | | | |
| <i>Salience for policy-makers</i> | | | | |
| Abstentions | | | 0.53 | |
| Consultation submissions gvts. | | | 0.44 | |
| Recitals – final act | 0.64 | 0.30 | | |
| <i>Salience for citizens</i> | | | | |
| Awareness | | | | -0.36 |

Note: we only show loadings equal or larger than 0.3 or equal or smaller than -0.3.

Factor 1 captures all media indicators. In our conceptual discussion we argued that media indicators such as the number of articles in itself do not indicate salience (while in many studies these are often used as indicators for salience) but measure media attention. However, both media indicators and two of our indicators for salience to policy-makers load on Factor 3, pointing at a positive relationship between media attention and political salience. The fact that an increasing number of articles corresponds with more public statements by *all* actor types underpins the robustness of the claim that media attention correlates with saliences. This is also substantiated by the fact that media attention correlates with the total number of groups that lobby as well as the final number of recitals. Yet, the correlation of media indicators with the factor varies and it is below 0.5 for interest group statements (0.49), while the final number of recitals, a salience indicator for decision-makers, shows a loading of 0.64. The fact that the final number of recitals correlates considerably with the media

indicators does, however, make sense: a higher number of recitals is likely an indicator of greater conflict on a proposal, making it more interesting also for journalists (De Bruycker and Beyers 2015). The number of groups mobilized also loads strongly on this factor.

Factor 2 captures almost all indicators for salience to interest groups. Again, however, the extent to which the indicators correlate with the factor varies. It is particularly high for *Proposal salience* and *Resources spent*, but somewhat lower for the total number of groups that mobilized (0.41). Moreover, the number of submissions by interest groups to the Commission's online consultations does not correlate systematically with this factor. Interestingly, this variable does not load highly on any of the four factors, indicating that it may not be the best measure of the political salience of EU legislative proposals. The fact that individual groups' salience assessment of the proposal, the political resources they spent on lobbying the respective proposal and the lobbying of the EC strongly correlates with factor 2, while the factor loadings are smaller for the measures of collective salience to interest groups gives plausibility to our distinction above between individual and collective indicators of salience.

Two indicators of salience to decision-makers load highly on factor 3, as do several of the measures of media attention. Interestingly, and this provides support for our argument about variation across types of actors, the media measures that do load highly on factor 3 are again related to policy-makers: media statements by MEPs and media statements by governments. Clearly, then, these measures of media attention are good measures of salience to policy-makers, but less indicative for the actor-centered salience.

Factor 4, finally, can be conceived as a residual category, with two measures of salience to interest groups – resource spending and media attention - loading highly on it. Interestingly, this factor also is the opposite of what our public salience measure captures, as indicated by the negative loading for this variable. That the public salience variable does not load more highly on any of the four factors may also be due to the fact that our measure is very crude. The fact that our public salience measure has no relation to any of the other factors and loads negatively on this one suggests that there is potentially a discrepancy between what is sensitive to the broader public and what goes on in Brussels. However, we would need public opinion data on the actual proposals in our sample to make a more confident judgment about how public salience relates to the other measures of salience in our dataset.

Overall, the factor analysis lends support to our conceptual argument that we need to be analytically clear about the type of actor we refer to when discussing and measuring

salience. Factors 1, 2 and 3 show strong loadings mostly of salience indicators for the media, interest groups and policy-makers, respectively. A crude measure of overall media attention such as the number of newspaper articles published on a proposal thus is not a good indicator of salience to either interest groups or policy-makers. Of course, this does not mean that topics that gain a lot of media attention are not salient to interest groups or decision-makers, but it implies that quite a number of topics which do not gain media attention are potentially salient to individual actors. Probably these are the issues on which media attention is low and where advocates aim to increase or prevent media attention. Further analysis is needed in order to shed more light on this. Second, at the same time the boundaries between the different categories and the media are not absolutely clear-cut as some of the indicators we relied upon in our analysis correlate considerably across types. This, however, is hardly surprising. We have argued above that it is very likely to expect systematic relationships across actor types and the media and called for an empirical investigation of these. The relationship is particularly strong between media attention and salience of proposals for decision-makers as indicators of both load highly on factor 3.

Conclusion

This paper tried to achieve two goals, namely 1) conceptualizing the concept ‘political salience’ and 2) exploring a substantial number of measures that might be used in order to assess salience.

Our conceptual discussion on salience started with a broad review of different branches of literature – media studies, public opinion, legislative politics and interest group politics – that makes extensive use of this concept. In addition to the fact that the concept is poorly specified, we observed that usually scholars use indirect behavioral measures in order to capture what in our view is essentially a cognitive concept. For instance, scholars rely on aggregate media-analyses as a basis for inferences on how individual actors think and behave. We don’t suggest that all the studies that use salience as a key concept are wrong or flawed. With our discussion we hope to contribute to a more careful usage of this concept. Instead of using salience as a generic concept, we would like to advise scholars to carefully distinguish between the varying levels of salience attributed to political topics or decisions by different types of actors, to think more about the cognitive and behavioral dimension of salience when conceptualizing and operationalizing salience, and finally to analytically separate whether we deal with actor- or individual salience or collective salience. We see our conceptual discussion as a start for further methodological and conceptual reflection in this area.

Next we discussed various salience measures and we explored empirically the relationship between these and the extent to which different dimensions of salience can and should be analytically distinguished. The unique contribution of our project is that we developed a large array of salience measures which enable us to carry out this analysis. Yet, some caveats are in place. First, although we emphasized the cognitive aspect of salience as well as the importance of an actor-centered approach, we need to admit that we, in addition to some actor-centered and cognitive measures largely rely on – as most other research in this area – behavioral and collective measures. Second, it needs to be stressed that our results are preliminary findings and that much more work – both in terms of data-analysis and theoretical reflection – needs to be done in order to fine-tune our insights.

Nonetheless, our preliminary and explorative analyses lead to some results which are worth mentioning. First of all, the media attention concrete policy topics gain seems to be somewhat different from other salience measures, which is interesting as media analyses are often used when measuring salience. This does not mean that media-analysis cannot be used, but the crude counting of media hits or articles is probably not sufficient. Interesting, more fine-grained media-measures – such as statements made by interest groups or statements made by policy makers – seem to correlate better with behavioral salience measures that concern a particular type of actors. Sure, media analyses will help to uncover a substantial set of visible and salient topics, but it will miss salient topics where a substantial number of stakeholders were unsuccessfully seeking media attention or tried to avoid public visibility. Second, the easy access to formal consultations is tempting for researchers (who as always lack time and resources), but based on our results we would caution against an uncritical usage of consultation documents. It is not that consultation documents cannot be used – they should be used – but the density of participation in consultation is probably not the best proxy for cognitive and actor-centered salience. Finally, although our data on public opinion and the topics we cover in our data-set are not as precise as we would like to have them, it is telling that we could not observe any correlation between broad public salience and attention in (EU-level) media sources or the other measures of salience. Of course, as always, more research is needed, but this observation confirms the image of two worlds, namely what is sensitive to the broader public and what is going on in Brussels.

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