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The political salience of EU policies

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Abstract. This research agenda starts from the observation that in most political science research, the salience which citizens, interest groups, policymakers and the media attach to policymaking processes on specific policies is usually measured for just one actor type. As a consequence, it is difficult to assess the extent to which the salience attributions of citizens, interest groups, the media and/or policymakers are interrelated. We thus undertake an explorative analysis of the salience attributions of these actors for a sample of 125 EU legislative policies. We find considerable differences but also some interdependencies across actor types in the salience that they attach to specific policies. Based on these findings, we suggest a research agenda that investigates different actor types' salience attributions *synchronically* and *dynamically*. Research along these routes has the potential to shed light on varying levels of EU-level political mobilization and the conditions which lead to un-equal policy influence.

Keywords: salience, politicization, interest group politics, legislative politics, media

Introduction

We propose a research agenda that investigates how the salience assessments of different types of actors relate to each other in European Union (EU) policymaking processes. Salience – generally understood as the relative importance actors attribute to a specific political matter (Thomson 2011: 234; Warntjen 2011) – is a concept that is applied to the study of a broad set of EU related topics. Some studies analyse the salience of EU policies to legislators and other policymakers in the EU (Kriesi et al. 2012; Wonka 2016) or interest groups (Dür and Mateo 2014; Klüver 2011; Mahoney 2007; Woll 2012) and in national (Hutter and Grande 2014) and European Parliament (EP) elections (De Vries et al. 2011). Political communication research, finally, studies the attention of media to EU policy issues (De Bruycker and Beyers 2015; Koopmans 2007; Wonka 2016).

For the purpose of this essay, we conducted an extensive review of 80 articles published between 2000 and 2015 in a set of leading political science journals, which deal in one way or another with salience.¹ Interestingly, only six of the identified articles (11 percent) contained salience measures for more than one actor type (for instance citizens *and* political parties; or parties *and* interest groups). Most research thus assesses salience for one specific actor type relying on one specific indicator. This seems perfectly reasonable as long as the empirical and analytical focus of a study is on one specific actor type's general salience assessment, for example political parties or voters. When studying policymaking processes in which several different actor types are involved, however, there are theoretical and, as we will show, also empirical reasons to study the salience assessments of these different actors types separately and not to rely on one single measure. To make a long story short, theoretical and empirical relationships between the salience that policymakers, citizens, interest groups and the media attach to a policy, are hardly ever investigated. As a result, different strands of research exist

largely independently of each other, and we know very little about whether and how the salience assessments of these different actor types are interrelated.

A research agenda that studies these interrelationships is important for at least two reasons. First, a better understanding of how salience assessments interrelate is essential for research interested in capturing the dynamics of policymaking and the content of EU policy outcomes. Previous research shows that salience is positively related to the level of political conflict and the number of actors who contest EU politics (Hutter and Grande 2014) and to individual actors' influence on policies in EU policymaking (Thomson 2011). Assessing the possibly varying salience assessments different political actors attribute to the same policy and understanding how salience evolves thus contributes to a better understanding of the dynamics, the nature, and the levels of conflict in EU policymaking. Second, the large body of research using the concept of salience with respect to one specific actor type may suffer from omitted variable bias as analysts fail to consider the salience of a policy for other actor types. Why a policy is salient to a specific actor type is not necessarily only a function of this specific actor type or the context in which she operates, but also a function of what other actor types do. Illustratively, policymakers and citizens may pay closer attention to a policy and attach greater salience to it because of interest group activity.

At a theoretical level, the question how the salience assessments of different actors relate to each other does not have a conclusive answer. On the one hand, political incentives and limits in political attention might lead actors (of one type) to pay attention to salience signals of other actors (of a different type) and change their salience assessments accordingly. For example, interest groups' efforts to increase the salience of policy (e.g. Burstein 2014: 147) may have an effect on the salience assessments of governments and parliamentarians. Both have an incentive to pay attention to the signals sent by electorally relevant constituencies. In fact, for the EU it has been shown that issues that are of high salience to interest groups end up being of high

salience to national governments (Leuffen et al. 2013). More generally, since political attention is a scarce resource, political actors might rely on the cues of other actors to form an idea about the importance of specific political developments and policies (Baumgartner and Leech 2001).

Increasing public salience can also be part of the strategy of political actors. Interest groups, for example, can try to increase the public salience of a policy salient to them in order to influence the outcome of a policymaking process (Dür and Mateo 2014). In addition, the conflict that often results from political mobilization might attract media attention and therefore raise the public salience of an issue (e.g. Schuck et al. 2011). Research on policy agendas also shows that media agendas are not only shaped by the activities of political actors, but that the salience of political topics in the media also affects political actors' salience assessments and shapes their political activities (Vliegenthart et al. 2013). These examples lend plausibility to the expectation that policies that are of high salience to citizens and/or media attract attention by both interest groups and policymakers, as both depend on citizens' support to realize their policy goals and secure their organizational survival. There are thus good reasons to expect that the salience assessments of different types of actors are positively related. If this indeed is the case, we should not necessarily observe uniform assessments, but substantial positive correlations among the salience assessments of different types of actors.

On the other hand, it is also possible that different actor types consider different policies highly salient. A policy that is highly salient to citizens is not necessarily salient to interest groups whose organizational survival depends on a very specific constituency of, for example, economic producers. A policy that is highly salient to interest groups, according to the same logic, then does not necessarily rank highly for policymakers. Indeed, interest groups might have an incentive to limit the salience of a policy among citizens and policymakers during policymaking in order to secure disproportional influence on it (Schattschneider 1960). In line with these considerations, many policies that are salient to at least some interest groups are of

little importance to either policymakers or the broader public (Burstein 2014; Baumgartner and Leech 2001; Rasmussen et al. 2014). What is more, media attention, which is often used as a proxy for the general salience of EU policies or EU integration, may capture conflict rather than salience, because of journalists' tendency towards sensationalism (De Bruycker and Beyers 2015; Schuck et al. 2011). These arguments thus lead one to expect considerable variation in different types of actors' salience assessments of the same policies.

One likely reason for why we have not seen more research on the questions if, how and to which extent different types of actors' salience assessments of policies diverge or converge is that measuring salience for different actor types is difficult. Except for some studies of legislative bargaining amongst EU governments (e.g. Arregui et al. 2006; Thomson 2011), research investigating policymaking among a broader set of actors, including interest groups, often relies on media data to characterize the salience of EU policymaking (Hutter and Grande 2014). But this is only a measure of how much media attention EU policies receive rather than a measure of the salience assessments of individual actors active in the policymaking processes (Zürn 2016).

Our contribution complements and extends these efforts by bringing together twelve established salience measures for different actor types to show that this problem is not insurmountable. We use these salience measures to take a first stab at the question of interrelationships in the salience assessments of different actor types. If the same policies are salient (or not) to all actor types, there is little need to further pursue the research agenda sketched out here. Since our analyses show that this is not the case, we conclude with setting out two avenues for future research.

Are the same policies salient to different actor types?

We combine various measures that capture the salience assessments of different actor types in relation to a substantial number of legislative cases. The data are from the

INTEREURO-project, which analyses lobbying strategies and interest group influence for a sample of 125 European Commission legislative proposals that were proposed between 2008 and 2010 (Beyers et al. 2014a).

The first measure of salience is the number of articles that were written on each of the 125 proposals in three EU-level media-sources (*Agence Europe*, *European Voice* and *EurActive*) between 2008 and 2010 (*Total number of articles*).² To arrive at more refined measures of salience, we used the news reports to identify all stakeholders (public and private) that were reported to be politically active in the respective decision-making process. Using these data, we developed four distinct variables that count the number of media statements made by 1) interest group officials (*Media statements IGs*), 2) Commission officials (*Media statements EC*), 3) members of the EP or representatives of EP party groups (*Media statements MEPs*) and 4) national government representatives (*Media statements Council*). These measures cover media attention in relation to a specific type of stakeholder.

Moreover, we 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 were salient to the public at large (Egmond et al. 2009). In that study, respondents across the EU were asked what they think the “most [second most, third most] important problem facing” their country was. We mapped the responses to these questions to the proposals in our sample relying on the codebook of the EU policy agendas project (Alexandrova et al. 2013). For each policy area, we calculated the weighted (by individuals and countries) 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 (*Awareness*). We are aware that this measure captures the salience of issue areas rather than

specific policies. For a lack of a better alternative and since it is also used in other studies (De Bruycker 2017; Rasmussen et al. 2014), we still rely on it and take this limitation into account when discussing our empirical findings.

Furthermore, we rely on 70 interviews with European Commission officials and 143 interviews with EU-level interest group officials who were closely involved in lobbying with regard to the sampled legislative cases (Beyers et al. 2014b). These interviews with Commission officials and organized interests allowed us to identify the set of stakeholders who actively lobbied on each legislative case. A first variable that results from these interviews measures the number of interest groups that mobilized on each piece of legislation (*Number of groups mobilized*).

Based on the interviews with interest group officials we developed two additional salience measures. First, interviewees were asked how important the policy issues at stake in each proposal were for their organization, with them answering on a three-point response scale (“highly important”, “somewhat important”, and “not so important”). Second, they were asked to compare their effort on the issues in a proposal with their investment on other issues during the past four years. They could answer that their efforts on the issues at stake were “more than average”, “about average”, or “less than average”. The resulting two variables capture the *share* of responses that an issue contained in a proposal was highly important (*Proposal salience*) and that groups invested more than average efforts (*Resources spent*) compared to the total number of issues that were at stake in the proposal. If we were not able to identify any interest group involvement on a case, we presume that salience is at its lowest level.

Furthermore, we collected data for a number of measures that account for the salience policymakers attach to a specific piece of legislation. First, we counted the number of recitals that precede each legislative proposal, both within the Commission proposal (*Recitals – proposal*) and the final legislative act (*Recitals – final act*). As recitals set out the main reason

or justification for the legislative act, we assume that the higher the number of recitals the more salient an act is to policymakers (see Warntjen 2011). Next, we counted the number of abstentions in EP voting on the final act (*Abstentions*). Abstentions can be an indication of either high or low salience. On salient proposals, EP party group leaders might strategically call for roll call votes to send signals to their constituency and other party groups, which provides incentives for members of parliament to refrain from abstaining in votes (Carrubba *et al.* 2006). Alternatively, members of parliament might simply not bother to abstain on proposals with low salience (Mühlböck and Yordanova 2017). Table A2 in the online appendix offers an overview of the various measures of salience and media attention.

We use a maximum-likelihood factor analysis across our 12 measures of salience to analyse possible interrelationships among them. Factor analysis is a data reduction technique that allows discovering the latent factor(s) – in this case salience (or salience by actor type) – that account for the variation in different manifest measurements. If the argument about interdependencies in the salience assessments of different actors is correct, we should find a one-factor solution or at least for some salience variables related to different actor types to load highly on the same factors. If, however, the argument that different actors have different salience assessments is correct, the indicators for different types of actors and the media should load on distinct factors. A multidimensional factor solution would, accordingly, most adequately represent the data.

The Kaiser criterion, namely the number of components with an eigenvalue greater than 1, and a scree-test clearly indicate that a four-factor solution best conforms with the data. We used the maximum-likelihood procedure to test how well the factor solution corresponds with the observed data. The difference in the Chi-square statistics for a one-factor and a four-factor solution is 291 ($p < 0.01$, with a difference in degrees of freedom of 30), meaning that a four-factor solution provides a much better fit of the observed data.³ The evidence thus clearly rejects

the expectation that a one-dimensional solution is sufficient to represent the data, which means that the policies in our sample are not equally salient to all actor types.

Table 1 presents the factor loadings and shows that the indicators for media attention and interest groups' and policymakers' salience assessments relate to different factors. However, a few variables also load "across" categories. In particular, the number of interest groups that mobilized is systematically related to the factors capturing media attention and decision-makers' salience assessments. These cross-loadings provide at least some support for the above formulated expectation that the fact that decision-makers and interest groups address each other in policymaking and that media tends to pay attention to policies which are addressed and contested by political actors, might lead to interdependencies of the salience measures for these different types of actors.

INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

Looking at the results in more detail, we observe that Factor 1 captures all media indicators and the number of interest groups that mobilized on the respective policy. The fact that the overall number of interest groups which were active on a specific policy correlates with the media factor suggests that interest group activities corresponds with high levels of media attention for a policymaking process. Four variables load on Factor 2: the number of recitals in the proposal and in the final act, the abstentions in the EP and the number of groups that mobilized. This factor thus captures all indicators included in the analysis which measure decision-makers' salience assessments of policies.

Factor 3 covers all indicators for salience to interest groups. Again, the extent to which the indicators load 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, our measure of overall interest group attention. Factor 4 captures media attention to the EU's legislative actors – EP and Council – and media's overall attention to a legislative policymaking

process. The fact that both government and EP variables load on this factor might indicate that newspapers are a useful source to assess the salience policymakers attribute to a policy. Importantly, the fact that *Proposal salience* and *Resources spent*, which measure the importance individual interest groups attach to a proposal, do not correspond with media salience shows that media sources have limited value to measure the salience individual interest groups attach to a specific policy.

Finally, public salience – the ‘most important problem’ – does not load highly on any of the four factors. This might be due to the fact that this measure is very crude and abstracts considerably from individual policies and policymaking processes which are at the center of attention in this paper (see Wlezien 2005). At the same time, it might also suggest that there is a discrepancy between what is sensitive to the broader public and what goes on in Brussels. We need more detailed public opinion data on the actual proposals to make a more confident judgment about how public salience relates to other measures of salience.

Research Agenda

The factor analysis supports a multidimensional understanding of salience: The factors identified separate salience indicators for different types of actors and media attention. In other words, what is salient to a particular actor type is not necessarily salient to other actor types. Moreover, policies that gain media attention are not necessarily salient to citizens, interest groups or policymakers: overall media hits as well as media hits for specific decision-makers and interest groups are not strongly correlated with Factors 2 and 3, which capture salience assessments of these actor types. Research tackling the question of interrelationships in the salience assessments of different types of actors involved in EU policymaking thus has the potential to offer insights in the dynamics of policymaking resulting from these

interrelationships and might positively feed back into discussions about salience in different strands of research dealing with specific actors or policy areas.

Concretely, we suggest two complementary routes for future research on policy salience. First, our results invite a systematic *synchronic comparison* of the salience attached to a policy by different types of actors. This will help identify the factors which drive the processes that lead citizens, interest groups, decision-makers as well as media to assess the importance of the same policy differently. Theories of democratic policymaking and politics assume that politicians are accountable to citizens. The latter's salience assessments should thus be reflected in the importance which politicians attach to policies. Moreover, in modern mass democracies media plays an important role in providing political information that is of importance to citizens, societal groups and politicians. One could, thus, have expected to observe stronger similarities in the salience assessments of these actors. But this is not what we observed (see for the United States, Kimball et al. 2012).

Future research should thus ask why the mutual political relevance of these actors does not result in similar salience assessments. One potential explanation is that interest groups' political attention and their advocacy activities in policymaking, on the one hand, and politicians' attention and activities, on the other hand, are driven by different motives and incentives. Interest groups might care strongly about their constituencies' and their members' political sensitivities, while politicians might be oriented more towards other politicians and/or the electorate. In addition, (synchronic) differences in the salience assessments of different types of actors might co-vary with the scope of policies. A synchronic comparison of actors' salience assessments could also investigate if and how the specific context or arena – e.g. legislative, electoral, media and general public – corresponds and/or is driven by actors' salience assessments. If these contextual factors are strong, salience assessments should not

simply vary across actor types but coincide with the arenas in which different types of actors are active.

Moreover, starting from an analysis of the salience measured for different type of actors, synchronic analyses of policymaking could investigate if and how differences in actors' salience assessments lead to differential levels of political action and political conflict in policymaking and, ultimately, in different levels of influence which different types of actors can exert on a policy outcome. One could conjecture, for example, that unequal levels of salience across different types of actors will lead to differential levels of political activity and to relatively unequal levels of policy influence across actor types – and vice versa. In this regard it would be interesting to use dynamic comparisons to investigate the political strategies which different types of actors use in trying to increase (or keep low) the salience that other actors attach to a policy or the attention that media pays to a policymaking process.

Finally, the institutional architecture of a polity might also affect the convergence of different actors' salience assessments: in a political system which is closely integrated politically, by, for example, political parties and party competition with a polity-wide reach, a system of interest intermediation with interest groups covering a polity's whole territory and whose political contestations and debates are covered and reported upon by country-wide media, the assessments of different political actors might more directly affect each other. Given its territorial scope, its segmented and institutional multilevel nature and its political heterogeneity this is clearly not the case in the EU.

Second, *dynamic comparisons* of actors' salience assessments over time, i.e. in the course of policymaking processes, are another interesting route that future research should take. If, for example, many interest groups mobilize on a policy, some policymakers, perhaps depending on the type of group and the policymaker's party affiliation, might in the course of a policymaking process change their assessments of the importance of a policy. The fact that

the number of mobilized groups also correlates with the salience indicators for decision-makers might point in this direction. Also, the absence of a (or the low) correlation between organization salience (importance for the group and resources spent) and other variables could indicate that many lobbying activities on policies that are experienced as salient at the organizational level are not aimed at generating media attention, but rather seek to prevent public exposure.

However, in order to investigate such dynamics, we need evidence on actors' salience assessments of policies at different points in time. Since it is hard to obtain such data for a relatively large number of policies which then lends itself to quantitative analysis, qualitative and process-tracing case studies might be particularly suited for such diachronic comparisons of different actors' salience assessments over the course of policymaking processes.

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Table 1. Factor loadings

Variables	Factor 1 <i>Media</i>	Factor 2 <i>Decision-makers</i>	Factor 3 <i>Interest Groups</i>	Factor 4
Total number of articles	0.92			0.33
Media statements IGs	0.66		0.30	
Media statements MEPs	0.67			0.42
Media statements Council	0.49			0.86
Media statements EC	0.86			
Abstentions		0.32		
Recitals – proposal		0.99		
Recitals – final act		0.81		
Number of groups mobilized	0.37	0.34	0.47	
Proposal salience			0.81	
Resources spent			0.90	
Awareness				
Eigenvalue	4.68	2.01	1.36	1.07
Proportion of variance explained	0.25	0.17	0.16	0.10

Note: Orthogonal Varimax rotation; we only show loadings equal or larger than 0.3.

¹ See the Online Appendix for more details.

² Since our EU-level media sources mostly target the Brussels community, their level of attention to EU-policies may diverge from the one of national newspapers that target the general public. Collecting media data in all EU member countries and aggregating this up to the EU level, however, was beyond what we could do for this paper.

³ This Chi-square difference test also indicates that moving from a four-factor to a five-factor solution still results in a statistically significant better fit. Given, however, that the inclusion of a fifth factor only marginally increases the overall explained variance (the cumulative variance explained increases from 0.67 to 0.70), and that the Kaiser criterion speaks in favour of a four-factor rather than a five-factor solution, we stuck with the former.