Brexit Rhapsody: Exploring Patterns of Issue Salience in the Negotiations

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Abstract

This study revisits the salience of the Brexit negotiations using an advanced Decision-Making in the European Union (EU) methodology to assess the relative importance of 20 key issues amongst the EU27 member states, the European Commission and the UK. Unlike earlier studies that suggest more uniform salience levels, except for the UK, our analysis identifies eight clusters of actors influenced by their political, economic and geographical contexts. These differences in salience levels have been conducive to logrolling, which likely supported a unified EU stance and a successful agreement with the UK. Additionally, our research quantitatively confirms the UK's distinct salience position, highlighting its isolation and reducing its ability to use divisive negotiation tactics. These findings offer insights into both the dynamics of past Brexit negotiations and ongoing EU–UK policy developments. They contribute to the analysis of Brexit and international negotiations in general by systematically exploring salience in high-level diplomatic negotiations.

Keywords: Brexit negotiations; EU27; salience; the Withdrawal Agreement and the Trade and Co-operation Agreement

Introduction

On 23 June 2016, UK voters decided to leave the EU, beginning a process that would lead to the triggering of Article 50 TEU. The next day, the president of the European Council, Donald Tusk (2016[1]), emphasised the EU27's determination to maintain unity. This unity persisted throughout the negotiations on the Withdrawal Agreement (WA) and the Trade and Co-operation Agreement (TCA) (European Council, 2016a, 2017, 2018). The EU27 consistently highlighted their united stance in these negotiations (European Council, 2016a, 2017), whilst for the TCA negotiations, the EU would proceed in a 'unified manner' (Council of the EU, 2020). Such unity was recognised by the media and scholars alike (Boffey, 2020; Jensen and Kelstrup, 2019; Laffan, 2019; McTague, 2019; Schuette, 2021; Usherwood, 2021). This shared emphasis on the EU's unified approach influenced the broader discourse on the WA and TCA negotiations.

However, this perspective does not fully capture the individual salience the EU27, the Commission and the UK placed on issues in the negotiations, nor does it compare their respective levels of salience. This article fills this gap by answering the following research question: what were the most salient issues during the Brexit negotiations, and how did their salience vary amongst the EU27 member states, the European Commission and the UK? To do so, it utilises a novel dataset detailing the salience attributed by the

EU27, the Commission and the UK to 20 key issues in the WA and TCA[2] to understand the role that salience played in the negotiations. The data, derived from the Decision-Making in the EU (DEU) methodology (see De Mesquita and Stokman, 1994; Thomson, 2011), are complemented by qualitative information from interviews with the Brexit Counsellors (BCs) of the EU27 and officials from the Commission and the UK, primary documents and secondary sources.

This analysis offers three main contributions. First, it provides a comprehensive and nuanced insight into intra-EU dynamics in the negotiations where the EU adopted a united position through the lens of salience, which thus far has been absent in the literature (e.g., Chopin and Lequesne, 2022; Kyriazi et al., 2023; Laffan, 2019) on the Brexit negotiations. Second, it enriches discussions about the importance of the concept of salience in EU decision-making, contributing to existing literature on the issue (Beyers et al., 2018; Leuffen et al., 2014; Warntjen, 2012) whilst adding clarity[3] within the DEU literature (e.g., De Mesquita and Stokman, 1994; Thomson, 2011; Thomson et al., 2006) when analysing salience in non-legislative negotiations. Lastly, whilst the findings are in line with previous research (Chopin and Lequesne, 2022; Kyriazi et al., 2023; Laffan, 2019) in confirming that the EU27 and the Commission agreed on a united front, they also go beyond the current understanding of the negotiations to show that these actors did not necessarily accord equal salience to several issues. Despite relatively minor variations in salience attached to key issues concerning the core institutional and economic structures amongst the EU27 member states and between them and the Commission, the unity of the EU was likely enabled by logrolling on other issues. In contrast, the negotiations with the UK involved more substantial differences in salience levels, both on major and minor issues, between the EU27 and the Commission on the one hand and the UK on the other. These differences possibly involved a wider range of logrolling to align diverse priorities and reach an agreement (Lewicki et al., 2021, pp. 68–69).

This study challenges the idea within the literature (Chopin and Lequesne, 2022; Laffan, 2019) that the EU27's salience in the negotiations was aligned across many issues. It enhances the academic literature by systematically exploring the varying salience levels between the EU27, the Commission and the UK. Despite the formal conclusion of the WA and TCA, understanding the EU27's varying levels of salience remains crucial. The Commission is set to review the TCA in the future. Member states will revisit issues in the TCA, such as fisheries. As Brexit dynamics continue to evolve, grasping the priorities of the EU27, the Commission and the UK is essential. The rest of the article will delve into existing literature and theory on the topic, present our research design, analyse the salience levels and discuss the findings.

I. Review of the Current State of Art

The importance placed on issues within the Brexit negotiations is increasingly receiving attention in the literature. In the case of the WA negotiations, the scholarly debate has sought to explain the 'unity' or the 'cohesiveness' of the EU27 and the EU more broadly by

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[2]A full list of the core principles and policy-specific issues and a brief explanation of each issue can be found in Appendix S1.
[3]For more information, see the section 'Addressing questions of validity of the data' in Appendix S1.

focusing on specific salient interests. Jensen and Kelstrup (2019, p. 36) suggested an economic element – an interest in preserving the Single Market – as a factor in uniting the EU in the WA negotiations. Likewise, Laffan (2019, pp. 16 and 22) argued that the EU's approach to protecting economic interests – the integrity of the Single Market, and the UK's commitments to the EU's budget – the 2014–2020 Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF), and non-economic factors – EU citizens' rights within the UK, and demonstrating solidarity to Ireland on the question of the hard border on the island – were key elements in the formation of unity amongst the 27 in the negotiations on the WA. Similarly, Chopin and Lequesne (2022, pp. 419 and 423) identified three issues: payments to the 2014–2020 MFF, citizen rights and the Single Market in the WA negotiations, which drove cohesiveness between and within the EU27 in favour of European integration. Conversely, the literature on the TCA focused solely on the negotiations and outcome – the agreement – with Usherwood (2021) noting several salient issues or 'EU's preferences': fisheries policy, a level playing field (LPF) and the role of the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU) in an EU–UK dispute settlement framework (p. 119).

Turning to the member states, scholars (Dooley, 2023; Kyriazi et al., 2023; Raimundo and Ferreira-Pereira, 2023) have examined salient issues for member states during the negotiations. For Dooley (2023), the deliberative approach adopted by Ireland with the EU26 and the Commission 'combined with a dysfunctional British policy style' were key factors in facilitating the formation of a consensus amongst EU actors on a salient issue for Ireland: 'No Hard Border' in the Brexit negotiations (p. 823). Similarly, in assessing the approach of Portugal to the Brexit negotiations, the member state within the framework of a unified EU27 position 'sought to give visibility' to its specific interests, which included defence co-operation with the UK (Raimundo and Ferreira-Pereira, 2023, pp. 608 and 610). In seeking to explain why the EU27 remained united despite threats to its cohesiveness, Kyriazi et al. (2023) argued that 'the generally low levels of domestic politicisation' attached to a range of salient issues, including Gibraltar, citizen rights, defence and Northern Ireland, amongst five member states, was an important element in ensuring a unified approach in the negotiations (pp. 18 and 22). Overall, whilst scholarly debate on the EU27 has evolved from assessing the priorities of the EU27 as a unified entity to examining the priorities of some member states in the negotiations, albeit as single case studies, no study thus far has outlined *in depth* how salience varied across the EU27, the Commission and the UK.

II. Theoretical Developments in Salience and Understanding the Unity of the EU Through Salience

In this article, we offer a unified measure of salience that is used to score the key issue in the Brexit negotiations and allows for systematic comparison of salience across a wide variety of policies and actors in the negotiation. To accommodate this, we utilise the growing body of scholarly work on salience in EU decision-making. In the context of Brexit negotiations, 'salience' refers to the level of importance that negotiators assign to various policy issues being discussed. Focusing on salience is important because, following Leuffen et al. (2014, p. 617), it reflects both the potential utility loss actors face when preferences are unmet and the extent of resources actors are willing to commit to achieve desired outcomes.

In the context of EU studies, De Mesquita and Stokman (1994) were the first to systematically model the salience of actors, along with their capabilities and positions. Building on and extending this work, Thomson et al. (2006) brought the concept of issue salience to the fore in EU research. Several studies followed that highlighted the significance of salience in EU decision-making. Specifically, Golub's (2012) study has led to a revaluation of the effect of salience on member states' bargaining success. Cross (2013, p. 72) included issue salience 'in the measure of bargaining success', whilst Arregui (2016, p. 1107) conceptualised 'salience as MS' utility evaluation to produce a particular policy outcome'.

Turning to the specific research that has assessed the level of salience attached by various kinds of actors across a range of EU policy areas, Beyers et al. (2018), in their 'explorative analysis of the salience attributions' of actors, concluded that different actors attribute various levels of salience to key issues. Thus, it is advantageous to investigate contrasting levels of salience attached by a range of actors (Beyers et al., 2018, p. 1726). Similarly, Warntjen (2012) assessed different measures of salience using three different data sources. The findings from this research indicate that salience scores given by key informants are the most accurate measure of salience (Warntjen, 2012, p. 180).

The results of the effect of salience on the bargaining success of member states are mixed. Several studies (Lundgren et al., 2019; Moloney and Whitaker, 2023) using data collected utilising the DEU methodological framework concluded that salience had no overall effect on the bargaining success of actors. Conversely, research (Arregui and Thomson, 2009), also employing data collected using the DEU methodology on bargaining in EU legislative proposals, found that where a member state attached a higher level of salience compared with other member states, the member state experienced a higher level of bargaining success (p. 671). Leuffen et al. (2014), in their study, took a more nuanced approach to salience by examining the factors that formed member states' salience in decision-making in the Council of Ministers of the EU. Here, they found evidence to support their argument that liberal intergovernmentalism could explain the formation of salience (Leuffen et al., 2014, p. 629).

The levels of salience that member states attach to issues are therefore important in shaping the outcomes of legislative (Leuffen et al., 2014) and non-legislative negotiations (Moloney and Whitaker, 2023). Thus, whilst the literature on bargaining success and Brexit has recognised the importance of salience on the negotiated outcome and the different priorities of some of the member states in the WA and TCA negotiations, the question of the extent of the varying levels of salience between the different actors in the Brexit negotiations remains unanswered. Before presenting the analysis leading to our findings, the next sections outline how salience scores have been gathered, processed and analysed statistically.

III. Data and Methods[4]

This study builds on the work of De Mesquita and Stokman (1994) and subsequent research on the importance of salience in EU negotiations (e.g., Arregui and Thomson, 2009; Leuffen et al., 2014; Moloney and Whitaker, 2023) in adopting a spatial approach to understand the EU's negotiation dynamics. The objective was to pinpoint

[4]A discussion of the methodological approach can be found in Appendix S1.

salient issues in the WA and the TCA. This approach was inspired by the consistent unity observed in the EU's previous negotiations on the WA and the TCA (European Council, 2016a, 2017, 2018).

Utilising the spatial model of politics, salience scales were implemented to capture the varying levels of importance attributed by the involved actors to the above-mentioned issues. Such salience scales, as embedded within the DEU framework, have found consistent use in gauging issue prominence by both member states and institutions (Leuffen et al., 2014; Lundgren et al., 2019; Moloney and Whitaker, 2023).

The process for identifying these salient issues involved two main steps.[5] In the first, senior policy-makers, referred to as key informants, identified salient issues in the WA. This identification was based on the European Council's (2017) Article 50 guidelines issued in April 2017. For the TCA, the identification was informed by the key informants, as these officials were already aware of what the important issues would be in these negotiations through the EU's stated position in the 'future partnership' (Council of the EU, 2020).

To ensure a comprehensive grasp of salient issues, various European Council guidelines were meticulously cross-referenced. This was complemented by an examination of a variety of media sources and official European Council documents.[6] The second step involved the key informants, termed BCs (Brexit Counsellors) for the EU27 and UK Officials and COM for the UK and the Commission, respectively, assessing the importance of each identified issue. They utilised a scale from 0 to 100, with 0 indicating no importance and 100 signifying extreme importance. For clarity, all key informants were presented with an illustrative salience scale at the start of every interview. Notably, when the BCs' estimates veered from the established scale markers, increments of 10 were suggested by senior officials, an approach credited to Thomson (2011, p. 45). After making their estimates, BCs were required to furnish detailed justifications for their judgments, mirroring Thomson's (2011) rigorous data-collection methodology for EU decision-making contexts (p. 45).

Key informant interviews spanned October to December 2019. By this juncture, significant portions of the WA negotiations had been finalised, and the process had transitioned to its ratification within the UK Parliament. Consequently, salience levels regarding the WA were expected to be stable. Moreover, during these discussions, BCs were probed about the TCA's pivotal issues. Using interviews to identify or clarify salient issues is in line with the DEU methodological framework (see Thomson, 2011, p. 40). Notably, many BCs had already reached an understanding of these issues during the WA's negotiation phase.

The study's dataset captured the salience levels of the EU27, the Commission and the UK.[7] This comprised a total of 540 observations by the 29 key informants across the 20 salient issues, collected from semi-structured interviews with 29 key informants across an 8-month span ending May 2020. Interviews lasted between 30 and 45 min. Anonymity was strictly maintained, with the 'Chatham House Rule' being adhered to. For ease of

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[5]Issues regarding the validity of the data can be found in Appendix S1.
[6]A list of media sources can be found in Appendix S1.
[7]More detailed information on how the issues were identified and on the key-informants, along with a brief description of each issue, can be found in Appendix S1.

reference, each interviewee was tagged as BC, followed by a unique identifier. Commission and UK officials were referred to as COM and UK officials respectively.

The analysis of salience measures entailed three methodological steps. In the first step, the distribution of salience scores for the 20 policy issues was analysed. The average was taken for the EU27's scores, whilst the UK and Commission scores were reported individually. Visualisation was achieved using a heatmap crafted with ggplot2 and reshape2 in R. In the second steep, the standard deviation of the EU27 member states' scores was computed, highlighting agreement and disagreement levels about the salience of negotiation issues. A larger deviation signified increased differences within the EU27, potentially revealing negotiation vulnerabilities, such as susceptibility to 'divide-and-conquer' strategies but also opportunities for logrolling. In the last step, we employed K-means cluster analysis to discern patterns using factoextra, cluster and ggplot2 packages in R. The average silhouette width method indicated up to eight distinct clusters. After determining the optimal cluster count, the K-means algorithm was applied to the salience scores. The algorithm grouped data points into clusters based on similarity to cluster centroids, which represent cluster cores. Post-algorithmic, cluster attributes were calculated in terms of overall salience scores and mean scores for each policy issue. For visualisation, another heatmap was produced using ggplot2 and reshape2 in R. When interpreting the analysis, we drew on the qualitative interview data collected from the interviews, which was augmented by a range of secondary sources. To ensure the accuracy of the data, we conducted validity and robustness checks.[8]

IV. Analysis

Figure 1 presents the average for the level of salience that the three actors – the EU27, the UK and the Commission – attribute to different issues in the negotiations. If we look at the EU27 first, three issues score on average 90 or above in salience, which are 'Protecting the Single Market' [Issue (I) 2], 'Citizens' Rights' (I1) and 'UK Obligations Under the 2014–2020 MFF (UK Obligations)' (I7). This is in line with qualitative studies (e.g., Laffan, 2019) and reports in the media (see McTague, 2019), which also pointed out these topics as very important for the EU27 member states. Four other issues come close in salience by scoring close to 90 in the form of 'CJEU in the WA' (I16), 'Non-Tariff Barriers' (I3), 'Transport Contingency Plans' (I18) and 'Maintaining an LPF' (I20), issues that are important for the operation of the Single Market and the EU. Conversely, there are also topics that are on average less important for the EU27 member states by scoring below 50 in salience in the form of 'Nomination of Commissioner' (I13), 'Protecting Geographical Indications (GIs)' (I19), 'Accessing Galileo' (I8), 'Gibraltar Veto' (I6) and 'Accessing the UK's Fishing Waters' (I10). For the EU27 as a whole, these issues are not core elements of their membership in the EU; however, for some member states, they are highly salient. The discussion in the following clusters of member states goes into further detail on what the important issues were for the member states, along with the Commission and the UK.

Turning to the UK, it can be observed that two issues are of high salience, with a score of 100 in terms of 'CJEU in the WA' (I16) and 'No Hard Border' (I14). These issues

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[8]For more information, see the section 'Addressing questions of validity of the data' in Appendix S1.

Figure 1: Salience Heatmap for the EU27, the UK and the Commission. Notes: COM, Commission; EU27, European Union 27 member states; UK, United Kingdom. [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]
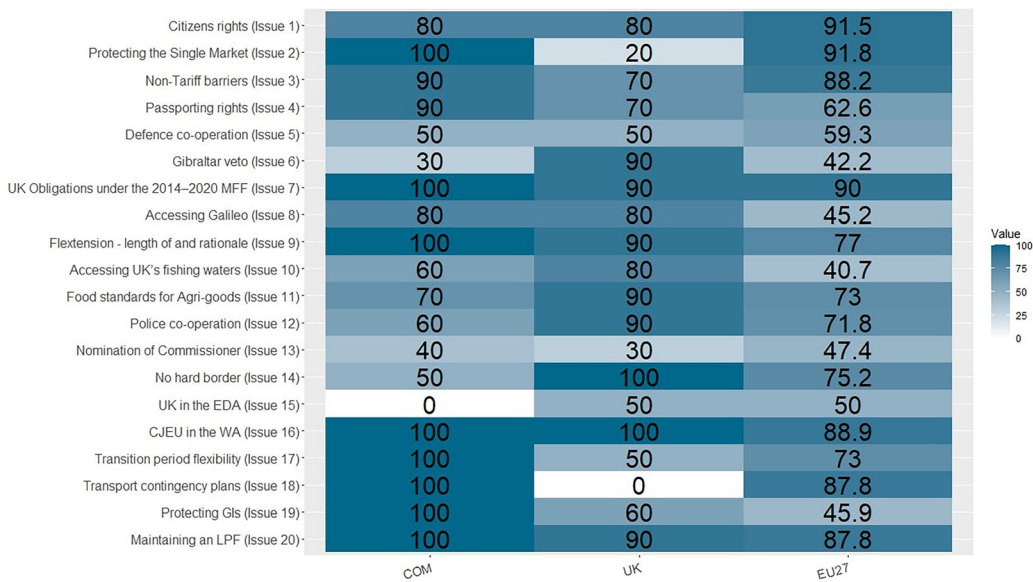
touch upon the sovereignty of the UK. A range of issues follow closely with a salience score of 90, including 'UK Obligations' (I7), 'Maintaining an LPF' (I20), 'Flextension' (I9), 'Gibraltar Veto' (I6), 'Food Standards for Agri-goods' (I11) and 'Police Co-operation' (I12). These issues cover important areas of sovereignty, the UK–EU trading relationship, security co-operation and securing the WA through paying the balance of the UK's commitment to the MFF and ensuring that there are enough votes in the House of Commons for the WA. By contrast, 'Transport Contingency Plans' (I18), 'Protecting the Single Market' (I2) and 'Nomination of Commissioner' (I13) are of no or little salience to the UK. On these three issues, the UK had no role in the EU's contingency plans on transport, whilst the UK was committed to withdrawing from the decision-making process as part of leaving the EU (UK Official; Commission, 2021a). On seeking to 'cherry pick' elements of the Single Market, it became clear as the negotiations progressed that this was not a realistic option (UK Official; May, 2017).

Finishing, with the Commission, it can be observed that it attaches the most salience, with a score of 100, to no less than 8 out of the 20 issues, including the 'UK Obligations' (I7), 'CJEU in the WA' (I16), 'Flexibility in the Length of the Transition Period (Transition Period Flexibility)' (I17), 'Transport Contingency Plans' (I18), 'Protecting GIs' (I19), 'Maintaining an LPF' (I20), 'Flextension' (I9) and 'Protecting the Single Market' (I2). This is an illustration of the Commission's central role in the negotiations. By contrast, the Commission considered 'Nomination of Commissioner' (I13), 'Gibraltar Veto' (I6) and 'UK in the European Defence Agency (EDA)' (I15) as less salient.
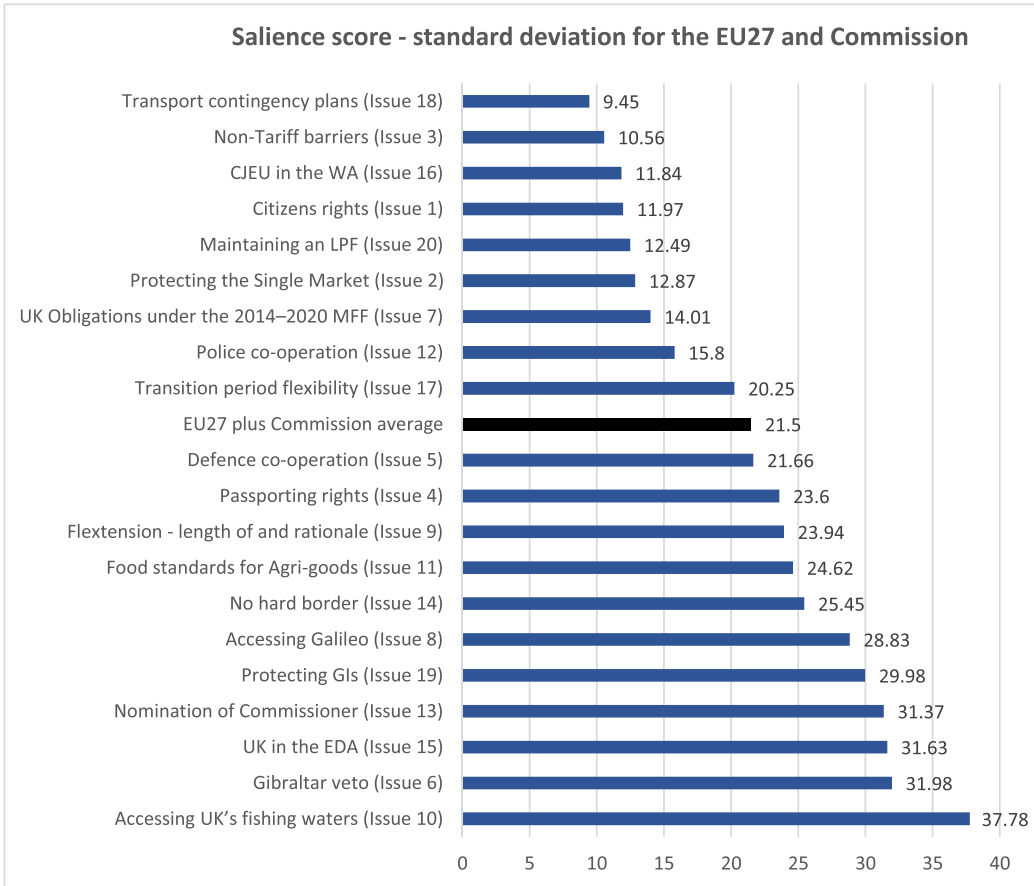
When moving to the comparison of salience between actors, there are several notable observations. The EU27 attaches much more salience than the UK to 'Transport

Contingency Plans' (I18) and 'Protecting the Single Market' (I2), whereas the UK is much more concerned about the 'Gibraltar Veto' (I6) and 'Accessing the UK's Fishing Waters' (I10). The pattern is somewhat similar when comparing the UK with the Commission, where the latter attaches much higher salience, for example, on 'Transport Contingency Plans' (I18) and 'Protecting the Single Market' (I2). When it comes to issues where the UK is demonstrating a much higher salience level than the EU27, we find the 'Gibraltar Veto' (I6) and 'No Hard Border' (I14). Generally, there is less variability when it comes to the levels of salience the EU27 and the Commission attach to issues in the negotiations, which gives evidence to studies (e.g., Jensen and Kelstrup, 2019) highlighting the high level of co-ordination between the two actors, with the latter acting as an agent of the former. Yet, the Commission attaches much higher salience compared with the EU27 to 'Protecting GIs' (I19), 'Accessing Galileo' (I8), 'Passporting Rights' (I4) and 'Transition Period Flexibility' (I17). This reflects the Commission's role in the negotiations: supporting the interests of the EU27 through supporting specific groups of member states with high salience for specific issues (COM; European Council, 2016b). On the other hand, the EU27 attaches much higher significance to 'UK in the EDA' (I15) and 'No Hard Border' (I14). Of note is the divergence in salience on I14, 'No Hard Border', between the Commission and the EU27. First, it is important to note that overall, the Commission considered this to be an important issue, so much so that it continued to back Ireland on the issue despite the border question increasing the possibility of a 'no deal Brexit' (Laffan and Telle 2023, p. 171). Second, in terms of the salience placed on the issue, the Commission saw two possible solutions: the 'Backstop' – the maintenance of an open border between Northern Ireland and the Republic resulting in the UK remaining in the Single Market and the Customs Union – or a protocol on Northern Ireland/Republic of Ireland (COM; UK in a Changing Europe, 2020). Thus, as the Commission was satisfied with both solutions and knowing that this was a priority issue in the negotiations on the WA (Laffan, 2019), a solution needed to be found to maintain an open border on the island of Ireland, the Commission gave a different level of salience to the issue within this context (COM).

Figure 2 presents the descriptive statistics pertaining to the standard deviation of salience for the diverse issues that constituted the WA and TCA negotiations. The figures enable a descriptive statistical analysis of the salience of issues in the negotiations. It highlights the issues that were perceived as most and least salient on average by the EU27, the Commission and the UK, as well as the spread around the mean in the actors' perceptions of salience. The figures facilitate a comparative analysis of the degree of salience attributed by the UK and the Commission to the diverse issues that were the subject of the negotiations in contrast to the EU27. In doing so, it adds further evidence and collaborates on the findings of existing studies (e.g., Jensen and Kelstrup, 2019; Laffan, 2019; Usherwood, 2021) on the Brexit negotiations, which have demonstrated a high degree of coherence between the EU27 member states and the Commission.

Figure 1 shows the standard deviation, or the spread around the mean, for the different issues in the negotiation calculated for the EU27 and the Commission together, excluding the UK. The standard deviation can be used as a measure of how coherent a coalition is in negotiation (Stenbæk and Jensen, 2016). A higher standard deviation indicates that there is a higher degree of heterogeneity within a coalition of member states plus the Commission, which can be exploited by other actors in the negotiations (Dür and Mateo, 2010a,

Figure 2: Standard Deviation for Salience. [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

Salience score - standard deviation for the EU27 and Commission

Issue	Value
Transport contingency plans (Issue 18)	9.45
Non-Tariff barriers (Issue 3)	10.56
CJEU in the WA (Issue 16)	11.84
Citizens rights (Issue 1)	11.97
Maintaining an LPF (Issue 20)	12.49
Protecting the Single Market (Issue 2)	12.87
UK Obligations under the 2014–2020 MFF (Issue 7)	14.01
Police co-operation (Issue 12)	15.8
Transition period flexibility (Issue 17)	20.25
EU27 plus Commission average	21.5
Defence co-operation (Issue 5)	21.66
Passporting rights (Issue 4)	23.6
Flextension - length of and rationale (Issue 9)	23.94
Food standards for Agri-goods (Issue 11)	24.62
No hard border (Issue 14)	25.45
Accessing Galileo (Issue 8)	28.83
Protecting GIs (Issue 19)	29.98
Nomination of Commissioner (Issue 13)	31.37
UK in the EDA (Issue 15)	31.63
Gibraltar veto (Issue 6)	31.98
Accessing UK's fishing waters (Issue 10)	37.78

2010b; Martill and Staiger, 2021; Rant and Mrak, 2010; Stenbæk and Jensen, 2016). Specifically, other actors can exploit the heterogeneity by playing a 'divide-and-conquer/rule strategy' by offering parts of the heterogeneous coalition a favourable deal, which, overall, is to the disadvantage of the coalition (Martill and Staiger, 2021). Translated to the Brexit negotiations, issues where the EU27 and the Commission have a relevantly high standard deviation indicate that they will have more difficulty negotiating for their collective interest in this area, due to the various levels of salience. Observing Figure 2 indicates that there is primarily a high standard deviation within areas that collectively have less significance politically, economically and legally for the EU27 plus the Commission. Conversely, there has been a low standard deviation on key issues in the negotiations, such as 'No-Tariff Barriers' (I3), 'CJEU in the WA' (I16), 'Citizens' Rights' (I1), 'Maintaining an LPF' (I20), 'Protecting the Single Market' (I2) and 'UK Obligations' (I7). Thus, these are the areas pertaining to the functioning of the internal market, the institutional structures of the EU and the economic commitments of the actors. This is in

line with, and provides further evidence for, previous studies, which have pointed out that, despite attempts to do so, the conditions for playing a 'divide-and-conquer strategy' successfully in the negotiations have not been present for the UK (e.g., Jensen and Kelstrup, 2019; Laffan, 2019; Martill and Staiger, 2021). However, differences in salience levels amongst actors – be it member states, the Commission or vis-à-vis the UK – have been conducive to reaching agreements on both the EU's negotiation positions and the overall deal between the EU and the UK. This is because actors can trade wins and losses across policies of varying salience to them through logrolling (Lewicki et al., 2021, pp. 68–69).

After examining patterns in the data in terms of mean and standard deviation, a K-means cluster analysis[9] is used to divide the EU27, the Commission and the UK into distinct clusters based on their salience scores in relation to the various policy issues. The allocation of actors into eight clusters, which is the optimal number, is shown in Figure 3. Figure 4 shows variation between the clusters in terms of salience scores through a heatmap.

Cluster 1 in Figure 2, comprising Austria, Finland, Portugal, Sweden and Slovakia, has an average salience score of 62.10, which is the second lowest. The issues that hold the highest importance for this cluster include 'Citizens' Rights' (90), 'UK Obligations' (86), 'Transport Contingency Plans' (84), 'Non-Tariff Barriers' (80), 'Flextension' (80) and 'Maintaining an LPF' (80). The cluster scores above average on issues such as 'Transport Contingency Plans' and 'Nomination of Commissioner'. On the contrary, the cluster scores low on issues like 'Gibraltar Veto' (18), 'Accessing the UK's Fishing Waters' (30) and 'Accessing Galileo' (32), indicating that these are less crucial issues. The score on Gibraltar is particularly low compared with the average, along with the issue of 'Passporting Rights'. The high level of salience within this cluster can be attributed to the role of Austria, Finland and Sweden as net contributors to the MFF, whilst Portugal and Slovakia are net recipients, their trading relationship with the UK and the need to avoid a no deal Brexit through a Flextension. Conversely, the banking and financial sectors of these member states did not have a strong business relationship with the City of London. The question of a Spanish veto, outside of solidarity for a member state, was not seen by the key informants to have a direct impact on their member state's interests, whilst the exclusion of the UK from Galileo was considered a technicality once the UK decided to leave (Aylott, 2021; BC1–BC5; Boffey, 2018; Boffey and Jones, 2018; Braun, 2018; Commission, 2021b; Durrant et al., 2018; Fella et al., 2019; Pollak, 2021; Puntscher-Riekmann, 2018).

Cluster 2, which solely includes Malta, shows a unique pattern of salience scores with an average of 54.00, the lowest amongst all clusters. Key issues for Malta appear to be 'Citizens' Rights' (100), 'Transport Contingency Plans' (90), 'Protecting the Single Market' (80), 'Non-Tariff Barriers' (80) and 'Passporting Rights' (80). Interestingly, Malta gives equal high importance to both safeguarding citizens' rights and maintaining economic relations, as seen in the high scores for non-tariff barriers and passporting rights for the City of London. This highlights Malta's concern about both the social and economic implications of Brexit as a result of the comparatively high levels of migration across a number of decades into the UK and the member states increasing focus on trade

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[9]An analysis of how the actors would be distributed if fewer than eight clusters were utilised can be found in Appendix S1.

Figure 3: Cluster Plot With Eight Clusters. [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary. com]
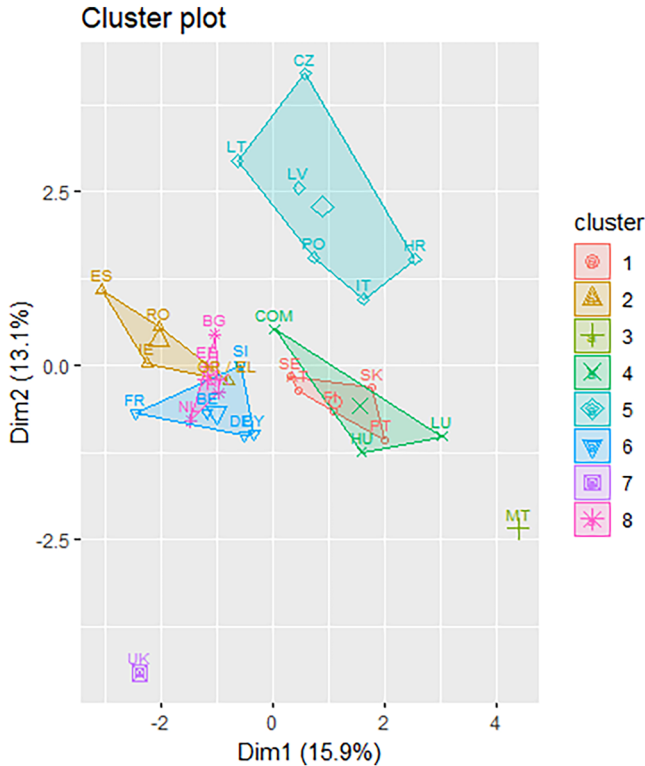
in financial services with the City of London. On the lower end, Malta scores lowest on 'Accessing Galileo' (10), 'Accessing the UK's Fishing Waters' (10) and 'Food Standards for Agri-goods' (10). These scores indicate that these specific issues carry less weight for Malta compared with other aspects of the negotiations, attributed to its geographical location and the specific characteristics of its economy. Comparatively speaking, Malta places higher-than-average emphasis on 'Transport Contingency Plans' and 'Passporting Rights', whereas it places relatively much lower emphasis on 'Food Standards for Agri-goods' and the 'UK Obligations' (BC6; Durrant et al., 2018; Fella et al., 2019, p. 162).

Cluster 3, composed of Belgium, Cyprus, Germany, France and Slovenia, carries an average salience score of 73.60, the second highest amongst all clusters, indicating that these countries generally attach a high level of importance across all issues in the WA and TCA negotiations. This cluster scores particularly high on 'Protecting the Single Market' (98), 'UK Obligations' (92), 'Maintaining an LPF' (92) and 'CJEU in the WA' (88). The high scores reveal this cluster's strong emphasis on preserving EU economic principles, regulatory structures and fiscal obligations and issues and that they consistently score above the overall cluster averages. Breaking this down by issue, Germany and France were for the 2014–2020 MFF period the two largest contributors from the EU27, whilst Belgium, Cyprus and Slovenia were net recipients. The protection of the

Figure 4: Salience Heatmap for Clusters. [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]
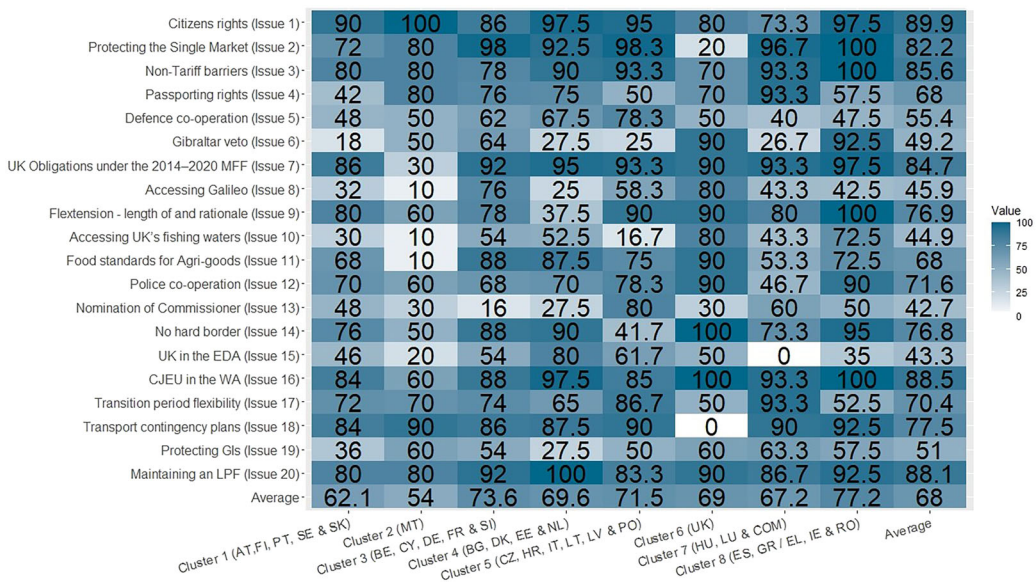
Single Market and the role of the CJEU represent the concerns of three of the founders of the EU and members of the 2004 enlargement for the integrity of the Union's rules-based order and unfair competition from the UK if it diverged from an LPF. Conversely, Cluster 3 scores notably low on 'Nomination of Commissioner' (16), 'UK in the EDA' (54), 'Protecting GIs' (54) and 'Accessing the UK's Fishing Waters' (54). In comparative terms, the cluster scores much higher than average when it comes to 'Nomination of Commissioner' and much lower in relation to 'Gibraltar Veto' and 'Accessing Galileo'. The low score on nominating a Commissioner and on the Spanish veto over Gibraltar signifies that these issues were not a priority for these countries as they dealt with the sovereignty of one member state and the running of the Commission, a view they share with most other clusters. In short, this cluster prioritises upholding the EU's core institutional and economic structures, including the Single Market's integrity, non-tariff barriers and the role of the CJEU. Further, in comparison with the average, Cluster 3 tends to have higher overall salience scores, showing their strong engagement in a wide range of Brexit negotiation issues (BC7–BC11; Boffey and Jones, 2018; Commission, 2021b; Durrant et al., 2018; Fella et al., 2019; Heidbreder, 2018, 2021; Lequesne, 2018, 2021).

Cluster 4 consists of Bulgaria, Denmark, Estonia and the Netherlands. With a little above-average salience score of 69.63, this cluster places high importance on a selection of issues, but not uniformly across the board. Cluster 4 ranks highest on 'Maintaining an LPF' (100), 'Citizens' Rights' (97.5), 'CJEU in the WA' (97.5), 'UK Obligations' (95) and 'Protecting the Single Market' (92.5). The emphasis on citizens' rights, maintaining the Single Market's integrity and the role of the CJEU showcases this cluster's strong inclination towards safeguarding the existing EU market structure and laws. On the lower end, this cluster gives less importance to issues such as 'Access to the Galileo' (25), 'Gibraltar Veto' (27.5) and 'Protecting GIs' (27.5). Compared with other clusters, Cluster

4 presents the highest score on 'UK in the EDA' and 'Food Standards for Agri-goods' and much lower scores on 'Flextension', 'Protecting GIs' and 'Citizens' Rights'. In general, this trade defending cluster is highly concerned with maintaining an LPF, non-tariff barriers and the integrity of the Single Market due to their trading relationship with the UK. Likewise, these member states have a strong interest in protecting the rights of their large expat communities in the UK and are equally aware of the consequences if the UK does not meet its MFF obligations; Denmark and the Netherlands are both net contributors, and Estonia and Bulgaria are net recipients. These member states also valued the UK's military capabilities and sought deeper co-operation, especially Estonia. Conversely, the pattern of geopolitical and certain regulatory issues indicates that these issues might not be the cluster's primary concerns. Again, as in other clusters, these member states viewed the issue of Gibraltar as a Spanish issue only, preventing the UK from accessing Galileo as a formality. On GIs, none of the member states had a large number worth protecting (BC12–BC15; Boffey, 2018; Boffey and Jones, 2018; Commission, 2021a, 2021b; Durrant et al., 2018; Fella et al., 2019; Hagemann, 2021; Jensen and Kelstrup, 2018; Korteweg, 2021; Rankin, 2017).

Cluster 5 consists of the Czechia, Croatia, Italy, Lithuania, Latvia and Poland, with an average salience score of 71.50, which is moderately high compared with other clusters. The issues of highest importance for this cluster include 'Protecting the Single Market' (98.33), 'Citizens' Rights' (95), 'Non-Tariff Barriers' (93.33) and 'UK Obligations' (93.33). On the other hand, this cluster gives less salience to 'Accessing the UK's Fishing Waters' (16.67), 'Gibraltar Veto' (25) and 'No Hard Border' (41.67). Starting with the salient issues and specifically the MFF, aside from Italy, all the member states in this cluster are recipients, with Poland receiving the most from the EU's budget. Thus, the UK's reneging on its commitments would have had negative consequences for all the member states in this cluster. On the economic issues, these member states place significant importance on maintaining the EU's economic unity and regulations, highlighting a strong desire for a structured Brexit process, that is, avoiding a hard Brexit at all costs to prevent economic disruption. As with the other clusters, the low level of salience attached to the issue of the 'Gibraltar Veto' can be explained by the lack of interest by the member states in uniquely Spanish issues. Likewise, there is no impact for these member states if no agreement could be reached on continued access to the UK's fishing waters due to a mix of geographical and/or small-scale fishing industries. Issues where this cluster scores significantly higher than the average pertain to the 'Nomination of Commissioner'. This reflects the cluster's particular concern for the need to have a fully operational Commission to ensure that the EU is functioning properly. It also scores higher than average when it comes to 'Defence Co-operation', whereas it scores significantly lower when it comes to the aforementioned issues of fishing and the Irish border. On defence ties, the role of NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) once again is a factor for these member states when viewing any post-defence ties between the EU and the UK (BC16–BC21; Boffey and Jones, 2018; Brunazzo and Della Sala, 2018, 2021; Commission, 2021b; Durrant et al., 2018; Fella et al., 2019; Kaniok, 2018, 2021; Popescu and Scholaert, 2022, p. 5; Styczyńska, 2018, 2021; Vilpišauskas, 2018, 2021).

Cluster 6 only represents the UK and has an average salience score of 69.00, which is moderate when compared with other clusters. This cluster demonstrates the highest salience for issues like 'No Hard Border' (100), 'CJEU in the WA' (100), 'Gibraltar Veto'

(90), 'Flextension' (90), 'Food Standards for Agri-goods' (90) and 'Accessing the UK's Fishing Waters' (80). On the lower end, the UK is not that concerned with 'Transport Contingency Plans' (0), 'Protecting the Single Market' (20) and 'Nomination of Commissioner' (30). On the two former issues, the UK scores comparatively lower, whereas it scores higher on 'Gibraltar Veto', 'Accessing the UK's Fishing Waters', 'Accessing Galileo' and 'Transport Contingency Plans'. First, on the high scores, this shows that the UK placed substantial emphasis on retaining sovereignty over its territories and waters, and in the case of the latter, ensuring that the commitments to coastal communities in the referendum were kept. Second, the UK was keen on avoiding a hard border in Ireland to preserve the Good Friday Agreement whilst ensuring that there was no divergence from EU food standards, which was considered important in maintaining access to the Single Market. Third, compared with other clusters, the UK notably stands out with the highest salience on the issue of Gibraltar, reflecting its unique geopolitical interests. It uniquely scores zero on 'Transport Contingency Plans', which contrasts with all other clusters that score relatively high on this issue. The UK's low level of salience on this issue is the result of the third country having no role in contingency planning on transport. As the country leaving the EU, the UK's priorities are mostly sovereignty focused and economic, such as avoiding the 'Gibraltar Veto' and ensuring that fishing communities reap the benefits of Brexit (Addison, 2016; Cabinet Office, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, Northern Ireland Office; Commission, 2021a; HM Revenue and Customs, 2019; Revoredo-Giha, 2021; UK Official).

Cluster 7 comprises Hungary, Luxembourg and the Commission and holds an average salience score of 67.17, which places them in the middle amongst the clusters. This cluster places significant emphasis on 'Protecting the Single Market' (96.67), 'Non-Tariff Barriers' (93.33), 'UK Obligations' (93.33), 'CJEU in the WA' (93.33) and 'Transition Period Flexibility' (93.33). On the other hand, the cluster gives lower importance to issues like 'UK in the EDA' (0), 'Gibraltar Veto' (26.67) and 'Defence Co-operation' (40). The high scores show a clear preference for maintaining the integrity of the EU's economic and legal structures, as well as a structured approach to the transition period. Specifically, on the MFF, Hungary is the second largest net recipient of EU funding after Poland, whilst Luxembourg is a net contributor. The UK failing to meet its obligations would have an impact not only on these member states but also on the Commission, which administers the MFF. On the economic issues, Hungary and Luxembourg sought to minimise disruption to their economies and protect the Single Market. Both concerns were shared by the Commission, though at the EU27 level. The cluster also records the highest scores for 'Transition Period Flexibility' (100), implying a strong concern for managing Brexit's timeline effectively to avoid economic disruption. The low scores suggest that defence co-operation and territorial issues are less crucial to this cluster. When compared with other clusters, Cluster 7 is the only one with a score of 0 on the issue 'UK in the EDA', suggesting a unique disinterest or irrelevance of this matter to the members because of co-operation with the UK through NATO and the recognition of the UK's lack of interest in deepening co-operation with the EU in this area. It also scores much lower than average when it comes to 'Gibraltar Veto' and 'Police Co-operation', whereas it scores higher when it comes to 'Passporting Rights' and 'Transition Period Flexibility' (BC22; BC23; COM; Commission, 2019a, 2019b, 2021b, 2023; Csehi, 2018, 2021; Durrant et al., 2018; Fella et al., 2019).

Cluster 8, comprising Spain, Greece, Ireland and Romania, has the highest average salience score amongst all clusters at 77.25, demonstrating the group's considerable level of engagement in a wide range of Brexit issues. The issues of utmost importance for Cluster 8 include 'Protecting the Single Market' (100), 'Non-Tariff Barriers' (100), 'Flextension' (100), 'CJEU in the WA' (100), 'UK Obligations' (97.5) and 'Citizens' Rights' (97.5). Conversely, the cluster has its lowest scores on 'Accessing Galileo' (42.5), 'Defence Co-operation' (47.5) and 'UK in the EDA' (35). In comparison with other clusters, Cluster 8 stands out due to its higher-than-average emphasis on issues such as 'Gibraltar Veto', 'Accessing the UK's Fishing Waters', 'Flextension', 'Police Co-operation' and 'No Hard Border'. By contrast, it is less than averagely concerned with issues such as 'Passporting Rights' and 'Transition Period Flexibility'. With the highest average salience score, this cluster shows intensive engagement across issues, particularly maintaining the EU's economic structures and avoiding a hard Irish border, reflecting a combination of economic, political and geographical interests. Of note, both Spain and Ireland are in this cluster, and both member states have concerns on two issues that specifically affect them: Gibraltar and Northern Ireland. Further, both member states seek to demonstrate solidarity for each other by attaching an above-average level of importance to Gibraltar and Northern Ireland. Spain, Greece and Romania are some of the main recipients of funding from the MFF, with Ireland amongst the smaller group of member states that are net contributors. Thus, ensuring that the UK agreed to its obligations was important to all these member states. Similarly, reducing economic disruption for these member states due to the importance of the UK market was crucial, as was upholding the rights of large expat communities. Again, as with other clusters, collaboration with NATO is seen as more important in the defence field, with the exception of Ireland, which is not a member, whilst member states agreed that once the UK left the EU, it also lost the right to participate in Union programmes such as Galileo (BC24–BC27; Boffey, 2018; Commission, 2019b; Durrant et al., 2018; Feás and Molina, 2021; Fella et al., 2019; Killeen, 2022; Laffan, 2018; Molina and Salvador, 2018; Murphy, 2021).

Exploring the different clusters shows significant diversity across the clusters, both in the overall salience of Brexit issues and in their focus on specific concerns. Clusters 4, 7 and 8 show similarities in their high salience on issues related to preserving the integrity of the Single Market, maintaining non-tariff barriers and the role of the CJEU in the interpretation and application of the WA. This can be attributed to the common understanding of these countries about the significance of maintaining the EU's economic and legal structures and avoiding the economic disruption of a hard Brexit. Clusters 1 and 2 are somewhat alike, particularly in their lower overall salience scores compared with other clusters, suggesting that these small and midsized member states had relatively lower stakes in the Brexit process. The UK (Cluster 6) stands out due to its unique focus on 'Gibraltar Veto', reflecting its direct interest in sovereignty matters. Moreover, the absence of high salience on 'Transport Contingency Plans' is also unique to the UK. Clusters 3, 4, 6 and 8 show particular interest in 'No Hard Border', reflecting the immediate geographic and economic impacts of any threats to the integrity of the Single Market of this issue on them, especially for Ireland, which was concerned about preserving peace on the island through the Good Friday Agreement (BC1–BC27; UK Official).

The observed similarities and differences amongst the clusters could be accounted for by their respective political, economic and geographical settings. Member states that

share common interests or concerns or that are more affected by the outcomes of the WA and TCA negotiations due to their close ties with the UK are likely to have higher salience scores on related issues. On the other hand, the EU27 member states with less direct involvement or stakes in the Brexit process may have lower overall salience scores or prioritise different issues. The various clusters in the dataset represent groups of member states with shared interests and concerns about the Brexit process. First, the political setting and alliances between countries can significantly impact the clusters. For instance, Cluster 4 (Bulgaria, Denmark, Estonia and the Netherlands) and Cluster 8 (Spain, Greece, Ireland and Romania) show high salience in maintaining the integrity of the Single Market and the role of the CJEU, indicating a shared political commitment to uphold EU norms and principles. Cluster 6 (UK), by contrast, has distinct priorities that reflect its political goals as the departing country, including avoiding a hard Irish border and retaining sovereignty over Gibraltar. Second, economic interests may also play a role. Member states with significant trade relationships or an economic approach similar to the UK are likely to prioritise economic issues in the Brexit negotiations. For example, Cluster 5 (Czechia, Croatia, Italy, Lithuania, Latvia and Poland), Cluster 7 (Hungary, Luxembourg and the Commission) and Cluster 8 (Spain, Greece, Ireland and Romania) all show high salience on maintaining non-tariff barriers, reflecting the importance of frictionless trade for these countries. Third, geographical proximity to the UK can also influence the clusters. Cluster 8 (Spain, Greece, Ireland and Romania), which includes Ireland and Spain, gives high importance to 'Gibraltar Veto' and 'No Hard Border', matters of direct geographical and political relevance to them. In contrast, clusters without immediate geographical links to the UK, such as Cluster 5 (Czechia, Croatia, Italy, Lithuania, Latvia and Poland), have lower salience on such issues.

The lack of variability between the member states and the Commission on core issues in the negotiations can be explained by its role as a negotiator for the EU and specifically the EU27 (European Council, 2016b). Where there was a difference between the average salience position of the EU27 and the Commission, this was likely because the Commission championed the interests of group member states with high salience levels on particular issues pertaining to them, for example, access to the UK's finishing waters, which deviated from the average salience level of the bloc or due to its own interests. It is known that member states lobby the Commission (Panke, 2012) and that the institution is an agent dependent on the preferences of the member states (Bailer, 2014). However, where there were considerable differences between the individual member states and the Commission, this pertained to issues that are not at the core of the EU.

Conclusion

This article has expanded on the role of salience in EU decision-making, with a particular focus on the Brexit negotiations. It addressed the following central research question: what were the most salient issues during the Brexit negotiations, and how did their salience vary amongst the EU27 member states, the European Commission and the UK? through adopting a more nuanced understanding of salience within the context of the DEU methodology, thereby extending the work of De Mesquita and Stokman (1994) and successive studies, for example, Thomson et al. (2006), and also incorporating recent theoretical contributions by Arregui (2016). The study also built on Brexit research (e.g.,

Kyriazi et al., 2023) by examining comprehensively the intra-EU dynamics within the negotiations through the lens of salience whilst also highlighting the importance of salience as a concept in EU negotiations (see Leuffen et al., 2014). Our study is the first to systematically collect and analyse data on the salience levels of the EU27, the Commission and the UK in the Brexit negotiations. Through this approach, we were able to examine its influence on the negotiations of the WA and the TCA.

Our findings illuminate several key results. First, they are in line with previous studies (e.g., Kyriazi et al., 2023; Laffan, 2019; Usherwood, 2021) that, despite varying levels of salience, the EU27 and the Commission maintained cohesiveness in the WA and the TCA. This cohesiveness was evident even though the UK assigned high salience to sovereignty issues, such as access to fishing waters, Gibraltar and Northern Ireland, whilst the EU27 and the Commission unexpectedly focused on protecting the EU's broader economic concerns and its institutional interests. Perhaps counterintuitively, the varying levels of salience within the EU, as well as vis-à-vis the UK, have been conducive to logrolling, likely supporting a more cohesive Union stance and enabling an agreement with the UK that surpassed the best alternative to no agreement for each side. Second, the research enhances the theoretical understanding of salience in EU negotiations, building upon developments in the DEU literature (e.g., Cross, 2013). It also proposes a novel exploratory statistical approach through K-means clustering to interpret salience scores beyond the conventional range, offering perspectives on understanding international negotiations. Third, the analysis suggests that despite nationalistic tendencies in some member states like Hungary and Poland, these countries aligned in terms of salience with the broader EU27 on core negotiation issues. This indicates a prioritisation of material interests in the EU over nationalistic agendas, challenging the potential of a successful 'divide-and-conquer' strategy by the UK.

More broadly, this study not only corroborates the unified stance of the EU and EU27 in the literature (e.g., Chopin and Lequesne, 2022), media reports of the negotiations (e.g., McTague, 2019) and the EU's stated position (e.g., Tusk, 2016) but also reveals the underlying nuances in their salience configuration on various issues related to political, economic and geographical factors. It was proposed that differences in salience levels likely facilitate actor cohesion and aid in reaching a negotiated agreement. Specifically, as the EU continues to evolve post-Brexit and with a review of the TCA anticipated in the future, understanding these nuances in salience amongst the EU27, the Commission and the UK remains crucial for comprehending and anticipating future EU–UK dynamics.

This study lays the groundwork for further research. Whilst we have extensively analysed salience as a standalone concept, our data can be utilised in multiple ways by future studies. First, our measure of salience can act as an independent variable to explore negotiation resources and strategies. It is anticipated that greater salience will prompt actors to allocate more resources and effort, thereby shaping their strategic decisions and the distribution of negotiation resources. Second, this article has proposed potential factors influencing variations in salience levels inductively, offering a basis for future studies to investigate these factors deductively. Third, whilst we suggest that the configuration of salience across the actors may have limited the UK's ability to deploy a 'divide-and-conquer' strategy and facilitated logrolling within and between the actors supporting and agreeing, future studies could investigate whether this is actually the case through detailed process tracing of the negotiations.

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Supporting Information

Additional supporting information may be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of the article.

Appendix S1. Supporting Information.