Why politicians react to media coverage: A comparative experiment of political agenda-setting

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Abstract

Why do politicians react to some stories in the news and ignore others? We attempt to answer this question by integrating the micro-level politician perspective with a macro-level country approach. Using a unique experimental approach, we test when politicians in the Netherlands and Switzerland (N = 80) take political action based on a (fictional) news report. We find that all politicians react more to negative coverage, but not if the information is merely presented as investigative reporting. Results also reveal a systematic variation that we ascribe to two key differences in the electoral systems. In The Netherlands, with its large single voting district, politicians react to news reports covering issues they are specialized in. In Switzerland, where between-party competition is more important, politicians are more likely to capitalize on the party's profile. Overall, this study shows when and how politicians react to news coverage also depends on the institutional context.

Keywords: Political agenda-setting, political elites, comparative, experimental, media effects.

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1. Introduction

The phenomenon of the media agenda affecting the political agenda is by now well documented and appears to be widespread. There is little doubt that the mass media, under certain circumstances, can influence the issue priorities of political actors (for an overview, see Van Aelst and Walgrave 2016). However, our knowledge of the exact mechanisms of media influence is much less developed. One of the reasons is that political agenda-setting is mostly studied at the aggregate level; general media coverage affects the agenda of political institutions. However, underlying the agenda of these institutions (e.g., parliaments) or organizations (e.g., parties) is the behavior of individual politicians. Therefore, some recent studies have used a disaggregated approach to study individual politicians' reactions to media coverage. These studies show that tenure (Helfer 2016) or how MPs conceptualize their role (Sevenans et al. 2015; Zoizner et al. 2017) influence whether and to what kind of media content they react. Moreover, Sevenans, Walgrave, and Epping (2016) convincingly show that politicians use news coverage when they consider it useful for their job. So, while all politicians follow the most prominent stories in the news, they only intend to act on it when the news fits their interests and can be easily used in their parliamentary work.

Complementing this individualistic approach, agenda-setting studies that focus on how institutional characteristics, such as the political system, influence the media-politics relationship have become more common over the past decade. Some of those focus on the European multiparty context. Vliegenthart and colleagues (2016), for example, find evidence that the composition of the government affects parties' reactions to media coverage: in political systems with coalition governments, government parties are more reactive to media coverage than in countries with single-party governments. Others have shown that in the US (Arceneauxet al. 2016), but also beyond (e.g., Amsalem and Walgrave 2017), the composition of the media system matters for the way politicians react to media coverage. Taken together we can thus conclude that while some studies focus on individual politicians, others emphasize variation in the media or political system (Midtbø et al. 2014).

Our goal is to bring the two together to understand, how media content might have different effects on individual politicians depending on the institutional context, more specifically, the electoral

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system in which politicians are active. To this end, we make use of an innovative experimental study with individual legislators in two multi-party democracies, The Netherlands and Switzerland. The experimental design gives us maximal control over the media reports we ask politicians to react to and, thus, allows us to identify the effects of single factors and compare political systems. We argue that the different government-opposition dynamic and the electoral system determine how politicians react to issues the media put forward. By following this approach, our intention is to add to the existing literature on the contingency of the political agenda-setting effects of the mass media. In the next section, we discuss the political context and its potential effects on the relationship between media and politics in detail and thus "capture diversity within a common framework" (Livingstone 2003: 487).

2. *Theory and hypotheses*

In communication science, the concept of 'agenda-setting' has become one of the dominant paradigms of media influence. Agenda-setting refers to the influence of media coverage on the issues people prioritize. Since the study of McCombs and Shaw (1972), the popularity of the (public) agenda-setting approach among media scholars has grown steadily, and it is now one of the most-cited media effects theories (Bennett and Iyengar 2008; Dearing and Rogers 1996). In the past decade, the interest of agenda-setting scholars broadened to political actors: do the media also set the issue priorities of politicians? This question has become the central question of a growing amount of studies that focus on the political agenda-setting role of the news media. And it is one central aspect of the broader research agenda on the relationship between media and politics (Walgrave & Van Aelst 2006; Wolfe, Jones & Baumgartner 2013). The agenda of politicians, however, is something different compared to the agenda of the public (Pritchard 1992). In fact, the agenda of politicians is hardly ever operationalized by asking them to list the issues on top of their mind, as is typically done by those studying the public agenda, but rather by looking at their words or deeds. It is not what politicians think (cognitive) but what they (plan to) do (behavior) that matters. Political agenda setting is part of the larger policy process and deals with the early phase of policymaking: drawing political attention to specific problems and the underlying issues. Due to its ability to focus attention on some problems

(and its tendency to neglect others), media can influence the problem identification phase of the policymaking process (Baumgartner and Jones 2009).

At the aggregate level, there is plenty of proof that the media agenda can indeed have an independent influence on the political agenda. However, much less is known on why and how politicians react to media coverage and use it in their work. In recent years, scholars started to tackle this matter in what can be called a micro-level actor approach, with a clear focus on the individual politician. This study also uses this approach, with special attention for the institutional context politicians work in. Our main argument is that the influence of the media on politicians is highly contingent on the institutional context. As politicians are bombarded with information daily, yet have limited time and resources, they can only react to some of this information. Politicians are strategic actors that respond selectively to news coverage (e.g., Sevenans 2017). From a rational perspective, this means that politicians are more inclined to react to media messages if they are useful for themselves or their party (e.g., Sevenans et al. 2016; Thesen 2012). What is useful, however, will depend on how the political system in a country works and what kind of behavior is most rewarding. To study how a country's institutional context might affect if and how politicians react to media reports, we conduct a comparison of two countries: Switzerland and The Netherlands. We elaborate on the relevant institutional differences between both countries before formulating concrete hypotheses.

Institutional differences: Switzerland and The Netherlands

From a global perspective, Switzerland and The Netherlands - the two relatively small Western-European countries - are highly similar, and both belong to the democratic corporatist type (Hallin and Mancini 2004). Historically, both countries developed by ultimately unifying dispersed political communities. There are no strong centralized national governments, and the countries share a long tradition of accommodation and compromise (Daalder 1971). Moreover, the Netherlands and Switzerland are both multi-party systems with a bicameral system with a Lower House and a Senate. Due to their longstanding tradition as consociational democracies, politicians in both countries search for the best compromise and focus on inclusion, in order to obtain a majority in support of legislation.

The media system is also similar along broad lines. Traditionally, the printed press had a high circulation with partisan ties that have, however, waned in the past years (Bakker and Scholten 2014). As a consequence, formerly partisan newspapers can no longer be attributed to a particular political party.

Although very similar in many regards, the two countries differ on two key aspects that we expect to influence how political parties operate internally and how politicians react to media coverage. First, the balance of power between the executive and the legislative branch works differently in Switzerland than in The Netherlands. The executive needs the support of the majority of the elected parliament in both countries. However, in The Netherlands, the political parties in government usually hold a (minimal) majority in parliament, which means they can determine legislation (Andeweg and Irwin 2014). Since these coalitions often have only a small majority in parliament, they opt for an extended and detailed government agreement that allows little freedom for coalition MPs to come up with their personal initiatives.

In Switzerland, however, one could argue that there is no clear-cut major opposition (Church and Vatter 2009). In fact, the seven representatives in government (Bundesrat) are elected by parliament on the basis of a 'magic formula' (*Zauberformel*). It ensures that the four parties who have around 80% of the total vote share are represented largely according to their electoral strength. Overall, political power is thus evenly distributed among the major parties (Kriesi and Trechsel 2008), leaving only very few small parties without participation in government. As a consequence, no strong opposition is present in the Swiss parliament, while in The Netherlands, we do find major parties in both government and opposition.

A second key difference relates to the electoral systems. In both countries, the legislative branch is mostly elected through a system of proportional representation.[1] The Netherlands is a highly centralized country and can be treated as one single electoral district (Andeweg and Irwin 2014: 98). The semi-closed list system means that political parties have major influence over who gets

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[1] In Switzerland, big provinces such as Zurich get 34 seats while a small one such as Glarus just a single one. For small provinces with only one representative, the electoral system becomes a majoritarian one (Hug and Martin 2012). Only three of the 50 Swiss MPs who participated are from majoritarian systems however.

elected (Van Holsteyn and Andeweg 2012). In Switzerland, however, the electoral system is highly

federalized. The small country with its 8.5 million inhabitants is divided into 26 electoral districts, the

so-called 'Cantons', which have extensive administrative and political authority (Vatter 2008). Swiss

legislators are chosen in an open-list system where the preference votes largely determine who gets

elected into parliament. This implies that winning (personal) votes from local constituents is key to

getting elected and is much more important than pleasing party leadership to get a higher list position,

like in The Netherlands.

In summary, we expect that the electoral system and the government-opposition dynamic will

affect the motivation for politicians to react (or not react) to media coverage. Below, we formulate

concrete hypotheses on how we expect different media content but also those institutional differences

to influence whether politicians react to media reports.

The role of the institutional context in political agenda-setting

In most parliamentary democracies, parties can broadly be divided into those in power and those in

opposition. Overall, research shows that members of opposition parties are more reactive to media

reporting than those of government parties (Green-Pedersen & Stubager 2010; Van Aelst et al. 2008;

Walgrave et al. 2008). A key explanation is the negative, or at least critical, nature of most political

news coverage, which forms a source of inspiration for opposition politicians to criticize or attack the

government (Thesen 2012). Generally, MPs from parties in government are much more constraint in

their reactions to media coverage, for example, because criticizing their party could threaten the

whole government agreement. Politicians from opposition parties, however, are much less constraint

to use media coverage in their parliamentary work (Van Aelst et al. 2008). We expect to find the same

mechanism in our study but only for the Netherlands. We expect that opposition party MPs in The

Netherlands are more likely to react to media reports than those from government parties (H1a) but

not the Swiss ones (H1b). Because there is no powerful opposition in Switzerland, MPs from

government parties, as well as those not represented, are as likely to react to media reports.

Party issue ownership (Petrocik 1996) is another important variable explaining why parties

pay attention to some issues from the media and not others (Dalmus et al. 2017; Vliegenthart and

Walgrave 2010; Walgrave et al. 2008). In recent years, the theory of issue ownership has been used to explain parties' reaction to news coverage (Green-Pedersen 2010; Thesen 2012), and the amount of coverage parties obtain (Petrocik et al. 2003), which in turn affects voters and their voting choices (Walgrave et al. 2009). As vote-seeking actors, parties can capitalize on existing party profiles by reinforcing existing issue ownership (Strøm 1998) and showing a unified front on "their" issue (Traber et al. 2014) by reacting to these issues. We, therefore, expect that politicians are more likely to react to a news report covering an issue their party owns compared to one their party does not own (H2).

Finally, we expect that politicians will mainly react to issues they are specialized in. Few parliamentarians are able to follow the debates in all policy areas. MPs are often representatives of their party in specific parliamentary committees, act as the party's spokesperson on those specific issues, and largely define the party's position on the issue (Patzelt 1999: 31). A recent study by Sevenans (2017) found that specialization significantly predicted politicians' likelihood to ask a parliamentary question. In essence, media coverage on an issue the MP is specialized in provides useful information or an opportunity for the MP to use this news report in his or her parliamentary work. However, we believe that different electoral systems will affect the division of labor within a party and, thus, also the usefulness of media coverage for politicians. Let us elaborate.

In The Netherlands, party and not individual electoral considerations are central because preference votes only play a marginal role in who gets elected (Louwerse and Otjes 2016). Van Vonno (2016: 54), for example, finds a relationship between toeing the party line and candidate selection procedures: more centralized procedures are linked to more party discipline and party unity. Therefore, we expect that when reacting to media coverage, Dutch MPs will make sure to adhere to the division of labor within their party. Politicians will leave commenting on a prominent issue in the media to the party leaders or the party's issue specialist (Andeweg and Thomassen 2011) even if they might find it important (H3a). This issue specialization should matter less in the Swiss case where MPs are mostly seen as representatives of their (small) district. Within those voting districts, the salience of issues often shifts, and politicians must signal their electorate they are responsive. Moreover, the system of permanent parliamentary committees was only introduced relatively recently

in 1991 (Lüthi 1996). Consequentially, we expect the Swiss to operate more as issue generalists and to mainly react to the issues that are likely important for their constituents (H3b).

Influences of the media content in political agenda-setting

We also formulate several hypotheses regarding the content of the news report (i.e., negativity). First, studies have shown that quality newspapers set the agendas of other media outlets, an effect also referred to as the New York Times effect (Gans 1979). As quality outlets cover politics differently and more extensively, they have more influence on political actors (Bartels 1993; Kepplinger 2007). Dutch and Swiss MPs are probably no exception and will thus be more responsive to coverage by a quality newspaper than a more popular one (H4). When we look at the content of political news coverage, one of the most important common characteristics or 'news values' is negativity. Or, more specifically, the coverage of negative developments (Shoemaker and Vos 2009). Humans are drawn to negative stories (Soroka and McAdams 2015), and politicians might be even more prone to react to negative coverage and developments. In their role as public actors, they "must consider that they might be held responsible for their actions or inactions — or how these are played out in the media" (Strömbäck 2008: 239). Therefore, we expect that politicians are more reactive to coverage of negative developments than positive developments (H5).

Finally, we make a distinction between 'normal' media coverage and news that is the consequence of investigative reporting. Studies show that the new and revealing information of investigative reporting can have far-reaching consequences for politics (Graber 2006; Protess et al. 1987). Thus, we test whether announcing exactly the same information as an investigative report versus official government communication affects whether politicians react politically. We expect that politicians react more to investigative reporting than to government communication (H6).

3. *Study design*

To disentangle the effects of the variables, some of which relate to the content of media report (H4-H6), while others more to the institutional context within which politicians operate (H1-H3), we need a controlled setting. To this end, we chose an experimental approach. This allows us to show

politicians in both countries the exact same media reports (albeit translated to their respective language) for internal validity. To maximize external validity, we use a multivariate experimental design where we manipulate several factors at the same time. More specifically, we use the factorial survey experiment, which is a multivariate design closely related to conjoint analyses or choice experiments (Auspurg and Hinz 2015: 105). In recent years, these designs have become more widespread in (political) communication research (e.g., Knudsen and Johannesson 2018; Auspurg and Hinz 2015).

The stimuli we use are fictional but realistic news reports formulated by the researchers. For each news report, we ask politicians to tell us the likelihood that they would take political action, such as asking a parliamentary question, based on this report. We systematically manipulate our experimental factors within these reports (see Table 1 for an overview).

INSERT TABLE 1 HERE

To operationalize the type of media outlet publishing a report, we take the quality and popular newspaper with the highest circulation numbers and put their logo prominently on the top of the report. In The Netherlands, this means *NRC Handelsblad* (quality) and *De Telegraaf* (popular), and in Switzerland *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* (quality) and *Der Blick* (popular). Moreover, the news report we show to the politicians always covers a specific issue. Because we want to measure the influence of negativity independently of the party position, we use valence issues (Stokes, 1963) on which parties usually prefer the same outcome, such as, for example, decreasing (instead of increasing) unemployment numbers. At the same time, we needed to choose issues that allowed us to investigate the role of party issue ownership. To that end, consulted voter surveys of the most recent elections in the respective countries (Kleinnijenhuis and Walter 2014; Lachat 2014). With these considerations in mind, we selected the following five valence issues that are linked to the same party family in both countries; taxation for Liberals, unemployment for Social Democratic parties, immigration for Populist-Right parties, air pollution for Greens, and abortion for Christian Democratic parties. To

capture what role investigative reporting plays, the news report states the source of this information: research by the newspaper itself or from government communication. An example of a news report (translated to English) is shown in Figure 1.

INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE

Combining all the factors, if we wanted to test in our experiment in a traditional between-respondent design, this would mean having to test 64 conditions and, thus, needing several hundred respondents to obtain a satisfactory level of statistical power. As this is not feasible in elite research with a small population of active MPs, we rely on the literature on design efficiency (Gunst and Mason 2009). The principles of design efficiency are, for example, common for experimental designs in medicine, where researchers need to limit the number of human subjects (e.g., Dejaegher and Vander Heyden 2011). Design efficiency departs from the assumption that when we run an experiment where we simultaneously test several factors, previous knowledge allows us to already rule out some of the interaction effects (to the highest level) between our factors. This means we can reduce the number of conditions we test without losing a significant amount of statistical power. Making use of this literature and the procedures commonly applied in factorial survey experiments, we choose a half fraction factorial sample of 32 of the total of 64 conditions using the program SAS. In this sample of conditions, our main effects and two-level interaction effects are not confounded. To reduce fatigue effects and limit survey length, we then systematically divide those 32 conditions into balanced sets of four news reports (Sauer et al. 2011). This means, each respondent only tells us about four of the 32 news reports, how likely it is that s/he would take political action based on this precise news report. Two of these four news reports cover the issue the party owns. By randomizing the order in which we present respondents the reports, we further limit learning effects (Auspurg and Hinz 2015).

In summary, our study thus uses a mixture of a within-and between-respondent design because we show each respondent a sub-set of our 32 news reports. After each news report, MPs are asked to indicate how likely it is that they would take political action, such as asking a parliamentary question, on a 7-point Likert scale. This likelihood to take political action based on a single news report is the dependent variable of our study. Overall, MPs judge the news reports as fairly realistic with a mean score of 4.5 (SD = 1.43) on a 7-point scale.

The survey also includes several additional questions. To capture individual issue relevance, we asked MPs to indicate on a scale from 1 (not important at all) to 7 (very important) how politically important the issue is for them personally at that moment. Finally, we obtain some information from public records. We include a dummy for government membership. In The Netherlands, the liberal VVD and the Labour Party PvdA were in government at the moment of data collection (50 seats for government versus 68 opposition for the Netherlands of all included parties), and in the Swiss case, all major parties were part of the government (174 government seats versus 24 opposition).[2] To test the role of issue specialization, we use official parliamentary records to determine whether an MP is a member of the parliamentary committee that deals with that issue or not. Finally, we create a variable that measures the years a respondent has been a legislator in the Lower House using official records.

a. Respondents and data

In both countries, we fielded an online survey among the members of the Lower Houses. In Switzerland, during 3 weeks in June 2014, when parliament was in session, German-speaking representatives[3] from the largest parties for each party family were approached (see Appendix A for a list of parties). Together, these parties held more than 85% of the total 200 seats. MPs were either contacted by the first author personally at parliamentary buildings to complete the survey on a tablet right away (n = 20) or via e-mail (n = 30). In Switzerland, the response rate was 40% (n = 50) of all

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[2] Additional analyses (not shown) for Switzerland with the parties as a categorical variable do not yield different results. There are no significant differences between the parties (probability ranges between p = .488 and p = .818).

[3] There are four official languages spoken in Switzerland. German is the first language of the biggest part of the population (64.5 %) and has the biggest group of representatives in parliament, followed by the French (22.6%), Italian (8.3%) and Rhaeto-Romanic (9.5%) speaking population.

MPs who had been contacted (response rates per party in Appendix A). Checks reveal that in terms of parliamentary experience (M = 7.48 years, SD = 5.84) and gender (32% female), the sample matches the distribution in the Swiss Lower House (experience M = 7.6 years, 31% female).

In The Netherlands, all representatives from parties clearly belonging to one of the selected party families were invited to the survey via an e-mail. These are seven of the 12 parties in parliament or 62% of the 150 members of the Lower House. After several e-mail reminders, we reminded 32 politicians from parties with low response rates using paper versions (n = 7). The overall response rate was 32% of all politicians contacted (response rates per party in Appendix A). Two Dutch respondents were removed because of incomplete answers. There were slightly fewer female respondents (30%, n = 9) than in the parliament (38% female). The mean political experience was 4.2 years (SD = 3.11) on average.

As mentioned above, each politician told us for several news reports what the likelihood was that s/he would take political action based on the report. Therefore, we have a classical multilevel structure in our data: evaluations of news reports are nested in politicians. For Switzerland, we ran the models with 198 individual evaluations of news reports coming from 50 politicians. For the Dutch models, we gathered 118 evaluations from 30 politicians. We account for the structure of our data with multilevel regression models with random intercepts at the politician level. The regression models control for the effects of all the factors we manipulate in the experiment. Also, we include tenure as a control variable because it has been found to be related to perceptions of media power (Vesa et al. 2015), reactivity to media coverage (Landerer 2014), and even the type of reporting politicians react to (Helfer 2016).

4. Results

Analyses of the full models show support for some of our hypotheses but not for others (Table 2). Our findings (Table 2, models 2) are in line with our expectations in both countries when it comes to the government/opposition dynamic (H1). For The Netherlands, our results show that a politician from a government party is less likely to react to a media report than one from an opposition party (b = -.94, p = .048 95% CI [-1.87; -.01]). Opposition MPs are more responsive to media coverage in their

parliamentary work with an increase of almost one point on the 7-point scale (from 2.12 to 3.06) as marginal effects show. In Switzerland, we do not find any difference for politicians from government parties (b = -.20, p = .644, 95% CI [-1.04; .65]). In fact, if we include a variable for the party in the regression models (results not shown), we do not find any significant differences between any of the parties. In summary, findings for both countries are in line with our first hypotheses: H1a and H1b.

We expected that politicians react more to a news report on an issue their party 'owns' (H2). The results differ between the two countries. In Switzerland, we find evidence in line with our expectations (b = .43, p = .023, 95% CI [.06; .80]). In The Netherlands, however, party issue ownership does not seem to matter if we control for the influence of other variables (b = .33, p = .167, 95% CI [-.14; .80]). Overall, we thus only find support for H2 in one of the two countries. We will come back to this unexpected finding in the conclusion. Next, we also expected that the issue specialization of the individual politician would play a role in political agenda-setting. However, this was true only for Dutch MPs (H3a) and not for their Swiss colleagues (H3b). This is because the division of labor is less common in the latter country. We found that issue specialization does have a significant effect on Dutch politicians (b = 1.06, p = .027, 95%CI [.12; 2.01]) in line with H3a. Marginal effects estimate of the full model (Table 2, models 2) underlines the importance of issue specialization. A politician who is seated in the respective parliamentary committee is more than one point more likely to indicate that s/he take political action based on the news report covering a relevant issue (from 2.38 to 3.44 on the 7-point scale). For Swiss politicians, in line with our expectations, specialization does not play a significant role (b = .39, p = .283, 95%CI [-.32; 1.11]). In summary, while Dutch MPs do react more to media coverage on an issue they are specialized in, issue specialization is not relevant for their Swiss colleagues.

INSERT TABLE 2 HERE

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We also tested whether the political importance of an issue might affect whether politicians take political action based on a news report. We expect that this matters for Swiss politicians (H3b) but not for their Dutch counterparts. Our findings are in line with these expectations. Swiss politicians show that if a news report covers an issue they deem politically relevant, they are much more likely to take political action (b = .13, p = .042, 95%CI [.005; .25]). For Dutch politicians, however, issue relevance does not seem to matter (b = .12, p = .175, 95%CI[-.05; .29]).

Studies in political agenda-setting have illustrated how politicians do not react to all media outlets in the same way. In line with previous research, we find some evidence that politicians differentiate between popular and quality outlets, but only for Switzerland (H4). For negativity, we find a consistent significant effect across context: politicians react to negative media reports more than to positive media reports (H5). Finally, whether a news report states that the information stems from investigative reporting (instead of official government communication) does not make a difference for politicians in the context of our study (H6). We put those findings into more context in the conclusions.

5. *Conclusions*

This study aimed to broaden our insights into how and when politicians might react to media coverage. Overall, we find that the reactions of individual politicians to mass media coverage are highly contingent. In line with previous findings, also in our study, politicians are more likely to react to negative news coverage across contexts (H5). However, merely presenting information as "investigative reporting" (H6) did not have a significant effect in either country. The experimental setting, in which the investigative reporting condition did not present new information to respondents, might explain this result. Other approaches are more suitable to study such effects, for example, collaborations between researchers and journalists (e.g., Protess et al. 1987). We also did not find clear evidence that quality outlets have more political agenda-setting power (H4). Only in Switzerland did the politicians differentiate between the two newspapers we selected for this study. The fact that this difference between quality and popular papers did not turn out to be relevant in The Netherlands

could be attributed to the smaller difference between the papers in terms of political relevance and trust compared to the Switzerland newspapers.[4]

The findings do, however, provide a case in point for the influence of the political system in political agenda-setting. By running the same experiment in two countries, we could explicitly link the variations to the country's political systems to the behavior of individual parliamentarians. We focused on party issue ownership, the politicians' issue specialization, and the perceived momentary relevance of an issue, and disentangled whether and how these affect political agenda-setting through the different motivations the institutional settings provide.

Our expectations that issue specialization and current political relevance play different roles in the two countries are supported by our findings. In the federalized Swiss system with small voting districts, media reports that cover an issue politicians deem politically relevant at that moment (H3b) increase the likelihood that the politician will take action based on the media report. The small electoral districts in Switzerland force politicians to be generalists and deal with (all) issues that are currently relevant for their voters. We expected district magnitude to have the opposite effect in the Netherlands. The fact that Dutch parties appeal to a much larger group of voters has pushed them to an outspoken division of labor within the party. Dutch MPs have built their personal profile on a very specific issue. This issue specialization (H3a) determines when they will react or 'use' media coverage to initiate a political initiative. More generally, this finding suggests that the district magnitude is an important factor for explaining to what issues in the media different politicians react, but more research is needed to explore the exact mechanism behind this relationship.

We also found support for our first hypothesis (H1). Only in The Netherlands, with its clearly different political role for the opposition and government parties, politicians from government parties are less likely to react to a media report than those from the opposition. In Switzerland, there is no pronounced difference between opposition and government, and we also do not find a significant effect. Since the government-opposition dynamic in the Swiss case is rather exceptional from a

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[4] The Digital News Report (Newman et al. 2018) shows that trust in the quality newspapers is higher (NZZ 6.92, NRC 6.66) than in the popular outlets we use in our study (Blick 4.86, Telegraaf 5.88). However, the difference between both outlets in Switzerland is much bigger (6.92 vs 4.86) than in in The Netherlands (6.66 vs 5.88) which might explain our findings.

comparative perspective, we believe the important difference between government and opposition politicians we and others found can be generalized to other countries.

However, not all of our findings were in line with our expectations. We expected that party issue ownership would apply across contexts (H2). But, it seems that for Dutch MPs, personal issue specialization was driving their behavior more than the issue ownership of their party. We attribute at least part of this finding, contradicting other political agenda-setting studies, to our focus on the individual politician. While as an aggregate actor, it makes most sense for parties to focus on issue ownership, for individual politicians, other considerations such as adhering to the division of labor in their party are more important. With the centralized nomination procedures most parties in The Netherlands use, it would be relatively easy for parties to sanction their members, for example, by a lower ranking on the party list (Hix 2002). Studies from related fields also underline that in The Netherlands, party, and not individual electoral considerations are central (Louwerse and Otjes, 2016). These findings likely transfer to other countries with centralized nomination procedures and a de facto closed list systems. At the same time, in systems like in Switzerland, where voting districts are relatively small, and preference votes play a key role in who gets elected, appealing to the electorate in the district will be much more important.

Our study has several limitations. First, although the response rate among political elites is satisfactory, the number of respondents remains low. This requires that some of our findings need be interpreted with caution (e.g., related to opposition members in Switzerland). Second, the system variables we tested in this study were strongly connected to the characteristics of the two countries under study. This hinders their generalization, especially beyond the European multi-party systems. Nevertheless, we believe this approach provides a fruitful stepping-stone for more comparative individual-level studies with politicians to further our understanding of political agenda-setting. Our study also clearly simplifies the complex dynamic taking place between media and politics in the real world. The relationship has been described as a cycle (e.g., Sellers 2010) where politicians might serve as information sources for journalists or even place "their" stories in the news, which in turn leads to more reactions by political actors. One reason why we had to be very specific and clear about the moment in the complex dynamic that we studied was our choice for an experimental approach. As

a consequence, we can only draw conclusions about how and when media reports can push politicians to ask a parliamentary question. We have to rely on other studies to understand what happens later in the policy process, where more actors and possibly different motivations play a role (for a similar argument see Wolfe et al. 2013). Finally, our media reports focus on factual information (i.e., about rising/declining unemployment numbers) but oftentimes, politicians use the media to gauge public opinion which might again lead to a very different dynamic (Herbst 1998, Arceneaux et al. 2016). This being said, we are convinced that focusing on a specific moment and aspect of this relationship will help us understand the dynamics at play in the complex interaction between media and politics.

Overall, our findings show that the issues news report cover is a core aspect if we want to study the media's agenda-setting influence on politics. However, these issues do not have an automatic influence on politics. Rather, they influence only some politicians of some parties, depending on the politicians' background and the institutional context within which these actors are operating.

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Table 1. Overview of experimentally manipulated factors and values in the news reports.

Factor	Values
Party issue ownership	Owned – not owned
Development	Negative – positive development
Media outlet	Quality – popular outlet
Information source	Investigated – government source

Table 2. Linear multilevel regression of Dutch and Swiss Lower House members' reactions to news reports nested in politicians (random slope).

		Netherlands			Switzerland		
		Model 0	Model 1	Model 2	Model 0	Model 1	Model 2
		Fixed effects					
Constant		2.52***	.658	.055	2.52***	.724	.322
		(.25)	(.66)	(.88)	(0,15)	(.51)	(.69)
Level 1 (Sender & message)							
Broadsheet newspaper (popular)	H5		.256	.180		.384#	.415*
			(.22)	(.21)		(.20)	(0.19)
Investigated (official communication)	H7		.354	.350		-.153	-0.165
			(.22)	(.20)		(.20)	(0.19)
Negative development (positive)	H6		.606**	.542**		.969***	1.019***
			(.23)	(.21)		(.20)	(0.19)
Level 2 (receiver)							
Government party (opposition)	H1			-.942*			-.199
				(.48)			(.43)
Party's owned issue (not owned)	H2			.332			.429*
				(.24)			(.19)
MP specialized on issue (not specialized)	H3a			1.064*			.393
				(.48)			(.37)
Individual issue importance	H3b			.119			.129*
				(.09)			(.06)
Parliamentary experience in years				.105			-.056*
				(.08)			(.02)
		Random effects					
Variance							
Receiver level (level 2)		1.21	1.23	1.11	.72	.78	.73
Sender & message level (level 1)		1.28	1.21	1.10	1.50	1.36	1.31
Number of observations			118			198	
Number of politicians			30			50	

Note. For dummy variables reference category in parentheses. Question: "Would you take parliamentary action (e.g., ask a parliamentary question) based on this news report?", response scale from 1 (absolutely not) to 7 (absolutely yes). The experiment included a factor where responsibility for a development was attributed to the parliament, government, or real-world developments. Because this did not have a significant effect in any configuration, it is excluded from these models.
* p<0.05, ** p<0.01, *** p< 0.001

Figure 1. Example of a news report shown to politicians.

Contrary to expectations, in the past month the number of unemployed persons has decreased by 4,000. This is what research by this newspaper shows. The parliament's decision for more spending has led to more orders in various sectors; this is the most important reason for this development. In a reaction minister Johann Schneider-Ammann said: „Each person who is unemployed is one too many. Those who do not have work have to be supported to find new paid work as fast as possible."

Appendix A

Response rates per country and party

Table A1. Response rates per party family for The Netherlands and Switzerland.

Party family	The Netherlands			Switzerland		
	Party	MPs contacted	Response (%)	Party	MPs contacted	Response (%)
Liberal	VVD	41	17 (41)	FDP	18	4 (22)
	D66	12	4 (33)			
Christian Democrat	CDA	13	3 (23)	CVP	23	10 (43)
	CU	5	0 (0)			
	SGP	3	2 (67)			
Social Democrat/Socialist	SP	15	3 (20)	SPS	30	14 (47)
Populist Right	*Declined to participate*			SVP	44	16 (36)
Green	GroenLinks	4	1 (25)	GPS	10	6 (60)
Total		*93*	*30 (32)*		*125*	*50 (40)*

Note. Number of seats per party at the time of data collection (June 2014). Total number of seats in the Lower House in The Netherlands 150, Switzerland 200.