Political elites' media responsiveness and their individual political goals: A study of national politicians in Belgium

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Abstract

This paper addresses the micro level variation in media responsiveness by political elites. It hypothesizes that individual political goals, in addition to party position, affect the extent to which MPs' parliamentary initiatives are inspired by media cues. Regression analysis on data from a survey with Belgian national parliamentarians confirms this assumption. Opposition MPs react more to the media than coalition MPs. Within parties, MPs who are focused on party political goals display higher levels of media responsiveness than MPs who are not. The findings are explained by the differential usefulness of news coverage for various political actors.

Introduction

The mass media hold a central role in the politics of many contemporary democratic systems. Scholars have frequently studied the political agenda-setting effect of the media (Dearing and Rogers, 1996), and have found that the media agenda systematically influences political agendas; an increase in media attention for an issue leads to an increase in political attention for the issue (see e.g. Edwards and Wood, 1999; Van Noije et al., 2008; Walgrave et al., 2008). Politicians thus adopt media issues in their political activities. However, the media do not influence all political actors to the same extent. Researchers investigating the conditionality of political agenda setting—a research agenda proposed by Walgrave and Van Aelst (2006)—demonstrate that there are notable differences in levels of media responsiveness, both between parties, and between individual politicians within parties (Midtbø et al., 2014). Some parties in parliament are more attuned to the media agenda than other parties, and some MPs are more often inspired by the media than other MPs.

While the variation between parties has been extensively addressed and has been accounted for (see Green-Pedersen and Stubager, 2010; Vliegenthart and Walgrave, 2011), the heterogeneity on the *individual* level has not satisfactorily been explained. In particular, the relationship between politicians' political motivations and their media responsiveness has never been studied. This paper takes up this question, asking: Do politicians' individual political goals affect the degree to which their personal initiatives are inspired by the media?

The paper contributes to the growing political agenda-setting literature by (partly) explaining the micro level heterogeneity that existing scholarship has so far left unexplained. Focusing on the individual level, and particularly on the motives and goals of individual politicians, helps to better define and understand the exact mechanism connecting the media agenda with the political agenda. It is individuals, not institutions or parties, who attend to information and issues. By analyzing in detail *who* react to the media it can be better understood *why* they do so and how the existing, consistent macro level findings about the media's agenda setting power are generated. Additionally, by focusing specifically on the goals of individual politicians, the mechanistic approach that

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considers the mass media as a powerful actor in its own right that imposes its agenda on politics is avoided. Instead, this paper shows that individual politicians, and some more than others, strategically *employ* the media to realize their goals.

Empirical analyses are based on data from a survey with national Dutch-speaking MPs in Belgium. The results show that politicians' individual political goals matter in addition to their partisan environment. Concretely, the more an MP is focused on party political goals, the higher the usefulness of media coverage to realize his/her goals, and hence the higher his/her media responsiveness.

Party level variation in media responsiveness

In contemporary politics, the media play an important agenda-setting role. This paper defines the media as the 'traditional' mass media, both in their old forms (newspapers, television and radio) and in new derivatives (such as websites from newspapers).[1] Large-scale studies in different countries have shown that the aggregate-level political agenda is influenced by the media agenda (see e.g. Edwards and Wood, 1999; Van Noije et al., 2008; Vliegenthart and Walgrave, 2011). Those studies have addressed the variation in media responsiveness between parties. Most importantly, they have shown that opposition parties are more inspired by media coverage than coalition parties (Green-Pedersen and Stubager, 2010; Thesen, 2012; Vliegenthart and Walgrave, 2011). The reason lies in the *usefulness* of the information that the media provide. Political actors do not passively respond to all kinds of information sources; on the contrary, they actively follow those sources that provide information they can *employ* to realize their political goals (Kingdon, 1973). The literature mentions various, typical coverage characteristics that enhance the usability of media coverage for opposition parties, while decreasing it for coalition parties.

In terms of content, the mass media cover a large variety of policy topics. Editors strive for a balanced composition, trying to appeal to a large and diverse audience (Galtung and Ruge, 1965). Consequently, media information is general rather than specialized. Concerning style, the news tends to be negative in tone (Galtung and Ruge, 1965), especially news about politics (Farnsworth and Lichter, 2007; Kepplinger, 2002). Furthermore, media coverage often focuses on conflict and controversy (De Vreese et al., 2001; Shoemaker and Reese, 1996) and takes a 'responsibility attribution frame', indicating which political actors are to blame or to reward for problems in society (Semetko and Valkenburg, 2000). And finally, the media regularly focus on the business of politics itself, rather than on substantive issues (Davis, 2009).

These particular characteristics of news coverage—general, negative, conflict-rich, responsibility-attributing and focused on the political game—make the coverage especially useful for opposition parties. Their role in parliament is to control the government, often via interpellations and parliamentary questions.[2] News coverage gives them potential ammunition to attack the government (Walgrave and Van Aelst, 2006). Coalition parties also engage in party politics, but must be careful in this respect because attacking other politicians, especially those from the government, could threaten the stability of the coalition (De Winter and Dumont, 2006). Accordingly, they often avoid negative, conflict-rich and responsibility-attributing media cues. This assumption is confirmed by studies that examine the type of news that politicians react to most (see e.g. Thesen, 2012), and which find that political actors react most to those messages that they can use in the 'attack and defense game' between parties (Green-Pedersen and Stubager, 2010).

Individual level variation in media responsiveness

Whereas differences in media responsiveness between parties are well documented, research into individual level variation is still in its infancy. Only two studies, which both rely on elite surveys, specifically asked politicians about the extent to which they personally act upon media cues in their parliamentary work (see Midtbø et al., 2014; Walgrave, 2008). These studies explain micro level variation by looking at *structural* features of MPs. Much like the studies of aggregate political agenda setting, these micro level studies find that opposition MPs are more responsive to the media than coalition MPs are. Men, more than women, are inspired by the mass media when taking parliamentary initiatives. Some authors think that women are less 'media-oriented' in general (Aalberg and Strömbäck, 2010). Finally, the media are used less by older politicians, who have built up networks and have other sources of information beyond the media to nurture their activities (Midtbø et al., 2014; Walgrave, 2008). Accordingly, this paper includes party position (government/opposition), sex, and age as control variables in its analysis.

This paper goes beyond the well-known structural features of elites and argues that their different *goals* affect their varying degrees of media responsiveness; inspired by the literature stating that the usefulness of media coverage is key to explain media responsiveness, this argument deals with two individual goals that MPs may have: fighting the *party political competition* and making *public policy*. These goals are not exclusive; many politicians probably have both foci simultaneously. This study measures the degree to which each politician attributes importance to each of the two goals.

In this paper, the MPs who focus mainly on the first goal—engaging in party politics—are called 'party warriors'. In a recent study about legislative roles, Van Vonno (2012) describes these MPs as being in 'interparty mode', viewing politics as an ideological struggle between parties.

Party warriors play the 'attack and defense game'. They are eager to publicly confront political rivals with their incompetence and mistakes. They are not proactively selective: they 'wait and see what crises appear in the media and then select their topic on this basis' (Searing, 1987: 442). The average usefulness of media coverage for these MPs is expected to be high. The media cover many issues from which a party warrior can pick the one that is most suitable in the competition. Features such as negativity, conflict and responsibility attributions are useful for attacking other parties. The news has become an important means for these politicians to gauge the 'political mood' (Sellers, 2009).

Those MPs who consider policy making to be their priority are different from 'party warriors'. In line with Searing (1987) and Van Vonno (2012), they are called 'policy advocates' here. These MPs take up governing-related tasks in their parties; realizing policy goals is crucial to them. Since developing bills and amendments is a technical and often slow process, it is expected that the quick, general and thematically diverse nature of media coverage will be less usable for these MPs. Davis, who interviewed British MPs about the role of the media in their work, found indeed that 'although many MPs listed the news media as an important source of information for their jobs, it was not usually regarded as a source of information on specific policy matters' (Davis, 2007: 187). At first sight, however, this assumption may seem to contradict the literature that policy makers strategically use the news media to promote their ideas and put their policy initiatives on the agenda of their colleagues (Davis, 2009), or that policy makers consciously launch initiatives when there is a lot of media attention for the issue, because it creates a 'window of opportunity' to change existing policy (Kingdon, 1984; Yanovitzky, 2002). But, in those instances, the media determine the *timing* of an initiative taken by a policy maker, or they serve as a *tool* for promotion, rather than as a source of inspiration. Whereas party warriors can be more re-active—since strategic political discussions are volatile and can follow the quick, daily rhythm of the news production—and can thus be inspired by media coverage, the information-seeking behavior of policy advocates is more long-term, pro-active, and topic-focused. It is likely that policy advocates typically use other sources to determine their issue agenda.

Individual MPs probably do not define their political goals fully autonomously. Their goals are determined by their own preferences, but also by the broader context in which they operate. It is likely that MPs from the opposition are generally more focused on party politics, while MPs from the majority attribute greater importance to policy making. Parties may also impose a division of labor on their MPs, assigning some the task to engage in war with the other parties, while asking others to focus on policy. The party and individual level are thus interwoven. This paper claims that individuals adapt their media responsive behavior contingent on their goals, their roles, and how they are embedded in the partisan structure. Two hypotheses are tested:

Hypothesis 1: The more an MP is focused on party political goals, the more he or she will be responsive to the media.

Hypothesis 2: The more an MP is focused on policy making goals, the less he or she will be responsive to the media.

Data and methods

These two hypotheses are tested using data from a survey with Belgian, Dutch-speaking national MPs. The survey, administered on iPads, is part of a series of face-to-face MP interviews conducted by the authors and their collaborators between June and November 2013. In total, 75 out of 87 MPs participated, leading to a response rate of 86%, which is exceptionally high for elite research. Each interview took approximately one hour and was scheduled beforehand. Most interviews took place in the MP's office in Parliament or in his/her hometown.

The dependent variable (media responsiveness) is based on item (a) of the following survey question:

Of the initiatives you personally raised in Parliament last year (e.g. bills, written and oral questions), roughly what percentage were inspired by the following?

(a) The media;

(b) Interest and action groups;

(c) Meeting with individual citizens;

(d) Personal experience;

(e) Within the party (e.g. leadership, research center);

(f) Other.

The six items add up to 100% for each politician, so this study's dependent variable is a proportional measure. Using a proportion—and not an absolute number of initiatives inspired by the media—allows MPs with different parliamentary activity levels to be directly compared. Moreover, it is believed that MPs are better able to estimate the relative importance of the media in their work, than they are able to precisely count their media-based initiatives in absolute terms, which would require they recall each individual initiative. This measure is limited, as it does not take the importance of the initiatives into account—some are more consequential and require more resources than others. However, the main interest here lies neither in the type of initiative nor in its importance, but in the source of inspiration, regardless of other factors.

The independent variables measuring MPs' political goals are constructed based on measures in the same survey. The question used is the following:

Table 1. Descriptive statistics.

Variable	N	Mean	Standard deviation	Minimum	Maximum
DEPENDENT VARIABLE					
Media responsiveness	73	22.93	11.61	4.39	55
POLITICAL GOALS					
Policy making goals	75	8.25	1.49	3	10
Party political goals	75	4.19	2.56	0	10
CONTROLS					
Female	75	0.39	0.49	0	1
Age	75	45.79	9.34	26	64
Opposition party	75	0.51	0.50	0	1

What features of information make you take action (e.g. ask a staff member to follow up on it, write a press release, and so on)? Please indicate for the following features how much they matter to you (on a scale from 0 to 10; 0 = does not matter at all; 10 = matters very much):

(a) Can help me realize my policy goals;

(b) Can be used to generate negative attention for another party.

Item (a) measures the extent to which an MP is focused on policy making goals—this is believed to be straightforward indicator of the concept. Item (b) is used to assess the degree to which an MP focuses on party political goals. It is only a partial indicator. For instance, having party political goals could also imply promoting an individual's own party. Yet, it is believed that this study's indicator captures the underlying concept of the party warrior reasonably well, especially in the light of its theoretical conceptualization, which characterizes party warriors primarily as MPs playing the 'attack and defense game'.

Based on the official website of the Belgian federal Parliament[3] three additional features of each MP were retrieved: sex; age; and party membership (government/ opposition). Descriptive statistics of all variables can be found in Table 1.

The data suggest that the media are, on average, the most important source of inspiration for MPs; 23 percent of their parliamentary initiatives are inspired by the media, MPs say. As was expected, the share of initiatives inspired by the media is larger for opposition MPs (26%) than for coalition MPs (19%). The standard deviation of 11 in both groups, however, shows that there are considerable differences between MPs within parties. There is a good deal of individual level variation that this paper will try to account for by looking at the goals of individual politicians.

As discussed above, it is anticipated that politicians' goals are partly determined by the context in which they operate, namely their party. A *t*-test shows that opposition MPs focus slightly more on party politics than coalition MPs, though not significantly so ($t = -1.45$; $p = 0.15$). The relationship between being a coalition MP and focusing on policy goals is not significant ($t = -0.06$; $p = 0.95$). It is clear that party membership does not fully explain the individual goals of politicians; there is plenty of variation within parties.

To test the two hypotheses, a linear regression analysis is performed. Some readers may consider this to be problematic—this study's dependent variable, media responsiveness, refers to percentages (always between 0 and 100), while the predictions of a linear model could go beyond those bounds. Therefore, an alternative model is also run following the procedure for proportional dependent variables as suggested by Papke and Wooldridge (1993)[4]; the results are highly similar and the predictions of the two models are nearly identical. To simplify interpretation, this paper reports the results of the simple linear regression model below.

Results

The results of the analyses are shown in Table 2. In spite of the small *N* (73), different variables appear to have a significant effect on media responsiveness. Most interestingly, MPs' goals matter. The importance an MP attributes to 'party political goals' has a positive and significant effect on media responsiveness, corroborating H1: party warriors use the media more often. The effect of 'policy making goals' goes in the expected direction, as well, but the negative coefficient is not significant ($p = 0.65$). H2 cannot be confirmed.

With respect to the control variables, the effect of party position is significant. Parliamentarians from opposition parties are more responsive to media than MPs from the majority. It is interesting to compare models 1 and 2 in this respect. The coefficient of being in an opposition party decreases when adding political goals, indicating that the individual political goals partly soak up the effect of party position, though not entirely. Individual goals matter *on top of* party membership. Media responsiveness is significantly higher for younger compared to older MPs. The third control variable (female) does not yield significant results; male MPs are not more responsive to media than female MPs. These results confirm what is already known about

Table 2. Ordinary least squares regression predicting media responsiveness.

	Model 1 Coefficient (standard error)	Model 2 Coefficient (standard error)
CONTROLS:		
Female	–4.10 (2.63)	–3.00 (2.54)
Age[1]	–2.62* (1.29)	–2.84* (1.24)
Opposition party	6.87** (2.54)	5.96* (2.46)
POLITICAL GOALS:		
Party political goals	–	1.37** (0.49)
Policy making goals	–	–0.37 (0.83)
Constant	27.79*** (4.13)	25.68** (8.21)
N	73	73
R² (adjusted)	0.13	0.21

*$p < 0.05$; **$p < 0.01$; ***$p < 0.001$.

[1]*Note*: Due to issues related to privacy (the authors promised politicians that the data would never become public in such a way that it would be possible to personally identify them) and replication policy (all data in this analysis must be publicly available), the variable 'Age' included here is an ordinal variable, with four groups (1 = 25–34 years old; 2 = 35–44 years old; 3 = 45–54 years old; 4 = 55–64 years old). The (highly similar) results from an analysis with 'Age' as a continuous variable are presented in the Supplementary Materials.

variation in media responsiveness, but they add an important new factor: politicians' individual political goals.
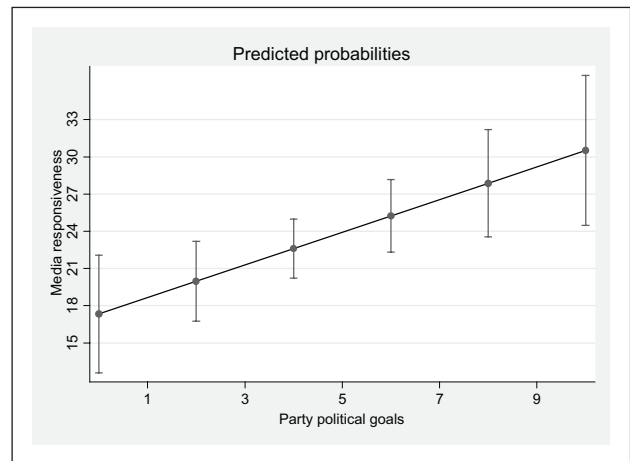
Adding goals to the model leads to a substantial increase of the adjusted R², from 0.13 to 0.21. Political goals clearly matter. They account for an additional part of the variation that could not be explained by previous studies.

Figure 1 visualizes the size of the effect of the importance of party political goals on media responsiveness. The predicted probabilities show that, keeping all other variables in the model at their means, MPs who state that generating negative attention for other parties is very important (score for 'Party political goals' is 10), base almost twice as much of their parliamentary initiatives (31 percent vs. 17 percent) on the media compared to MPs who attribute no importance at all to these party competition-related aspects of politics (score for 'Party political goals' is 0).

Figure 1. Predicted probabilities.

Conclusion and discussion

This paper investigated individual level variation in media responsiveness by Belgian political elites. Descriptive analyses showed that the media provide MPs with important information—on average, 23 percent of all parliamentary initiatives are inspired by the news—but that not all MPs are equally reactive to media. Most importantly, politicians' individual political goals matter. While MPs who focus more on policy making goals do not use the media significantly less, focusing on party politics does make MPs substantially more reactive to the media. Furthermore, as is shown in previous studies, the context in which parliamentarians operate is crucial as well. Opposition MPs are inspired by the media more often than coalition MPs. Individual goals matter *on top of* the party context.

The differential usefulness of media coverage for various political actors explains this study's findings. On the party level, the typically general, negative, conflict-rich and responsibility-attributing media coverage is much more relevant for opposition parties than for coalition parties. As this paper has shown, this is not merely a consequence of the underlying differences in individual goals. Opposition party members—even those who are not focused on party politics—are more reactive to media than government MPs. An explanation could be that they have fewer alternative sources for information. Compared with government MPs, who for instance can get inside information from the cabinet and from 'their' ministers, opposition members are 'information poor' and have to rely on the media to be informed and to get inspired. Within parties, there is a division of labor as well, leading to differences in media responsiveness on the individual level. The more MPs consider engaging in the party political game to be important, the higher the usefulness of media coverage, and the higher their media responsiveness.

In this study, it was assumed that motivations and position are largely stable and affect MPs' information seeking behavior, rather than vice versa (for a similar argument see Searing, 1991). Technically speaking, however, this study's cross-sectional design only demonstrates the co-occurrence of the two phenomena and a causal relationship cannot be demonstrated. It is interesting to reflect on the inverse mechanism as well. It is possible that politicians partly define their goals based on what the incoming media information is suited for, and that their goals and their media responsiveness reinforce each other; panel data—which are difficult to collect since political elites are being dealt with here—would be interesting to further investigate the exact causal mechanism.

In any case, this study's findings have implications for the relationship between media and politics; it was observed that the party-political rather than the policy-making aspects of politics are sensitive to agenda influences from the mass media. This is good news for those who think media influence on policy-making is undesirable because policy decisions need to be based on a long-term vision rather than on the news of the day. Alternatively, media responsiveness in politicians might be viewed as a good thing, as it ensures that the topics politicians care and develop policies about are relevant to what happens in society. It is seen that especially party warriors guarantee this responsiveness vis-à-vis media priorities.

Using a survey design has limitations—though it certainly has advantages as well. The main drawback is the possibility of misperception; politicians may not be able to adequately assess the contribution of the media to their political initiatives (Van Aelst and Walgrave, 2011). On the other hand, perceptions are relevant; it is how politicians perceive reality, and not reality itself, that structures politicians' behavior (Maurer, 2011). A second disadvantage of surveys is the influence of social desirability on the answers. In this study, the item gauging MPs' use of information 'that can be used to generate negative attention for other parties' may to a certain extent be prone to biased answers. Despite these limitations, it is thought that this survey is an appropriate method—it is simply impossible to directly observe political goals, for instance—and produces valid results.

The current study deals with one country only: Belgium. Future research should examine whether the same results are obtained elsewhere. Since this study's findings largely resemble the results of Midtbø et al. (2014), who conducted a similar study with MPs of fifteen European countries, Belgium can likely be considered a representative case for European countries. Media responsiveness appears to be, at least partly, a function of individual politicians' goals.

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Supplementary Material

The replication files are available at: http://thedata.harvard.edu/dvn/dv/researchandpolitics

Notes

1. This paper's conceptualization thus excludes social media and specialized media outlets.
2. Parliamentary questions differ from interpellations as they are directed to one minister (instead of the whole government) and cannot lead to a motion.
3. See www.dekamer.be/.
4. Generalized linear model with family(binomial), link(logit) and robust standard errors.

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