

Political Agenda-Setting in Belgium and the Netherlands: The Moderating Role of Conflict Framing

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Abstract

This article investigates the role of conflict framing as a moderator of the political agenda-setting effect. Conflict is at the heart of politics: Political debate arises from political actors taking opposing positions. We hypothesize that conflict framing in media coverage enhances the relevance of the news for politicians, who in turn react more to this news in parliament. We test our expectations by looking at media coverage and parliamentary questions in Belgium (1999-2008) and the Netherlands (1995-2011). Pooled time-series analyses demonstrate that conflict framing indeed matters as it strengthens the “basic” political agenda-setting effect from the media on parliamentary questions.

Keywords

political agenda-setting, conflict framing, mass media, parliament

In recent years, political agenda-setting has gained a steady place on the research agenda of political scientists and communication scholars. Next to the more “classical” agenda-setting questions that relate to the impact of media attention on public attention (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Wirth et al., 2010) and the influence of issue attention in one outlet on the other (Denham, 2014; Heim, 2013; Vlienghart & Walgrave, 2008), a reasonable number of studies in a variety of countries have demonstrated that after issues get more media attention, they rank higher on the political agenda as well (e.g., Bonafont & Baumgartner, 2013; Boydston, 2013; Green-Pedersen

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& Stubager, 2010; Vliegenthart & Walgrave, 2011b). In their daily work, politicians are influenced by media coverage. Many studies pay attention to so-called “contingent factors”: factors that determine the presence and size of the media’s influence on politics (Walgrave & Van Aelst, 2006). Indeed, political agenda-setting effects may be large, rather small, or even non-existent, depending on structural characteristics of the sender (e.g., newspapers vs. television), issue (e.g., obtrusive vs. unobtrusive), receiver (e.g., coalition vs. opposition parties), and political agenda (e.g., parliamentary questions vs. bills) under study (Bartels, 1996; Walgrave, Soroka, & Nuytemans, 2008).

A very recent development in the research on the contingency of political agenda-setting is the shift from those structural contingent factors to ones that relate to the *content* of media coverage. Apparently, when political actors react to news messages, they mainly do so because those messages fit their interests content-wise. For example, research has shown that political parties are more reactive to news that contains blame attributions toward political actors (Thesen, 2012). Such news is highly relevant for politicians: It allows them to attack or defend the presumed responsible actor. This line of thinking is important as it puts the findings of political agenda-setting studies into perspective: Not all news is the same, even when the media outlet (sender) and the topic covered (issue) are identical. Rather, politicians take the concrete content of the media information into consideration, and they consciously and strategically use only those items that can help them realize their goals.

In this article, we build on this idea by taking the *conflict framing* of media coverage into account. Conflict—defined here as disagreement between individuals or groups of people—is at the core of politics: Policy making entails choosing between alternatives that serve conflicting interests. In addition, in mass communication research, conflict is considered to be one of the most important news values, that signals the relevance of a certain piece of information (Galtung & Ruge, 1965). We think that high levels of conflict framing, just like the presence of blame attributions, enhance the newsworthiness of media coverage for politicians. Hence, we hypothesize that conflict framing positively moderates the political agenda-setting effect.

We test our expectations by looking at media coverage and parliamentary questions in Belgium (1999-2008) and the Netherlands (1995-2011). Pooled time-series analyses on the weekly level demonstrate that conflict framing indeed matters, as it reinforces the “basic” political agenda-setting effect from the mass media on parliamentary questions.

Political Agenda-Setting Effects

A growing volume of studies in different countries demonstrate the impact of the media agenda on the political agenda (see, for example, Edwards & Wood, 1999; Green-Pedersen & Stubager, 2010; Van Noije, Kleinnijenhuis, & Oegema, 2008; Vliegenthart & Walgrave, 2011b). They show that symbolic agendas such as parliamentary questions are affected by the media agenda most; the direct impact of the media on substantial agendas, for example, policy change or budgets, has proven to be smaller and more diffuse (Walgrave & Van Aelst, 2006). Yet, dramatic policy changes

are often preceded by heightened political attention for an issue (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993). In that sense, the media play a relevant indirect role: Media attention leads to political attention (symbolic), which serves on its turn as a precondition for policy change (substantial). Like much of the recent work, we focus on a symbolic agenda—parliamentary questioning—and we first aim to replicate the basic finding of the political agenda-setting literature. Does an increase in media attention for an issue lead to an increase in parliamentary questions about the issue? In line with previous findings, we formulate the following hypothesis:

H1: An increase in media attention for an issue leads to an increase in parliamentary questions about the issue.

Scholars investigating the conditionality of the political agenda-setting effect have addressed a wide range of structural factors—too many to discuss here in detail. The common idea behind several recent studies focusing on *news content* as a moderator of political agenda-setting is that political actors deliberately and strategically use media information to their advantage. They react to the news only when it is relevant to them. Thesen (2012) demonstrates how the political agenda-setting effect is stronger for news in which blame attributions are present. Furthermore, opposition parties react more to bad news—which is ammunition to criticize the government for negative developments in society—whereas government parties prefer to act upon good news, allowing them to claim credit for positive developments (Thesen, 2012). Issue ownership matters as well: Parties react more to news about issues they are the issue owner of; this fits their strategy to compete with other parties on this issue (Green-Pedersen & Stubager, 2010; Vliegenthart & Walgrave, 2011b). Van der Pas (2014) shows that the framing of media coverage matters: Swedish and Dutch political parties only respond to news about immigration and the European integration when the issue-specific framing matches the party's own frame. This does not contradict the finding that politicians mostly react to news that attacks them (generic framing as discussed above); it rather suggests that the party's definition of the issue must be in line with the way the issue is portrayed in the news (issue-specific framing). For example, a party defining immigration in terms of cultural consequences will react to news viewing immigration as a cultural aspect, rather than to news taking an economic framework.

We think that conflict framing—one of the key elements of political media coverage and politics in general—serves a similar function. We argue that this content characteristic is key to take into consideration when trying to understand why parties respond to news coverage at certain times, while in other instances remain silent.

The Moderating Role of Conflict Framing

In line with the definition of Lengauer, Esser, and Berganza (2012), we consider conflict framing to be present in a news article when there is at least a two-sided depiction of disagreement between individuals or groups of people about an issue. Different studies show that the conflict frame is one of the most often used generic frames in

media coverage in many different countries on a wide range of political issues (Canel, Holtz-Bacha, & Mancini, 2007; Neuman, 1992; Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000). Journalists are not seldomly accused to be conflict driven and to search for a conflict angle too often (De Vreese, 2005); although conflict may be inherent to certain news facts (e.g., a labor strike) as well.

For the sake of conceptual clarity, we briefly distinguish conflict framing from other concepts discussed in the political agenda-setting literature and more generally in political communication. First, conflict framing is something else than a general negative tone of the news, which is considered to be a moderator of political agenda-setting effects as well (Baumgartner, Jones, & Leech, 1997; Thesen, 2012) but is not the subject of this article. For example, a plane crash is bad news but does not imply conflict, and an article covering disagreement about budgetary affairs contains conflict but is not necessarily negative in tone. Second, blame attributions (Thesen, 2012) also differ from our definition of conflict framing. Although a blame attribution may often imply a certain degree of conflict, conflict framing can be considered to be much broader than blame framing. Conflict does not necessarily have to be about who is to blame for a certain problem, but can also be on the factual existence of a problem, or on possible solutions that are appropriate. Third, note that conflict does not need to be purely political in nature: A good deal of articles mentions disagreement between societal actors, for example, who are disconnected from the political sphere. And fourth, we distinguish conflict framing, which is always about a concrete issue, from horserace coverage, focusing on political strategies and personalized disputes between politicians, instead of issues (Iyengar, Norpoth, & Hahn, 2004). Parliament deals only with matters related to concrete policy issues, so we do not expect politicians to react to this kind of news in parliament.

We know that the omnipresence of conflict in the media is not without consequences. Research into media effects on the general audience has demonstrated, for example, that highly conflictual news coverage has the strongest public agenda-setting impact (Wanta & Hu, 1993), and that conflict has a mobilizing effect on citizens (De Vreese & Tobiasen, 2007; Schuck, Vliegenthart, & De Vreese, 2014). This raises the question whether conflict also moderates political agenda-setting. Are political actors inclined to ask more parliamentary questions about an issue when conflict levels are higher? Our proposition in this article is that they are—for several reasons.

First, conflict is at the heart of politics (Schattschneider, 1960). Political debate exists exactly because different political actors have different opinions on how societal problems should be addressed. Debating about opposing viewpoints is politicians' core business. It is, in this respect, logical that politicians tend to focus even more on controversy than "ordinary" citizens, as it increases the relevance of an issue for their work. Kingdon (1973), in his classical study on congressmen's voting behavior, explains how conflict is a precondition for decision making. Only when there is a conflict situation about an issue, a politician is confronted with a decisional problem and starts gathering information about the issue. Conflicts and crises make an issue politically relevant, and hence create a "window of opportunity" for politicians to undertake action and put issues on the political agenda.

Moreover, disagreement about policies makes differences between political parties visible to the public: It allows them to differentiate themselves from the other parties and informs voters about the range of alternative views that are present within the political system. Citizens, on their turn, use this information about parties' positions on controversial issues to decide who to vote for (Rabinowitz & Macdonald, 1989). Politicians, thus, have a strong incentive not only to pay attention to conflict news, but also to *react* to it: It is important for them to make their standpoint clear to the electorate. When there is conflict, there is actually something at stake for parties, it is something they can win or lose policy decisions or votes with.

The parliamentary arena—and the agenda of parliamentary questioning in particular—is well-suited to fight out political conflict. Parliamentary questions are merely symbolic, and thus prone to media influences, and serve to control the government (Wiberg, 1995). Inherent to this control function is a certain degree of disagreement about viewpoints, or distrust in the capabilities of the government. In that sense, questions are an agenda well-suited to test the effects of conflict: Contentious news articles can often be considered potential subjects for questions. This is the case both for opposition parties, which are keen on exploiting conflict in media coverage as it offers them the opportunity to signal their viewpoints and potentially create a loss of support for the coalition, and for government parties, which may preempt potential harm by tackling the conflictual matter themselves (for a similar reasoning about attack and defense strategies of coalition and opposition, see Thesen, 2012). Moreover, parliamentary questions regularly make it into the news, which means that they are an instrument well-suited for politicians to communicate their reactions to conflict to the larger public. In sum, we formulate the following hypothesis:

H2: The higher the levels of conflict framing in news coverage, the stronger the political agenda-setting effect of the media on parliamentary questions will be.

Before moving on to the Data and Method section, we need to address the issue of causality. A long-standing debate among political agenda-setting scholars deals with the question of whether the media have more impact on the political agenda or vice versa (see, for example, Soroka, 2002; Van Aelst & Vliegenthart, 2013; Wanta & Foote, 1994). Based on the results of many different studies, we can safely conclude that the relationship is reciprocal (Bennett & Livingston, 2003; Kepplinger, 2007; Wolfsfeld, 1997). We thus do not intend to claim that the impact of media on politics is unidirectional. Politicians and the media influence each other, and the former or the latter can be more dominant depending on the circumstances. Importantly, this endogeneity—being inherent to the media–politics relationship—might be challenging research-wise, but does not need to be problematic: It simply represents how things work in reality. And, there is enough evidence that the influence of media on politics is not *only* an effect of politicians reacting to news that they brought in the media themselves: We know that politicians also react to news coming from non-political sources (Van Aelst & Vliegenthart, 2013).

A legitimate concern for this article, however, is that we need to make sure that the effect of conflict framing—if this effect appears to exist—is not purely endogenous. Politicians are an important source of information for journalists, and, especially, elite conflict is interesting for journalists to cover (Davis, 2009). If politicians appear to be highly reactive to conflict news, we need to make sure that this is not merely a function of their own preceding (conflict-rich) behavior. Do politicians react to conflict news because of the conflict framing itself, as we argue in this article, or because the conflict is often political in nature and they themselves are involved in it? We acknowledge that this is an important consideration, and we will deal with this issue further below.

Data and Method

To test our hypotheses, we rely on a dataset that is based on a content analysis of news coverage and parliamentary questions in Belgium and the Netherlands. These two countries—like a lot of other countries in the Northwest of Europe—display many similarities regarding their media and political system. Both countries have a “democratic corporatist media system” (Hallin & Mancini, 2004), characterized by an autonomous neutral and strongly professionalized press. Politically speaking, Belgium and the Netherlands are small, corporatist countries with strong parties, a proportional electoral system, and coalition governments (Lijphart, 1999). Those systems have proven to be prone to general media effects and are thus good cases to test our hypotheses (see, for example, Vliegthart & Mena Montes, 2014). Due to the similarities between the two countries, we cannot make generalizations about systems that are very different (e.g., the United States), yet we can be confident that effects, if existing in both countries, probably also exist in many other, similar European countries such as Denmark or Switzerland.

In Belgium, we coded all *oral* parliamentary questions and interpellations asked in the plenary meeting from 1999 until 2008 ($N = 4,584$). For the Netherlands, we use a random sample of *written* parliamentary questions from the period 1995 to 2011 (roughly 500 per year, $N = 7,850$, roughly 20% of the total number of written questions submitted). All questions are submitted and asked by legislators. We choose those different agendas (oral vs. written questions) because of differences between the two countries regarding the specific mechanism of questioning. In Belgium, a large part of the weekly plenary meeting is dedicated to oral questions, which are systematically covered by the media and have a highly symbolic status: They are the main instrument for politicians to clash (Vliegthart & Walgrave, 2011a). Belgian written questions are much less visible and often technical in nature or about local affairs. In the Netherlands, oral questions are answered in a strict 1-hr weekly session, and the number of oral questions asked is therefore much smaller than in Belgium (Green-Pedersen, 2010); their number is too limited for the purposes of this article. Written questions, on the contrary, regularly receive media attention in the Netherlands (Van Aelst & Vliegthart, 2013), and their function and status can be compared with that of Belgian oral questions, though they might be somewhat less visible.

All parliamentary questions, the *dependent* variable in this study, are issue-coded according to the topic codebook of the Comparative Agendas Project (CAP). This codebook, originally developed in the United States by Baumgartner and Jones (1993; see <http://www.policyagendas.org>) and then slightly adapted to the Belgian and Dutch contexts respectively, contains 28 major topic codes (e.g., “Macroeconomics,” “Health,” “Education,” . . .) subdivided into 247 specific topic codes. All observations get only one main topic code. For this article, we rely on major topic codes, and we only include “political” issues from the CAP codebook (20 in Belgium and 22 in the Netherlands), excluding specific media codes such as “Fires and accidents.” In Belgium, the coding of parliamentary questions is done by converting EUROVOC-descriptors to CAP-codes. Each parliamentary question has a main EUROVOC-descriptor, assigned to it by the parliament itself (thesaurus consists of 6,797 words in total and is used to classify all EU documents). We classified each keyword in the appropriate CAP major topic code and then the coding of oral parliamentary questions was done automatically. In the Netherlands, the written questions are coded manually. Tests for inter-coder reliability performed on a sample of 198 parliamentary questions are satisfactory with a Krippendorff’s alpha of .60.

The media agenda, our *independent* variable, is in Belgium operationalized as domestic newspaper articles from the front section of the quality newspaper *De Standaard* ($N = 20,963$),¹ which is coded daily from 1999 till 2008. For the Netherlands, the newspapers coded are *NRC Handelsblad* and *de Volkskrant* ($N = 69,669$) for the period 1995-2011.² In Belgium, all newspaper articles are coded manually. All coders were native speakers of the Dutch language and received extensive training. For the Netherlands, a random sample of 13% of the newspaper articles is coded manually ($N = 9,207$). The articles that are coded manually are used as input for a supervised machine learning (SML) procedure. In such a procedure, the computer learns from human-coded documents to predict content-analytical variables for similar documents—in this case, issue categories and conflict framing in newspaper articles (see further below for coding details). The human-coded articles compose the “golden standard” that is used to train the computer. It is a complete bottom-up process where no additional information is given to the computer except the articles, presented as a list of (preprocessed and) weighted words (“bag-of-words” approach), where rare words are assumed to carry a higher discriminatory power and are assigned a greater weight, and the coding of the human coder. In information sciences, numerous algorithms have been developed that distinguish features of the documents in the training set to code other similar documents. Their performance can be assessed by training on a sample of the human-coded data and use the other part of the coded data to assess *accuracy*—that is, the percentage of agreement between human coder and computer. For issue coding, a linear support vector machine algorithm performs best and is used. For conflict framing, a combination (“ensemble”) of various commonly used algorithms turned out to give the best results and is used to code the complete set of newspaper articles. Accuracy scores are reported below. For a more elaborate description of the procedures and technical details, we refer to Burscher, Vliegenthart, and De Vreese (2014, 2015).

Issues are again coded according to the CAP codebook. Krippendorff's alphas are sufficient with .82 and .69 for Belgian (based on a sample of 75 newspaper articles) and Dutch (based on a sample of 198 newspaper articles) data, respectively. Computer coding of the Dutch data reaches an accuracy level of 72%. Conflict framing in the news is measured using the following question: "Does the article explicitly mention disagreement about an issue between people/groups/parties/countries, yes (1) or no (0)?" Krippendorff's alphas are .62 and .47 for Belgian and Dutch data, respectively. We acknowledge that the score for especially the Dutch data is low, yet after visual and statistical inspection of the data, we think we can still validly use them for the purpose of this article—for more details, see below.³ The accuracy score for the computer-coded data is 77%, which is actually higher than the human inter-coder agreement of 72%. Coding guidelines and concrete coding examples are provided in the supplemental appendix.

All data are aggregated into a pooled time-series structure, with weeks nested in issue categories. For each agenda, the weekly share of attention for each of the major issue categories is determined. Both the independent (media) and the dependent (parliamentary questions) variable refer thus to the proportion of attention for a given issue in a certain week. The conflict framing measure indicates the proportion of news about a certain issue in a certain week that contained conflict. We aggregate on the weekly level because it fits the weekly parliamentary cycle well—there is a plenary meeting once a week—and because we expect media influences to take place at short time intervals (see also Vliegthart & Walgrave, 2011b). In Belgium, weeks are constructed from Thursday to Wednesday as the plenary meeting takes place on Thursdays. The weeks without plenary meeting (e.g., parliamentary break during the summer or elections), and thus without oral questions, are left out of the dataset. As such, we make sure that the dataset does not contain missing data, which would be problematic for time-series analyses; this technique is regularly used in time-series agenda-setting research (see, for example, Vliegthart & Walgrave, 2011b). For the Netherlands, this is no problem as written questions can be asked throughout the year. Descriptive statistics are provided in the supplemental appendix. The tables show that there are quite large differences between issues with respect to parliamentary attention, media attention, and conflict framing. Moreover, the standard deviations indicate that these variables also vary considerably within issues over time.

The pooled time-series structure of our datasets asks for a careful consideration of the used method for analysis. First, to deal with the temporal dependency (*autocorrelation*) of the dataset, we include a lagged dependent variable in each of our models.⁴ Second, to meet one of the requirements of *causality*, namely, that the cause has to precede the consequence, we additionally use lagged values for our independent variables. Third, an important issue when dealing with pooled time-series is the issue of *heterogeneity*. Heterogeneity is the variation across units (issues in this case) that is not captured by the variables included in the model. Leaving possible heterogeneity unaddressed might result in biased results. To deal with heterogeneity, we include a dummy variable for each unit (fixed effects). This means that inter-issue variation is captured by dummy variables, and the analysis focuses on intra-issue variation in

parliamentary attention. In other words, conflict framing is not treated as an issue characteristic: We model the variation in conflict framing *within* a given issue. As we formulated no expectations on time invariant (issue) characteristics and, as the descriptive statistics in Online Appendix II and III demonstrate, conflict over the same issue does differ considerably over time, this is a viable option. Moreover, it offers the advantage that our results would probably hold if we controlled for other factors found to moderate the political agenda-setting effect. Due to data availability, we cannot control for all these factors here, but as many of them are stable issue characteristics (such as issue obtrusiveness, see, for example, Soroka, 2002; or issue ownership, for example, Vliegenthart & Walgrave, 2011b) and (largely) time invariant, this would have no impact on our findings, as all issue variation is captured by the dummy variables included in the models.

By using lagged independent variables, we make sure that in our models, media attention precedes political attention in time. However, as acknowledged in the theory section, it is possible that this media attention is, in its turn, a consequence of preceding political action, as media and politics interact continuously. We will test this with a Granger-causality for time-series cross-sectional data, following the procedure as recently suggested by Hood, Kidd, and Morris (2008). Even more importantly, we need to make sure that the effect of conflict framing is not endogenous. It would be problematic for the argument of this article if politicians only reacted more on conflict news about conflict situations in which they themselves were involved. We will test this for the Belgian data by including a variable “political” in the model. This variable is originally coded on the level of the individual news item as a dummy, indicating 1 when *the news item is political in nature or mentions at least one political actor* (Krippendorff’s alpha is .81), and it is then aggregated to the weekly level like the conflict framing variable. Assuming that politicians are most of the time mentioned in articles about conflicts they are involved in, we would expect the “political” variable to (at least partly) take over the effect of conflict framing if we had an endogeneity problem. The results of these tests are reported in the section below.

Results

Table 1 (Belgium) and Table 2 (the Netherlands) present the results of our analyses. For both countries, we include two models: one with only the main effects and one that includes the interaction between media attention and conflict framing. The results reveal significant autoregressive elements. Furthermore, in line with the general idea of political agenda-setting, we find that media attention for an issue in the previous week significantly influences parliamentary attention for the same issue in the subsequent week, although more so in Belgium (coefficient of .167) than in the Netherlands (.044). This confirms **H1**.

H2 focuses on the moderating role of conflict framing. We expected that conflict framing would increase the effect of media attention on parliamentary attention. This hypothesis is confirmed for both countries. The effects are substantial. The biggest effect is found in Belgium: If an issue is presented as non-conflictual at all, a 1%

Table 1. Predicting Attention in Parliamentary Questions—Belgium.

	Model 1	Model 2
	Main	Interaction
Parliamentary questions ($t - 1$)	0.062*** (0.013)	0.059*** (0.013)
Media ($t - 1$)	0.167*** (0.020)	0.081** (0.028)
Conflict ($t - 1$)	0.002 (0.003)	-0.009* (0.004)
Media \times Conflict ($t - 1$)		0.233*** (0.053)
Constant	0.051*** (0.004)	0.054*** (0.004)
N (observations)	5,640	5,640
N (weeks)	282	282
N (issues)	20	20
R^2 (adjusted)	.2355	.2380

Note. Standard errors are given in parenthesis. Issue dummies included in the analyses but not reported in table.
* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Table 2. Predicting Attention in Parliamentary Questions—The Netherlands.

	Model 1	Model 2
	Main	Interaction
Parliamentary questions ($t - 1$)	0.044*** (0.007)	0.044*** (0.007)
Media ($t - 1$)	0.044*** (0.016)	0.011 (0.022)
Conflict ($t - 1$)	0.005* (0.002)	0.002 (0.002)
Media \times Conflict ($t - 1$)		0.092* (0.040)
Constant	0.031*** (0.003)	0.031*** (0.003)
N (observations)	18,700	18,700
N (weeks)	850	850
N (issues)	22	22
R^2 (adjusted)	.1306	.1308

Note. Standard errors are given in parenthesis. Issue dummies included in the analyses but not reported in table.
* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

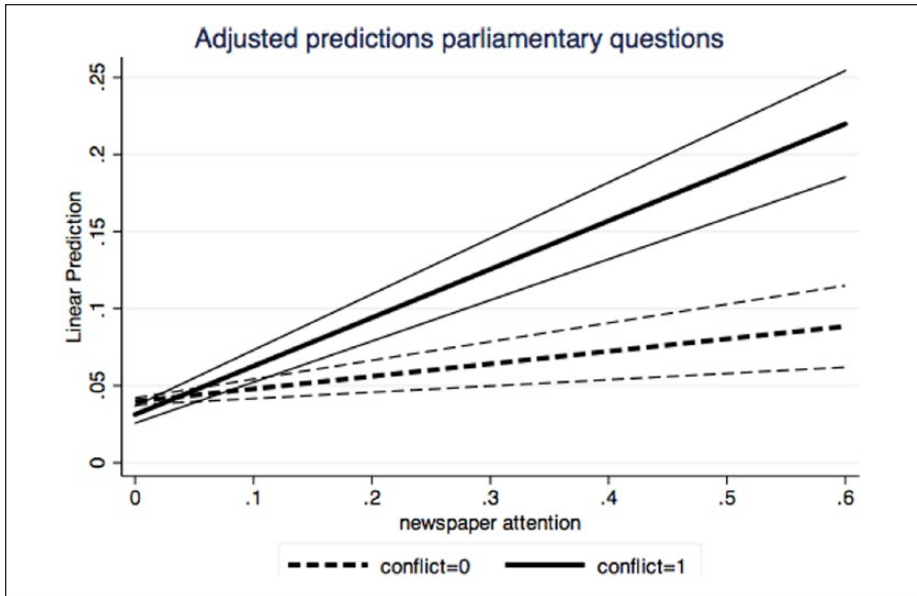


Figure 1. Interaction effect between newspaper coverage and conflict framing for Belgium. Note. 90% confidence intervals.

increase in media attention results in a .08% increase in parliamentary attention. If the issue is presented as completely conflictual, this effect increases to .31%. For the Netherlands, the political agenda-setting effect size ranges from a (nonsignificant) .01% for a non-conflict situation to .10% for completely conflictual media coverage. Figures 1 and 2 provide graphical representations of the interaction effects. They show the predicted parliamentary attention for the range of media attention for an issue that is not framed in conflict terms and for an issue that is always framed in conflict terms.

Regarding the directionality of the media-politics relationship, Granger-causality tests reveal that in both countries, parliament is (also) Granger-causing media for at least some of the issues: for Belgium, $F(20, 7869) = 2.871, p < .001$; for the Netherlands, $F(22, 18700) = 2.460, p < .001$. Substantially, this means that some of the influence of media on parliament might be an effect of previous parliamentary action, rather than a completely independent media effect.

This finding is not problematic as such, but we need to make sure that the effect of conflict framing is not endogenous. Therefore, we add the variable “political”—and the interaction term with media attention—to the Belgian model (Model 2 in Table 1, results not reported in the table). This does not significantly change the results for the interaction term between media attention and conflict framing ($b^* = 0.20, t = 3.43, p = .001$). “Political” itself ($b^* = -0.00, t = -0.69, p = .488$) and the interaction term with media attention ($b^* = 0.10, t = 1.89, p = .059$) do not take over the effect of conflict framing: Their coefficients (b^*) are not significant on the .05 level. We can be confident

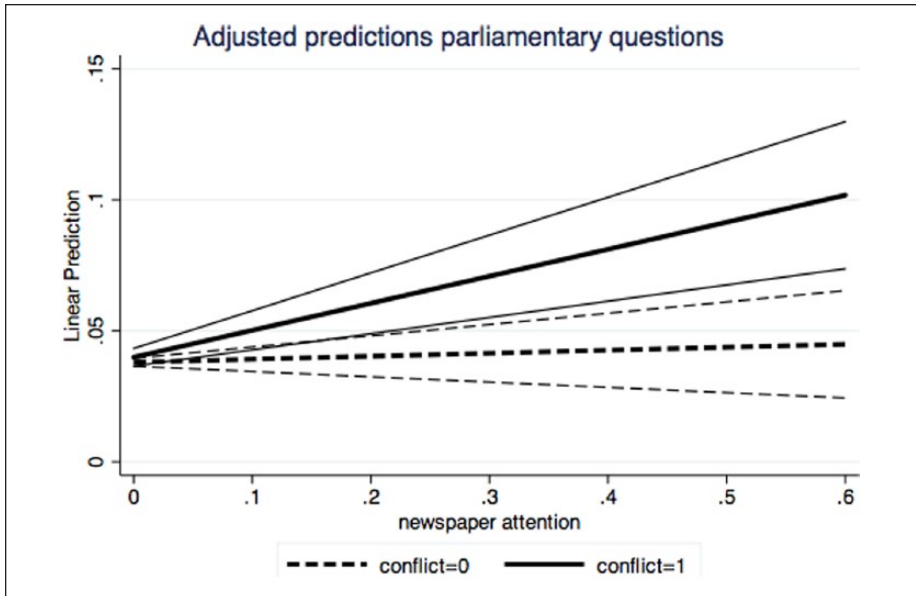


Figure 2. Interaction effect between newspaper coverage and conflict framing for the Netherlands.

Note. 90% confidence intervals.

that our claim about conflict framing is valid and that politicians react more to news because it contains conflict and not because it is originally political in nature.

Although the effects of conflict framing are significant and substantial, the increase in the explained variance (adjusted R^2) between the first and the second model is relatively low. Conflict framing matters with respect to media influence, but it can explain only a small part of the total variation in parliamentary attention for issues. This is especially the case for the Netherlands. Here, it is important to remember that we investigate written questions, which may be used by politicians somewhat less for responding to conflict than the oral questions in Belgium. The fact that the effect is significant and in terms of effect size substantial, even when studying this agenda, may be considered as a relevant finding.

Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this article demonstrate that conflict framing has not only cognitive effects on citizens, as we know from the existing literature, but that it also has behavioral effects on politicians. Conflict acts as a *catalyst* of political agenda-setting effects. Issues that attract media attention become more politically consequential when they are presented in a conflictual manner. Very much in line with previous findings of Thesen (2012) and Van der Pas (2014), this indicates that politicians do not simply

“scan” the media agenda and adopt it unconditionally. Rather, the content of the coverage matters and is taken into consideration.

Although we find this pattern in both Belgium and the Netherlands, Belgian questions generally seem to be more media-driven than Dutch questions. It may be that written questions, which we studied in the Netherlands, are somewhat less salient and also receive less media attention than oral questions (or interpellations) in Belgium; yet we cannot prove this assumption. Still, the fact that we do find the expected effects in both countries even when using different political agendas and relying on different coding procedures reassures us that conflict framing really matters. Here, we also have to note that the coding of conflict does not reach desired levels of reliability, adding noise to our measurement of conflict and thus making the estimation of the effect size less precise. Although we have no reason to assume that our measurement is systematically biased and it might well be that results would even be more pronounced with a better measurement of conflict, future research has to devote more attention to the coding of conflict. It might then take a more detailed approach, distinguishing different types and levels of conflict—ranging from the expression of different opinions about policy issues to fundamental and personal disagreements.

Testing our main hypotheses in two different countries and finding largely the same results makes us confident that our results can be generalized to other Western European countries with similar media and political systems. We can only speculate about the extent to which results would be different in countries with other system characteristics. We think that an interesting feature to take into account in this respect is, for example, party polarization. Most countries in Western Europe, including Belgium and the Netherlands, display similar degrees of polarization (Dalton, 2008). We can expect that in countries where media and political systems are more polarized, such as Spain or the United States, effects of conflict framing are even stronger as politicians will feel less constrained to use conflictual material than in consensus-oriented countries (Vliegenthart & Mena Montes, 2014). Future research will have to demonstrate whether this is indeed the case.

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Notes

1. *De Standaard* represents the Flemish media agenda; we currently do not have data available from the Walloon part of Belgium. Previous research has shown high overlap between the Flemish and Walloon media agendas (Vliegenthart & Walgrave, 2008). Furthermore, media effects are likely to be stronger if we could also account for the Walloon media market and thus obtain a complete assessment of the Belgian media agenda.
2. This imbalance—we have two Dutch newspapers and only one Belgian newspaper—does not pose any problems in terms of analyses. We take all news articles of the Dutch newspapers together, and the structure of the Dutch dataset is similar to the Belgian one.
3. First, news articles in which the presence or absence of conflict framing is very clear are coded most reliably. And, it is probably those obvious cases of conflict framing that have most impact on political attention for issues. Second, the differences between coders seem to be random; we have no reason to believe that there are systematic coding errors. Logistic regressions reveal that the likelihood of disagreement does not depend on time (year in which the article was published), newspaper, or major issue that the article dealt with. Overall, as our analysis is not descriptive but explanatory—it is the relationship between conflict and another variable, parliamentary questioning, that we are interested in—unreliable coding may add random noise to our model, but it is unlikely to substantially alter our results. If we find an effect of conflict framing on parliamentary questions, we can be confident that this effect exists and it would potentially even be stronger without noise on the data. That said, know that we do not intend to claim that inter-coder reliability is not important; rather, we argue why our data—in this particular case—are of sufficient quality to investigate the question that we are interested in. Note furthermore that the pairwise agreement is substantial (81% and 72%) as Krippendorff’s measure heavily corrects for chance with dichotomous variables.
4. For the Belgian data, the lagged dependent variable refers to questions asked in the preceding plenary meeting, which may have taken place more than 1 week before.

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