

**What Draws Political Elites' Attention and Why.  
The Accessibility and Applicability of Media Information.**

*ABSTRACT — Attention is a crucial resource in politics. If issues do not attract political attention, they do not gain agenda status, and policies regarding these issues will not change. The study tackles the question of political attention by focusing not on political output (e.g. parliamentary questions or legislation) but on MPs' attention allocation preceding formal action. We argue that individual attention by political actors is a multi-faceted phenomenon consisting of cognitive, behavioral and intentional aspects linking initial exposure to subsequent action. We draw upon a large survey of Belgian MPs right after exposure to news media stories in the preceding week. Our theory holds that the recall of messages is determined by the accessibility of the message, that elite conversation is additionally sparked by partisan applicability, and that in order for a signal to induce politicians' intention to act it must, on top of being accessible, also be institutionally applicable.*

Word count: 8,495 words

Attention is a crucial resource in politics. Starting with the early work of Schattsneider (1960) and Bachrach and Baratz (1962) the fact that some issues draw the attention of government while others fail to do so, is a classic finding in political science. Attention is not only scarce, it is also consequential: if issues do not attract political attention, they do not gain agenda status, and policies regarding these issues will not change. Agenda setting work confirmed that attention is a prerequisite for political decision-making (see for example: Cobb and Elder 1971; Walker 1977; Kingdon 1984; Baumgartner and Jones 1993; Jones and Baumgartner 2005). Some of the literature has focused on the dynamics of attention, and found that political attention is irregular and spiked (e.g. Jones, Sulkin, and Larsen 2003) and that different institutions display different attention dynamics (e.g. Baumgartner et al. 2009). Most of this work considers political attention as an *independent* variable, though, as the explanation of other political phenomena (typically policy change). Relatively little work has been devoted to dealing with political attention as the *dependent* variable: What attracts political attention?

The question is broad. We tackle it here by conceptualizing political attention as a problem of *information processing*. Politicians, on a daily basis, are bombarded with signals from society drawing their attention to underlying issues. Elites suffer from a constant state of information overload (Simon 1955; Simon 1985). Interest groups ask for meetings, over breakfast politicians' spouses talk about a problem at the children's school, constituents complain about a local problem, colleagues address issues during caucus meetings, reports from think tanks come in and request attention for urgent crises, the news media continually bring problems under political elites' attention, and so on. The demands from society are infinite, while the resources to attend to these demands are limited (Jones 2001). Cognitively and institutionally constrained, politicians face large volumes of incoming signals about

society. They have to be selective in what they pay attention to. What information gets through and is actually attended to?

Extant work lacks a clear answer because of theoretical and methodological reasons. Theoretically, attention is affected by a host of factors at different levels: the message itself, its source and the receiver of the message—and by the intricate interplay between message, source and receiver. It is exceedingly hard to theorize about which signals seep through and which do not. We reduce the complexity in this study by primarily zooming in on characteristics of the message and the receiver. The source of the information is left aside (kept constant). We put forward a novel theory of political attention allocation and test it taking message features into account and interacting these with individual features of politicians.

From a methodological point of view as well, investigating which information passes the gates is tricky. More generally, studying elite behavior in a rigorous and systematic way is hard, and rare. Considering public action to be a measure of political attention, extant studies focused on what politicians *do*—asking questions, voting in parliament, initiating bills, giving speeches (see for example Walgrave, Soroka, and Nuytemans 2008; Edwards and Wood 1999). Political attention itself, though, which inevitably *precedes* the publicly recorded action, remains an elusive phenomenon that is never captured directly. Just like the preceding studies, ours cannot directly measure ‘pure’ political attention either. Yet, we present three new measures of political attention broadly defined. We argue that political attention has cognitive, behavioral and intentional aspects and offer, for the first time, direct indicators of these three faces of political attention all preceding formal action. We argue that political attention, and definitely its cognitive and intentional aspects, are almost impossible to tap on an aggregate, institutional level—only individuals can devote attention to something without publicly displaying some kind of action. We cannot study how institutions think, or what they

intend to do. Therefore, we focus on individual MPs within institutions (for a similar argument see: Wood and Vedlitz 2007).

To measure which information gets through and attracts political attention and which does not, one needs a measurement of the *universe* of information that political actors are exposed to. This is necessary to avoid selecting on the dependent variable and to ensure the presence of negative cases among the observations—bits of information that have not been attended to. Therefore, this study employs an innovative measurement of the universe of a certain kind of information available to political elites (media stories) and directly taps which signals get through.

Concretely, during a week we analyze the universe of media information in the small country of Belgium (Flanders) and, immediately after that week, via a large face-to-face survey of legislative branch members, test whether MPs have attended to a random sample of media stories. The study keeps the source of the information (only mass media) constant, allowing to fully focus on how features of the message (we content analyzed all news stories) combined with features of the receiver (all MPs) predict whether a story has been picked up by political elites.

Studying media signals has several advantages. For one, it is possible to map the universe of information, at least in a small country like Belgium and for a short period of time. Information from other sources, from interest groups for instance, is impossible to register as it is often not public and fragmented. Next, mass media signals form a major source of information for politicians. In fact, political elites are exposed to huge daily portions of media coverage (Herbst 1998; Eilders 1997; Van Aelst et al. 2008). Finally, there is a host of recent work on the political agenda-setting power of the media (see for example: Walgrave and Van Aelst 2006) on which we can draw to build a theory about individual political attention.

Our theory of political attention relies on the dual concepts of *accessibility* and *applicability*, well-known in the political psychology and political communication literature (see for example: Althaus and Kim 2006; Scheufele and Tewksbury 2007). Put simply, we argue that accessible and applicable information draws more elite attention. Things are a little more complicated in the sense that there are different sorts of attention. Concretely, our study taps (1) recall of news stories, (2) conversation with colleagues about news stories, and (3) intended action on news stories. We argue that these three different faces of political attention are affected by distinct features of information. We demonstrate that politicians behave much like ordinary people when it comes to merely noticing information; the more accessible information is, the more they recall it. Yet, when it comes to a sort of political attention that is closer connected with their political task—tapped here via informal conversations with colleagues and intended action in parliament—other features of the message kick in and applicability, the perceived relevance of the information for the task at hand, becomes an important filter. In sum, some news stories better match the cognitive and task-related needs of political elites.

### **Theory & hypotheses**

Nobody can pay attention to all available information or even everything that appears in the media. There is simply too much of it. The bounded rationality approach, one of the main theories about human information-processing, elaborates on this idea in general terms (Bendor 2010). It is impossible to take all available information into account and make fully rational decisions. People use heuristics, i.e. mental shortcuts, to select only relevant bits of information (Jones 1999). Politicians are not different from ordinary people in this respect. Similar to all other human beings, they lack the time and the cognitive ability to be totally informed (see e.g. the work of Simon 1985). When politicians have to decide which

information to pay attention to, they as well develop ways to gauge what is important without taking all available information into account.

Tversky and Kahneman (1973), pioneers in the branch of psychology investigating which heuristics people employ, consider how easily a certain thought comes available in the mind as a crucial heuristic people use to process information and make decisions. This is determined by, amongst other things, two factors: accessibility and applicability. The *accessibility* of information in memory increases after exposure to a stimulus (Higgins 1996). The more prominent the stimulus, the more easily it can be retrieved from working memory. Applied to media coverage: the more news coverage about an issue or event, the larger the chance that political elites are being (multiple times) exposed to it: the story becomes ‘top of mind’. In a sense, accessibility refers to the passive role of the receiver of the information who cannot help but attend to an ubiquitous story. Cognitive psychology refers to ‘bottom-up’ processing or stimulus-driven attention to signals. It relates to attentional processes solely driven by features of the stimulus itself that draws our attention whether we want it or not (Theeuwes 1991). So, our first general proposition is that *politicians devote more attention to news stories that are more accessible.*

*Applicability* is a second way in which information comes more readily available (Althaus and Kim 2006). Information draws more attention when it is considered as being applicable to the task at hand or, in other words, when there is a perceived link with the decision that has to be made (Higgins 1996). This is even more the case, we believe, for politicians compared to common people. Politicians attend to large chunks of information from society—it is their job to represent society—and hence need an efficient selection procedure to deal with the constant risk of information overload (see Zaller 1992 for a similar account of how citizens process information). For example, elites’ staffers predigest incoming information and consciously filter out information that is not concretely usable. Kingdon

(1973), in his study about congressmen's voting decisions, extensively underpins the importance of information being 'politically relevant', so as to be used by politicians. Similarly, recent aggregate agenda setting studies, though implicitly, incorporated perceived applicability as well and find that politicians use those bits of media information that fit their political task and strategy (see e.g. Green-Pedersen and Stubager 2010; Thesen 2012; Vliegenthart and Walgrave 2011a). Applicability, thus, refers to the active role the information's recipient plays by deliberately filtering and weeding in what comes in. Cognitive psychologists speak in this case about 'top-down processing', or goal-driven, endogenous attention as these attentional processes are under the control of the attending person (Theeuwes 1991). That *politicians attend more to news stories which they perceive to be applicable to their task*, forms our second general proposition.

In cognitive psychology individual attention is defined as "... *the cognitive process of selectively concentrating on one aspect of the environment while ignoring other things*" (Anderson 2009, 519). This makes attention hard to measure directly except by actually observing people while they are exposed to incoming signals. This study deals with *political* attention of individual elites and we employ a broader definition. We conceptualize individual political attention as the cognitive, behavioral and intentional processes *following* exposure to information coming in from the environment and *preceding* formal political action. Our definition covers the entire process linking initial exposure to subsequent action. We propose three measures of attention tapping the different faces of attention studied (concrete measures are dealt with in the next section).

First, attention leads to the storage into memory of the phenomenon that one has attended to. Being exposed to loads of media coverage, only a part really gets through and sticks in politicians' minds. It is a recurring finding in cognitive psychology that higher levels

of attention lead to more retention (Johnson and Proctor 2004). Therefore, our first measure of attention is ‘recall’.

The second measure of individual political attention we label ‘conversation’. Of all the stories a politician recalls, due to scarcity of time, he can only talk with colleagues about a fraction of them. Conversing with colleagues, mostly from the same party, is a more costly, time-consuming, and scarce form of attention. Their conversational behavior, even informal, is more constrained than their recall. Talking about news with colleagues signals a broader political interest for the story and indicates higher levels of political attention. Attention is in this case actual, yet still informal, behavior.

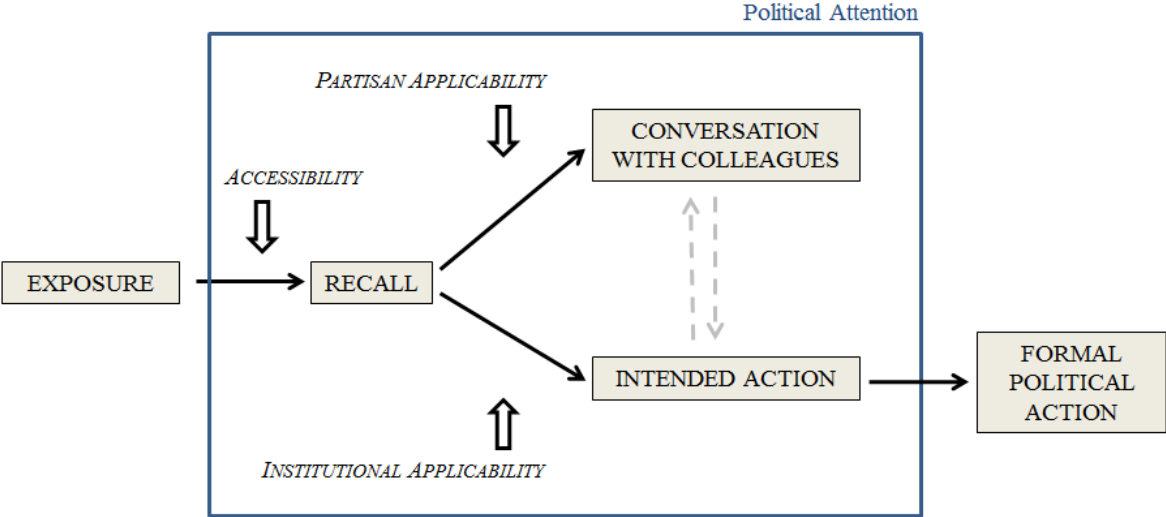
Third, attention for a story may materialize in plans for formal political action, we label this ‘intended action’. Planning action, and definitely *saying* that one plans formal action, is entirely costless. But, it is the form of attention measured here that probably comes closest to formal action. One needs to plan to take action before one can effectively act. Planned action, in cognitive psychology also called ‘planned behavior’, forms the link between beliefs and action (Ajzen 1991).

Including a cognitive (recall), a behavioral (conversation) and an intentional aspect (intended action) our three indicators present a novel and encompassing measure of individual political attention. The relationship between these three faces of political attention and the structure of our argument are summarized in Figure 1. In brief, (1) *recall* is caused by exposure, moderated by accessibility; (2) recall can lead to *conversation*, while partisan applicability moderates it; and (3) recall can lead to *intended action* with institutional applicability as a moderator. In other words, we consider recall as the first and necessary stage of the political attention process. Conversation and intended action are not preconditions for each other, but they may affect each other: informal conversation can inspire a politician to undertake formal action; and vice versa a politician intending to take action may want to



discuss it first with colleagues. Note furthermore that exposure to a news story can be direct, when the politician reads the newspaper or watches television, but also indirect via interpersonal communication (a friend or colleague tells him about the story during a conversation). But theoretically speaking, still, recall then occurs before the politician starts conversing about the story himself. Below, we further develop these general ideas, conceptualize the three moderators, and formulate concrete hypotheses.

Figure 1 – Theoretical framework



ACCESSIBILITY AND RECALL — Just like common people, elites notice stories more easily when they receive more media coverage. This is in line with the basic priming idea that has been confirmed over and again in psychology and political science (in political science, see for example: Iyengar and Kinder 1987). When humans are exposed to recent and frequent messages, the chance that they recall a message increases as the message becomes easily retrievable (accessible) from memory (Althaus and Kim 2006; Claibourn 2008). We expect accessibility to play a crucial role for recall—which is basically a matter of storage in memory—and, as a consequence, also for conversation and intended action, because recall is

a precondition for conversation and intended action (see Figure 1). We thus hypothesize that accessibility matters for the three faces of political attention.

*H1: Accessibility matters for recall, conversation, and intended action.*

Concretely, we present two straightforward indicators of accessibility: (1) story prominence and (2) media wideness. Story prominence refers to the amount of coverage that a news story receives. A newspaper, for instance, can be largely devoted to a single news fact, or it can present the fact in one small, almost invisible article. Media wideness increases with more outlets covering the same story. Story appearing in a wider range of news outlets should get noticed more. In fact, the agenda setting literature found that the impact of media information on politics is larger when the information is congruent across outlets (Eilders 2000).

PARTISAN APPLICABILITY AND CONVERSATION — The second face of attention is conversing about a media story with colleagues. Due to the strong fractions in the parliament we are talking about in Belgium—with regular meetings within the parliamentary party, offices grouped per party, common party rooms, very strong party discipline etc.—we suppose those conversations about news stories mainly concern chatting with fellow MPs from the same party. We anticipate the stories they talk about over coffee to be not only the most accessible stories, as discussed above, but more in particular the stories most applicable to partisan competition. Applicability means that information matches the task at hand, or at least that the MPs consider the information to fit their task. Many tasks MPs undertake in their party are intimately linked to the intense party competition so prevalent in most European party systems and in Belgium as well. MPs talk more about news stories that are relevant to party competition because this is the strategic interest that all politicians, among and within parties, share.

*H2: Partisan applicability matters more for conversation than for recall and for intended action.*

Which stories are perceived as having a high partisan applicability? We propose two dimensions: (1) the degree to which news is politicized, and (2) issue-ownership. For both indicators, we expect an effect on conversation more than on recall or intended action.

News can be politicized or not. Politicians are an exceptionally important source of information for journalists (Bennett 1990) and, as a consequence, politicians feature frequently in news stories. Consequently, the media are a valuable source of information for politicians (Davis 2007). From the news, politicians learn about other political actors' priorities, opinions and tactics. The news is a means for them to gauge the political 'mood' (Sellers 2009). As a consequence, whether a news story is about politics, becomes an important criterion of its usefulness for MPs. Politicized stories are perceived to be more partisan applicable and, as a consequence, lead to more conversation among fellow MPs.

A second indicator of partisan applicability is issue-ownership. Issue-ownership refers to the fact that voters consider a party to be the best able to handle an issue (Petrocik 1996). Parties owning issues have a strategic advantage over other parties on 'their' issues and emphasize them whenever they can. Extant work found that parties react more on news about issues they are the issue-owner of, because it fits their partisan strategy (Green-Pedersen and Stubager 2010; Thesen 2012; Vliegenthart and Walgrave 2011b). So, as an issue gets coverage in the media, we expect MPs of the owning party to talk more about it as they perceive the issue to be more applicable. After all, these issues are of interest to every MP of the party.

INSTITUTIONAL APPLICABILITY AND INTENDED ACTION — Whether an MP plans to undertake action or not depends partly on the accessibility of the story, since accessibility affects recall and recall is a precondition for intended action (see Figure 1). But even more

important is the applicability of the story to the formal task an MP is confronted with; we label this the institutional applicability of a story. MPs write bills, ask questions, organize hearings... Some media stories are more relevant for these tasks. It is not the case that MPs would not be interested in other stories, but they cannot, and are not supposed to, turn those stories into action in parliament.

*H3: Institutional applicability matters more for intended action than for recall and for conversation.*

We present two factors tapping into institutional applicability: (1) whether the story plays in a regional (Flemish) setting and (2) whether the story matches the specialization of the MP at stake. We expect each of those factors to correlate stronger with intended action than with recall and conversation.

As many other states around the globe, Belgium is a federal state with a regional competence level. The Flemish Parliament, the institution studied here, exercises its authority within a specific geographic region (Flanders) and within certain policy domains. Media information, as to generate political (intended) action, must be useful for the task a Flemish MP has to fulfill. Hence, the institutional applicability, and thus the intended action, should be higher for news that plays in a Flemish, regional setting as compared to local or national news.

Our second measure of institutional applicability is the match between an MP's specialization and the news story at hand. Within each political party of a certain size, there is a division of labor and MPs specialize in a few specific policy domains. MPs are member of parliamentary committees corresponding to their specialization. They are in constant search for information about the issues they are specialized in. The media are a source of information about issue-related problems in society and possible solutions. Journalists have often covered specific issues for a long time and their expertise and opinions are valued by MPs (Davis

2009). Hence, the more a news story's issue content fits the specialization of an MP, the higher its relevance for this MP's institutional task.

We formulated three hypotheses and presented six measures of how news characteristics, sometimes in interaction with MPs' features, impact the political attention MPs devote to specific news stories. Our hypotheses held that accessibility is key for recall, conversation and intended action—the three faces of political attention under study—and that, in addition, conversation is typically a consequence of the partisan applicability of the news, while intended action is mainly the result of the news' institutional applicability.

## Data & methods

**MEDIA CONTENT ANALYSIS** — During one week in May 2013 (May 8<sup>th</sup> – May 14<sup>th</sup>) Belgian (Flemish) mass media coverage was content analyzed. Every day, eight news outlets were entirely coded: five newspapers (*De Standaard*, *De Morgen* and *De Tijd*, all broadsheets, and *Het Laatste Nieuws* and *Metro*, popular papers), two television news broadcasts (7 p.m. news from *VRT*, the public channel and *VTM*, the largest commercial channel) and one radio news broadcast (7 a.m. news from *Radio 1*, the public radio channel). One week fits the weekly parliamentary cycle—committee and plenary meetings take place once a week. We expect recall, conversation and intended action to occur quickly after media exposure (see Walgrave and Van Aelst 2006). With about 6 million inhabitants, the Belgian (Flemish) media market is relatively small and not very fragmented making it possible to content-analyze almost all news during a week<sup>1</sup>. Without coding a lot of additional media stories, we cannot prove that

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<sup>1</sup> There are some more national newspapers (*Het Belang van Limburg*, *Gazet van Antwerpen*, *Het Nieuwsblad*) and the websites of newspapers and TV-stations, but their news agenda largely overlaps with the outlets we cover.

the week we picked is representative for Belgian (Flemish) media coverage in general. When coding, it appeared to us as a normal week far from any election campaign with a small number of very large stories and a great deal of minor stories.

In a first phase, all individual news items (e.g. each newspaper article) were assigned to ‘news stories’. Two news items belong to the same news story when (1) they deal with exactly the same topic and when (2) the event they cover, is set on the same geographical location. The reason for grouping news items into broader news stories is that humans process different bits of information about the same news fact as a whole. For example, different outlets, over different days, covered a news story about two boys who went missing and the progress of the investigation. When asked about their attention for the disappearance, people do not distinguish between different details of the story, but consider the different aspects as one larger news fact. Our unit of analysis is thus a news story. The 1,847 individual news items that appeared in the eight outlets under study, were grouped into 769 separate news stories<sup>2</sup>. This is the universe of news during that one week in May 2013.

Then, from these 769 stories, a stratified random sample of 150 news stories was taken. Prominent news stories (appearing in more than one outlet) were oversampled, while foreign news stories and soft news stories (e.g. about sports and celebrities) were undersampled (Table 1). It makes no sense to confront politicians with a large number of non-prominent stories, because the chance that they paid attention to these stories is small. It would have generated lots of zeroes and decreased the variance of our dependent variables.

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<sup>2</sup> Regarding the assignment of individual news items to news stories, a random subset of news items was coded by two coders. The overlap was 93%, indicating sufficient intercoder reliability.

Table 1 – Stratified random sample of stories (number of stories in population between brackets)

	Hard news		Soft news
	Domestic	Foreign	
Prominent (> one news outlet)	100 (135)	20 (42)	5 (85)
Not prominent (one news outlet only)	15 (188)	5 (113)	5 (206)

Third, to construct our independent variables, every news item belonging to one of the 150 selected news stories was coded in-depth<sup>3</sup>. The codings of the individual news items were then aggregated on the news story level. *Media wideness* indicates how many different news outlets covered the story. *Story prominence* is the average number of individual news items that these outlets spent on the story. *Politicized news* gives the share of news items per news story that are politicized; whereby a news item is considered to be politicized when it mentions an action or statement of a Belgian political actor. The variables measuring issue-ownership and matching specialization were constructed by coding the main topic of each news story according to the topic codebook of the Comparative Agendas Project (CAP). We calculated *Issue-ownership party* via the party manifestos of the last Flemish elections of 2009, by measuring the importance a party attributes to the issue the story is about using an identical coding scheme (CAP). This proxy of issue-ownership is often used in political agenda-setting research (see e.g. Vliegenthart and Walgrave 2011a). Two independent MPs are excluded from the analyses, they did not have a party. *Matching specialization* is a dummy variable indicating 1 when the issue the news story is about matches the issue competence of one of the parliamentary committees the MP is member of. We retrieved committee membership from the official website of the Flemish parliament. *Regional setting*

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<sup>3</sup> To test the intercoder reliability of the in-depth codings, 50 items were coded by two coders. All Krippendorff's alphas exceeded .70, indicating sufficient reliability.

gives the share of news items per news story playing in the Flemish region (and not exclusively the national, local or European level).

**SURVEY OF FLEMISH MPs** — The face-to-face MP survey (administered on iPads and laptops) took place on May 15<sup>th</sup>, 2013 in the Flemish parliament, during the plenary session. In total, 93 out of 124 MPs participated in the survey. A response rate of 75% is exceptionally high for elite research<sup>4</sup>. All MPs were informed beforehand. We received support from the chairman of the Flemish parliament, who encouraged all members to participate. Parliament ushers helped us to target the MPs that had not participated yet. MPs were surveyed in the hall and the lobby when they left or entered the plenary meeting.

Belgium is a strongly federalized state with large competences (education, environment, culture, foreign trade...) situated at the regional level (Deschouwer 2009). The Belgian regions (Flanders, Wallonia and Brussels) manage about half of the total government's budget and the Flemish parliament deals with more than half (60%) of the Belgian population. There is a lot of mobility from national to regional parliaments in Belgium, and regional elections are by no means second order elections but are as 'national' as the general elections, with media devoting equal levels of attention to both elections. In a sense, Belgium is a two-nation country and studying one of the regions comes very close to studying a state-wide, national system.

Thirty news stories were presented to every MP. Our dependent variables—*recall*, *conversation*, and *intended action*—were assessed by asking them three questions for every story: (1) *Have you seen or heard about this story during the last week, yes or no?* If yes, (2)

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<sup>4</sup> Moreover, there is no selection bias. Sixteen MPs were abroad during the plenary meeting and could therefore not complete the survey. Respondents do not significantly differ from non-respondents in terms of gender, age, years of experience in parliament, standing (chairs of committees and caucuses), and party.



*Have you talked about this story with colleagues, yes or no?* (3) *Have you considered to undertake action about this story, yes or no?* For each MP, the thirty stories were randomly selected out of 160 news stories: the sample of 150 real news stories, as described above, plus ten *fake* news stories, made up by the researchers. The fake stories were included to test for recall error and to assess the reliability of our measures. The respondents were informed about the inclusion of these fake stories at the beginning of the interview which may have made them complete the survey more attentively. The sample of ten fake stories contained six fake domestic stories, two fake foreign stories, and two fake soft news stories, about a diverse range of issues (economy, justice, transport, health, culture,...). On average, 2.1 out of thirty stories presented to each MP were fake.

CONTROLS — Apart from the six independent variables of interest—the indicators gauging accessibility, partisan and institutional applicability—we use five control variables. Since the information-gathering behavior of specialist and generalist MPs may differ (Tetlock 2005), we control for their self-perceived degree of specialization, measured by the question: *Some politicians specialize in one or a few policy domains, while others focus on a lot of different domains. Where would you place yourself on a range from 0 (I focus on one domain) to 10 (I focus on a lot of different domains)?* Second, we include a dummy variable measuring whether a story has been covered by one of the broadsheets (*De Standaard, De Morgen, De Tijd*); broadsheet coverage may be considered as more reliable leading to more political attention. Third, we control for whether a story is foreign news, contains both foreign and domestic aspects, or is entirely domestic (*Domestic news* coded as values from one to three respectively). The Flemish Parliament has both domestic and international competences so we expect Flemish MPs to attend to all types of news. Fourth, we include a measure of the recency of the story—the number of days between the last news item on a news story and the

MP survey—to test whether a decay effect occurs. Fifth, to control for possible party effects, we incorporate party dummies in all analyses. For all descriptive statistics, see Table 2.

Table 2 – Descriptive statistics

<b>Variable</b>	<b>Mean (S.D.)</b>	<b>Freq. (%)</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>Level of measurement</b>
<i>Dependent variables</i>				
Recall	0.51 (0.50)		2,448	MP-story combination
Conversation	0.18 (0.39)		2,448	MP-story combination
Intended action	0.06 (0.24)		2,448	MP-story combination
<i>Independent variables</i>				
Story prominence	1.41 (0.87)		150	Story
Media wideness	3.01 (1.70)		150	Story
Politicized news	0.14 (0.29)		150	Story
Issue-ownership party	0.04 (0.04)		2,448	MP-story combination
Matching specialization	0.13 (0.34)		2,448	MP-story combination
Regional setting	0.16 (0.34)		150	Story
<i>Controls</i>				
Generalist MP	4.25 (2.23)		89	MP
Broadsheet coverage	0.76 (0.43)		150	Story
Domestic news	2.47 (0.80)		150	Story
Recency	4.23 (2.11)		150	Story
Party:				
Christian Democrats		21 (23.60)	89	MP
Liberals		19 (21.35)	89	MP
Socialists		10 (11.24)	89	MP
Far-right		14 (15.73)	89	MP
Flemish Regionalists		13 (14.61)	89	MP
Right-wing Liberals		6 (6.74)	89	MP
Greens		6 (6.74)	89	MP

ANALYSES — We run three separate models with recall, conversation and intended action as the dependent variables (N = 2,448)<sup>5</sup>. Our analyses are crossed random-effects

<sup>5</sup> From all 2,790 cases (93 MPs x 30 stories), there are 83 cases where the answer on one of the survey questions (dependent variables) is missing; 193 cases are about fake stories; there are 56 cases of independent MPs for whom we do not have issue-ownership data; and 10 cases for which the generalist-specialist measure is missing. Thus: 2,790 – 83 – 193 – 56 – 10 = 2,448 cases.

logistic models with Laplace approximation. Crossed models are needed because the data are nonhierarchical (news stories are not nested in MPs or vice versa); instead, every unit is cross-classified by the factors ‘MP’ and ‘news story’. Since our three dependent variables are binary, we estimate logistic models. All three models include the same independent variables. Because the number of observations and the independent variables in the models are identical, we can compare the strength of effects across models.

## Results

We first discuss the relationship between the three dependent variables. In 49 per cent of all 2,448 cases a story was not recognized by the MP: (s)he indicated that (s)he had not heard or read about it. Of the stories that were recalled, 63% did not lead to conversation nor to intended action; 26% sparked conversation (but did not lead to intended action); 2% led to intended action (but not to conversation); and 10% led to conversation and intended action. Apparently, when MPs consider to undertake action on a story, they mostly discuss it with their colleagues as well. Note that, for the fake stories, we find that recall is infrequently affected by error; this reinforces confidence in the reliability of the measures<sup>6</sup>.

A cursory look at Table 3 shows that almost all independent variables seem to matter for some type of attention; but there are differences between models. In any case, all three full

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<sup>6</sup> Of the 193 fake stories presented to MPs, recall occurred in 15 cases (8%), conversation occurred twice (1%) and intended action only once (0.5%). A considerable number of these incorrect answers were related to one specific fake story that, unfortunately, was very similar to a news fact that had truly happened earlier. The fake story said ‘*Referee assaulted a soccer player, who was brought to hospital*’, while two weeks before, a soccer player had attacked a referee. The confusion caused by this mix-up explained almost half of the incorrect answers: 6/15 for recall, 1/2 for conversation, and 1/1 for intended action.

models perform better than the empty models: the Akaike Information Criterion (AIC) decreases when adding independent variables. The empty models show that there is more variance on the level of the news story than on the MP-level. When explaining attention for stories, the difference between stories is larger than the difference between MPs. Our models, focusing mostly on features of the *message*, succeed in considerably reducing this unexplained variance as can be seen in the table.

RECALL — Several factors have a significant, positive effect on recall. The two accessibility measures (shaded block) are, as predicted, crucial variables in explaining recall of a news story. Prominence and wideness significantly affect recall. When stories are covered by more news outlets, and when they are covered more prominently by these outlets, they are recalled by more MPs. The first part of Hypothesis 1 is confirmed. Another variable, not related to accessibility, also appears to significantly affect whether MPs can recall a story as well: whether it matches their specialization.

CONVERSATION — The conversation model, explaining an MP's talking about news stories with colleagues, displays notable differences with the recall model. Most importantly, the effects for the two indicators tapping partisan applicability are both significant and larger than in any of the other two models where they are not significant. Politicized news sparks chatting<sup>7</sup>. And, if a story deals with an issue owned by their party MPs tend to talk more about it. In sum, Hypothesis 2 gets confirmation. Furthermore, prominence and wideness still matter. Both coefficients of the accessibility indicators are similar in size compared to the recall model. As expected in Hypothesis 1, politicians also talk more about the most

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<sup>7</sup> To test whether Flemish MPs converse in particular about politicized stories in which they themselves are covered (indicating endogeneity), we excluded the stories mentioning *Flemish* MPs from the politicized news stories. It affected the results only slightly: politicized news remained a significant predictor of conversation.

prominent and widespread news stories. Finally, there also is an effect of matching specialization on conversation.

INTENDED ACTION — For intended action, the significant effect of both institutional applicability measures is apparent and the size of the coefficients exceeds those of previous models, corroborating Hypothesis 3. When stories play in a Flemish setting and when the story matches their specialization, MPs tend to make more plans to undertake action. Intended action is driven by institutional applicability. Regarding the accessibility indicators, story prominence still matters, although the coefficient is somewhat smaller compared to the two previous models. The effect of media wideness is no longer significant. Hypothesis 1 again receives (some) support from the data.

INTERACTIONS — The theoretical model we put forward and tested in Table 3 is a simple, direct effects model. One may wonder whether reality is really that straightforward and whether accessibility and applicability do *interactively* determine recall, conversation and intended action. For example, the effect of applicability may be multiplied by accessibility. Therefore, we tested models including interaction effects of the two accessibility measures with the four applicability indicators. None of the interaction effects reached conventional levels of significance (results not shown in table). Hence, we can conclude that our additive model best grasps the underlying reality.

Table 3 – Analyses

		<b>Recall</b>				<b>Conversation with colleagues</b>				<b>Intended action</b>			
		(1) Empty		(2) Full model		(1) Empty		(2) Full model		(1) Empty		(2) Full model	
		Coef.	S.E.	Coef.	S.E.	Coef.	S.E.	Coef.	S.E.	Coef.	S.E.	Coef.	S.E.
Accessibility	Story prominence			0.66*	(0.18)			0.68*	(0.19)			0.51*	(0.19)
	Media wideness			0.40*	(0.07)			0.42*	(0.11)			0.07	(0.13)
Partisan applicability	Politicized news			0.79	(0.31)			1.93*	(0.44)			0.57	(0.53)
	Issue-ownership party			2.33	(1.72)			6.91*	(2.35)			2.49	(3.29)
Institutional applicability	Regional setting			0.44	(0.27)			0.75	(0.38)			1.21*	(0.44)
	Matching specialization			0.76*	(0.16)			0.69*	(0.20)			1.44*	(0.25)
Controls	Generalist MP			0.09*	(0.04)			0.08	(0.05)			0.09	(0.07)
	Broadsheet coverage			0.25	(0.23)			0.60	(0.38)			1.28	(0.51)
	Domestic news			0.32*	(0.12)			0.51	(0.20)			0.50	(0.26)
	Recency			-0.06	(0.05)			0.05	(0.07)			0.11	(0.09)
	Party (ref.: Christian Democrats)												
	Liberals			0.17	(0.23)			-0.27	(0.35)			-0.92	(0.46)
	Socialists			0.29	(0.28)			-0.17	(0.42)			0.03	(0.50)
	Far-right			0.36	(0.25)			0.24	(0.38)			0.09	(0.45)
	Flemish Regionalists			-0.28	(0.26)			0.26	(0.39)			0.14	(0.46)
	Right-wing Liberals			0.01	(0.34)			0.07	(0.51)			-0.76	(0.66)
Greens			-0.51	(0.34)			0.23	(0.51)			-0.61	(0.67)	
Constant		0.09	(0.14)	-3.52*	(0.51)	-2.69*	(0.24)	-7.88*	(0.81)	-4.28*	(0.32)	-8.58*	(1.07)
	Number of stories	150		150		150		150		150		150	
	Number of MPs	89		89		89		89		89		89	
	Number of observations	2,448		2,448		2,448		2,448		2,448		2,448	
	Unexplained var. (MP)	0.65		0.55		0.87		0.87		0.96		0.88	
	Unexplained var. (story)	1.42		0.82		2.14		1.21		1.76		1.19	
	AIC	2,913		2,776		1,780		1,677		952		896	

Note: \* p &lt; 0.01

CONTROLS — Some control variables too exert some influence on recall. Generalist MPs recall more stories. Domestic news is more recalled than foreign news. Broadsheet coverage has no effect. There also is no decay effect: the most recent stories are not more recalled than then slightly less recent stories. Finally, there is no effect from parties.

So far, the results match our theory. Recall is mainly a matter of accessibility, conversation is determined by accessibility and partisan applicability, and intended action is caused by accessibility (although to a smaller extent) and by institutional applicability. The models in Table 3 only inform us about the significance of the effects and give no indication of their size. What does our theory mean in real numbers? In order to get a better sense of what the effects actually mean, we calculate the predicted probabilities of the three dependent variables (for the fixed effects only), for different values of the relevant independent variables, keeping all other independent variables at their mean.

Figure 3 - Predicted probability of recall for the accessibility indicators (with 95% confidence intervals)

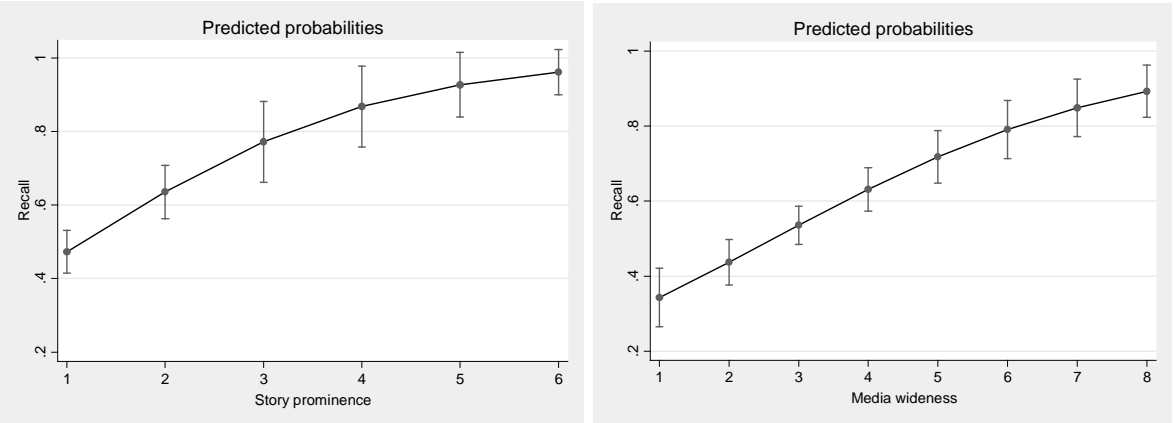


Figure 3 presents the results for recall. The effect of story prominence, our prime indicator of accessibility, on recall is huge. When outlets reporting a story spend on average six items on the story instead of one, the chance of recall increases from 47 per cent to 96 per cent—approximating almost perfect recall. Figure 3 (first graph) shows how the marginal

effect of one additional news item about a story decreases as the total number of items increases. A similar logic applies for media wideness: a story that appears in all eight news outlets has a chance of 89 per cent of being picked up (recalled) by an MP; whereas for a story mentioned in only one outlet this chance is only 34 per cent. The predicted probabilities underscore the fact that accessibility is crucial for recall, especially because prominence and wideness may often go hand in hand, possibly resulting in real ‘media storms’ that are as good as impossible to ignore for MPs.

Figure 4 - Predicted probability of conversation for the accessibility and partisan applicability indicators (with 95% confidence intervals)

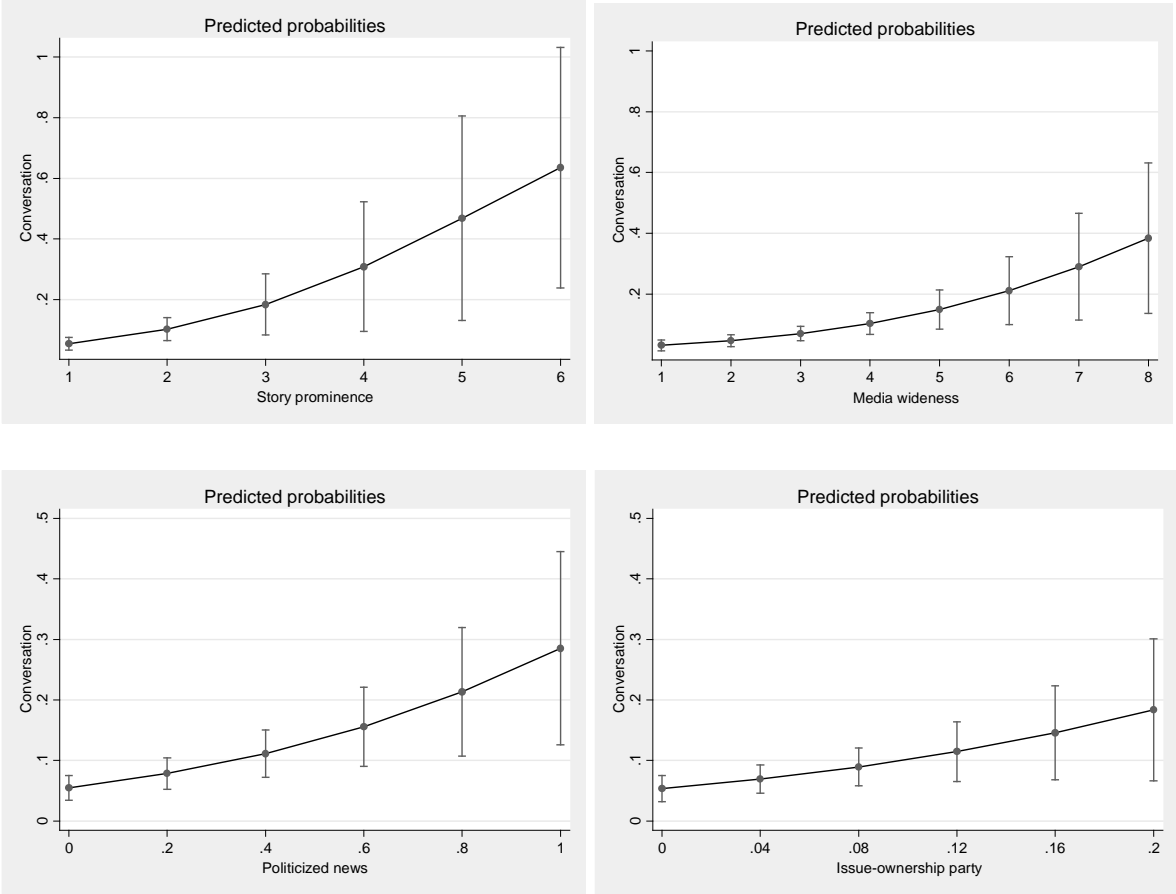
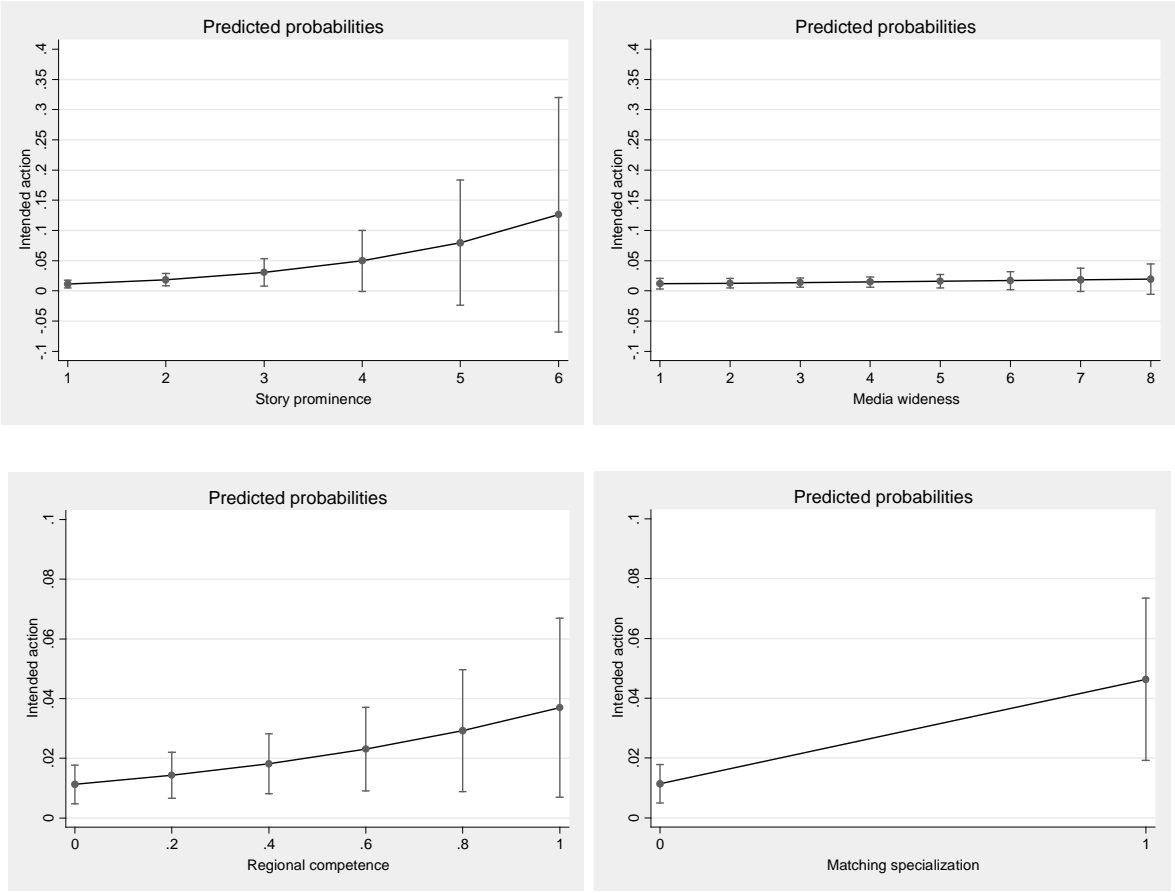


Figure 4 (upper part) displays that accessibility matters for conversation as well. The odds of conversation increase drastically when going from minimum to maximum values of



prominence and wideness (from 5% to 64% and from 3% to 38% respectively). The curves differ from those for recall, however, with the marginal effect of an additional item or outlet decreasing as the total amount increases. Furthermore, the two partisan applicability indicators both perform pretty strong with regards to conversation (lower part of Figure 4). MPs talk a lot more about politicized news. When every news item that covers a story contains statements and/or actions by political actors, the chance that an MP talks about the story with his/her colleagues is 28 per cent, which is much higher than the 5 per cent chance when not a single news item of a story is politicized. The issue-ownership of an MP's party (0/1) also leads to substantial increases of conversations by this MP, from 5 per cent to 18 per cent.

Figure 5 - Predicted probability of intended action for the two institutional applicability indicators (with 95% confidence intervals)



For intended action (Figure 5), the effect size of story prominence is considerable (1% to 13%), yet media wideness does not have any effect, shown by the flat line in the graph (upper left graph of Figure 5). The indicators of institutional applicability exert a considerable influence, though. When all items on a story play in a regional setting, the probability that an MP intends to take action is 4 per cent, which is much higher than the 1 per cent when the story has nothing to do with Flanders. Matching specialization is a strong predictor of intended action as well (1% to 5%).

All in all, the predicted probabilities suggest that most of the effects found in the models are substantial and represent large shifts in MPs' attention allocation in the real world.

## **Conclusion and discussion**

The study argues that political attention is a multi-faceted phenomenon. Drawing on a broad conceptualization of political attention—including the cognitive, behavioral and intentional processes linking exposure to action—we tapped three faces of individual political attention: recall, conversation with colleagues and the intention to undertake institutional action. We argued that distinct features of the incoming message (and of the receiving MP) affect whether a signal is noticed, whether it is informally talked about among elite members, and whether elites plan to follow-up by undertaking formal action. Table 4 summarizes the results. The arrows indicate significant positive effects.

By and large, our theory gets support from the evidence. The pure recall of a media story is affected by accessibility: the more news there is about a story, the more it is remembered. Consequently, the most accessible stories also have a higher chance of being discussed and being acted upon, although intended action is remarkably less driven by accessibility than conversation. Additionally, when stories allow to assess what other parties

are doing, and when they address issues on which a party has a strategic advantage, elites tend to talk more about them. The political talk of the town is determined by the stories that are relevant for party strategy. We labeled this ‘partisan applicability’. Institutional (intended) action, in turn, is determined by another type of informational applicability: its institutional applicability. Stories that are situated in the specialized field of an MP and that are related to the Parliament’s geographic region are more easy to transform into formal action; they lead to more plans to act. The results support our claim that elites are selective in the information they retain, process, and work with.

Table 4 – Overview of results

		<b>Recall</b>	<b>Conversation with colleagues</b>	<b>Intended Action</b>
Accessibility	Story prominence	↗	↗	↗
	Media wideness	↗	↗	
Partisan applicability	Politicized news		↗	
	Issue-ownership party		↗	
Institutional applicability	Regional setting			↗
	Matching specialization	↗	↗	↗

One factor plays a role for all types of political attention scrutinized: individual specialization. Matching specialization not only affects MPs’ intended action; also for the cognitive (recall) and behavioral (conversation) aspect of the attentional process, specialization affects how MPs deal with mass media information. This strongly suggests that politicians selectively pick from the media what they perceive to be relevant for their specialized task.

Our study provides a new answer to the question ‘What draws political attention?’. We tackled the question from an information-processing perspective. Part of the process is very much determined by political elites’ common human limitations. Politicians react in very much the same way as citizens, as more and stronger stimuli lead to better recall, and more talking and intended action. However, elites’ political attention allocation is also determined

by the specific partisan/institutional environment in which they operate. Applicability is the key mechanism here. The specific task environment of politicians makes them selective in a very special way. In other words, part of the attentional process is generally human while another part of it is specifically ‘elitist’.

In their seminal work on the agenda-setting dynamics in US institutions, Baumgartner and Jones (1993; 2005) argue that the typical punctuated nature of aggregate, institutional political attention—institutions ignoring issues and then suddenly and briefly overattending to them—is the consequence of general limitations of the human mind on the one hand and of institutional design on the other hand (they call this cognitive and institutional ‘friction’). Yet, Baumgartner and Jones’ argument about the dual causes of aggregate punctuated attention patterns remains largely speculative and they do not offer evidence to what extent and how these two factors matter. Our results—for the first time offering evidence about *individual-level* attentional processes *preceding* action—support the notion that both human and institutional factors matter for political attention allocation. The general human cognitive infrastructure determines how political elites deal with information (role of accessibility). But institutions matter hugely as they define the relevance of a signal (role of applicability). In other words, our study innovates by grounding the aggregate pattern found on the institutional level in the behavior of individuals operating *within* those institutions.

Going beyond the crude dichotomy cognition vs. institution, we further show that there are at least two different aspects of the institutional context affecting political attention allocation patterns. Two types of applicability were theorized and each primarily affected a specific mode of political attention: the partisan context makes actors attentive (talking) to cues that are related to party competition; the institutional context makes actors attentive (planning action) to cues that are directly useful for their formal parliamentary task. The dual

role of elites—they are representatives of a party and at the same time they are member of parliament—has a clearly distinguishable effect on what they attend to.

It is our novel design drawing on data at the individual level and focusing on the phases preceding formal action, that allowed us to empirically distinguish between accessibility and applicability effects. Also, we would not have been able to disentangle the two types of applicability effects, one caused by the role of MPs as being party soldiers and the other by being an MP with a certain specialization, had we not drawn on such precise evidence. Our findings thus not only empirically ground aggregate-level conjectures at the individual level, they also add to our understanding of how political attention comes about and contribute with new ideas.

It deserves repeating that we did not look into formal political action, only into attention (potentially) preceding action. We expect that the applicability filter would even be stronger, due to more constraints and costs, had we assessed actual behavior and not just intended behavior. Taking a step back and not looking at action but directly at the preceding political attention phase has helped us to unravel the process leading to political action and partly opening the black box of political agenda-setting. We do not claim that our approach does any better than the research studying formal action, but we do believe that we can explain better both theoretically and empirically why those studies have found what they found.

The study has several limitations. To start with, the six indicators used above form incomplete indicators of the underlying concepts of accessibility, partisan, and institutional applicability. The partisan applicability of a news story, for example, is not only a matter of its politicized character and of issue-ownership—the indicators we used here—but also, for instance, of how the story relates to a party's stance on the underlying issue. Although our

measures are partial, we do believe that they tap the underlying concepts reasonably well, accessibility probably better than partisan and institutional applicability.

The most important drawback is that while our theory about individual elites' attention allocation is general, the test we proposed was partial. The indicators of accessibility and applicability incorporated in the models mostly grasped features of the *message* (e.g. prominence, politicization). Some variables modestly gauged *receiver* features (matched specialization, issue-ownership) but there is much more variation at the receiver level than we could test for here. A full test should also include the *source* of the information, and compare attention allocation effects across sources. Media information—the source kept constant in this study—has specific features that must have affected what we found: media coverage is public, not exclusive, superficial, fast, not policy oriented, unsolicited etc. Information coming in from interest groups, for example, probably displays many of the opposite characteristics. It could be that interest group signals carry further and are more efficacious. Still, even for these other sources of information, we would argue that accessibility and partisan and institutional applicability are the main mechanisms leading to selection and attention allocation.

Finally, the study only draws on one country and on one level of government. The Belgian state structure is special and there is no doubt that some factors studied are of no importance in other political systems. Though many states have some sort of multi-level structure in place with competences dispersed over different levels, the regional competence level effect we found, for instance, may be an idiosyncratic Belgian phenomenon. Thus, having comparative data of elites in different countries would be useful. However, we hold that the results are generalizable in the sense that our broader theory about accessibility and applicability may comparatively hold true. The precise features making information relevant and applicable differ between political contexts but we believe the mechanisms to be

identical. Politicians, just like all information-processors, are boundedly rational in what they let come through. They pay attention to the most important developments in their environment (accessibility) but they attend more actively when information is relevant for their party and for their own political position (applicability).

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