

Inter-party Agenda-Setting in the Belgian Parliament: The Role of Party Characteristics and Competition

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In this article we explore the inter-party agenda-setting dynamics in the Belgian parliament during the period 1993–2000 and investigate whether and when parties respond to the attention paid to issues by other parties in parliament. We rely on an elaborate coding of parliamentary questions and interpellations, as well as media coverage and government meetings. Pooled time series analyses demonstrate considerable agenda-setting effects from one party agenda to another. The results indicate that in particular parties from the same language community, parties that participate in government and extreme-right and environmental ‘niche parties’ have agenda-setting power.

Keywords: Belgium; agenda-setting; parliamentary questions; issue attention

The agenda-setting approach is increasingly used to study political processes (Baumgartner and Jones, 1993). Taking attention to political issues as the key prerequisite for policy change, the main focus is on when, how and why certain political actors pay attention to specific issues. Increasingly, scholars explore how the agenda of one political actor influences the agenda of another political actor (e.g. Van Noije *et al.*, 2008; Vliegenthart and Walgrave, 2009; Walgrave and Van Aelst, 2006). Until now this research has been limited in scope in at least two respects. First, it often focuses on the influence of the mass media, which is perhaps not a very typical political agenda. This is due to the fact that the agenda-setting approach and accompanying research into the transfer of issue salience from one agenda to another is strongly developed in the area of communication science, where the approach has provided one of the main theoretical frameworks since the early 1970s and has been used elaborately to assess mass media impact on public opinion and political actors (Graber, 2005). Second, although parliament is often considered to be an important institution for study – it is often the dependent variable – it is almost always treated as a unitary actor when researchers talk about ‘the’ parliamentary agenda (e.g. Walgrave and Van Aelst, 2006). In well-functioning democracies, however, parliament consists of at least two parties that have different ideologies and political preferences and give different priorities to issues. In this article we try to overcome these two shortcomings. More specifically, we are interested in the dynamics of internal parliamentary agenda setting: when are parliamentarians from one party influenced by parliamentarians from other parties? How and to what extent do parties differ in their influence on – and thus their agenda-setting power over – other parties?

We address these questions by looking at the attention twelve different political parties devoted to 25 political issues in the Belgian federal parliament during the 1993–2000 period. Based on weekly data on parliamentary questions and interpellations and a longitudinal time series design, we assess the agenda-setting relationships between the parties in the Belgian parliament. First, we more elaborately introduce the political agenda-setting approach and base our arguments on the ideas of issue competition advanced by scholars of party politics. From these arguments we formulate several hypotheses regarding the contingency of agenda-setting effects.

The Contingency of the Political Agenda-Setting Process

The term ‘agenda setting’ is widely used in political science, yet with a different meaning in different schools of research. George Tsebelis (2002), for example, uses agenda setting to refer to the institutional power of political actors to issue a proposal to which other actors must react. However, the approach to agenda setting we follow here does not rest on the idea of this notion of a first actor but on the idea of resource scarcity for different actors.

The origins of what can be labelled as the ‘policy agenda approach’ to politics can be traced back to classic works by Kingdon (1984) and Schattschneider (1960). Since then, the approach has gained momentum, especially in the study of American politics but increasingly in Europe as well (John, 2006). One of the most recent articulations of the ‘policy agenda approach’ is elaborated in *Agendas and Instability in American Politics* by Frank Baumgartner and Bryan Jones (1993). The basic premise of this approach is that political decision making requires political attention – taking the form of resources, time, personnel, etc. – and that shifts in attention are a precondition for policy change. Primarily, agenda-setting scholars investigate why some issues get more attention from parties, government, parliament, interest groups, etc. than other issues.

A key finding of contemporary agenda-setting research is that the level of political attention is often stable for a long time but that there are then often sudden and strong changes in political attention, which are termed ‘punctuations’. Jones and Baumgartner (2005) suggest *cascading* to be one of the explanatory mechanisms of the punctuated character of many policy agendas, where cascading implies that political actors imitate each other. To phrase it differently, imitating behaviour can partly account for the fact that attention to issues is stable over time, with only a few irregular but significant upsurges in attention. We employ this idea of cascading and imitation as an explanation of how different political actors imitate each other by adopting each other’s issue agenda.

Imitation implies that there is a causal relation between the agendas of different actors whereby attention by actor A leads to attention by actor B. A fair amount of work has been done by different scholars and applied to very different agendas as dependent and independent variables. For example, Gary King and colleagues take an agenda-setting approach to look at the impact of various US social movements on different stages of the policy

process (King *et al.*, 2007; Soule and King, 2006). Ideas about agenda-setting processes and how one actor impacts on the other's issue attention have perhaps been best developed within the realm of political communication. Here, numerous studies have focused on how issue saliency travels from the media agenda to the public agenda (McCombs and Shaw, 1972), between different media (Vliegenthart and Walgrave, 2008) and from the media agenda to political agendas (for an overview see Walgrave and Van Aelst, 2006). Recent political communication research has moved away from solely establishing the presence of agenda-setting effects and increasingly focuses on the *contingent* factors that determine the occurrence and size of agenda-setting effects (see, among many others, Edwards and Wood, 1999; Vliegenthart and Roggeband, 2007).

More specifically, regarding parliamentary activities most of the existing research focuses on the legislative activities of members of parliament (MPs) (Döring, 1995; Döring and Hallerberg, 2004). However, during recent decades a seminal increase in non-legislative activities of MPs has been identified (Green-Pedersen, 2010; Norton, 1998; Wiberg, 1995). These non-legislative activities encompass, among others, parliamentary questioning and interpellations, and these are seen as being increasingly powerful tools for determining which issues attract political attention and consequently direct means to influence government, fellow MPs and other political actors. Determining what issues are discussed politically – that is, setting the agenda – is regarded as a key factor in exerting political influence (Green-Pedersen, 2010; Jones and Baumgartner, 2005). Parliamentary questioning is an important tool in this respect, but it is important to acknowledge that it is also important in other ways: it fulfils an important function in policy advocacy (Bertelli and Dolan, 2009; Norton and Wood, 1993) since MPs use questions to represent certain constituencies and to defend the interests of these particular population segments, not only to set the agenda.

In many agenda-setting studies that look at the influence of media on one or more political agendas, attention to issues in parliament is considered as a dependent variable. Research in different contexts has shown that especially the 'symbolic' parliamentary agenda – consisting of parliamentary questions and oral debates – is affected by media coverage (Edwards and Wood, 1999; Van Noije *et al.*, 2008; Vliegenthart and Roggeband, 2007; Walgrave *et al.*, 2008), although in some cases the reverse relationship can be identified (Edwards and Wood, 1999; Vliegenthart and Roggeband, 2007). In most of these studies, however, the parliamentary agenda is treated as being unitary and there is no distinction between the different political parties in parliament. None of the studies thus far has considered the agenda-setting processes that occur *within* parliament. This is surprising, since whoever is capable of setting the parliamentary agenda determines to a considerable degree which issues are considered in the legislative process as a whole.

In the next section, we first discuss why agenda setting between political parties in parliament can be expected. Second, we propose four party characteristics – both from the party that exerts the influence as well as from the party that is influenced – that might affect the size of agenda-setting effects.

Inter-party Agenda-Setting in Parliament: Hypotheses

MPs and parliamentary parties face a strategic choice: they can address the same issues as their fellow MPs/parties, or they can try to differentiate themselves from what others are doing by embracing different issues. Of course, parties have very good reasons to address *other* issues than those of their competitors and there is a whole literature on party competition and issue ownership that investigates how and why parties try to bring different issues to the fore (Budge, 1993; Green, 2007; Green-Pedersen, 2007; Klingemann *et al.*, 1994; Petrocik, 1989). Some scholars argue that the battle over what issues are on the political agenda (i.e. 'issue competition', see Carmines and Stimson, 1993), rather than how different political actors position themselves towards those issues, has become increasingly important in Western democracies (Green-Pedersen, 2007). Indeed, based on the issue ownership thesis one would expect parties to diverge strongly with regard to which issues they emphasise (Sigelman and Buell, 2004). Attention to 'owned' issues – that is, the issues on which the party has the best reputation – is electorally advantageous. Getting those issues on to the political agenda is then one way to electoral success. Since these issues differ from party to party, their emphasis would also differ widely between parties. Nonetheless, under some conditions political actors may decide that it is best to do what the others are doing and to follow their issue lead. Lee Sigelman and Emmett Buell explain considerable *convergence* in issue attention in US presidential election campaigns by the idea that candidates are obliged to show interest in the major issues of the day, whether they own these issues or not (see also Ansola-behere and Iyengar, 1994). Such issue convergence might well be (at least partly) the outcome of agenda-setting processes: the effects from one agenda or actor on another. The studies mentioned in the previous section have indeed shown that such agenda-setting effects, where one actor imposes their issue agenda on to another, are to be found in highly different contexts. We believe that there are five key characteristics of parliament that foster imitation between its members and that make the presence of agenda-setting effects likely.

First, it does not need much explanation that imitation will only happen when there are several actors. In parliament, this is clearly the case. There is no unitary actor in charge of the parliamentary agenda but rather a collection of MPs, all with their own agendas and interests, who interact with each other. Of course, parliaments cannot simply be considered as a bunch of individual MPs and their behaviour is highly structured by party adherence. It is for this reason that we do not focus on individual MPs but on parties in parliament. In Belgium, as in many other countries, MPs cannot simply put any oral question they wish, though this is different for written questions that are much more dependent on individual MPs' personal tastes and constituencies. The party's parliamentary leadership acts as a gatekeeper and regulates the party's MPs because the number of questions any party is entitled to ask during the weekly Question Time is limited. Consequently, a question slot is a valuable asset which is controlled by the party leadership. Therefore, with regard to oral questions and interpellations, it seems reasonable to take the party – rather than the individual MP – as the unit of analysis. Most parliaments are composed of several parties and, because of this plurality of actors, the chances that

parties imitate each other in their attention pattern are substantial. If one party starts devoting more attention to an issue, other parties may follow.

This relates to a second characteristic of parliamentary activity: structural equivalence. If several actors sit in the same structural position – they perform the same function in a political system – the chances are greater that they will emulate each other's attention pattern. Identification with and access to structurally equivalent actors is higher than to non-equivalent actors, which increases the chance that imitative behaviour will occur. Party MPs all perform the same function in a political system and this increases the likelihood of imitation and agenda-setting influences.

The third factor, which is again related, is fostering imitation: the degree of communication between actors. Only if actors are able to observe each other's reaction – that is, only if behaviour is communicated to other actors – is it likely that imitation will occur. The more transparent the actions of other actors, the greater the chance that imitation effects will occur and that there will be a cascading effect. Parties in parliament are in the business of communicating with each other, most often directly, and therefore their actions are almost by definition public and transparent. Didier Sornette developed this argument for the stock market: the more traders can observe each other, the more they will mimic the behaviour of others (Sornette, 2003, p. 95).

Fourth, if actors are competitors, then emulation is more likely. The fiscal mimicking literature, for example, has shown that in a more competitive environment, when voters can actually compare the fiscal performance of several political entities, these entities will engage more in imitating each other than when there is no competitive setting (Schaltegger and Küttel, 2002). In fact, in a competitive environment actors will monitor the behaviour of others even more closely since they may threaten their own interests. As soon as an actor seems to be displaying successful or potentially successful behaviour, others will start to emulate that behaviour in order not to lose the competition. Even if the success of another actor's behaviour is unknown or uncertain, it still makes sense to imitate it, since imitation reduces the risk of suffering competitive disadvantages. Political parties can clearly be considered competitors, since votes, media attention and public support are all scarce. If a political party – especially a leading and successful one – starts devoting attention to an issue, the chances are high that a good many will follow.

Finally, settings with iterative games with low costs are more sensitive to imitation than settings with one-shot games entailing high costs. Question Time in parliament, for example, happens weekly and many different questions are put during this weekly session; it is a high-frequency and low-cost activity. It does not take much time and effort to put together a question.

In principle, in any political arena these five features will result in imitation and agenda-setting effects. For instance, outside parliament during an election campaign, many functionally equivalent parties compete in low-cost iterative (communication) games. Therefore we also expect that in specific campaign settings parties will emulate each other's issue prioritisation to some extent. The same also applies to different media outlets in a common media market (Vliegenthart and Walgrave, 2008).

These five features of parliamentary question setting where several structurally equivalent, competitive and communicative actors are engaged in a low-cost game result in the basic hypothesis that *inter-party agenda-setting effects will be present in parliament* (H1).

However, there are also reasons to expect that the likelihood of inter-party agenda setting differs between MPs and their parties. We distinguish four factors relating to party characteristics that might affect the occurrence of agenda-setting effects across different parties and for each of those factors we coin an additional hypothesis.

The Belgian political system is characterised by a federal structure in which the language border between Flanders (Dutch speaking) and Wallonia and Brussels (French speaking) is of key importance. Even for the federal parliamentary elections different parties with different candidates run in Flanders and in the French-speaking part of Belgium, and coalition governments in Belgium always consist of Flemish and French-speaking parties. It is likely that this strong divide between Flanders and French-speaking parts of the country will also become visible in agenda-setting patterns. Although it is interesting to see whether parties of either of the two sides are better at setting the agenda of other-language parties, we expect in particular that agenda-setting effects between parties on the *same* side of the language divide are more likely to occur than between parties on different sides of that line. The reason for this is that parties in the same electoral arena are direct competitors and therefore have an interest in imitating each other. They compete for the same part of the electorate who are concerned about the same issues, and thus same-language parties carry higher relevance than other-language parties and their issue attention needs to be monitored and followed more intently. Following a similar logic, Vliegenthart and Walgrave (2008) found comparable agenda-setting patterns between different Belgian media outlets: while the language border does not entirely remove agenda-setting effects between media outlets, they are suppressed to a considerable extent. Therefore, our second hypothesis is that *inter-party agenda-setting effects are more likely between same-language parties* (H2).

Based on the same underlying competition logic that might amplify imitation, we suspect that some parties are more direct competitors than others. An important factor that may determine the level of competition is the ideological proximity of two parties. As several studies have shown, during the past decades voters have become less stable in their voting behaviour and usually choose between parties that are close to each other in terms of policy preferences and ideology (Dalton, 1996). For a political party, this means that parties that are ideologically close can be considered as direct competitors and their actions are more relevant than those of parties ideologically more distant. It is therefore likely that parties are more responsive to parties that are close in ideological terms. This also makes sense from an issue competition perspective: in a multiparty context, issue ownership is less clear-cut than in a situation where the political system is dominated by two parties (Aalberg and Jenssen, 2007; Walgrave and De Swert, 2007). Parties that are ideologically close often compete over issue ownership – for example, socialists and social democratic parties over social welfare – and are thus likely to have a more similar issue agenda as well as to respond when direct opponents devote attention to issues they consider to be their own.

Of course, this mechanism only functions when parties are in direct electoral competition and are operating in the same electoral arena. This means that we only expect this effect when the two parties that are considered are either both Flemish or both French speaking. Therefore, our third hypothesis reads: *the closer parties are ideologically, the more likely that inter-party agenda-setting effects will occur; this only applies when parties belong to the same language group* (H3).

Some parties might be in institutional positions that make them more relevant than other parties. Here, we particularly expect the government–opposition divide – which is key in Western European democracies – to be of crucial importance. Christoffer Green-Pedersen and Peter Mortensen (2010) argue that opposition parties have a structural advantage over government parties for setting the agenda as they are freer to address any issue they see fit, while government parties are more restricted, for example, by the government agreement. On the other hand, we argue that political parties that are members of a coalition government have more opportunities to get their ideas translated into actual governmental decisions and policy; consequently their parliamentary questions and interpellations might carry higher relevance, their actions might lead to actual policy and they are likely to be monitored more scrupulously by the other political parties. Their direct policy-making power makes their questions more influential as well.¹ Therefore, we expect that *agenda-setting effects are more likely for questions and interpellations of government party MPs* (H4).

Finally, the unique position of so-called ‘niche parties’ deserves special attention. As Bonny Meguid (2005) demonstrates in her analysis of environmental and radical right parties in Western European countries, their electoral successes depend to a considerable degree on the extent to which mainstream political parties devote attention to their issues. Also, although dealing with positions rather than issue attention, Joost Van Spanje (2010) demonstrates that successes of extreme right parties are strongly related to mainstream parties’ adjustments in their position towards immigration. Both environmental and radical right parties have been successful in Belgium: both the Flemish and French-speaking environmental parties have gained a stable position in the political arena and the Flemish Vlaams Blok party can be considered as one of the most successful extreme right parties in Western Europe over recent decades, having gained substantial electoral support in the 1990s (Pauwels, 2010). While other Flemish political parties decided to keep the party in a ‘cordon sanitaire’ by agreeing not to engage in any government coalition on any level with the Vlaams Blok (Deschouwer, 2004), this does not mean that they were not affected by the presence of this party in parliament. In fact, these parties continually stressed that while they deliberately ignored and discriminated against the Vlaams Blok as a party, they wanted to win back its voters by addressing the issues they found important. The Vlaams Blok’s Walloon counterpart – the Front National – has been far less successful and only marginally present in parliament during our research period (see Table 1).

The successes of the environmental parties and Vlaams Blok during the research period result in the expectation that their political agenda will be closely watched and followed by

Table 1: Belgian Political Parties Included in our Study

	Abb.	Type [†]	Seats			Ideology
			1999	1995	1991 [†]	
Agalev (Groen!)	Aga	Opposition	9	5	7	Ecological progressive left
Christelijke Volkspartij	CVP	Coalition	22	29	39	Christian democratic centre
Front Démocratique des Francophones [‡]	FDf	Opposition	18	18	3	Liberal nationalistic right
Front National	FN	Opposition	1	2	1	Nationalistic extreme right
Parti Réformateur Libéral [§]	PRL	Opposition	18	18	20	Liberal centre right
Parti Socialiste	PS	Coalition	19	21	35	Social democratic left
Parti Social Chrétien	PSC	Coalition	10	12	18	Humanistic centre left
Socialistische Partij	SP	Coalition	14	20	28	Social democratic left
Vlaams Blok	VB	Opposition	15	11	12	(Extreme) right
Vlaamse Liberalen en Democraten	VLD	Opposition	23	21	26	Liberal centre right
Volksunie	VU	Opposition	8	5	10	Flemish nationalist centre
Écologistes confédérés pour l'organisation de luttes originales	Ecolo	Opposition	11	6	10	Ecological left

[†]In 1991 the Belgian parliament consisted of 212 seats. Rossem, a party that stopped existing in 1995, won three seats in 1991. In 1995 the number of seats was reduced to 150.

[‡]September 1991–June 1999. After June 1999 the composition of the coalition changed into VLD/PRL–FDf–MCC, SP/PS, Agalev/Ecolo.

[§]In the elections of 1995 and 1999, the FDf and PRL together won eighteen seats in the parliament.

other parties. Our final hypothesis is that *niche parties with considerable electoral support are more likely to exert parliamentary agenda-setting power than other parties* (H5).

Data and Methods

Our case is parliamentary questions and interpellations in Belgium. As the agenda-setting literature gradually becomes more and more comparative, recent studies have shown that agenda-setting dynamics differ between countries but that there are many similarities as well. Institutional rules determine how political actors pursue their interests and institutional differences lead to different dynamics. So we can certainly not simply generalise from the Belgian case. On the one hand, the Belgian context may be atypical. Belgium is characterised by an extremely fragmented party system (Anckar, 2000) and this leads to large coalition governments that are required to consist of an equal number of ministers from both sides of the language divide (Deschouwer, 2009). Parties are powerful players and have a very strong grip on policy and on the state (De Winter *et al.*, 1996). These features exacerbate party competition – both between government and opposition and also within government and within the opposition – in a multi-actor parliament. Hence, we would expect that inter-party agenda setting would be particularly strong in Belgium. On the other hand, the fact that half of the parties are irrelevant to the other parties due to the language split and the fact that they compete in different constituencies weakens the claim that the Belgian case would be especially conducive to finding examples of inter-party agenda setting. Competition remains largely confined to a part of the parties in parliament.

Our analysis is based on an elaborate coding of parliamentary questions and interpellations, governmental meetings and media coverage of 25 issues during the period 1993–2000. To assess the presence of parliamentary agenda-setting effects, we perform several analyses where the *dependent variable* is the weekly attention any of the twelve political parties that were present in parliament during our research period pays to any of the 25 issues by asking parliamentary questions or issuing interpellations. Table 1 gives an overview of the political parties that are included in our analyses.

Questions and interpellations are the most important non-legislative activities of most parliaments. In most European countries their number is clearly on the rise (Green-Pedersen, 2010). To obtain our data we coded all parliamentary records for the period 1993–2000, which contained 10,556 interpellations and parliamentary questions. Codes are based on the internationally employed hierarchical EUROVOC thesaurus, designed for coding all EU documents (<http://eurovoc.europa.eu>). The initial 110 issue categories that are used in this thesaurus are collapsed to 25 mutually exclusive categories in order to circumvent small and non-present categories. Table A1 in the Appendix presents the issue categories, as well as the mean weekly number of questions that are asked on each of those issues by all political parties together. Throughout the research period, 237 weeks in which the Belgian parliament met are recorded. Overall, this results in a total of 237 weeks * 25 issues = 5,925 per party.

For each party we conduct a pooled time series analysis in which we estimate the party's current attention to each of the issues based on its own lagged value and the lagged values of the other political parties. It does not take much time for MPs to process and respond to questions and interpellations made by other parliamentarians. We do not use contemporaneous values to meet one of the basic requirements of causality: the cause has to precede the consequence. Therefore, a one-week lag seems to be most appropriate.

Additionally, we include two control variables that are likely to exert an influence on the parties' attention to issues. The first is *Media*: we use a large media database comprising the main evening news of the four major TV stations – two Dutch language (*TV1* and *VTM*) and two French language (*RTBF* and *RTL*) – and five major newspapers – Dutch language: *de Standaard*, *de Morgen* and *het Laatste Nieuws*; French language: *La Libre Belgique* and *Le Soir*. We coded all front-page newspaper stories, with the exception of the newspapers that appeared on Tuesdays and Thursdays, on a daily basis. The prime-time TV news (7.00 p.m.) is coded in its entirety on a daily basis. Taken together, the Flemish and French-language media database contains 180,265 news items (113,658 TV items and 66,607 newspaper items). The media are coded according to the same procedure as the parliamentary questions and interpellations. Counts for each issue are aggregated to a weekly level and lagged one week. The second is *Governmental Meetings*: communication about ministerial meetings, which take place on Fridays, is coded in a similar way as the parliamentary interpellations and questions and lagged one week.

The choice for the appropriate technique to analyse the data is based on the following considerations:

- (1) The observations that together form our data are presented as counts, namely the number of times a party discussed a particular issue in a particular week. This means that the data consist of discrete values, which is the number of times that an event has happened within a certain time interval. The values in the count data often vary from zero to several or many (Hausman *et al.*, 1984). One characteristic of count data is that they rarely have a normal distribution, also known as the Gauss distribution, but that the distribution of the variables is relatively skewed (Osgood, 2000). Highly skewed variables are characterised by the fact that the values are clustered to the upper or lower bound of the measurement scale (Hayes, 2005). In our data set this is also the case, where most values are zero, some are one and only a few show a value of two or more. Because of this typical distribution, ordinary linear regression is not a suitable method for analysing the data (Hayes, 2005). A useful alternative is a Poisson model that is especially appropriate for count data. Two types of a Poisson models are often used. First, the 'ordinary' Poisson model assumes a distribution in which the variance is roughly equal to the mean. Our data violate this assumption: they are over-dispersed, with the variance being considerably larger than the mean. In such a situation, a negative binomial regression is a useful alternative: it functions in the same way as the Poisson, but it does not require an equal mean and variance.

- (2) In many weeks, political parties do not devote attention to a particular issue, which means that the dependent variable has a lot of zero values. In that case, it might well be that a zero-inflated negative binomial regression is a more viable option (Long, 1997). For several of the analyses we conducted we compared the results of a negative binomial model with those of a zero-inflated negative binomial model using a Vuong test. A significant value of this test indicates that the zero-inflated model is a better option. In none of the cases, however, did the zero-inflated model outperform the ordinary negative binomial model and therefore we stayed with the latter.
- (3) Another characteristic of our data is apparent from the description presented above: it takes the form of pooled time series, with weekly values as the units of analysis. These weekly observations are ‘nested’ in issues. This offers opportunities in terms of more convincingly demonstrating causality and requires adequately modelling the dynamic structure of the series. To establish the preferred type of analysis, it is generally recommended to check first for heterogeneity (Kittel, 1999; Wilson and Butler, 2007). Heterogeneity indicates the presence of panel-specific (in our case issue-specific) differences in the dependent variable that are not captured by the independent variables in the model (Greene, 1997). From a substantial point of view it is likely that heterogeneity is present in our data: there are substantial differences across issues, with some issues receiving more attention from political actors than other issues. Other reasons apart from inter-party agenda-setting dynamics might account for these variations. Diagnostic analyses confirm our expectation and demonstrate heterogeneity for all our media. Taking this heterogeneity into account, we have to choose between a fixed-effects or a random-effects analysis. The first represents an analysis in which dummies for each of the issues are included as independent variables. The latter represents an analysis in which for each issue a random deviation from a mean intercept is allowed. Depending on the sample size (number of panels and time points) one or the other is more efficient. Several Hausman tests indicated that in our case the fixed effects model provides a better fit and therefore we decided to use this type of model.

Overall, these considerations result in our choice of pooled negative binomial fixed-effects analyses with a lagged dependent variable. For each of the parties we assess the impact of eleven other parties. This results in $11 \times 12 = 132$ parameter estimates and corresponding z -values. We use those z -values as an estimate of the likelihood for agenda setting to occur.² In the second analysis, we try to explain the size of those values based on the following independent variables. This analysis offers a test of hypotheses 2–5:

Same language – A dummy is computed, which takes a value of ‘1’ when the z -value is from an effect of a Flemish party on another Flemish party or from a French-speaking party on another French-speaking party. In other instances it takes the value ‘0’.

Ideological closeness – This measure indicates the distance between the party that exerts the influence and the party that is influenced. The left–right positioning on a 1–10 scale for all Belgian parties, as collected in the *Chapel Hill Expert Survey*, is used (Steenbergen and Marks, 2007).

Coalition – With the exception of the last few months of the research period, the same coalition government governed Belgium throughout the research period. It consisted of the Flemish parties Christelijke Volkspartij (CVP) and Socialistische Partij (SP), and the Walloon parties Parti Social Chrétien (PSC) and Parti Socialiste (PS). A dummy variable was created which indicates for the effect estimate whether it was exerted by one of these parties (value 1) or by any other party (value 0).

Different institutional position – A dummy variable was computed, which takes a value of ‘1’ when the z -value is from an effect of a coalition party on another coalition party or from an opposition party on another opposition party. In other instances it takes the value ‘0’.³

Niche parties – A dummy is computed, which takes a value of ‘1’ when the z -value is from an effect of one of the successful niche parties (Ecolo, Agalev and Vlaams Blok). In other instances it takes the value ‘0’.

Finally, to test whether the overall agenda-setting power of Flemish and French-speaking parties is equal, we include one additional control variable:

Flemish party – A dummy is computed that takes a value of ‘1’ when the z -value is from an effect of a Flemish party on any other party. It takes a value of ‘0’ when the z -value is from an effect of a Walloon party on any other party.

To assess the influence of these six variables on the probability of the inter-party agenda-setting effect as measured in the pooled negative binomial regressions, we conduct an ordinary least squares regression. Since in some cases (e.g. ideological closeness) we only expect effects for same-language parties, we conduct an additional analysis that looks specifically at the effects in cases of same-language parties.

Results

We start the discussion of our results by examining the inter-party agenda-setting process in the Belgian parliament in general. We ran twelve fixed-effects negative binomial models, each time taking the weekly attention of one of the parties for any of the 25 issues as the dependent variable and explaining this attention by the lagged dependent variable, lagged values of all other parties’ attention for those issues, as well as media and government attention for those issues as the independent variables. Table 2 presents the results of all these analyses. For reasons of clarity, we only present the z -values of all parameter estimates.

Table 2 demonstrates that there are indeed significant inter-party agenda-setting effects and thus offers corroborating evidence for the first hypothesis. If we exclude the effects of the party’s own agenda, we find eighteen significant coefficients, of which fourteen are positive.

If we look at the results in more detail, the first thing we notice is that the CVP, the largest Flemish and government party, was the major agenda setter among Belgian political parties in the 1990s. This party’s attention pattern is remarkably stable; the z -score of

Table 2: General Inter-party Agenda-Setting Patterns

	Aga	CVP	DFD	FN	PRL	PS	PSC	SP	VB	VLD	VU	Eco
Aga _{t-1}	2.43*	-0.43	0.95	0.16	0.44	1.49	3.11**	4.47***	-0.70	-0.00	2.07*	1.06
CVP _{t-1}	-0.19	7.08***	1.71	2.15*	0.87	2.88**	0.65	1.58	4.02***	3.12**	3.25***	1.61
DFD _{t-1}	1.17	1.32	1.59	-1.03	2.33*	0.73	0.73	0.00	1.60	0.48	1.18	1.09
FN _{t-1}	-1.10	-1.97*	-0.11	3.31***	-0.92	-0.35	-1.57	0.41	-1.43	0.31	-0.57	-0.06
PRL _{t-1}	-1.08	-2.63**	1.97*	0.08	1.51	-1.27	-1.34	-0.23	-1.06	-0.24	-1.94	0.68
PS _{t-1}	-0.34	1.61	0.82	0.05	0.62	1.78	1.54	-1.80	1.62	-1.22	0.63	1.09
PSC _{t-1}	1.78	0.28	1.04	-0.81	0.48	0.32	0.38	0.82	0.13	2.54*	0.30	0.22
SP _{t-1}	1.00	1.59	-0.23	-1.09	0.23	0.50	-0.25	2.12*	0.58	-0.08	0.76	0.45
VB _{t-1}	2.91**	3.87***	1.78	-2.05*	1.29	1.16	1.75	0.76	4.03***	1.55	2.35*	0.87
VLD _{t-1}	-0.28	0.42	0.36	0.67	0.53	-0.97	-0.89	-1.02	-0.20	0.91	1.00	0.30
VU _{t-1}	2.09*	0.89	0.96	0.93	-0.29	1.14	0.95	1.06	0.64	1.49	1.26	1.26
Eco _{t-1}	0.01	1.26	-1.70	2.43*	-2.81**	1.48	2.04*	0.03	-0.36	0.11	1.21	0.01
Media _{t-1}	-0.07	2.22*	1.78	-0.06	2.32*	1.67	1.72	2.26*	4.28***	0.37	3.37***	2.70**
Min _{t-1}	1.00	0.97	1.25	-1.29	0.59	0.70	0.64	1.77	-0.97	0.82	2.19*	1.17

Notes: z-values for models with party as the dependent variable and lagged values (1 week) of all parties, media and ministerial meetings as independent variables (pooled fixed effects negative binomial regression); N = 5,900 in all models.
 *** p < 0.001, ** p < 0.01, * p < 0.05 (two-tailed tests); Min = ministerial meetings.

7.08 for the lagged dependent is high and indicates that the party is most consistent in its discussions of issues. Issues that are discussed by the CVP in a certain week are also likely to be discussed in the next week. The CVP also has a clear leading role for the Front National (FN), PS, Vlaams Blok, Vlaamse Liberalen en Democraten (VLD) and Volksunie. Furthermore, the party acts rather autonomously – it is only positively influenced by the Vlaams Blok, while attention to issues by the Walloon parties FN and Parti Réformateur Libéral (PRL) actually results in the CVP's MPs devoting less attention to those issues.

The results in Table 2 furthermore indicate a substantial agenda-setting role for the extreme right Vlaams Blok and for the environmental parties Agalev and Ecolo, offering support to the idea that niche parties have considerable agenda-setting power (H5). It is remarkable to note the negative effect of the Vlaams Blok on its Walloon extreme right counterpart, the Front National. This might well be a consequence of the marginal position of the FN in the Belgian parliament, where it had only one or two seats. For this reason the party was unable to discuss many issues and therefore there are only a small number of different issues discussed by the FN throughout the research period. Interestingly, Flemish parties seem to be stronger agenda setters than Walloon parties. Of the fourteen positive effects found, ten relate to a Flemish party.

Table 2 also shows that the role of the media as agenda setter for political parties is most probable for the Vlaams Blok ($z = 4.28$). This means that of all parties in the Belgian parliament, Vlaams Blok is influenced most by preceding media coverage and therefore often discusses issues to which the media paid attention in the week before. Next to Vlaams Blok, there are other parties for whom the agenda is influenced by media attention, namely CVP, PRL, SP, Volksunie and Ecolo. The other control variable in the model, the discussion of issues in the ministerial council, appears to have only a minor influence on party agendas. The only party that is significantly influenced by the decisions of the Cabinet is the Volksunie ($z = 2.19$).

We now turn to the question of what determines the probability that agenda-setting effects occur (differ from zero) in order to test the remaining hypotheses; Table 3 presents the results. First we look at the effects of the language division and we find some support for the second hypothesis that agenda-setting effects are more likely between same-language parties. However, the effect is small and only significant at a 10 per cent level (unstandardised coefficient is 0.347). As we already noted when discussing Table 2, we find that the agenda-setting coefficients for Flemish parties are more likely to differ from zero than those of their French-speaking counterparts; in general they have a 0.641 higher z -value than French-speaking parties. We come back to this result later. Another finding regarding the language split is that there does not seem to be an agenda-setting effect across the language border within the same ideological family. It is not the case that the socialist, liberal, Christian democrat and green parties from one part of the country have a distinct impact on their ideological brothers in the other part; of all the significant effects reported in Table 2 *none* of them refer to 'within-ideology' interactions. This is yet further evidence of the fact that both party systems are to a considerable extent autonomous.

Table 3: Predicting Agenda-Setting Effect Probabilities

	(1) <i>Full model</i>	(2) <i>Same language parties</i>	(3) <i>Other language parties</i>
Sender coalition party	0.567** (0.248)	0.615* (0.394)	0.518** (0.309)
Sender Flemish party	0.641*** (0.218)	0.830** (0.347)	0.525** (0.284)
Sender niche party	0.714*** (0.428)	0.984** (0.453)	0.536* (0.351)
Difference in ideology	-0.070* (0.054)	-0.212** (0.091)	0.028 (0.064)
Same language	0.347* (0.215)		
Constant	0.320 (0.281)	0.620 (0.421)	-0.154 (0.291)
Observations	132	60	72
R ²	0.162	0.253	0.111

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses. Estimations from an OLS regression, unstandardised coefficients are reported.

* $p < 0.10$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$ (one-tailed tests).

The third hypothesis predicted a higher probability of agenda effects when parties were ideologically close and in direct electoral competition. The parameter estimate for ‘difference in ideology’ in model 2 that considers same language contexts – and thus same election arenas – indicates that this is indeed the case: the larger the distance between two parties, the smaller the agenda-setting effect. A 1-point extra distance on the left–right scale results in a decrease in the z -value of the effect of 0.23. In the overall model this effect is a lot smaller (0.07) and only marginally significant, but even here it is in the expected direction. Across the Flemish–French divide (model 3), in contrast, we do not find a significant effect of ideology.

The fourth hypothesis expected the inter-party agenda-setting effect to be more probable for coalition parties, since the questions and interpellations of their MPs might be more consequential and mark the fact that the government may be starting to devote attention to an issue. And indeed, we find that coalition parties are better in setting the parliamentary agenda than are opposition parties. If we consider all parties together, we see that their effect estimates have on average a 0.567 larger z -value. The results of analyses 2 and 3 as presented in Table 3 indicate that this effect is present across both same language and different language parties, indicating that being a member of the coalition carries relevance beyond the language divide.

Finally, we look at the role of the niche parties as put forward in the fifth hypothesis. Table 2 already indicated that Ecolo, Agalev and Vlaams Blok are strong agenda setters. The results

of Table 3 confirm this. The extreme right Flemish party which is officially 'excommunicated' by all other political parties turns out to be a much stronger agenda setter than many of those other parties, as in the case of the two green parties. The results indicate that it might well be that other MPs do not respond directly to MPs of the Vlaams Blok, but that they do monitor which issues the Vlaams Blok discusses and embrace those issues at the next Question Time in parliament. Although the effect is smaller for parties that have a different language (model 3), it is still present and in the expected direction. All in all, we have to confirm firmly the fifth hypothesis.

Overall, the models explain a considerable amount of variation in the inter-party agenda-setting effects. In particular, the model that only considers the influences of same language parties turns out to be a pretty good one, with more than 25 per cent explained variance. Our hypotheses thus grasp a considerable part of the differences in agenda-setting power between parties.

Conclusion

With this article we have shown that – just as with political institutions ranging from the mass media to the US president – the behaviour of political parties in parliament is influenced by agenda-setting processes. In parliament, parties determine each other's agendas. If MPs from other parties start to devote attention to certain issues, MPs are likely to follow those changes in the attention they pay to issues. The results also provide insight into which others can be considered as 'relevant': MPs from same language parties, from parties that are part of the coalition, from parties that form an electoral pact and from those parties that occupy a specific and successful niche in the country's political landscape are considered especially relevant. This finding is in line with our hypotheses predicting that these characteristics of parties and party competition are especially key in understanding inter-party agenda-setting dynamics.

We acknowledge that we have taken only a first step in looking into the factors that modulate these agenda-setting effects. Recent research into political agenda setting (Walgrave and Van Aelst, 2006), inter-media agenda setting (Vliegenthart and Walgrave, 2008) and public agenda setting (Peter, 2003) has started to analyse the contingent character of agenda setting and the present study is entirely in line with this research. The nature of the actors involved in the agenda-setting process is one of the key factors in the contingency of the process.

We have found that there are differences between parties, but we also expect that issue and country characteristics play a role and differentiate the agenda-setting effect. For some issues agenda setting between parties might be more likely than for others (see also Walgrave *et al.*, 2008) and some institutional contexts might foster quick and strong imitation processes by different political actors (Döring, 2001; Minkenberg, 2001). We were not able to tackle these potential other modulators of inter-party agenda setting in the present study. To be able to get a full view of what determines the presence and strength of inter-party agenda setting we need more elaborate and specific issue coding,

as well as cross-national comparative data. Our data remain confined to Belgium and to a particular time frame in that country. As we argued earlier, there are no clear-cut reasons why the Belgian results would systematically deviate from inter-party agenda-setting dynamics in other countries – apart from the fact that the country has a very fragmented party system and that more parties are ‘relevant’ competitors for more other parties as a consequence – but we need more evidence from other countries to be able to generalise with more confidence.

The fact that we were better able to explain variations in inter-party agenda setting for the Flemish and French-speaking parties separately points to a particular characteristic of the Belgian political system. On a more general level, the results also indicate that agenda-setting processes are less likely to travel across divides and that social and institutional barriers to agenda setting exist. This may also be the case in countries that do not have such a formal, institutionalised divide as Belgium. However, many of our hypotheses also held across those barriers and were only attenuated by the language divide. In general, our findings indicate that party competition over issues is not an entirely unstructured and open game – party competition is not a battle of everybody against everybody; parties have distinct competitors that they follow and imitate more closely. Parties that target a different part of the electorate – be it on the other side of the language divide or on the other side of the political spectrum – are likely to consider each other as less relevant and are therefore much less likely to respond to each other’s issue agenda.

Finally, one remarkable finding that is specific to the Belgian context deserves further attention: Flemish parties are stronger agenda setters than French-speaking parties. Yet, at the same time, they are also more receptive to what other (Flemish) parties are doing. This seems to indicate that the Flemish party system in the 1990s was more integrated than the French-speaking party system, which makes sense – there were more parties and the political space was more crowded – and this entailed higher direct competition and, hence, more imitation of what other parties were doing. Moreover, the volatility of the Flemish voter in the 1990s was higher than that of French-speaking voters, which again increased competition and, consequently, might have led to more imitation of the competitors. We also find somewhat greater effects of the Flemish parties *across* the language divide towards the French-speaking parties. This cannot be due to competition in the Flemish arena. Here, we suppose that the leading role of the larger and economically much more affluent Flemish region may be held responsible. The centre of power was situated in Flanders – for example, throughout the research period the prime minister was a Fleming – and consequently the Flemish parties also led politically. This suggests that further research into agenda-setting dynamics may also take relevant characteristics of the socio-economic context into consideration.

Appendix

Table A1: Issues and Mean Number of Questions Asked by All Political Parties

<i>Issue</i>	<i>Attention in parliament</i>	<i>Issue</i>	<i>Attention in parliament</i>
Political organisation	1.759	Education	0.477
<i>SD</i>	2.209	<i>SD</i>	0.972
Institutions	0.308	Communication and information	0.785
<i>SD</i>	0.865	<i>SD</i>	1.399
Executive	0.671	Science	0.059
<i>SD</i>	1.436	<i>SD</i>	0.270
State	6.899	Companies	0.624
<i>SD</i>	4.908	<i>SD</i>	1.057
Development aid	0.160	Labour and employment	2.101
<i>SD</i>	0.495	<i>SD</i>	2.409
Defence	2.565	Mobility	3.325
<i>SD</i>	3.309	<i>SD</i>	3.982
European Union	0.928	Environment	1.030
<i>SD</i>	1.535	<i>SD</i>	1.391
Justice and law	6.295	Agriculture and food	0.924
<i>SD</i>	5.228	<i>SD</i>	1.400
Economy and trade	1.329	Production	0.211
<i>SD</i>	1.624	<i>SD</i>	0.649
Finance	3.173	Energy	0.241
<i>SD</i>	3.346	<i>SD</i>	0.649
Social questions	8.249	Industry	0.620
<i>SD</i>	7.712	<i>SD</i>	1.057
Leisure	0.422	Other	1.165
<i>SD</i>	0.911	<i>SD</i>	1.757
Religion and cultural identity	0.219	Overall mean	1.782
<i>SD</i>	0.738	<i>SD</i>	3.469

Note: *SD* = standard deviation.

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Notes

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- 1 The fact that Green-Pedersen and Mortensen (2010) find some empirical evidence for their claim that opposition parties are more influential might well have to do with their particular case under study and the way they conceptualise the political agenda. In Denmark, parliamentary questioning is done solely by opposition parties, so instead they take the yearly prime minister's speeches as a proxy for the government parties' issue agenda. Furthermore, their dependent variable does not capture the response by individual parties, but the attention devoted to issues in all parliamentary debates in one year. Such a design does not lend itself to assess short-term responses to individual activities of parties in parliament, which is the main focus in our article.
- 2 We refrain from talking about the *size* of the agenda-setting effects. This would require a comparison in effect sizes from the different negative binomial regressions, which to our knowledge is not possible. What the *z*-values do indicate is the probability that the found coefficient is larger than zero and thus the probability that the effect found is not a result of a random process. We also ran the same analysis using an ordinal regression, splitting the effects into three: negative effect, no effect, positive effect. Results from this analysis yielded largely similar outcomes.
- 3 One could argue that other party characteristics, such as size, are also of importance. However, the size of the party does not influence the space it is given to ask questions in the Belgian parliament. Vliegenthart and Walgrave (2009) have actually shown that smaller parties – often belonging to the opposition – are more active in asking parliamentary questions. In any case, party size is excluded from the analysis due to its high overlap with the coalition variable, which we believe is the more relevant one when considering agenda-setting effects.

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