How preferences, information and institutions interactively drive agenda-setting: Questions in the Belgian parliament, 1993–2000

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Abstract. In this article an integrated framework of agenda-setting is proposed that incorporates the two main accounts of agenda-setting: the information-processing approach by Comparative Agenda Project scholars and the preference-centred account advanced by Comparative Manifestoes Project scholars. The study claims that attention allocation is determined at the same time by preferences, information and institutions, and that attention allocation is affected by the interactions between these three factors. An empirical test is conducted that draws upon a dataset of parliamentary questions/interpellations in Belgium in the period 1993–2000. It is found that attention in parliament is indeed driven by preceding party manifestos (preferences), by available information (media coverage) and by institutional position (government or opposition party). The evidence establishes that agenda-setting is also affected by the interactions between preferences, information and institutions. Actors, given their preferences, treat information in a biased fashion, and institutions moderate information's role.

Keywords: agenda-setting; Belgium; parliamentary questions; mass media; party manifestos

Agenda-setting is a common approach in political research, but scholars use the term in a variety of ways. This study shows that integrating distinct agenda-setting approaches increases our understanding of the behaviour of political actors. We generate new hypotheses about when actors give attention to which issues by integrating the '*information*-processing tradition' of Comparative Agendas Project scholars (CAP) with the '*preference*-centred tradition' advanced by scholars of the Comparative Manifestos Project (CMP). Our common framework suggests that preferences and information (and institutions) affect political agendas. Most importantly, the preferred determinants of agenda-setting fostered by the two dominant schools of agenda research *interact*.

We draw on the case of parliamentary questioning in Belgium and test the increased explanatory power of integrating both theories' predictors. Data from the Belgian Agendas Project are employed, which codes all

party manifestos (preferences), all major news stories (information) and all parliamentary questions (policy attention) put by government or opposition parties (institutions) between 1993 and 2000. We find that MPs devote more attention to issues that received attention in their party manifestos (preferences), that have been in the media (information), and that government and opposition MPs (institutional position) deal with different issues in their questions. Rich evidence from the Belgian case supports the main claims. Integrating these theories suggests a clear logic of why Belgian MPs devote attention to which issues. They are driven by information, preferences and their institutional position, and by the interaction between these factors.

Two traditions of agenda-setting research

Placing an issue on the political agenda is a precondition for *any* political decision making. If political actors do not devote attention to an issue, there can be no political decision. The agenda-setting stage is important because the agenda of any institution is too limited to afford considerable attention to every issue. The core idea of attention scarcity motivates a long tradition of agenda-setting work in American political science starting in the early 1960s with Schattschneider (1960) and Bachrach and Baratz (1962), from Cobb and Elder's (1971; Cobb et al. 1976) work through Walker (1977) and Kingdon (1984). Recent developments in the field have culminated in the United States with the punctuated equilibrium theory of Jones and Baumgartner (Baumgartner & Jones 1993; Jones & Baumgartner 2005), which has led to a renaissance of comparative agenda-setting work under the common header of the CAP (see, e.g., John 2006). The basic proposition is that political attention is discontinuous due to non-linear information processing. The result is periods of relative stability punctuated by bursts of change. In the research programme of the CAP the concept of 'information' is highly prioritised. New information may lead to a sudden shift in attention to issues that have previously been ignored. When informative signals about problems or solutions enter the system, attention shifts.

At the same time, another research tradition draws primarily on the approach of the CMP and suggests that agenda-setting is essentially based on political actors' *preferences* for some issues (Budge et al. 2001). In this view, preferences lead to divergent packages of policies. Like CAP scholars, CMP scholars argue that issue attention is the primary antecedent of policy making. Political parties compete by emphasising different issues rather than by taking diametrically opposed positions on the same issues. This leads CMP scholars to evaluate party manifestos and to establish whether the issues parties give

space to in their manifestos are translated into real policies (Budge & Hoffer-bert 1990; Klingemann et al. 1994). In short, CMP work suggests that political attention shifts are the consequence of electoral changes through which some parties gain power to translate their preferences into political attention.

Remarkably, both streams of agenda-setting work have remained largely self-contained. They have even come to divergent conclusions regarding the role of parties and the electoral cycle. While CMP researchers find that parties' preferences and their electoral mandates are central to policy making, CAP research has largely concluded that parties and elections are not nearly as central to explaining changes in government priorities compared to the role played by the flow of information and the cognitive limitations of human institutions (Jones & Baumgartner 2005). We believe that these divergent conclusions result from examining different aspects of the agenda-setting process. A full account should integrate these aspects.

Obviously, both approaches are rooted in different views of democracy and have a different scope. CMP scholars adhere to a normative theory of politics. Mandate theory, implicitly, holds that parties 'should' carry out the mandate they get from the voters. The CAP has less normative underpinnings, but rather presents an updated version of incrementalism. Also, the CAP approach is broader than that of the CMP, dealing with all types of information and actors while CMP focuses only on parties, their programmes and governments.

Notwithstanding these differences, it is possible to reconcile both traditions as they, in practice, simply focus on different independent variables – for CAP, information, and for CMP, preferences – to explain the same behaviour (devot-ing political attention). Both CAP and CMP have something to say about a third factor affecting issue prioritisation: *institutions*. CAP theorists Jones and Baumgartner (2005) see institutions mainly as constraints or bottlenecks hin-dering a proportionate reaction to incoming information or as enabling greater information flow by entry points into the political system (Baum-gartner & Jones 1993). In CMP studies, institutions are present in the form of electoral systems, government coalitions and the fault line between govern-ment and opposition.

To develop a more complete picture of the policy process, these different agenda-setting schools must be reconciled, with both information *and* pref-erences being taken into account. Currently, the punctuated equilibrium approach gives an image of politics that is nearly devoid of agency where policy is at the whim of chaotic information spurts. Likewise, most CMP research implicitly draws upon the often incorrect view that political prefer-ences are the sole rudder linearly driving attention. Our claim is that atten-tion is determined by the *interplay* of preferences and information as well as institutions. We integrate these previously known drivers of agenda-setting,

suggesting new avenues of inquiry *and* new relationships between prefer-ences, information and institutions. Information and preferences do not need to be merged in an additive fashion. To include the variables from the other school as a 'control' is part of the solution as preferences and information *independently* determine the agenda-setting process. Yet, we contend that preferences and information *interact* – a key component missed by scholars in both traditions. Incoming information activates certain preferences while, at the same time, preferences lead to an active search for specific bits of infor-mation. Thus, in the governing process, the preferences of decision makers are a key element of 'cognitive friction' that has been hitherto largely ignored in the information-processing perspective. At the same time, the formal and informal rules of the political game constrain as well as facilitate attention allocation to specific issues in a certain institutional realm – a claim central to both CAP and CMP.

That attention is driven by preferences, information and institutions, and that these factors interact, is not an entirely new idea. John Kingdon (1984), in his classic account, implicitly and indirectly addresses preferences ('politics'), information ('problems and solutions') and institutions ('choice opportunities' and 'participants'). When the different 'streams' are coupled in a window of opportunity (we would say when preferences, information and institutions interact), policy attention (or change) comes about.

Preferences

Political actors prefer to attend to some issues above others, but they also have preferences regarding how an issue should be dealt with. However, the agenda-setting perspective only focuses on issue preferences regarding the prioritisation of issues. Only actors have issue preferences – not institutions or information – and only actors have the ability to put an issue on the agenda. Therefore, any approach to understanding agenda-setting must start with actors and their issue preferences – a claim well understood by CMP scholars. The issue preferences of political actors are multifaceted and are driven by ideological, reward and damage motives. Different types of political actors weigh these motives differently when determining their issue preferences.

Intrinsically, political actors have issues that they want to emphasise because doing so would help to realise their ideology. The *ideological* motive is arguably the key concept in CMP research (see, e.g., Budge et al. 2001; Klin-gemann et al. 1994). Extrinsically, political actors have issues they prefer to prioritise because doing so would serve some other end. These instrumental motives are pursuant to two goals: reward and damage. Actors can gain advan-

tage and weaken their competitors' position through the emphasis of issues. Many theories of party competition are founded on this logic (see, e.g., Budge 1994; Budge & Farlie 1983b).

The *reward* motive makes actors prefer issues that reinforce their position even if they do not care for the issue as such. For example, actors prefer issues because doing so caters to the interests of certain groups who, in turn, may provide rewards. In the case of political parties, the most obvious type of reward is electoral support. To ensure these rewards, political parties develop ties with specific groups in society (Kingdon 1984; Rokkan 1977). Political actors may also champion issues they think are important to the population at large. A growing body of work shows that the political agenda is affected by the issues prioritised by the public (Soroka & Wlezien 2009; Page & Shapiro 1992).

Political actors not only try to reinforce their own position. Parts of their issue preferences are determined by a wish to damage competitors: the *damage* motive. Actors may fuel political scandals, for example, and boost attention not because the issue is in any way connected to their ideology, or because the group they represent cares about it, but simply because they can expose their adversaries to negative publicity. Issues on which the competitor is internally divided or has a bad track record are preferred. This logic is closely associated with issue-ownership theory, where parties are known to be either strong or vulnerable on specific issues (Petrocik 1996).

Different political actors in different political systems possess issue preferences driven by different motives: ideological, reward or damage calculations. Partisan actors, for instance, have a different incentive structure than non-partisan actors; they are more likely driven by ideological motives. Bureaucratic actors may be more motivated by reward and damage motives if they are placed in an environment where they compete for authority over a given problem. Larger parties may be more driven by reward motives while smaller parties may be driven by damage motives. Opposition parties in a parliamentary system are less able to deliver policy change to groups and thus may rely more on damage motives than reward motives. In sum, the concept of 'issue preferences' is able to encompass actors with different mixes of influence on their priorities.

The multiple motives of issues preferences imbues them enduring and short-term components. This is a more accurate and useful concept of preferences, which acknowledges that 'true' preferences are elusive and likely non-existent in actual humans, given our sensitivity to context. Ideological motives are more enduring. When reward and, especially, when damage motives dominate, issue preferences are more fluid and adapt to contextual circumstances. The political context provides temporary strategic opportunities that may lead to (temporarily) changing issue priorities. The flexibility of issue preferences is

important for our argument that issue preferences interact with information and with institutional position.

The distinction between the three different motives – ideology, reward and damage – that lead political actors to prefer certain issues above others is theoretically relevant. Actors in different institutional positions, and based on different information, may have different motives to address the same issue. The distinction in motives allows us to explain how issue preferences interact with information and with institutions (see below). Yet, in this study, we cannot empirically distinguish between the three motives since our measurement of issue preferences is based on party manifestos, which are arguably driven by an indiscriminate mix of the three motives.

Information

The core claim of the CAP is that information intrusion leads to attention and policy change. Baumgartner and Jones (1993; Jones & Baumgartner 2005) make a strong case for the role of information. Policy attention is the result of a conversion of informative signals into policy output: 'Agenda-setting can be viewed as a process by which a political system processes diverse incoming information streams' (Jones & Baumgartner 2005: ix). Information is the incoming menu of facts indicating which issues require policy attention. These facts could be about policy performance, the extent of the problem, trends of these problems, solutions to these problems, responsibility for these problems and so on. The flow of information in politics is extensive; the key question is what bits of information shall be picked up and ignored.

The model of information-processing advanced by CAP scholars focuses on the macro-level. Political actors are acknowledged to be limited in their capacity to process signals, but for the rest, the information-processing mechanism on the actor-level is a black box. Preferences of key actors have, unlike in the CMP approach, no privileged position. We contend that, on the actor-level, the way actors acquire, process and attend to information is biased by their issue preferences. Preferences lead to selective information processing and information activates preferences. CAP students have mainly theorised about the information as having a uniformly direct and unfiltered effect.

Preferences motivate actors to attend to some information and not to other. Whether information is noticed and used depends on its fit with pre-existing issue preferences. Contra the assumption of CMP scholars, the fact that political actors have specific reasons to devote attention to issues does not mean that they will automatically do so. In the face of information emphasising a crisis in the tax system, even a social-democratic government may need,

reluctantly, to take up this issue and ignore those it prefers. However, the view advanced by many CAP scholars that the mere intrusion of new information will spark attention, without being subject to actor's preferred priorities, is equally questionable. Actor preferences *and* information determine what issues actors will devote attention to.

The interaction between preferences and information has two faces: preferences lead actors to actively seek information on issues that they prioritise, but preferences also act as a heuristic for filtering incoming information. Jones and Baumgartner (2005: 9–10) make a strong case that winnowing through all the available information is often more of a problem than finding information in the first place. Preferences function as an interpretative device that helps to both select and evaluate the evidence, and thus are a key component of cognitive friction in policy making.

Issues closely related to actors' core ideological beliefs motivate an active search for information (ideology motive). It is equally plausible that political actors actively seek information about issues the groups they are affiliated with care about, or that the public at large prioritised (reward motive). Political actors also attend more to information about issues that are potentially damaging for their competitors (damage motive). Hence, issue preferences in the form of the different motives interact with information. If all these conditions are absent, if there is no ideological, reward or damage motive at play, actors are satisfied with reactively monitoring the incoming information. So, preferences act as a kind of filtering lens through which incoming information is read, interpreted and processed.

Institutions

Apart from preferences and information, the institutional framework wherein political actors pursue their activities affect how their attention is distributed. We define 'institutions' here following North (1990), as the formal and informal rules that govern the cooperation and competition of individuals. Institutions define actors' position in a political system and determine the formal and informal roles they play. Following CAP and CMP accounts, institutions and institutional positions constrain, as well as enable, actors to devote attention to issues. Institutions as such do not have preferences, nor do they provide information, even though they may reflect the preferences of their creators (Riker 1980).

For Jones and Baumgartner (2005), institutions, and the positions they provide, prevent political systems from reacting proportionally to incoming information. One could say that institutions organise the inevitable scarcity of

attention and create 'friction'. Friction is resistance to change and comes in two guises: cognitive limitations and institutional costs. Cognitive friction, as discussed above, can be understood in terms of the information filtering and seeking effects of preferences. Institutional friction, on the other hand, is the inevitable bottleneck of attention as the time and resources of institutions are limited. For government, for example, to produce a response to an incoming informational signal, an internal decision-making procedure has to be followed constraining an immediate and proportional reaction. Approval processes take time and deliberation. Oppositional actors, most of the time, are less constrained by internal rules as their response only binds the party.

CAP scholars have successfully compared the responses of institutions using the friction concept. These studies rank order institutions according to their position in the policy cycle and find that institutional agendas 'early' in the policy cycle react more proportionally than institutions 'later' in the policy cycle. These differences are then ascribed to increasing levels of friction as one moves through the policy cycle: it is easier to ask questions in parliament as there is less friction in this early part of the policy cycle than it is to change a budget (Jones et al. 2003).

The more institutional rules and the roles that come with a given institutional position constrain actors from attending to problems, the larger the expected gap between their issue preferences and the available information, on the one hand, and their actual agenda-setting behaviour, on the other. Actors may prefer to devote attention to certain issues and have the necessary information to do so, but they may not act because they are constrained by the various rules that must be satisfied before being able to devote attention to an issue, or their institutional position and their role may prevent them from addressing the issue. Thus, as has been emphasised elsewhere, institutions, and institutional position, *interact* with preferences and information.

Institutions not only create thresholds thwarting action, but they also create positive opportunities to act upon preferences and information. In many parliaments, for example, MPs get a weekly opportunity to question and criticise government during Question Time. The institution creates a slot that 'demands' to be filled with issue attention. Institutions create space and invite attention because they need content. The committee system in many democracies creates forums for the devotion of official state attention to more issues, and in greater depth, than could be possible if the plenary legislative body was the only forum capable of investigating issues.

CAP scholars recognise the enabling role of institutions. In their 1993 book, Baumgartner and Jones describe in detail how groups profit from different venues to get their pet issues onto the political agenda. CMP scholars see institutions mainly as empowering particular issue preferences to gain domi-

nant access to policy agendas. Institutions such as separated powers and electoral systems create incentives that can enhance the ability of political actors to translate their preferences into the policy agenda.

The constraining and facilitating aspect of institutions and institutional positions provides different opportunities for different actors. Some actors are able to command more space under some institutional rules than others, or their institutional position and role induces them to make more use of a specific instrument. Government parties, for example, dominate the legislative process in most countries, while opposition parties' legislative initiatives only get limited parliamentary attention. Some actors participate in several institutions and can choose between different institutional equivalents to further their issue priorities ('venue shopping'). Political parties can act in several ways in parliament (calling for hearings, bills, asking questions and so on). A government can do several things – for example, try to pass legislation, produce executive orders or change the budget. Similarly, although the rules regarding asking oral question in parliament may, in many countries, be identical for government and opposition parties, the different institutional position and the role of opposition parties makes them use the oral question instrument more than the government parties.

So, we argue that rules and roles directly affect what issues political actors direct attention to as rules and roles create scarcity and space. Institutions can put a break on change independently of other factors. If a procedure is time-consuming, less will get done. However, without reference to preferences or information as inputs institutions 'do' very little. Whether an institutional barrier is overcome depends, in part, on the intensity of the issue preferences. Parties that care strongly about an issue will do anything in their power to pass legislation even if passing legislation is a sticky process implying huge amounts of institutional friction. Also, the effect of information on issue attention is moderated by institutional rules and positions. Some actors are in a position to benefit from rules that yields them more direct and unambiguous information, other actors have to depend on ambivalent and uncertain bits of information. In short, institutions interact with both preferences and information.

Parliamentary questioning in Belgium

We apply these ideas to plenary parliamentary questioning in Belgium in the period 1993–2000. Belgium is in part selected on the basis of data availability; the data demands of examining the effect of preferences, information and institutions over time are large. Belgium is a suitable case as well. It is a strong partitocracy, where the questioning behaviour of individual MPs is very much

steered by their parties and not by MPs' individual features or personal interests. MPs in Belgium implement their party's preferred priorities, and institutional position distinctions will be clear between parties in and out of government. The actual units of analysis, therefore, are the parties and not individual MPs. As we will demonstrate below, in Belgium, parliamentary questioning is party behaviour. In a less strongly party-dominated system, party adherence would explain a smaller part of MPs parliamentary behaviour. Hence, our analysis and findings remain limited to the specific context in which they are carried out. The institutional links between MPs and their parties, the way they are connected to their constituency via the electoral system, and the way they define their role probably affects their questioning behaviour and would lead to different results in other countries. Yet, also in another institutional context we expect that preferences, information and institutional position are driving agenda-setting.

Investigating the added explanatory power of integrating preferences, information and institutions in one framework by applying it to one political activity in one country is a modest beginning. However, it is necessary to start somewhere. Both the CMP and CAP approaches started with foundational, but limited, studies in the United States (Robertson 1977; Baumgartner & Jones 1993). The data at our disposal, even though rich, does not allow a definitive test of all possible implications of our framework. Rather, we see the empirical analyses as an example of how a more integrated approach of agenda-setting can be empirically tackled. For example, our operationalisation of institutions is crude, and our measurement of the information available to MPs in Belgium is indirect, but the approach spelled out below offers a first take and shows a way to start testing whether political attention is steered by preferences, information and institutions and by their interaction.

Parliamentary oral questions and interpellations are non-legislative activities that have been established as important in most parliaments (Green-Pedersen 2010; Wiberg 1995). They serve as a source for the generation of attention to issues in the broader political system, particularly in Belgium where weekly Question Time is televised. Questions are an initial and diverse agenda upon which the rest of legislative policy agendas partially play. For a similar small democracy (i.e., Denmark), Green-Pedersen and Mortensen (2009) showed that parliamentary questions exert a considerable impact on the entire political agenda. If there is an arena that is at the beginning of the agenda-setting process in Belgium it is parliamentary questions, or congressional hearings in the case of the United States (Sheingate 2006). Comparatively speaking, parliament is not the strongest of political institutions in Belgium; the Belgian government dominates the political system (De Winter & Dumont 2003). So, the direct policy consequences of parliamentary

questions are limited and their role remains largely confined to the agenda-setting stage.

Questions are a realm typically 'favouring' the opposition. It is the preferred (and often only) way the opposition can challenge the government. Questions are in most countries mainly used to criticise the government, and less for credit claiming by the government (Vliegenthart & Walgrave 2011). Yet, in the Belgian case, the government parties use the question technique almost as often as the opposition: 44 per cent of the questions recorded in the research period were asked by parties that were part of government, while 56 per cent of the questions were asked by opposition parties. Government party MPs use questions to give a minister the opportunity to elaborate on his plans or to display her successes, whereas opposition parties use questions to grill government and criticise its policies. So, while questions are a key weapon of the opposition, in the Belgian case they also belong to the government parties' repertoire, but due to the diverging institutional roles of government and opposition, we expect their use to differ.

Questions are a good place to start searching empirically for the effect of preferences, information and institutions and of their interactions because the agenda size is large and questions are asked frequently. Bill introduction and law passage, for example, provide much less of a smooth time series when analysing the translation of preferences and information into policy agendas, which essentially adds another variable (i.e., variant agenda size across time) to an already complex study. Furthermore, the institutional constraints that create small policy agendas when one examines bills and laws would add yet another level of institutional complexity.

Typically, when the Belgian parliament is in session it allocates a fixed period for oral questions (five minutes each) and interpellations (twenty minutes each) every Thursday. The short time must be used to address the varied concerns of the parties arising over an entire week. These time constraints make it unlikely that partisans ask questions whimsically. All questions (oral or interpellations) that move to the plenary (we deal only with plenary questions here) must be approved by the parliamentary party leaders of those asking the question. Oral questions are put forth by party leaders on behalf of their membership. Interpellations are approved by party leaders before being submitted, and require either approval of the relevant parliamentary committee or representatives of 30 of the 150 seats of the parliament in the conference of party group leaders. These procedures underscore the fact that questioning is party behaviour in Belgium. All questions must be submitted by 11 am on Thursday, just before actual Question Time.

Discussions with parliamentary staff suggest that the House President and conference of party leaders do little by way of filtering questions in their

Thursday meeting when they finalise the order of questions as party leaders tend to self-limit the number of questions proposed. As a matter of principle there tend to be no more than two oral questions per party per week. There is an opportunity for parties to 'bandwagon' their questions during the conference of party leaders with the House President.

Hypotheses

We claim that political actors devote attention to issues because they *want* (preferences), because they *know* (information) and because they *can* (institutions). Wanting, knowing and being able are mutually reinforcing. Do these ideas suggest concrete hypotheses when applied to the particular agenda-setting process we study here? Is the attention behaviour of real political actors measurably steered by preferences, information and institutions independently, and by their interaction? The claim we put forward is broad and abstract. It may apply to any kind of political activity in any country. The case of Belgian parliamentary questions is a precise and concrete application. How can we test whether our ideas hold the track – at least in this one case?

We operationalise the preferences, information and institutions that steer Belgian MPs' questioning behaviour in a specific way. Because Belgium is a partitocratic system, and because questioning is party behaviour, we treat all MPs of a single party as a uniform actor and deal with the preferences of parties and not of individual MPs. We consider the *party manifesto* as a good source of a given party's issue preferences: issues receiving a lot of attention in the party manifesto are high among that party's priorities. Note that parties may have issue priorities not highlighted in the party manifesto.

We operationalise information available to parties as the 'media coverage' of issues. When the media talk about an issue, this delivers information for political actors about the issue. Media coverage tells actors about the severity of the problem, the urgency of finding solutions, the actors involved in trying to solve it and so on. The more media coverage there is, the more information there is. Again, MPs get their information from different sources and the media is just one of these (e.g., private conversations, party cues, privileged contacts with interest groups), but media reports definitely grasp a part of the information about real-world problems that is available to MPs. The advantage of media coverage is that it is widely accessible and provides information that is available to all political actors at the same time.

Institutions are operationalised in a very straightforward way: whether a party is part of the *government or opposition*. This is a crude measure, yet it grasps a crucial – maybe *the* crucial – institutional distinction between differ-

ent partisan actors. In most political systems the institutional position and capacities of government and opposition parties are very different in terms of the way the subsequent roles they play diverge, as well as the way they make use of instruments like parliamentary questioning. Again, alternative measures of institutions could be, for example, the change in rules for questioning over time, or a comparison of questioning of MPs under different electoral systems producing a different connection between an MP and his or her constituency.

If we had measured preferences, information and institutions differently, relying on other measures, we still would have formulated six equivalent hypotheses stating, first, that these three factors have a direct and independent effect and, second, that they interact to set the agenda. Thus, in concrete terms, we investigate how party manifestos, media coverage and the government–opposition position of a party determine, independently and in interaction, the questioning behaviour of their MPs.

Political actors have different motives (ideology, reward, damage) driving their issue preferences. Parties' issue preferences are expressed in their party manifesto. Manifestos are not only about the salience a party attaches to a given issue, but also include a party's directional preferences (in what way the issue should be dealt with). Still, CMP scholars have made a convincing case that manifestos largely encapsulate parties' issue priorities (Budge & Farlie 1983a). These expressed priorities have widely been assumed to be ideological, but scholars have argued that they likely contain strategic considerations (Green-Pedersen & Mortensen 2010). That manifestos contain not only ideological but also reward and damage considerations makes them a better measure for our purpose. Hence, party manifestos list the issues a party prioritises due to a mix of ideology, reward and damage motives. Because of this compound character of party manifestos we are unable to distinguish the three types of motives for issue preferences empirically. We expect MPs to ask more parliamentary questions about issues that receive ample attention in their party's manifesto.

> *H1*: *Main effect of preferences* – More attention to an issue in party manifestos leads to more attention to those issues in parliamentary questioning of the MPs of that party.

MPs in Belgium, as in most democracies, act in a sea of information about societal concerns and problems. Every week, a cacophony of signals enters the political arena, consisting of a small amount of direct, and a preponderance of indirect information. One of the sources of indirect information for MPs is the mass media. Belgian MPs spend nearly three hours a day reading newspapers or watching current affairs on television (Walgrave 2008). Studies in other

countries, too, have found that mass media coverage forms a key source of information for political actors (Herbst 1998). MPs' sources of information are broader than just media coverage. One could argue that the information available in the media is not primarily reflecting what happens in society, but is rather a reflection of what is going on in politics. Yet, research has showed that the media do generate input for the political system and that the opposite relationship, from media to politics, is the weaker one (Van Noije et al. 2008; Walgrave et al. 2008). In sum, we expect MPs to ask questions about issues that have received media attention.

> H2: *Main effect of information* – Media attention for an issue leads to parliamentary questions about the issue in the subsequent period.

The key institutional fault line in parliamentary democracy is the distinction between government and opposition. Parties on different sides of this divide play different roles and have different restrictions on their ability to react to information and preferences. Belgian MPs require permission from party leaders to gain access to question time. Furthermore, in coalition governments these desired expressions are restricted by the tolerance of coalition partners. Thus, overall, we would expect that opposition versus government MPs will have different capacities to ask questions on any topic due to institutional friction.

> H3: *Main effect of institutions* – Opposition MPs ask more parliamentary questions than government MPs.

Agenda-setting is not only a simple translation of preferences, information and institutions into attention. We hold that the interplay between these three factors affects attention allocation. Preferences form a filter on incoming information and actors mostly attend to information about issues that match their pre-existing issue preferences. Applied to MPs, we expect that they select issues that both are high on their party's priority list, as testified by their party manifesto, *and* that receive media attention, which suggests that there is new information regarding the issue.

> H4: *Interaction between preferences and information* – MPs react more to media coverage in their questioning when the media cover issues that have received ample attention in the their party manifesto.

Our framework not only suggests that opposition MPs ask more questions than government ones, but also different questions about dissimilar

issues (for different reasons/motives). In Belgium, governments are large coalitions. That reduces the freedom of action by government MPs significantly. Parties tie their hands to maintain government stability. The government agreement, reflecting part of a party's issue priorities previously encapsulated in their party manifesto, is a no-go area for government MPs. Opposition MPs, in contrast, can more freely pursue their preferred issues and attack government on the issues they most care about. Hence, opposition MPs should stay closer to their party manifesto when questioning government.

> *H5*: *Interaction between preferences and institutions* – Opposition MPs, more than government MPs, ask questions about issues that have received ample attention in their party's manifesto.

The institutional position of government parties within the state apparatus gives them exclusive access to a supply of direct information. The bureaucracy controlled by government parties has enormous resources for the collection of direct information. Also, given that government parties have nearly complete control of which bills will likely pass into law, interest groups are eager to provide information to these parties. Opposition parties, in contrast, are largely out in the cold, and must therefore rely more on the indirect information provided by the media. Additionally, media coverage often provides information that is negative and may be detrimental to the government (news about new problems, failed policies or conflict). Consequently, larger chunks of media coverage provide good ammunition for opposition MPs when attacking government while only smaller parts of the media agenda generate information that may benefit the government. So, we expect that the opposition would react more to media coverage than the government parties.

> *H6*: *Interaction between information and institutions* – Opposition MPs, more than government MPs, ask questions about issues that have been covered in the mass media.

Data and methods

Our *dependent* variable is the weekly percentage of plenary parliamentary questions in the Belgian parliament about any of 25 issues (see further below) by each of the ten political parties that were represented during our research period. All questions asked in a given week add up to 100 per cent. Thus, each party has the opportunity to control, on average, 10 per cent of the agenda in

a given week. Because this measure is a relative one and thus affected by the frequency of asking questions by the other parties, we control in all our models for the number of questions asked by the other parties in that same week.

We coded all parliamentary records in 1993–2000, totalling 10,556 plenary interpellations and questions. Coding was based on a detailed codebook containing 110 different issue codes. The Belgian Agendas Project 1990–2000 did not rely on the common CAP codebook as it did not exist yet and the authors were not aware of the existence of the original American version of the codebook. The codebook used here is similar to the CAP and original American codebooks, especially since we use major topic codes alike in number and content. We combined the original 110 issue codes into 25 issue categories. We deleted the 'other' issue category since it includes a wide variety of unrelated topics. Some of the issues addressed in the Belgian federal chamber are, strictly speaking, regional issues that fall under the competence of the legislators of the Belgian regions/communities. Yet, since competences for most of these issues (such as environment and work) are mixed and blurred, and since even issues clearly belonging to the regional competences (such as education and communication) *are* addressed by the federal MPs (see further in Table 2), we decided to keep all issues on board.

We use a weekly aggregation level for two reasons. First, it encompasses the shortest 'political cycle' with one Question Time per week. As discussed above, most questions and interpellations are delivered after a 'build up' over a week. Second, as Walgrave and Van Aelst (2006) have demonstrated, media effects on political agendas, for example, are mainly short-term. Those weeks in which no parliamentary activity took place are excluded, leaving 236 weeks for the eight years that are used in our analyses. This results for ten parties, 24 issues (the 'other' category is dropped in the analysis) and 236 weeks, with some missing values, in a total of 59,186 cases. Table 1 lists the various parties included in the study.

Our independent variables are threefold. In terms of *party manifestos (preferences)*, in order to assess parties' issue preferences we coded quasi-sentences in party manifestos drawn up before the elections of 1991, 1995 and 1999 for each party that gained parliamentary seats (N = 31,783 quasi-sentences). With *media (information)*, we cover the main evening news of the four major television stations and five major newspapers. 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 television news (7 pm) is coded in its entirety on a daily basis. Taken together, the media database contains 180,265 news items. We aggregate the attention given to issues across the four television stations and five newspapers, and use the weekly attention devoted to an issue as the percentage of the attention devoted to all issues. To

Table 1. Belgian political parties included in the study

	Abbreviation	Type**	1999	1995	1991*		Ideology
Agalev (Groen!)	Aga	Opposition	9	5	7	Flemish	Ecological progressive left
Christelijke Volkspartij	CVP	Coalition	22	29	39	Flemish	Christian democratic centre
Parti Réformateur Libéral***	PRL	Opposition	18	18	20	French	Liberal centre right
Parti Socialiste	PS	Coalition	19	21	35	French	Social democratic left
Parti Social Chrétien	PSC	Coalition	10	12	18	French	Humanistic centre left
Socialistische Partij	SP	Coalition	14	20	28	Flemish	Social democratic left
Vlaams Belang	VB	Opposition	15	11	12	Flemish	(Extreme) right
Vlaamse Liberalen en Democraten	VLD	Opposition	23	21	26	Flemish	Liberal centre right
Volksunie	VU	Opposition	8	5	10	Flemish	Flemish-nationalist centre
Écologistes confédérés pour l'organisation de luttes originales	Eco	Opposition	11	6	10	French	Ecological left

Notes: * In 1991 the Belgian parliament consisted of 212 seats. In 1995 the number of seats was reduced to 150. Front Démocratique des Francophones (FDF), Front National (FN) and Rossem are excluded from the analysis, since they did not issue party manifestoes. ** 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 18 parliamentary seats.

ensure causality, the media variable is lagged one week. Finally, with *opposition/government party (institutions)* a dummy variable was created indicating for each political party whether it was in a certain week member of the government (value '0') or an opposition party (value '1'). In the period under investigation the same centre-left government (Dehaene I and II) with Christian-democrat and socialist parties was in power most of the time. Only at the very end of the research period, in 1999, did the coalition change to a liberal-socialist-green one (Verhofstadt I). Hence, the government/opposition variable is in fact mainly a stable party variable.

For parliamentary questions, party manifestos and media coverage mean scores for each issue are presented in Table 2.[1]

Our dataset includes three levels: parties, issues and weeks. When clustering takes place on more than two dimensions, (pooled) time-series are no longer appropriate. Given this, we employ multilevel analysis. Diagnostic statistics reveal that, indeed, a multilevel model is more appropriate than a regression model that does not take into consideration the layered structure (LR test 5442.13, df = 2, p < 0.001). The intra-class correlations suggest that only a limited amount of the total variance is to be explained at the party level (0.001 per cent), but a substantial part on the issue level (10.57 per cent). Our approach does not account for the fact that scores are bounded at both ends, as recent work suggests (e.g., Breunig 2010). Cases attain a score of '0' if the respective party does not ask any question about the specific issue and '100' if the party asks all questions about the specific issue at hand. The zero value occurs very often, but the upper-bound only rarely. The data show a rather normally distributed decaying pattern, with only 1.6 per cent of the cases having a higher score than 5. Also, given the fact that diagnostic statistics strongly suggest that a multilevel model is to be preferred and that there is indeed considerable variance to be explained at, in particular, the issue level, we decided to stick to the multilevel model.

As mentioned above, the dependent variable has many zero values. In 87.4 per cent of the cases, a party does not ask a question about an issue in a certain week. We checked the residuals of our analyses to see to what extent they resembled a normal distribution and were affected by this skewed distribution of the dependent variable. Residuals are not completely normally distributed; the distribution is denser at levels around zero and thus leptokurtic, but only modestly. Thus, we find little reason to estimate a non-linear model.

Our dataset has a multilevel structure with three levels: time (weeks) is nested in issues that are nested in political parties.[2] Next to a multilevel structure, also the time-series character of the dataset is taken into account. After all, the value of a certain party–issue combination in a certain week is likely to be, to some extent, dependent upon its value in the previous week.

Table 2. Occurrence of 25 issues in parliamentary questions, media coverage and party manifestoes

Issue	Parliamentary questions	Media coverage	Party manifestoes
Political organisation	4.1	5.82	7.2
Institutions	0.7	1.21	0.5
Executive	2.1	0.93	0.6
State	16.5	7.11	7.5
Development aid	0.4	0.47	1.7
Defence	5.5	7.58	2.0
European Union	2.2	2.46	5.0
Justice and law	14.5	6.19	7.5
Economy and trade	3.2	2.47	5.2
Finances	7.1	2.67	5.1
Social questions	16.8	11.13	28.0
Leisure	0.8	3.03	2.7
Religion and cultural identity	0.5	0.81	0.1
Education	1.0	1.85	5.2
Communication and information	1.3	1.54	1.6
Science	0.2	0.37	0.5
Companies	1.4	3.25	0.5
Labour and employment	4.6	5.92	7.3
Mobility	6.5	3.79	2.9
Environment	2.8	2.46	5.8
Agriculture and food	2.6	1.04	1.5
Production	0.4	0.53	0.8
Energy	0.6	0.13	0.5
Industry	1.4	0.16	0.1
Other	2.7	27.10	0.3

Notes: Reported are percentages, column totals 100 per cent. Standard errors in parentheses. * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$ (one-tailed tests). N = 55,152.

Therefore, we include a lagged dependent variable on the right-hand side in all of our analyses. Additionally, the behaviour of other parties might matter: if they ask questions about an issue, it is more likely that a certain party will pick up that issue in the next week (Vliegenthart et al. 2011). Thus, we include the summed values of the attention that other parties devoted to the issue in the previous week as an additional independent variable. As mentioned earlier, since we employ a relative dependent variable, we also control in all models for the total amount of questions asked by other parties in a given

week. We conduct multilevel models using STATA (*xtmixed* command) with restricted maximum likelihood (REML) estimations and (if necessary) unstructured covariance matrices.[3]

Results

Table 3 displays the results of the analyses. The first empty Model I with random intercept indicates that there is variance at all three levels. Model II presents the main effects in a model with a random intercept. Comparing this model with Model I, we see that the past parliamentary agenda, the total number of questions asked and the three main variables (manifestos, media and opposition) improve the model fit considerably (LR test 10441.13, df = 6, p < 0.001). The effect of the total number of questions asked is negative, as expected, though not significant. We now discuss the results of Model III that employs random effects estimation.

H1 and *H2* expected a positive relationship between questioning and the attention parties devote to issues in their manifestos (preferences) as well as the media coverage of issues (information). These two effects are those that are classically accepted by the main agenda-setting schools, and thus represent an important benchmark against which the magnitude of the interactive effects reported later can be compared. If both effects exist, this would statistically confirm that both the CMP and CAP approaches explain (a part of) actors' agenda actions.

We find indeed that partisan preferences directly impact the content of their questions, confirming *H1*. *Ceteris paribus*, political parties dedicate, on average, 0.0317 per cent more attention to those issues to which they dedicated 1 per cent of their manifestos. Given the number of current events, scandals and simply old business from prior weeks on the agenda, combined with the mere 10 per cent of the agenda at a party's control every week, and considering that there are 25 different issues to attend to, it is remarkable that MPs pay such substantial and consistent homage to their core issues.

H2 is supported as well: information (media) drives parliamentary questioning. A week's media coverage influences the end-of-week parliamentary questioning, but to a lower extent than manifestos. Each percentage increase in attention to an issue in the media results in a 0.0171 per cent increase in the estimated proportion of parliamentary questions asked by all parties together in that week; per party, the increase is about 1.7 per cent per media coverage increase of 1 per cent. The media effect may seem small, but in many instances (roughly 20 per cent of cases) the media give 10–35 per cent of their weekly attention to one issue (not shown in the table). Thus, attention in the media can

Table 3. Main effects and interaction effects of manifestos (preferences), media (information) and government/opposition position (institutions) on parliamentary questions and interpellations

	Model I Empty model (random intercept)	Model II Main effects model (random intercept)	Model III Main effects model (random slopes)	Model IV Interaction model
Constant	0.3887*** (0.0380)	0.0830* (0.0407)	0.0671* (0.0325)	0.1564*** (0.0337)
Lagged party		0.0151*** (0.0036)	0.0117*** (0.0036)	0.0102** (0.0036)
Lagged other parties		0.0047*** (0.0011)	0.0052*** (0.0011)	0.0054*** (0.0011)
Number of questions by other parties		−0.0001 (0.0002)	−0.0001 (0.0002)	−0.0001 (0.0002)
Manifestos (*H1*)		0.0317*** (0.0026)	0.0347** (0.0129)	0.0169 (0.0133)
Media (*H2*)		0.0171*** (0.0023)	0.0178*** (0.0039)	0.0056 (0.0050)
Opposition (*H3*)		0.1879*** (0.0162)	0.1898*** (0.0156)	0.0633** (0.0206)
Manifestos*media (*H4*)				0.0010** (0.0004)
Opposition*manifestos (*H5*)				0.0223*** (0.0034)
Opposition*media (*H6*)				0.0124*** (0.0049)
Party-level variance	0.0027	0.0076	0.0016	0.0016
Issue-level variance	0.2726	0.1343	0.1256	0.1269
Week-level variance	2.3035	1.5869	1.5778	1.5747
Log-likelihood	−101,670.38	−91,229.25	−91,109.78	−91,071.37

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses. * p < 0.05; ** p < 0.01; *** p < 0.001 (one-tailed tests). N = 55,152.

have considerable impact. Further, one must also remember that where attention to one issue in different party manifestos is diverse, all political parties experience increases in the media agenda at once. Information's direct contribution, controlling for preferences, validates the key CAP proposition.

H3 held that opposition parties would be more active questioners of government than government party MPs. The hypothesis receives clear support. There is a positive effect of the opposition dummy indicating that members of opposition parties – in line with their position in a parliamentary democracy – ask more questions of the government and dominate 0.19 per cent more of the agenda per each party in the opposition, per week and per issue.

Model IV in Table 3 offers tests for the interaction effect *H4*, *H5* and *H6*. Comparing this model with model III, we find a considerable model improvement (LR test 38.41, df = 3, p < 0.001). Also *H4*, *H5* and *H6* are all confirmed. The interaction effect of party manifestos (preferences) and media (information) is significant and positive, which corroborates *H4*: MPs 'read' mass media through their issue preferences. They especially react to media coverage when it addresses issues to which they were positively inclined. As expected in *H5*, institutions constrain preference expression: government MPs are more constrained in voicing the issue preferences expressed in their party manifesto. This is indicated by the significant coefficient for the interaction between 'manifestos' and 'opposition'. The effect of media on parliamentary questioning is considerably larger for MPs of opposition parties than for MPs of incumbent parties; *H6* thus receives support. In short, preferences, information and institutions do matter for attention allocation independently, and their interactions yield additional effects.

Overall, the log-likelihoods for Model III and Model IV show that the fully specified model with interaction effects (Model IV) suggested by the integrative framework is a better fit for the data than the main effects model (Model III) suggested by a simple addition of the preference-centred (CMP) and information-centred (CAP) approaches.

The first and second part of Figure 1 offer a further illustration of the interaction between preferences and information as the predicted effects are plotted with their respective confidence bounds. Both for opposition and government parties separately, the figures confirm that the interaction effects are significant and substantial.

The apparently small coefficient for the interaction between preferences and information (0.0010 in Table 3) is more substantial once one accounts for the fact that manifestos and media scale and thus multiply at very high values. Our model estimates that when the media dedicates its maximum observed attention to an issue in our sample (about 55 per cent), with a party dedicating the observed maximum to that same issue in its manifesto (about 45 per cent)
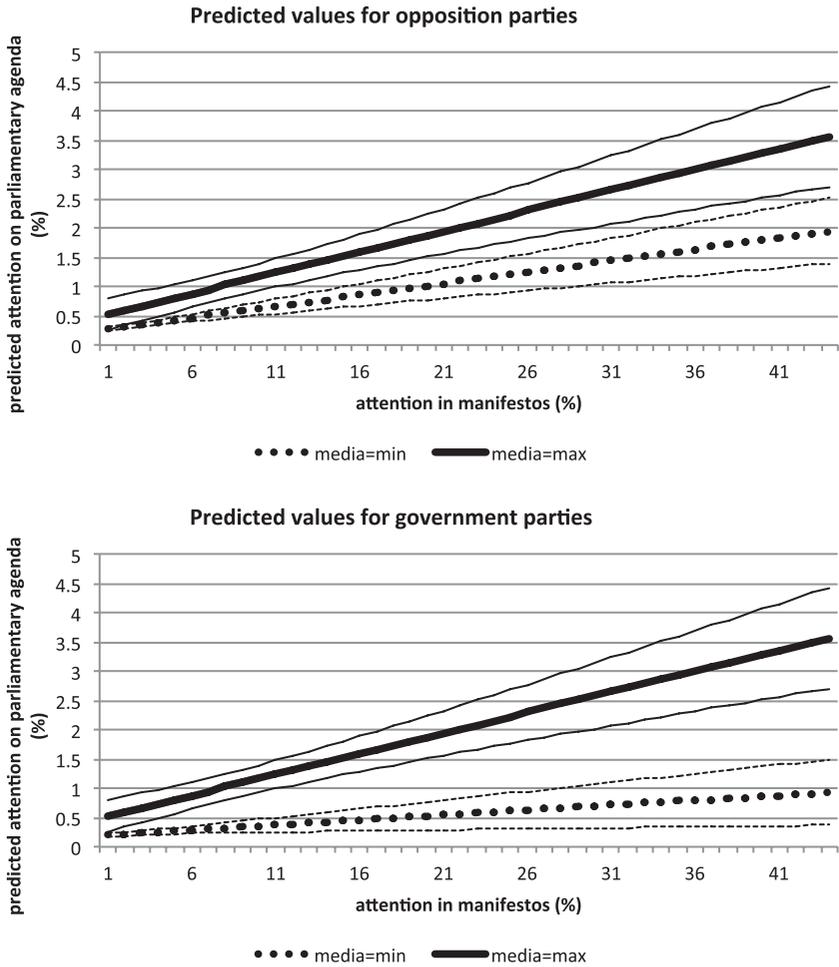
Predicted values for opposition parties

Predicted values for government parties

Figure 1. Interaction effects between preferences (manifestos), information (media) and institutions (government and opposition).
Note: Figures display predicted values based (+/− 1 standard deviation) on the fixed portion of the model.

then that party's MPs will dedicate an additional 2.48 per cent of that week's total agenda to that issue. This is out of a total possible party contribution of 10 per cent to the total agenda.

The findings for the interaction between preferences (manifestos) and institutions (government-opposition) are less strong but still significant, as is illustrated by the third of Figure 1. It is true that opposition parties' freedom to express their preferences is significantly higher than those of

Predicted values when manifestos is at its mean

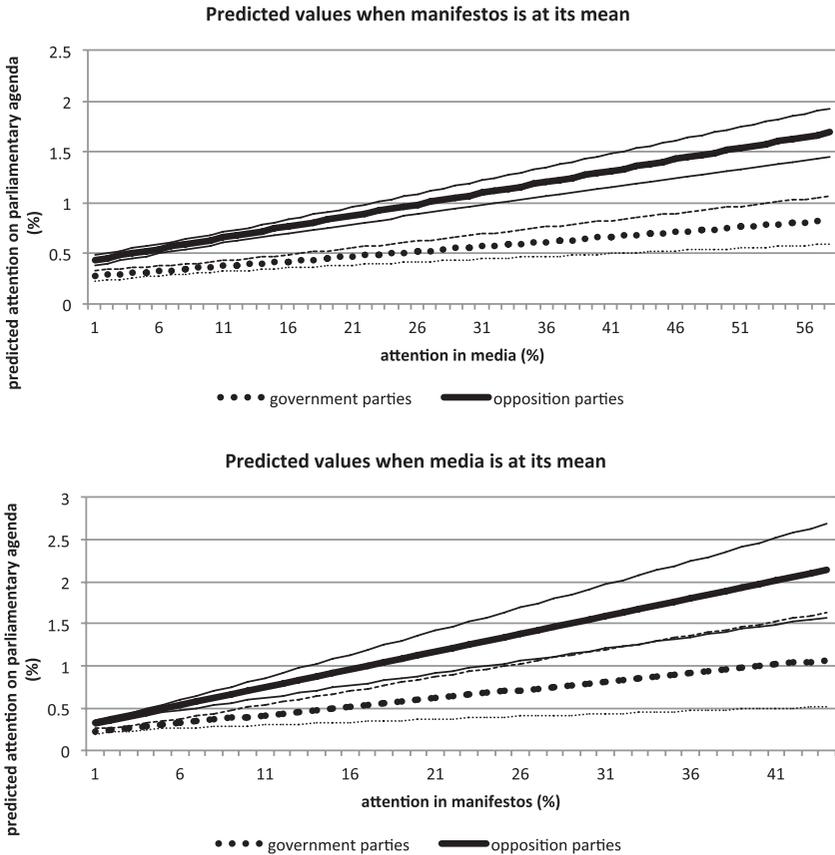**Predicted values when media is at its mean**

Figure 1. Continued.

government parties, but only when the level of attention paid in the manifestos is relatively small. When we plot the predictions with one standard error confidence intervals in the case when a party is an opposition party, and when it is a government party, we find that the effect is only significant for middling to minor issues – that is, roughly 70 per cent of total issue preferences (evidence is not shown in the figure). Major priorities of parties are, statistically, equally favoured in their questions by both government and opposition parties. This finding is perhaps not as odd as it first appears. Government parties will be particularly interested in promoting their core issues when helping to formulate the government's agenda and thus may be rather unconstrained over these issues when in government.

The interaction effects between information (media) and institutions (government–opposition) are documented in the fourth part of Figure 1. Coa-

lition parties are significantly and consistently less sensitive to the 'issues of the week' reported in the media. Opposition parties take up these issues more often. Effects are significant across the whole distribution of media attention. The predicted share of the parliamentary agenda when the media is devoting no attention, compared to maximum attention, goes up with over 1 per cent (from 0.4 to 1.7 per cent) for opposition parties, while only just over 0.5 per cent for government parties (from 0.3 to 0.8 per cent).

Conclusion

Our ambition was to sketch an integrated approach, integrating the two main accounts, for studying agenda-setting while showing empirically that integrating existing theories into an integrated framework increases explanatory power. We claimed that attention allocation is simultaneously a function of preferences, information and institutions independently, and that these three factors are interactively reinforcing. Preferences and institutions matter, but processing information from the broader political environment is key to understanding what preferences and institutions do. Institutions do not simply manage and organise preference conflict, but organise actors with preferences to process information. Incorporating preferences, information and institutions in an integrated approach may seem trivial as these concepts are the cornerstones of political science in general, but integrating them in a single framework to study political agenda-setting is novel.

We applied our ideas to a test case drawing upon a dataset of parliamentary questions in Belgium and found, indeed, that preferences (manifestos), information (media) and institutions (government and opposition) each independently and interactively drive political attention. With the interactive relationships included we could better account for the full effect of preferences and information and institutions in the Belgian parliament, rendering the explanatory power of our integrated approach greater. None of our hypotheses regarding the questioning behaviour of Belgian MPs were refuted and, substantively, the interactive relationships are as important as any of those traditionally accepted by agenda-setting scholars. We can state that both CAP and CMP accounts are right in the Belgian case, but each only partially. The isolation of the preference-centred and information-driven accounts of agenda-setting misses important aspects of what is happening.

Much remains to be done to test the generality of this approach. In this first application our operationalisation of the three key concepts was partial. We did not differentiate between the motives that drive actors' issue preferences even though these different motives interact asymmetrically with other ele-

ments (e.g., institutional position). We focused on fairly stable motives encapsulated in the party manifestos while neglecting the fact that motives are more flexible. We ignored the fact that MPs not only get their information from the media, but from many other sources; they receive direct information from government agencies and stakeholders, and indirect information from their competitors. Most glaringly, we ignored the fact that institutions entail much more than just the crude difference between government and opposition; they imply detailed rules about how and when actors can behave and address issues.

We only examined one political actor (party MPs) in one realm (questioning) in one country (Belgium). All agendas have their own rules, their own institutional impediments and opportunities. We cannot be certain that what we find here can be generalised to other actors, other agendas and other countries. Even in light of these shortcomings, we think the study proposes a promising way to understand agenda-setting patterns drawing upon a more complete understating of actors' attention allocation decisions. The basic logic should apply to other actors in other institutional contexts – with changes in the parameters and particulars rather than the general framework. Our theoretical argument is general, and its straightforward support in the particular case of Belgium provides more reason to be confident that these mechanisms may point to more general patterns.

Notes

1. We tested the direction of causality by employing tests for Granger causality for time-series cross-sectional data. We aggregated the data over all the parties, looking at the attention parliament as a whole was devoting to each of the issues, as well as the attention the media was devoting to those issues. Tests reveal that media is Granger-causing parliament for at least one issue ($F_{(24,5615)} = 17.766$, $p < 0.001$), but not for all issues ($F_{(24,5615)} = 10.293$, $p < 0.001$). For the reversed relationship, the same holds true: parliament is Granger-causing media for at least one issue ($F_{(24,5615)} = 250.518$, $p < 0.001$), but again not for all issues ($F_{(24,5615)} = 217.411$, $p < 0.001$). Substantially, this means that some of the potential influence of media on parliament might be an effect of previous parliamentary action that is mediated through the media, rather than a completely independent media effect. Still, it is through the media that other MPs are inspired to pick up an issue as well.
2. In the strict sense we deal with a party-per-election level; indeed, the main variable on this level – the opposition/coalition distinction – can change with every national election held. We considered using a party-per-election level instead of the party level, but this would have created dependencies across observations on that level since parties hardly change their institutional role in the research period. Because of this stable position of most parties (either member of coalition or in opposition from 1993 to 1999), we decided to use the party level.

3. The final model is as follows:

$$
\begin{aligned}
PQ_{ijk} = {} & \gamma_{000} + \gamma_{100}(PQ(t-1)_{ijk}) + \gamma_{200}(PQ\_OTHERS(t-1)_{ijk}) \\
& + \gamma_{001}(OPPOSITION_k) + \gamma_{010}(MANIFESTOS_{jk}) + \gamma_{300}(MEDIA_{ijk}) \\
& + \gamma_{011}(OPPOSITION_k * MANIFESTOS_{jk}) + \gamma_{101}(OPPOSITION_k * MEDIA_{ijk}) \\
& + \gamma_{110}(MANIFESTOS_{jk} * MEDIA_{ijk}) + u_{01k}(MANIFESTOS) \\
& + u_{10k}(MEDIA_{ijk}) + u_{1j0}(MEDIA_{ijk}) + u_{00k} + u_{0jk} + u_{ijk} + r_{ijk}
\end{aligned}
$$

The first two lines represent the fixed part of the equation and mention all the main and interaction effects, while the last line lists the random effects and the error term.

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