

3 Do the media shape parties' agenda preferences?

An empirical study of party manifestos in Belgium (1987–2003)

Stefaan Walgrave and Jonas Lefevere

Whether mass media affects public policy and political decision making still is an unanswered question. One of the reasons we do not have a conclusive answer yet is that *the media's impact on the public policy* simply is too broad a question to be answered. It can only be dealt with when split up into small and theoretically and empirically manageable subquestions: which media, which politics, and what impact? One of the most straightforward ways of defining media power is to consider the media's role in setting the political agenda, that is, the array of topics that receive attention in a given political system. But even in this distinct sub-domain, the available studies contradict each other: some claim the media do matter for the political agenda, others disagree and argue that the media is entirely tangential to the agenda-setting process (Walgrave and van Aelst 2006). The dependent variable – the political agenda affected by the media – has, in most studies, been the official and institutional agendas of parliament, government or the president. Studies sought to find out whether, for example, oral questions and interpellations in parliament (Soroka 2002a; Walgrave *et al.* 2007); governmental decisions (Walgrave *et al.* 2007); or presidential statements (Bartels 1996; Edwards and Wood 1999; Gilberg *et al.* 1980) are affected by preceding media coverage. The central argument this paper makes is that focusing on these institutional political agendas is only half of the story. Media might on the one hand directly affect the political priorities of democracy's primary *institutions* such as parliament or government. Yet, media coverage might on the other hand also affect the agenda of democracy's primary *actors* which are in most democracies political parties. The aim of this paper is to *scrutinize whether political parties' agenda preferences are affected by preceding media coverage.*

In many democracies, parties' issue priorities affect actual public policies. Parties make pledges in their manifestos and when they are elected in office they tend to carry out those pledges. Klingemann and his colleagues (1994) demonstrated, based on longitudinal evidence covering 40 years and ten democracies, that party manifestos matter for policy making. Parties keep their manifesto promises: when parties devote attention to a certain issue in their manifesto, chances are high that government spending on policies related to that issue will go up in the following legislature. Others have shown, in single country studies, that not only budgeting but also legislation is affected by electoral program

promises (Budge and Bara 2001; Stimson *et al.* 1995; Walgrave *et al.* 2006). Our point is that party manifestos matter; they affect the political agenda and steer policy attention towards certain issues and away from other issues. Party manifestos are good 'predictions' of subsequent public policy.

Consequently, media coverage may not only directly affect the priorities of democracy's main institutions – the legislative and executive branch of government – but may also indirectly, *via* political parties, matter for political agenda-setting. The mass media set the agenda of the political parties, the political parties in turn set the policy agenda. Hence, examining whether media coverage affects party programs is a useful, albeit indirect, way to tackle whether mass media affect political decision making and public policy. However, we note that party manifestos cannot be equated with actual public policy. At the heart of this book lays the distinction between media's impact on the policy debate on the one hand and on policy institutions on the other hand. Party manifestos sit somewhere in between: they are not pure discourse as they encapsulate the main political actors' official policy pledges; they are not real political institutions that can issue binding decisions either.

This chapter considers the case of Belgium, a small consociational democracy. Belgium is the prime example of a partitocracy dominated by political parties (de Winter *et al.* 1996; de Winter and Dumont 2003). Party manifestos, hence, are important policy documents in Belgium. Belgian parties are the main players in the polity – issue entrepreneurs and veto players at the same time – determining government policy. If we effectively find the media to impact party programs in Belgium this would almost certainly mean that the media indirectly determine public policy. Yet, Belgium also is a tough case. Parties are closed mass organizations exclusively associated with a host of befriended social organizations in a system called 'pillarization' or segmented pluralism (Lorwin 1971). Parties do not have too much leeway to react freely on media cues and to change their issue priority as they are closely connected to organizations who try to influence their priorities. In the period under study, though, the pillars were gradually disintegrating and consequently we expect the grip of organizations on their befriended party programs to have diminished.

In this chapter, first, we review the existing evidence about how party programs come about and we formulate five explorative hypotheses. Next, we present our evidence: party programs covering five national elections in Belgium between 1987 and 2003. Then, we turn to our results and empirically assess whether the media effectively affect parties' priorities. We conclude with summarizing our results and sketching avenues for further research.

What affects party program priorities?

Party manifestos have received extensive scholarly attention. Doubtless, the most important stream of research has been produced by the Manifesto Research Group (MRG) who has systematically focused on party manifestos in 25 democracies for more than half a decade (Budge *et al.* 2001). MRG scholars have

undertaken ample research on the left–right dimension in party programs, on the link between programs and electors, on the policy consequences of party programs, on policy equilibria, on government composition, on the polarization of party systems etc. (Budge and Bara 2001). Remarkably, the primary question – where party programs come from in the first place – has been largely neglected. The origins of party manifestos did not receive a lot of scholarly attention. We know relatively little about where party manifestos come from, how they are drafted and, especially, how and why party programs change over time (Rohrschneider 2002). This implies that we do have access to ready hypotheses about to what extent and under which circumstances party manifestos are affected by preceding media coverage.

Our research question on the media’s impact on party manifestos can be reframed more general in terms of party program *change* (see also: Walgrave and Nuytemans 2009). Only if party programs change can they be determined by media coverage. As circumstances change – new demands, new issues, new popular preferences, and new challenges turn up – party manifestos are expected to follow and to change too. These new demands, issues, and preferences are partially conveyed to parties via the media. Electoral competition should lead to constant adaptation of parties’ preferences, as Downs (1957) has argued. The maximum of votes lies in the middle of the ideological spectrum, around the median voter. Parties try to maximize votes by trying to get as close as possible to the media voter. Other scholars maintained that parties only change their manifesto when they see elections as competitive and they need extra votes to win. If winning or losing is perceived as being sure, they do not need to win votes and, thus, will not adapt their programmatic preferences (Robertson 1976). Budge, in contrast, argued that parties have no, or only imperfect, information about whether they will win or lose the election, or about the median voter’s position, and thus they move little or incrementally because they do not want to risk losing the votes they have (Budge 1994). Hence, Budge, in contrast to Downs, expects no adaptation but hardly changeable and incremental party manifestos.

Empirical research tends to confirm Budge’s argument: party preferences are quite stable. Parties’ programmatic left–right positions, for example, do change but big changes are rather uncommon (Budge and Bara 2001; Budge and Klingemann 2001; Volkens and Klingemann 2002). Parties do not change opinion all the time and they do not haphazardly jump from one issue to another; they hardly leapfrog each other. Budge and Bara found, regarding some compound measures of party position, in the 18 countries under study between 1945 and 1998, that party positions remained remarkably stable ‘which may tell one something about the rigidity of party ideology and their lack of responsiveness either to external problems or electoral concerns’ (Budge and Bara 2001: 53). If parties do not adapt their programs and hardly change, the media’s impact on the party manifestos, obviously, cannot be large. But sometimes parties *do* change their program, sometimes even dramatically (Walgrave and Nuytemans 2009). In those instances, does media coverage then play a role?

Media coverage probably plays a role because parties consider the media to reflect the issue priorities of the public. Parties may not react on media coverage per se but on their perception of public opinion as reflected by media coverage; this 'proxy effect' is a well-known mechanism in the political agenda-setting literature (Cook *et al.* 1983; Kennamer 1992; Walgrave and van Aelst 2006). So, the general argument goes as follows: parties adapt their party program to gain votes; via this adaptation they try to get as close as possible to the median voter; they find out about the position of the median voter via mass media coverage. Hence: the more media cover a certain issue the more parties will consider this issue as being an important issue for the public at large and, consequently, the more attention they will devote to that issue in their party program. This very general hypothesis must, of course, be qualified and specified. We expect not all parties to react to media coverage to the same extent.

The only study we found that systematically examined the media's impact on the content of the party manifestos and the government agreement is a study by Rihoux *et al.* (2005). They found that, in Belgium in the 1990s, 14 percent of the issue saliency variation in party programs could be attributed to preceding media coverage (Rihoux *et al.* 2005: 137–139). Their study also established interesting differences between parties. The Christian-Democrat center parties' programs were more affected by the preceding media coverage than the manifestos of the socialist and ecologist parties. Also, they found differences between the two elections they examined with more impact of the media on the 1995 manifestos than on the 1999 manifestos.

What tentative hypotheses can we put forward? Janda and colleagues (1995) argue that one of the main drivers of programmatic renewal is electoral success or failure. One can expect that parties that lost the previous elections tend to change their program more dramatically than parties that won the previous electoral competition. Electoral loss often severely shakes parties: party leaders resign, parties reorganize their structures, and the party reconsiders its party manifesto. This is precisely what Janda *et al.* (1995) found in their analysis of party manifesto change in Britain, Germany and the United States. Looking for cues about what to change in their failing program, parties may look at media coverage to see what the public cares about and change their issue emphases accordingly. *Manifestos of parties that lost the previous elections are more affected by media coverage than parties that won the previous elections* (H1).

Klingemann and colleagues contend that opposition parties more than government parties have strong reasons to draft innovative and alternative programs. As they have only their program to attract attention and not their deeds, manifestos of opposition parties tend to be more changeable than government parties' manifestos trying to seek maximization of votes (Klingemann *et al.* 1994). Moreover, incumbents run the risk of being confronted afterwards with their pledges while opposition parties cannot be held accountable for the fact that their program has not been carried out. To be responsive, opposition parties more than government parties draw on media coverage to nurture their program. Research has shown, similarly, that opposition MPs' parliamentary action is more affected

by media coverage than government MPs' initiatives (Vliegenthart and Walgrave 2009; Walgrave *et al.* 2007). The second hypothesis, thus, states that *opposition parties' issue priorities as reflected in their manifesto are more affected by mass media coverage than government parties' programs* (H2).

Apart from their government or opposition position, parties' ideological position may play a role too. Centre parties' ideological positions are less outspoken; they are positioned less clearly on the deep cleavages dividing societies than more extreme parties. Often, they switch government partners and alternate left-wing with right-wing government partners. Their ideological maneuvering space is probably more extended than parties positioned at the extremes of the ideological spectrum (see Rihoux *et al.* 2005). This allows centre parties to adapt more easily and to follow media cues more closely (Klingemann *et al.* 1994). *Parties having a central ideological position are more affected by media coverage when drafting their program than ideologically extreme parties* (H3).

The agenda-setting literature established that there are quite some differences across issues in the way political actors react on coverage. Whether issues are 'prominent', 'sensational' or 'governmental' makes a difference, as Soroka (2002b) has shown. Law and order issues and environmental issues are most typically 'sensational' and we expect the media to affect the party programs more when it comes to these issues than to political and social issues that are 'prominent' or even 'governmental'. Hence, we hypothesize that issues matter and that the agenda-setting impact of the media will differ. *For some issues mass media coverage affects the party manifestos more than for other issues* (H4).

Finally, the political agenda-setting literature states that political actors tend to react quickly on media attention. As the issue attention cycle from both public and media tends to be short (Downs 1972) it is not in political actors' interest to wait before reacting. They react immediately or they do not react at all (Walgrave and van Aelst 2006). On the one hand, as parties want to display their responsiveness, we expect party manifestos to obey these same mechanisms of immediacy. On the other hand, party manifestos are sometimes well-wrought pieces of work designed to have some staying power; they contain a party's plans for the whole next legislature and this is not reconcilable with an immediate and symbolic reaction on media cues. A crucial question, of course is *when* precisely parties draft their program. Drafting the program might be a sustained process stretching out for months or it may be a clenched exercise taking just a few weeks. This is important as it determines the media coverage to take into account. The question thus remains: Do parties incorporate in their party manifesto media coverage during a longer period relying on their long-term memory or do they just attend to the short time period when they are actually drafting their program? As we have no clear clue here, our hypothesis can only be general. *Parties' electoral manifestos are differentially affected by long-term and short-term media coverage* (H5).

Our aim is to test media's independent impact on party programs. Since party programs, like many political documents or activities, are often stable and characterized by inertia and path dependency, we will control for parties' own

programmatically. Consequently, we will not only assess whether media coverage merely affects the attention for issues in the manifestos but also whether media coverage affects the *change* in parties' issue attention from one manifesto to the next.

Data and methods

Our study focuses on the 1987–2003 period. In this period, Belgium counted ten major parliamentary parties – we omitted parties that held seats in parliament during only a small fraction of the research period. In the 18-year research period five general elections were organized. So, we consider the 1987, 1991, 1995, 1999, and 2003 national elections and party manifestos. Party manifestos were carefully encoded (quasi)sentence per (quasi)sentence following the methodology devised by the MRG (Budge *et al.* 2001). However, we did not rely on the 53-code system as developed by MRG but on a much more detailed issue categorization system drawing on 141 different issue codes (for more details, see: Walgrave *et al.* 2007). Not only manifestos but also the mass media were measured drawing on the same codebook.

The mass media database consists of two separate parts. National media do not exist in Belgium: both media-systems are completely separate with (Dutch-speaking) Flemings only reading Flemish newspapers and watching Flemish television and French-speaking people doing the same with their media. Therefore, for the core 1991–2000 period including three of the five elections covered here, we take into account French-speaking as well as Flemish media, and code both print and broadcast media in both regions. In Flanders, our media dataset for this period contains three Flemish newspapers, tabloids and broadsheets with different partisan leanings (*De Standaard*, *De Morgen* and *Het Laatste Nieuws*), and two main television channels: one public service broadcasting (TV1); and the other commercially run (VTM). For the newspapers, no indexes were available and we consequently used actual newspaper copies. We coded all front-page newspaper stories, with exception of the newspapers that appeared on Tuesdays and Thursdays, on a daily basis. The main news programs in prime time (7 p.m.) of the two main national television channels TV1 and VTM were coded on a daily basis. For the Walloon media, we undertook a comparable effort, also combining newspapers with TV news. The newspapers we coded are *Le Soir* and *La Libre Belgique*, both broadsheets but one with a more leftist and the other one with a more conservative leaning. Just as in Flanders we focused on the two main news channels, RTBF and RTL-TV, the first a public channel and the latter a commercial channel. Taken together, the Flemish and French-speaking media database contains 180,265 news items (to be precise 113,658 TV items and 66,607 newspaper items).

For the 2003 manifestos, we do not have at our disposal such detailed preceding mass media measures. We only have – thanks to the Flemish Electronic News Archive (see ENA website) – an extensive measure of the issue salience of the coverage on the main evening news on the Flemish public and commercial

Table 3.1 Number of (quasi)sentences per party manifesto 1987–2003

	1987	1991	1995	1999	2003	Total
CVP	817	897	750	1,278	2072	5,814
PSC	477	583	671	656	3,846	6,233
SP	831	2,930	771	557	390	2,842
PS	648	1,265	1,073	851	763	4,600
VLD	197	385	205	1,339	244	2,370
PRL	776	264	312	1,247	3,405	6,004
Agalev	2,405	712	1,239	2,574	3,509	10,439
Ecolo	174	3,052	340	1,698	690	5,954
Volksunie	210	235	1,730	1,842	–	2,460
Vlaams Belang	201	270	1,425	4,826	2,230	6,945
Total	6,736	7,956	6,959	16,868	15,142	53,661

Note

The name of almost all Belgian parties changed during the research period. We opted to use the name that was used during most of the research period, often this is the old party name.

broadcaster, TV1 and VTM, in the months preceding the May 2003 elections. In total the TV database for 2003 includes 7,191 news items. For the 1987 elections, we do not have at our disposal any media coverage at all. Consequently, we use the 1987 manifestos only as a control for the path-dependency of the 1991 manifestos.

The dependent variable of our study is based on an extensive coding of the 50 Belgian party manifestos issued during the 18-year research period. Table 3.1 documents the data per party and per year.

One can observe that some party manifestos are more detailed than others but in general the number of observations (quasi-sentences) per party and per manifesto is quite high. The Flemish green party, Agalev, clearly issues the lengthiest programs; the Flemish liberal party, VLD, has the most succinct manifestos. Over time a net increase in the volume of the Belgian party manifestos is manifest. The average size more than doubled from 1987 to 2003.

An analytical problem for our analysis is that parties do not produce and present their party manifesto at the same time. Some approve their manifesto months before Election Day while others only approve their program just before the elections. As only *preceding* media coverage can affect party manifestos the precise media coverage period to take into account differs from party to party. We decided to only consider media coverage up till one year before Election Day on a monthly basis. If a party issued its manifesto in September while elections were in December, for example, we will check whether media issue coverage from January till August has had any impact on the issues put forward in the manifesto presented in September.

Analyses and results

General results

As a first step, we calculate simple Pearson's correlations between party manifestos and preceding media coverage for four aggregated party manifestos of all parties (1991, 1995, 1995, and 1999). In this explorative phase, we do not distinguish between elections, time periods, issues, losing or winning parties etc.

Many associations are significant. This means that there is, at least statistically, a relation between parties' issue attention and the media coverage for these issues in the preceding months. This suggests that the media indeed affect party programs. Correlations are most of the time modest, however. There are differences between parties and media outlets which we regrouped according to language and type. French-speaking parties seem to be systematically less affected by media coverage than Dutch-speaking parties (average correlation of 0.64 compared to 0.106). Most affected by media coverage are the programs of the Christian-Democrat CVP (0.130) and the extreme-right party Vlaams Belang (0.131). Least affected by media coverage are the programs of the French-speaking socialist party PS (0.059). Comparing the TV and newspaper coefficients yields a more or less consistent picture. Both French-speaking and Flemish party manifestos seem to be more affected by newspaper coverage than by TV coverage. This is in line with earlier studies by Walgrave and colleagues (2008) showing that political actors react more to newspapers than to TV. The least influential media clearly are the Dutch-speaking TV-stations TV1 and VTM, both among French-speaking and Flemish parties.

If we run analyses 'predicting' a certain party manifesto's issue attention based on the same party's previous manifesto we come to very high autocorrelations (systematically +0.60). This means that party programs are highly path-dependent. There is a lot of continuity in party programs; parties do not change issue emphasis frequently or strongly. The consequences are obvious: there is little variance left over to be explained by external factors like the media or changing real world situations. Media's impact on party programs can only be modest as manifestos are largely determined by their own past (that past might, in turn, be partially determined by past media attention).

Testing the hypotheses

We proceed with testing our five explorative hypotheses one by one. For each hypothesis we present analyses. First, we always correlate party programs' *level* of proportional attention for issues with media's *level* of proportional attention for the same issues in the preceding months. Second, we correlate party programs' attention *change* for issues with media coverage's attention *change* for the same issues in the preceding months. This latter procedure controls for path-dependency; that is: programs being determined by their own past.

Table 3.2 Correlation (Pearson and significance) of party program issue attention (%) and preceding media issue coverage (%) (1987–2003)

	<i>Flemish television</i>	<i>Flemish newspapers</i>	<i>Flemish media</i>	<i>French television</i>	<i>French newspapers</i>	<i>French media</i>	<i>Average</i>
<i>Flemish parties</i>							
CVP	0.099***	0.148***	0.127***	0.123***	0.148***	0.137***	0.130
SP	0.084***	0.111***	0.119***	0.094***	0.107***	0.105***	0.103
VLD	0.053**	0.088***	0.089***	0.081***	0.106***	0.102***	0.087
Agalev	0.067***	0.056***	0.085***	0.059***	0.066***	0.081***	0.069
Volksumie	0.088***	0.141***	0.114***	0.095***	0.133***	0.112***	0.114
Vlaams Blok	0.104***	0.143***	0.152***	0.113***	0.136***	0.138***	0.131
Average	0.083	0.115	0.114	0.094	0.116	0.113	0.106
<i>French parties</i>							
PSC	0.010	0.067***	0.047**	0.092***	0.091***	0.099***	0.068
PS	0.027	0.072***	0.055**	0.064***	0.069***	0.066***	0.059
PRL	0.033	0.081***	0.066***	0.052**	0.071***	0.063***	0.061
Ecolo	0.027	0.096***	0.054**	0.066***	0.091***	0.081***	0.069
Average	0.024	0.079	0.056	0.069	0.081	0.077	0.064

Note

N depends on analysis: ranges from 2,961 to 4,935. Significance: ***p < .001; **p < .01

Electoral success or failure

Table 3.3 tells us that there is no systematic difference between parties that won and parties that lost the previous elections. The first hypotheses that especially losing parties would adopt media cues must therefore be rejected. For both elections (1995–1999) there are even fairly clear signs of the exact opposite pattern: winning parties are slightly more adaptive to media cues than losing parties. This opposite pattern is apparent both among the Flemish as among the French-speaking parties alike (not shown in table). Losing elections clearly does *not* inspire parties to take media attention into consideration more carefully. Of course, adapting to media cues might have been what made the winning parties successful in the first place. So if there is some continuity in parties' behavior it might be the case that parties who gained votes thanks to their adaptability to media cues continue to do so and persist in their winning strategy. Losing parties would then follow the opposite pattern and stick to the losing non-adaptive strategy.

Table 3.3 also contains the analyses of the *changes* in coverage and programmatic attention. Patterns are unclear. Often, we find negative correlations. This means that when media coverage for an issue goes up attention for that issue in the subsequent party programs goes down, and vice versa. This is, of course, difficult to explain. For 1999 however, there seems to be an interesting consistent pattern emerging. Parties that lost votes at the previous elections change their party manifesto in the *opposite* direction than media coverage change. This opposite pattern is entirely absent among the winning parties. Again this seems to suggest that losing parties do not adapt to media cues. Even the opposite seems to be true to some extent. Parties that have lost the previous elections adapt their program by attributing less attention to issues that gained more attention in the media. This non-adaptive strategy may lead to more electoral defeats.

Opposition and government parties

Table 3.4 seems to confirm the hypothesis that opposition parties take media coverage more into account than government parties when drafting their party manifestos. This seems to be a general tendency that applies both to the 1995 and 1999 elections. Except for a single case (1995, French TV), all coefficients tapping the correlation between media and party manifestos are larger for opposition than for government parties. Most telling is that there often is a negative and significant relationship between party manifesto change and media change and that this only applies to the government parties, never to the opposition parties. When government parties change their program compared to their previous program they even move in the opposite direction than the media; their party manifesto tends to drift away from media coverage instead of getting closer to the media agenda.

Table 3.3 Correlations between winning versus losing parties' (previous elections) issue attention and preceding issue attention in the media (N = 1692)

	<i>Flemish media</i>	<i>French media</i>	<i>Flemish newspapers</i>	<i>French newspapers</i>	<i>Flemish television</i>	<i>French television</i>	<i>Average</i>
Winning parties	0.117**	0.125**	0.095**	0.133**	0.157**	0.109**	0.123
Losing parties	0.122**	0.115**	0.120**	0.111**	0.140**	0.084**	0.115
Attention change 1995 manifestos							
Winning parties	-0.065**	-0.042	-0.077**	0.019	0.008	0.015	-0.024
Losing parties	0.009	0.034	-0.023	-0.029	-0.004	-0.046*	-0.010
Attention level 1999 manifestos							
Winning parties	0.131**	0.137**	0.110**	0.134**	0.132**	0.119**	0.127
Losing parties	0.046	0.059*	0.023	0.068**	0.084**	0.045	0.054
Attention change 1999 manifestos							
Winning parties	0.042	0.044	0.033	-0.025	-0.036	-0.012	0.008
Losing parties	-0.151**	-0.137**	-0.146**	-0.125**	-0.072**	-0.127**	-0.126

Table 3.4 Correlations between government versus opposition parties' issue attention and preceding (6–12 months) issue attention in the media (N = 846)

	Flemish media	French media	Flemish newspapers	French newspapers	Flemish television	French television	Average
Government parties	0.146**	0.155**	0.120**	0.142**	0.152**	0.126**	0.140
Opposition parties	0.154**	0.159**	0.132**	0.141**	0.159**	0.119**	0.144
Government parties	-0.086*	-0.080*	-0.070*	-0.039	-0.062	-0.009	-0.058
Opposition parties	0.027	0.050	-0.006	0.005	-0.009	0.017	0.014
Government parties	0.080*	0.102**	0.043	0.074*	0.093**	0.045	0.073
Opposition parties	0.126**	0.137**	0.098**	0.120**	0.137**	0.087*	0.118
Government parties	-0.157**	-0.164**	-0.112**	-0.179**	-0.110**	-0.178**	-0.150
Opposition parties	-0.001	0.004	-0.007	0.002	0.010	-0.005	0.001

Center and radical parties

Looking at Table 3.5 it shows that especially the party manifesto of the radical Flemish nationalist and right-wing Vlaams Belang is inspired by media coverage. The congruence of this populist party's manifesto and the media coverage is by far the highest both in 1995 (0.179) and in 1999 (0.166). This makes some sense as we can expect populist parties to be very sensitive to media coverage. Next come the Christian-Democrat parties. Their program priorities came fairly close to the media agenda in the previous period in 1995 (0.129); this had changed in 1999 (0.090). This mixed finding more or less confirms the hypothesis that center-parties are more affected by media coverage. Indeed, the least affected by media coverage seem to be both green parties that, especially in 1995 (0.049), were not inspired at all by media coverage. On the other hand, extreme parties are not less affected by media coverage than the other parties, contradicting the radicality hypothesis. We also see differences between both elections in the tables with some parties only weakly affected in 1995 and stronger in 1999 (e.g. the socialist parties).

The part of Table 3.5 taking the change in attention in media and programs as focus does not yield clear and interpretable results. There is no clear indication that media attention change leads to party manifesto change and that this differs systematically across party families. Also, 1995 and 1999 results partially contradict each other.

Issue type

We run the issue type analysis only for the 1995 data. We created two groups of issues: on the one hand the 'law and order' issues from which we know that they often affect the political agenda and on the other hand all other issues pooled together. These two groups are mutually exclusive. We then ran our correlational analysis on these two separate groups. The results yield a nuanced picture. First, when inspecting the top of the table we see that, on average, coverage on law and order themes affects the party programs more than coverage on non-law and order issues; congruence is higher for law and order issues. Especially French TV coverage on law and order themes, and consequently the aggregated French media agenda, was very strongly correlated with law and order issue attention in the party programs of both the Flemish (0.346) and the French (0.431) parties. These are the highest correlations we found so far.

The bottom table documenting the change in issue attention in the party manifestos shows, again with unusually high correlations, that the change in media attention for law and order issues was followed by a similar change in attention in the Flemish party manifestos in the amount of attention devoted to law and order. Remarkably, this only applies to the Flemish parties. French parties did not react at all to changes in media coverage. We believe this fact must be attributed to the presence and the electoral success of the extreme-right party Vlaams Belang in Flanders who forced the other Flemish parties to embrace a more

1 repressive law and order agenda. The impact of the Vlaams Belang on the
2 French parties – the Vlaams Belang is not participating in the elections in the
3 French speaking part of Belgium in the French-speaking part of Belgium – was
4 much less compelling and they did not react as strongly on the increased media
5 attention for law and order issues. Our results corroborate the hypothesis put
6 forward: both when it comes to the level of attention and when it comes to atten-
7 tion change, parties do seem to adjust their programs more to law and order
8 coverage than to other kinds of coverage. If media devote more attention to law
9 and order issues, then parties tend to follow. This is especially the case when a
0 strong challenging party is claiming the issue of law and order, pushing the other
1 parties to be extra sensitive to crime and similar coverage.

2 3 4 *Long- or short-term impact*

5 Table 3.7 contains the analyses distinguishing two periods. We take into account
6 long-term impact by assessing media coverage 6–12 months before the elections
7 and we assess short-term impact by measuring coverage 1–6 months before
8 Election Day.

9 An interesting pattern emerges from the data. When it comes to attention
0 level the long-term impact seems to prevail slightly. Both in 1995 and in 1999
1 the correlations with the earlier period are somewhat more substantial than the
2 correlations with the latter period. When it comes to attention level change, in
3 contrast, the data suggest the opposite. Correlations with the short-term period
4 are higher – yet also here very modest – than with the longer-term period. This
5 seems to suggest that parties, when drafting their programs take both the long-
6 and the short-term into account, but differently. For the level of attention they
7 stick to the longer-term, to decide what issues should get more or less attention
8 compared to the previous program they seem to rely on the coverage just before
9 they started drafting the program. Hence, we can cautiously maintain our
0 hypothesis that there would be a diverging impact from short- versus long-term
1 media coverage as the hypothesis is not clearly rejected but certainly not strongly
2 corroborated either.

3 4 5 **Conclusion**

6 Our analysis was preliminary and explorative. Our methods were not very soph-
7 isticated and we did not control for alternative effects on party manifesto content.
8 Party manifestos, for example, may not only be affected by preceding media
9 coverage but also by other activities and initiatives parties and their representa-
0 tives undertake. For example: party programs may also be ‘predicted’ by a
1 party’s preceding activities in parliament. Parties, then, would first adjust their
2 issue emphasis in parliament and only afterwards change their party program.
3 Another track to pursue is to see what happens *after* a party has changed or not
4 changed its party program according to media coverage. We may anticipate, for
5 example, that parties who do manage to adjust their manifesto to media coverage

Table 3.5 Correlations between parties' issue attention and preceding (6–12 months) issue attention in the media across party types (N=846)

	<i>Flemish media</i>	<i>Flemish newspapers</i>	<i>Flemish newspapers</i>	<i>Flemish television</i>	<i>French newspapers</i>	<i>Flemish television</i>	<i>French television</i>	<i>Average</i>
	<i>Attention level 1995 manifestos</i>							
Traditional parties	0.110**	0.124**	0.081*	0.132**	0.127**	0.127**	0.129**	0.117
Extreme parties	0.125**	0.147**	0.084*	0.112**	0.127**	0.127**	0.094**	0.115
Socialist parties	0.091**	0.093**	0.080*	0.104**	0.093**	0.093**	0.108**	0.095
Liberal parties	0.088*	0.109**	0.051	0.093**	0.090**	0.090**	0.090**	0.087
X-democratic parties	0.111**	0.122**	0.085*	0.154**	0.155**	0.155**	0.146**	0.129
Green parties	0.045	0.058	0.024	0.055	0.069*	0.069*	0.040	0.049
Nationalist party (VB)	0.202**	0.216**	0.164**	0.165**	0.179**	0.179**	0.145**	0.179
	<i>Attention change 1995 manifestos</i>							
Traditional parties	-0.001	-0.006	0.005	0.044	0.034	0.034	0.045	0.020
Extreme parties	-0.075*	-0.068*	-0.065	-0.002	-0.079*	-0.079*	0.071*	-0.036
Socialist parties	-0.062	-0.086*	-0.019	-0.042	-0.032	-0.032	-0.042	-0.047
Liberal parties	0.059	0.057	0.046	0.016	0.038	0.038	-0.008	0.035
X-democratic parties	-0.015	0.005	-0.034	0.118**	0.055	0.055	0.153**	0.047
Green parties	-0.032	-0.030	-0.026	0.039	-0.007	-0.007	0.074*	0.003
Nationalist party (VB)	-0.024	-0.035	-0.007	-0.009	-0.035	-0.035	0.018	-0.015

Attention level 1999 manifestos

Traditional parties	0.119**	0.129**	0.095**	0.097**	0.112**	0.071*	0.104
Extreme parties	0.173**	0.182**	0.145**	0.167**	0.181**	0.131**	0.163
Socialist parties	0.148**	0.146**	0.137**	0.086*	0.093**	0.068*	0.113
Liberal parties	0.065	0.077*	0.042	0.074*	0.105**	0.033	0.066
X-democratic parties	0.097**	0.111**	0.069*	0.092**	0.091**	0.081*	0.090
Green parties	0.110**	0.115**	0.092**	0.109**	0.142**	0.060	0.105
Nationalist party (VB)	0.176**	0.179**	0.156**	0.168**	0.156**	0.159**	0.166

Attention change 1999 manifestos

Traditional parties	-0.035	-0.041	-0.019	-0.018	0.007	-0.032	-0.023
Extreme parties	0.015	-0.003	0.034	-0.075*	-0.059	-0.063	-0.025
Socialist parties	0.088*	0.054	0.111**	0.067	0.042	0.066	0.071
Liberal parties	-0.084*	-0.068*	-0.085*	0.000	0.008	-0.007	-0.039
X-democratic parties	-0.036	-0.037	-0.026	-0.122**	-0.048	-0.144**	-0.069
Green parties	0.004	-0.015	0.028	-0.078*	-0.002	-0.115**	-0.030
Nationalist party (VB)	0.047	0.049	0.033	0.048	-0.060	0.123**	0.040

Table 3.6 Correlations between the Flemish versus French parties' issue attention and preceding (6–12 months) media attention across issue types

	<i>Flemish media</i>	<i>French media</i>	<i>Flemish newspapers</i>	<i>French newspapers</i>	<i>Flemish television</i>	<i>French television</i>	<i>Average</i>
Attention level 1995 manifestos							
Law-and order (N=60)							
Flemish parties	0.013	0.346**	0.033	0.110	-0.019	0.435**	0.153
French parties	-0.005	0.431**	0.011	0.147	-0.030	0.535**	0.182
Other issues (N=786)							
Flemish parties	0.170**	0.133**	0.182**	0.157**	0.137**	0.107**	0.148
French parties	0.051	0.072*	0.075*	0.080*	0.014	0.062	0.059
Attention change 1995 manifestos							
Law-and-order (N=60)							
Flemish parties	0.356**	0.371**	0.387**	0.010	0.201	0.478**	0.301
French parties	0.009	0.104	0.150	-0.008	-0.180	0.142	0.036
Other issues (N=786)							
Flemish parties	-0.015	-0.008	-0.021	-0.055	-0.004	0.038	-0.011
French parties	-0.071*	0.045	-0.072*	0.003	-0.052	0.077*	-0.012

Table 3.7 Correlations between parties' issue attention and preceding media attention by preceding time periods (N=846)

<i>Months before election</i>	<i>Flemish media</i>	<i>Flemish newspapers</i>	<i>Flemish television</i>	<i>French media</i>	<i>French newspapers</i>	<i>French television</i>	<i>Average</i>
	<i>Attention level 1995 manifestos</i>						
6-12	0.159**	0.171**	0.128**	0.092**	0.082*	0.096**	0.121
1-6	0.116**	0.114**	0.108**	0.081*	0.104**	0.059	0.097
	<i>Attention level 1999 manifestos</i>						
6-12	0.175**	0.178**	0.155**	0.076*	0.093**	0.050	0.121
1-6	0.128**	0.130**	0.113**	0.108**	0.089**	0.110**	0.113
	<i>Attention change 1995 manifestos</i>						
6-12	-0.013	-0.019	-0.003	0.049	0.001	0.084*	0.017
1-6 n	0.032	0.019	0.042	0.064	0.053	0.045	0.043
	<i>Attention change 1999 manifestos</i>						
6-12	-0.052	-0.069*	-0.017	-0.009	0.025	-0.035	-0.026
1-6	-0.063	-0.050	-0.074	0.146**	0.152**	0.120**	0.039

have a higher chance of winning the elections than parties who do not follow the mass media.

What have we learned in this chapter? The first finding is that party manifestos are highly stable and not very variable. Party programs are strongly path-dependent. This means that, inevitably, the media's impact on the party manifestos can only be small as there is not much variation left to be explained. Second, we do find systematic similarities between issue emphasis in manifestos and preceding media coverage. Party programs and media coverage are associated. Statistically, the associations are weak but they are significant. Third, our hypotheses did not really deliver very strong results. Our understanding of party manifesto antecedents remains limited. Two hypotheses kept the track and were corroborated. First, opposition parties are more inspired by media coverage than government parties. Second, issue types make a difference with more media impact on attention for law and order issues in the programs than for other types of issues. Another interesting finding, going against our initial hypothesis, is that parties who won the previous elections do seem to adjust their manifesto *more* to media coverage than parties who lost the previous electoral contest. If adjusting to media coverage is a winning strategy this would mean that some parties persist in their winning strategy while others persist in embracing a losing strategy. We also found some proof of the fact that some parties' manifestos are more affected by media coverage than other parties: in Belgium, especially the extreme-right populist party Vlaams Belang seems to have been inspired by media coverage more than any other party. Finally, long-term media impact on party manifestos seems to prevail on short-term impact – parties are more inspired by media coverage a long time before they draft their program – but this finding was not entirely consistent and must be nuanced.

By and large, we found some evidence that media matter for party manifestos, but admittedly the link we found was weak and elusive. Media matter to some extent, it is clear that parties decide on their priorities while somehow taking media into account, but the association is not straightforward nor is it easy to disentangle it. Especially the level of attention media and parties devote to issues is correlated, but a change in media attention hardly seems to lead to a subsequent change in party attention. Our analysis was explorative, our results show that there probably is something going on, but we need more research to lay bare the actual process.

References

- Bartels, L. (1996) *Politicians and the Press: Who Leads, Who Follows?* Paper read at APSA 1996, September, San Francisco.
- Budge, I. (1994) 'A New Spatial Theory of Party Competition: Uncertainty, Ideology and Policy Equilibria Viewed Comparatively and Spatially', *British Journal of Political Science*, 24(4): 443–467.
- and Bara, T. (2001) 'Manifesto-based Research: A Critical Overview', in I. Budge, H.-D. Klingemann, A. Volkens, J. Bara, E. Tanenbaum (eds) *Mapping Policy Prefer-*

- ences: *Estimated for Parties, Electors and Governments 1945–1998*, Oxford: Oxford University Press: 51–75.
- and Klingemann, H.D. (2001) ‘Finally! Comparative Over-time Mapping of Party Policy Movement’, in I. Budge, H.-D. Klingemann, A. Volkens, J. Bara, E. Tanenbaum (eds) *Mapping Policy Preferences. Estimated for Parties, Electors and Governments 1945–1998*, Oxford: Oxford University Press: 19–51.
- , H.-D. Klingemann, A. Volkens, J. Bara, E. Tanenbaum (eds) (2001) *Mapping Policy Preferences. Estimated for Parties, Electors and Governments 1945–1998*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Cook, F.L., T.R. Tyler, E.G. Goetz, M.T. Gordon, D. Protesse, D.R. Leff and H.L. Molotch (eds) (1983) ‘Media and Agenda Setting: Effects on the Public, Interest Group Leaders, Policy Makers, and Policy’, *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 47(1): 16–35.
- Downs, A. (1957) *An Economic Theory of Democracy*, New York: Harper & Row.
- (1972) ‘Up and Down with Ecology – the Issue Attention Cycle’, *Public Interest*, 28: 38–50.
- Edwards, G.C. and Dan Wood, B. (1999) ‘Who Influences Whom? The President, Congress and the Media’, *American Political Science Review*, 93(2): 327–344.
- Elektronisch Nieuwsarchief Vlaanderen [Flemish Electronic News Archive] (no date) online, available at: www.nieuwsarchief.be.
- Gilberg, S., C. Eval, M. McCombs, D. Nicholas (1980) ‘The State of the Union Address and the Press Agendas’, *Journalism Quarterly*, 57: 584–588.
- Janda, K., R. Harmel, C. Edens, P. Goff (1995) ‘Changes in Party Identity: Evidence from Party Manifestos’, *Party Politics*, 1(2): 171–196.
- Kenamer, D. (ed.) (1992) *Public Opinion, the Press and Public Policy*, Westpoint, CT: Praeger Publishers.
- Klingemann, H., Hofferbert, R. and Budge, I. (1994) *Parties, Policies and Democracy*, Oxford: Westview.
- Lorwin, V.R. (1971) ‘Segmented Pluralism: Ideological Cleavage and Political Cleavage in the Smaller European Democracies’, *Comparative Politics*, 3(2): 141–144.
- Rihoux, B., Dumont, P. and Dandoy, R. (2005) ‘L’effet des médias et des programmes de partis sur le contenu des accords de gouvernement, 1991–1999: participation ou médiacratie?’, in S. Walgrave, L. De Winter and M. Nuytemans (eds.) *Politieke agenda-setting in België (1991–2000). De moeilijke dialoog tussen publieke opinie, media en het politieke systeem*, Gent: Academia Press: 123–148.
- Robertson, D. (1976) *A Theory of Party Competition*, London and New York: Wiley.
- Rohrschneider, R. (2002) ‘Mobilizing versus Changing: How do Parties Target Voters in Election Campaigns?’, *Electoral Studies*, 21(3): 367–382.
- Soroka, S.N. (2002a) *Agenda-setting Dynamics in Canada*, Vancouver: UBC Press.
- (2002b) ‘Issue Attributes and Agenda-setting by Media, the Public, and Policymakers in Canada’, *International Journal of Public Opinion Research*, 14(3): 264–285.
- Stimson, J.A., Mackuen, M.B. and Erikson, R.S. (1995) ‘Dynamic Representation’, *American Political Science Review*, 89(3): 543–565.
- Vliegenthart, R. and Walgrave, S. (2009 forthcoming) ‘When Media Matter for Politics. Partisan Moderators of Mass Media’s Agenda-setting Influence on Parliament in Belgium’, accepted for publication in *Party Politics*.
- Volkens, A. and Klingemann, H.-D. (2002) ‘Parties, Ideologies and Issues: Stability and Change in Fifteen European Party Systems 1945–1998’, in K.R. Luther and F. Müller-Rommel (eds.) *Political Parties in the New Europe: Political and Analytical Challenges*, New York: Oxford University Press: 143–169.

