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Selective Deafness of Political Parties: Strategic Responsiveness to Media, Protest and Real-World Signals on Immigration in Belgian Parliament

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How do political parties react to different signals from society indicating the saliency of a particular social problem? Are all parties equally responsive to all signals or do certain signals prove more effective in engaging some parties than others? We address these questions from an agenda-setting perspective. In particular, we investigate how media attention, protest activity and real-world signals shape parties' attention for immigration in the federal parliament of Belgium. A time series model suggests that media attention, protest activity and real-world indicators all increase parliamentary attention as measured by weekly oral questions. More detailed models show the impact of these signals to differ across parties. Media attention and protest activity engage left wing parties, whereas asylum applications drive political action of the party delivering the responsible secretary. Far-right parties, finally, react both to media attention and real-world indicators. We conclude that political parties are 'selectively deaf'; they act (or do not act) strategically upon incoming signals, depending on whether the signal fits their political goals or not. This article contributes to agenda-setting research by including multiple societal signals in its research design and by focusing on party characteristics and party competition to disentangle the conditionality of various agenda-setting effects.

Keywords: Agenda-setting, Immigration, Mass media, Parliamentary questions, Protest, Party competition

Finding out what drives the attention of political parties in parliament is a key puzzle for political scientists (Dearing and Rogers, 1996). Besides broadly

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speaking to key questions of democratic responsiveness and accountability, understanding 'what gets attention from whom, when, and how' also touches upon crucial issues of power, strategy and competition in politics (Jones and Baumgartner, 2004). Over the last few decades, the lens of political agenda-setting has proven to be a powerful tool in addressing such puzzles (Jones and Baumgartner, 2005; Bevan and Jennings, 2014). A variety of scholars in different countries have investigated the agenda-setting power of *societal signals* such as focusing events (e.g. Birkland, 2006), mass media coverage (e.g. Edwards and Wood, 1999; Van Noije *et al.*, 2008), public opinion (e.g. Jones and Baumgartner, 2004; Tan and Weaver, 2007) and protests (e.g. King *et al.*, 2007; Johnson *et al.*, 2010). Also the agenda-setting power of *political signals* such as government agreements (e.g. Joly *et al.*, 2015) and party manifestos (e.g. Vliegenthart and Walgrave, 2011) has been scrutinised.

With this article, we aim to contribute to and extend this burgeoning agenda-setting literature. Our study speaks to two important strands of inquiry within political agenda-setting research. The first line of research that we rely on focuses on the agenda-setting power of *mass media*. Here, studies typically investigate the relationship between media and politics across a large number of issues and scholars are interested in establishing mass media as a cause of political attention. Of particular interest to us, is this literature's focus on the *contingency* of mass media's agenda-setting capacities. Both characteristics of media content (conflict, negativity) and traits of political actors (issue ownership, government or opposition status) have been found to condition mass media's agenda-setting power (Green-Pedersen and Stubager, 2010; Thesen, 2013).

A second line of agenda-setting research incorporates *multiple signals* in their design. Doing so, these studies counter the criticism that the media–politics relationship might be spurious. Next to media attention, these studies add real-world indicators (e.g. crime rates, or unemployment figures), public opinion data or protest events to the mix of political input signals (Soroka, 2002; Johnson *et al.*, 2010; Delshad, 2012; Olds, 2013). The main interest of this second type of studies lies in disentangling which signals are more potent than others in setting 'the' political agenda. Indeed, although these studies consider multiple *input* signals they largely neglect different *output* reactions by different political parties.

In this article, we combine the strengths of both strands of literature. We incorporate *multiple* signals on a single issue—immigration—and disentangle to what extent *different parties* react *differently* to these different societal signals. Such an approach clearly brings party competition to the fore as a relevant explanation for agenda responsiveness. Whereas traditional agenda-setting studies generally stress salience aspects of party competition—that is, parties competing by emphasizing different issues (Green-Pedersen and Mortensen, 2010)—our

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focus on multiple signals and a single issue allows us to engage with positional aspects of party competition as well—that is, parties competing by emphasising the same issue at different points in time, and more precisely, in response to information conveying different issue-positions (Downs, 1957; Guinaudeau and Persico, 2014).

Specifically, we study how media attention, protest activity and real-world indicators shape parties' attention for immigration in Belgium—as measured by oral questions in the federal parliament. Attracting relatively much public and media attention due to the weekly live television broadcasts and simultaneously having potential for real policy influence, oral questions are well-suited to study parties' strategic responsiveness. Since the weekly number of questions a party can ask is limited, parties are forced to set clear priorities, which is why they are often used as an indicator of partisan issue attention (Vliegenthart *et al.*, 2016). Based on agenda-setting and party competition theories, we argue that not all signals are equally likely to resonate with all parties. Some signals 'fit' some parties better than others depending on the extent to which parties can use them strategically in the party competition game. Particularly, we focus on the link between societal signals and traits of political parties—like for instance parties' policy responsibility, left-right positioning and issue-ownership—to explain differential responsiveness. Our results show that all three signals affect attention in parliament, yet that the impact of these signals differs across parties. Media attention and protest activity engage left wing parties, whereas asylum applications drive political action of the party that bears policy responsibility for immigration. Far-right parties, finally, react both to media attention and applications. In sum, our results show that political parties are 'selectively deaf'[1]: they act (or do not act) strategically upon incoming signals, engaging with those signals that best fit their political goals and needs. These findings underline the idea that political parties are strategic actors that are not merely passively undergoing external influence but instead deliberately pick and choose to respond to incoming information—or not.

1. Societal signals and the political agenda

Why do politicians react to societal signals? And why would they do so selectively? In line with democratic theory, we argue that politicians—and in the aggregate, parties—pay attention to society as a matter of *responsiveness* (Jones and

[1]Selective deafness or selective hearing is a form of selective attention, most often conceptualized as people's auditory attention being directed at only those things people are most interested in hearing about. As such, selective deafness is a nice metaphor capturing the strategically selective attention that parties pay to societal signals, on which we will elaborate in this paper.

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Baumgartner, 2004). Worrying about electoral consequences, political parties have an interest to respond to the priorities and positions of citizens (Downs, 1957; Stokes, 1963). Since citizens' priorities and positions are not easy to read—especially in small countries where systematic public polling data are unavailable—politicians rely on a variety of indirect indicators, such as media attention, to assess the public saliency of a topic.[2] By reacting to such societal signals, parties show their constituents and other observers that they care and keep track of the world around them.

This does not mean that *all* parties necessarily respond equally to *all* incoming signals, however. Attention is scarce, agenda-setting studies would argue (Kingdon, 1995; Walgrave *et al.*, 2018), and this is all the more true for parliamentary agendas that are further confined by strict procedures (e.g. Döring and Doring, 2001). The combination of information abundancy, attention scarcity and electoral fear makes responsiveness also very much a matter of strategic politicisation, in which aspects of *party competition* play a key role (Walgrave and Van Aelst, 2006; Green-Pedersen and Stubager, 2010).

Party competition theories come in two different guises. On the one hand, spatial theories stress that parties compete by presenting different positions on a pre-given set of issues (Downs, 1957). All kind of factors might contribute to the positions a party takes, including a range of party characteristics. Spoon and Williams (2017), for example, demonstrate how party divisiveness on the issue of European integration makes them more responsive to an Eurosceptic electorate. Mader and Steiner (2019) demonstrate that parties with high levels of 'infusion'—that is, parties whose candidates are committed to the parties—have more homogeneous positions on issues than parties that have lower levels of infusion.

Issue competition theories, on the other hand, stress that parties emphasise issues on which they have an advantage—issues they 'own' for instance; that is, of which they believe that a majority of voters is on their side and views them as competent (Budge and Farlie, 1983; Petrocik, 1996; Egan, 2013; Stubager and Slothuus, 2013) and adjust strategies depending on their electoral fortunes (De Vries and Hobolt, 2012). According to this latter perspective, party competition is essentially about controlling which issues are on the agenda (Stokes, 1963). This does not mean that parties can always focus on the issues they want to, however. Parties are sometimes forced to attend to specific issues by other parties (Meguid, 2005; Green-Pedersen and Mortensen, 2010). And, besides party-driven determinants of issue focus, also external events determine party attention. Ansolabehere and Iyengar (1994) speak about how parties 'ride the wave' of hot

[2]As such, we define 'responsiveness' broader than the many representation studies looking at the direct effects of public opinion on politicians' issue agendas and positions. In Belgium (and in many other small European countries), unfortunately, no polling data are gathered on a regular basis.

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issues in order to appear as 'concerned, responsive and informed' to voters (also see Wagner and Meyer, 2014). Recent work elaborately engages with the questions when and why political parties decide to devote attention to issues. Again, it is argued that general party characteristics matter—for example, party size increases responsiveness to voters' issue preferences, as does an opposition role (Klüver and Spoon, 2016). Also the electoral context matters: parties are more responsive in national elections than in European elections (Spoon and Klüver, 2014).

In sum, positional and issue competition strategies are considered to co-exist; party competition is simultaneously a matter of parties taking distinct positions, of stressing owned issues, and of attending to issues brought to the agenda by other parties or by external events. A large and growing body of research demonstrates this co-existence of party competition logics (Meguid, 2005; Abou-Chadi, 2016), showing that there are strong degrees of issue overlap (Sigelman and Buell, 2004) and that depending on parties' profiles, their manifestoes have varying degrees of broadness and hence convergence (Greene, 2016). These theories of party competition help us a great deal in understanding how parties distribute attention.

Another way of structuring parties' varying issue strategies is to distinguish between long-term and short-term strategies. Across the board, parties pay more attention to some issues than to others, for instance, to issues they own (long-term strategies). Additionally, however, all parties 'ride the wave' and occasionally show that they care about immigration by responding to external circumstances (short-term strategies).

In this article, we posit that parties ride *different* waves. We focus on three external signals that might affect political parties' attention in parliament: mass media signals, protest activity and real-world indicators. All these signals inform parties about the salience of immigration. And, all of these signals are relatively easily available to—and often even systematically tracked by—political parties. In the next section, we will argue that the *affordances* of these signals—the properties that define their possible use and make clear how they can or should be used—vary across political parties given their different position in the party competition game. This is where position competition interferes with issue competition. Some signals 'fit' or 'match' better with some parties, allowing them to capitalise on this signal by reacting to it. In the next few paragraphs, we elaborate on the different signals, their affordances for different parties and tie them with the issue of immigration.

1.1 Mass media signals

The first signal we consider is media attention. Sevenans (2018) specifies several specific tasks media signals can fulfill for parties. Media attention can reveal novel information about social problems, can reflect and influence public opinion, can

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create a window of opportunity to push long-held policy plans and can include frames that allow for critically assessing and targeting political opponents. Given this variety of functions, it makes perfect sense for parties to engage with media signals (Strömbäck, 2008).

Multiple studies have shown that the agenda-setting power of mass media is contingent, however. It varies across issue-types, media outlets and news content characteristics; as well as across policy-making stages, (non-)electoral periods and party types (see e.g. Bonafont and Baumgartner, 2013; Thesen, 2013; Vliegenthart *et al.*, 2016). One recurring finding is that media signals resonate less with parties that are in government. In contrast, especially opposition parties' parliamentary questioning behaviour is influenced by media attention (see e.g. Vliegenthart and Walgrave, 2011; Thesen, 2013). The explanation for this contingent media effect ties the negativity of media signals (signal feature) to the opposition status of parties (party feature). That is, media signals are most often negative and conflict loaded, allowing opposition parties to critically oppose and attack government policy (Seeberg, 2013; Thesen, 2013). This negativity trait of media signals surely holds true for immigration news in Belgium. Recent research by Jacobs *et al.* (2016) finds that immigration news in Belgium is overwhelmingly negative, strongly problematising immigration and stressing its negative consequences. It is therefore particularly suitable for opposition parties as 'ammunition' to attack government.

Thus, we expect government parties to be less eager to react to immigration media signals. More importantly, we argue that the effect of mass media is less likely for the party that is in charge of the policy domain of immigration; delivering the responsible secretary. Two arguments support this specification: first, the responsible party is the 'public face' of the issue and hence very unlikely to politicise negative media information, since that information will often be detrimental for that party. Two, having access to inside cabinet information, this party is also less dependent on media coverage for information about the issue. This leads to hypothesis 1:

> *H1: An increase in media attention to immigration leads to an increase in the number of oral parliamentary questions about immigration asked by opposition parties (both left-wing and extreme-right opposition parties).*

1.2 Protest signals

Also protest actions are signals informing parties about what (a particular segment of) the public cares about (Lohmann, 1993; Wouters and Walgrave, 2017). Protest signals capture what a specific mobilised and active segment of the general citizenry wants. Since the turn of the century, there has been a boom in studies

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investigating the political potency of protest (Andrews, 2001; Amenta *et al.*, 2005; Soule and King, 2006; Walgrave and Vliegenthart, 2012; Gillion, 2013).

Only recently researchers have taken a closer look at how different parties respond to protest. Hutter and Vliegenthart (2018) find that protest is more often responded to by issue-owning parties and that parties are more likely to react if a competing party is already engaging with the issue. Similarly, Hutter and Vliegenthart (2018) also found left-wing parties to pay more attention to protest.

Again, the combination of protest signal and political party traits in a competitive party landscape makes us expect differential attention to immigration as a consequence of immigration protest. First, immigration protests are often staged by organisations that are formally or informally affiliated with left-wing parties, making sure that protest gets easier on the radar of left-wing parties. Secondly, the claims made by these protesters tend to be in line with the claims in left-wing party programs. And thirdly, immigration protests tend to draw participants that belong to the voting potential of left-wing parties (Hutter, 2014). Finally, in terms of the usefulness of the information communicated by immigration protests, these protests allow political parties to frame immigrants and asylum seekers as victims; which resonates with left-wing audiences (Van Gorp, 2005; Odmalm, 2012; Helbling, 2014). In all, given this fit between protest signals and left-wing parties, we expect protest signals to increase left-wing party attention to immigration in parliament.

> *H2: An increase in protests on immigration leads to an increase in the number of oral parliamentary questions about immigration asked by left-wing parties.*

1.3 Real-world indicators

The final signal we consider in our study is a real-world indicator: the number of official asylum requests in Belgium. To be clear, this does not imply that media and protest signals are less 'real'. In the agenda-setting literature, the term is used to refer to those signals that are less ambiguous; that are of a more quantitative nature and therefore reflect more objective conditions and evolutions (Hilgartner and Bosk, 1988). Statistics generated by government agencies, like crime rates, unemployment figures, emission figures, or casualties of war fall in this category. Several studies have used the number of asylum requests as a real-world indicator for the immigration issue before (see Vliegenthart and Roggeband, 2007; Van Noije *et al.*, 2008).

Whereas economic indicators have frequently been tied to a range of political decisions and changes (Fiorina, 1978; Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier, 2018), real-world indicators have been used less in agenda-setting research. Behr and Iyengar

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(1985) included real-world indicators on unemployment, inflation and energy in a public agenda-setting study. Soroka (2002), in a political agenda-setting study, incorporated statistics on crime and the environment. Van Noije *et al.* (2008) did so for immigration. And more recently, Vliegenthart and Damstra (2019) relied on stock market indices and changes in unemployment to explain parliamentary attention for the economic crisis.

Interestingly, most of these studies use real-world indicators simply as control variables, generally finding proof for their argument that media matter *on top* of these statistics (but see: Delshad, 2012; Gava *et al.*, 2013). As a consequence, less attention is paid to *why* real-world indicators matter; let alone matter differently across political parties. We believe that real-world signals indicate the magnitude of a certain problem, presenting parties with the opportunity to politicise the issue. More specifically, we expect real-world indicators to especially engage (i) parties responsible for the issue and (ii) those who own the issue.

First, we expect real-world indicators to be especially potent in engaging members of parliament (MPs) of the party in charge of the policy domain to ask parliamentary questions. Again, government-opposition dynamics underlie this expectation. Being responsible for the issue and its department, the responsible party is eager to closely track real-world developments in the issue domain to see whether its policy approach works as intended. This is even more so because this party is likely to have the information first-hand available. Secondly, delivering the executive politician, the performance of the party's minister on this issue is likely to influence the overall electoral performance of the party, as voters might judge the competence of the party in handling the issue domain when casting their vote (Healy and Malhotra, 2013). As a coping strategy, MPs of the responsible party therefore can be expected to ask questions to 'their' minister, giving her the opportunity to defend the policy approach and to pre-emptively debunk possible criticisms of challenging parties. Thus, because of easy availability, important electoral consequences and providing 'their' minister with defence-opportunities, we expect real-world indicators to have a significant effect on parties in charge of the issue domain.

> *H3: An increase in the number of asylum requests leads to an increase in the number of oral parliamentary questions about immigration asked by parties that are in charge of the issue domain.*

Secondly, we expect a rise in asylum applications to activate far-right parties as well, who own the immigration issue in Belgium (Walgrave and De Swert, 2007; Dandoy, 2014). Basically, several agenda-setting studies have found issue-ownership to steer the attention of parties in reacting to societal signals (Green-Pedersen and Stubager, 2010; Vliegenthart and Walgrave, 2011). Rising requests clearly indicate the severity of the immigration issue, an issue far-right parties

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and their voters strongly care about (Van der Brug and Fennema, 2007; Cutts *et al.*, 2011). In terms of framing the issue, rising requests allow far-right parties to depict immigrants as intruders, a frame preferred by their constituents (Van Gorp *et al.*, 2009; Helbling, 2014). Moreover, rising requests provide far-right parties ammunition to target the party in charge of the policy domain, depicting it as incompetent and not in control of the situation (Odmalm, 2012). This leads to our final hypothesis.

> *H4: An increase in the number of asylum requests leads to an increase in the number of oral parliamentary questions about immigration asked by far-right parties.*

2. The case: immigration

We focus on the issue of immigration for several reasons. First, in the past decades, immigration has become a heavily politicised issue worldwide (Van der Brug *et al.*, 2015), and this definitely holds for Belgium (Dandoy, 2014). According to Kriesi *et al.* (2012) globalisation has presented traditional cleavage structures with a critical juncture, giving rise to a new, cross-cutting 'integration-demarcation' cleavage, that separates 'winners' and 'losers' of globalisation. This cleavage—with the issue of immigration at the heart of it—consists of both economic (economic competition due to globalisation) and cultural (cultural and ethnic diversity due to globalisation) dimensions and is considered to affect *all* parties across the political spectrum. The scope and politicisation of the immigration issue make immigration an ideal topic to study how *different* parties react to different societal signals.

Secondly, from a protest perspective, immigration presents an ideal-typical issue as well. Protest is the 'weapon of the weak'. Migrant organisations confirm this picture of outsider organisations with little resources, only having protest to make their voices heard. Moreover, protest activity on immigration in Belgium is a one-way street: as good as all protest actions organised on this issue make pro-immigration claims (Wouters, 2013). Finally, several political agenda-setting case studies have investigated political attention for immigration, allowing us to build on a solid foundation and to expect at least some agenda-setting effects (Vliegenthart and Roggeband, 2007; Green-Pedersen and Krogstrup, 2008; Van Noije *et al.*, 2008). None of these studies, however, have fleshed out differences in party reactions to different societal signals.

In sum, we believe that immigration is an ideal-typical issue to test our theoretical arguments about societal signals and the 'selective deafness' of political parties. We focus on Belgium; a small, federal, multi-party consensus democracy in Western Europe. Belgium is considered a textbook example of a partitocracy,

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with high within-party unity strongly shaping the policy-making process (Lijphart, 1999). Again this makes Belgium an ideal case to start looking at aspects of strategic party responsiveness to societal signals.

With regard to immigration in Belgium, three aspects deserve attention. First, Flanders, the northern part of Belgium, saw the early rise of one of the most successful far-right parties in Europe (Vlaams Belang), with the Vlaams Belang clearly owning the immigration issue (Dandoy, 2014). Interestingly, all other parties signed a 'cordon sanitaire'—an agreement not to collaborate or form a coalition with the Vlaams Belang (Erk, 2005). This does not mean that parties ignored the immigration issue or that it was less politicised. Just like on other issues, the boom of a niche party affected mainstream parties (Meguid, 2005). The stronger the Vlaams Belang became, the more attention other parties paid to immigration in their manifestoes (Dandoy, 2014). Although the cordon gives an extra twist to the immigration issue in Belgium, we have no reason to believe that party competition on immigration played out differently in Belgium compared to other countries.

Secondly, during the entire period under study, the issue of asylum was handled by the liberal party: till 2003 with the French speaking Duquesne and from 2003 till mid-2008 with the Dutch speaking Dewael, both ministers of interior affairs. In the later governments (mid-2008 onwards), Asylum and Migration became a separate department, twice with the Flemish Liberal Turtelboom as minister.

Finally, in terms of legislation, under Dewael, a new immigration law was voted that speeded up asylum procedures, but was still lacking clear regularisation criteria. In the following Turtelboom periods, an executive order with regularisation criteria was promised but never delivered. This non-deliverance triggered theprotest, media and political attention. We further detail the particular events that shaped the course of the immigration issue in Belgium in our next section, where we present data and methods.

3. Data and methods

To empirically test our hypotheses, we rely on content analysis data of different agendas in Belgium over a seven-year period, ranging from 2003 to 2009. Although this research period is constrained by matters of data availability (combination of different data sets), the period is substantially interesting given that it pre-dates the more recent outburst of the asylum and migration issue, with for instance the Syrian refugee crisis hitting Europe in 2015. We measure political, protest and media attention for immigration and add a real-world agenda to our models.

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Table 1 Descriptive statistics of dependent variable (data not yet aggregated)

	Total number of questions asked	Number of questions about immigration (proportion)
Political action		
Parliamentary questions (all parties in parliament)	3528	207 (5.87%)
Parliamentary questions by left-wing parties	1101	87 (7.90%)
Parliamentary questions by liberal parties (responsible for asylum)	867	29 (3.34%)
Parliamentary questions by extreme-right parties	500	34 (6.80%)

Note: Numbers to not sum up to total, because questions by the Christian Democrats are not included separately in this article.

Political agenda: To measure political attention—our *dependent* variable—we look at the oral parliamentary questions asked by federal MPs in the weekly plenary meeting. These oral questions are part of the 'symbolic' political agenda on which content is decided in the short term (Walgrave and Van Aelst, 2006), and a tool by which MPs can address 'the issues of the day'. All parliamentary questions were issue-coded in the framework of the Comparative Agendas Project (CAP). The CAP codebook contains 28 major topic codes (e.g. '*Macroeconomics*', '*Health*', '*Immigration and integration*',. . .). All parliamentary questions got one topic code.[3] For this article, we selected those observations that were placed in major topic '*Immigration and integration*' from the full data set ($N = 207$). As one would expect from party competition theory, Table 1 shows that, overall, the parties under study do not pick up the issue of immigration to the same extent. With 3.34% of its parliamentary oral questions dealing with immigration, the liberal party has least attention for the issue—which is not surprising, knowing that they themselves delivered the state secretary of immigration. Left-wing parties, known for criticising the (centre-)right immigration and integration policy, pay more attention (7.90% of all questions) to immigration. Somewhat surprisingly, the extreme-right parties—who are issue-owner of immigration—remain below the left-wing parties with a proportion of 6.80% of oral questions devoted to immigration.

Media signal: We gauged media attention for immigration—our first independent variable—via a content analysis of Belgian (Flemish) television news. The Electronic News Archive (ENA; see: www.steunpuntmedia.be) is a data set that records and classifies all news items of the daily 7 PM news broadcasts on VRT

[3]For the CAP-coding of parliamentary data, EUROVOC-codes were automatically converted to CAP codes. For all data and coding procedures, see www.comparativeagendas.net.

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(main public broadcaster) and VTM (main commercial broadcaster) since 2003. The ENA coding scheme contains, amongst others, the issue of the news item and the countries the item deals with. We sorted out all domestic news items, dealing with the issue of immigration, broadcasted between 2003 and 2009 ($N = 1235$). Inter-coder reliability tests show sufficiently high Krippendorff's alphas for both variables: domestic news ($\alpha = 0.83$) and the immigration issue classification ($\alpha = 0.80$) (De Smedt *et al.*, 2013).

Protest signal: We assessed our second independent variable—immigration protest—by coding records from the Brussels' police archive. Brussels is the capital and political heart of Belgium. All political institutions are located in Brussels, which makes the city an obvious location for protestors to display their grievances. The consulted police archive possesses a report of (almost) every demonstration taking place in Brussels. Based on these documents, the day of the action, the issue, the size and the occurrence of disruptiveness were coded. For more information about the police archive, see Wouters (2013). During the research period under study, 408 demonstrations took place with claims related to immigration.

Real-world signal: The number of asylum requests—our third independent variable—was obtained via the Office of the Commissioner General for Refugees and Stateless Persons (CGVS; see: www.cgvs.be). Every month, this office publishes a document with statistics on the asylum applications and decisions taken. Per month, on average 1198 people apply for asylum in Belgium.

Data structure: In order to conduct time-series analyses, all data were aggregated to the weekly level. Weeks are an appropriate unit of analysis: plenary parliamentary meetings take place once a week and questions have been shown to respond to current events at short time intervals (see Vliegenthart and Walgrave, 2011). Weeks in which no plenary parliamentary meeting took place (e.g. during the summer recess or in election times) were excluded from the analysis, resulting in a shortened seven-year period data set of 195 weeks. The dependent variable *Parliamentary questions* refers to the number of parliamentary questions about immigration asked in a given week. In the period under study, there was a weekly average of about one parliamentary question about immigration; but this number varied between 0 and 11. Since we expect parties with different positions and ideological backgrounds to react differently to various signals, we constructed three separate variables. We distinguish between *Parliamentary questions by left-wing (green and socialist) parties*,[4] *Parliamentary questions by the responsible (liberal) party*[5] and

[4]Agalev (later changed name into: Groen), Ecolo, SP (later changed name into: sp.a), Spirit and PS.

[5]Over the whole period, the liberals delivered the minister/state secretary responsible for Immigration. Liberal parties: VLD (later changed name into: Open Vld), MR and LDD.

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Table 2 Descriptive statistics of all variables (data aggregated on weekly level)

	Mean	S.D.	Min.	Max.	*N*
Political action					
Parliamentary questions about immigration (all parties in parliament)	1.06	1.78	0	11	195
Parliamentary questions about immigration by left-wing parties	0.45	0.79	0	3	195
Parliamentary questions about immigration by liberal parties (responsible for asylum)	0.15	0.48	0	3	195
Parliamentary questions about immigration by extreme-right parties	0.17	0.43	0	2	195
Number of other issues addressed	8.49	2.24	1	17	195
Mass media					
Media attention	3.39	3.26	0	24	364
Protest					
Protest frequency	1.12	1.33	0	8	364
Protest size	0.02	0.16	0	1	364
Disruptiveness	0.04	0.23	0	2	364
Real-world					
Asylum requests (in thousands)	1.20	0.27	0.79	2.02	364

Parliamentary questions by far-right parties.[6] As such, we incorporate all Belgian parties in our more specific models, except for the centrist Christian Democratic party, for whom we have no clear expectations.[7] With respect to our independent variables, *Media attention* measures the weekly number of television news items devoted to immigration. On average, about three news items in a given week are about immigration, but there are weeks without coverage on immigration on the one hand, and weeks with substantially more immigration items (up to 24) on the other. Secondly, we measure protest in three different ways. Most importantly, *Protest frequency* captures the weekly

[6]Vlaams Belang and FN.

[7]We do not have clear expectations about the Christian Democrats with regard to our three signals. Analyses focusing on questions asked by the CD&V (not presented here) indeed suggest that this party does not respond to any of the incoming signals discussed in this paper. This does not mean that Christian-Democratic parties are not selectively dealing with some signals or issues. Van Kersbergen (2008), for instance, shows that Christian-Democratic parties are argued to struggle with, and prefer to avoid, issues related to religious values. In addition, it should be noted that the CD&V for the largest part of this period formed a cartel with the Flemish Nationalist N-VA. Back then, the N-VA was still a small party (hence its willingness to form a cartel). After the research period, the N-VA became the biggest party in Flanders, strongly stressing the migration issue and contesting the Far Right Vlaams Belang's ownership. But all of this of course was still unknown in the period 2003–2009.

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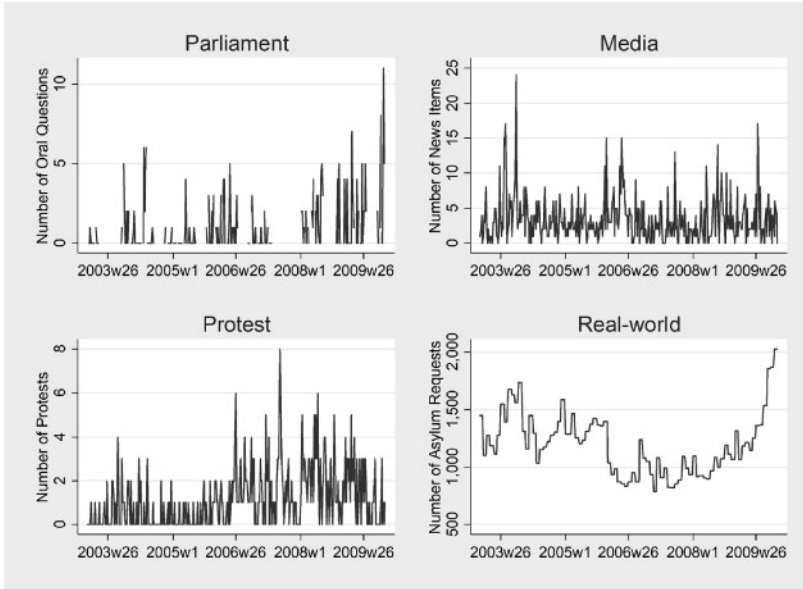

Figure 1. Overview of the different agenda's.

number of immigration demonstrations. In the period 2003–2009, the number of these protests varied between 0 and 8 per week, with an average of about one demonstration. Additionally, *Protest size* is a dummy variable (0/1) indicating 1 when at least one 'big' protest (more than 1000 demonstrators) took place in a given week. In the period under study, 9 such 'big' protests were organised, with the number of participants ranging from 1100 to 17,000. *Disruptiveness* refers to the weekly number of disruptive demonstrations, that is, where violence was used (either by the police or by demonstrators) or where people were hurt. Of all protest events, only 16—staged in 14 different weeks—were disruptive. We use the latter two variables to test whether protest in general has agenda-setting capacity—as we hypothesised above—rather than large and disruptive protest only. Our real-world data, the number of asylum requests (in thousands), are only available on the monthly level, so the variable *Asylum requests* changes only every four or five weeks in our data set. The full descriptive statistics of all variables can be found in Table 2.

Figure 1 provides some insight into the relationship among the different agendas included in our analyses. As the figure shows, the different agendas follow their own dynamics, yet sometimes coincide. For instance, the controversial presence of illegal immigrants in the port of Zeebrugge in November 2003 sparked a lot of media attention, three protest actions about how these illegal immigrants were treated, as well as five oral questions on the issue. In 2009, a one-time action

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by the government allowed many economic immigrants to be regularised, which was first covered amply by the media (and led to a peak in asylum requests) and afterwards got a lot of parliamentary attention, when the operation was declared unlawful. In other instances, attention peaks remain limited to the sphere of one specific agenda. Correlation analyses of our main variables of interest (see Supplementary Table S1) confirm what the figure suggests: some of our societal signals are correlated, but only moderately. Mass media in particular deserve mentioning here: concerns that mass media, as the 'master' forum of public debate, would to some extent take up and channel our other societal signals—protest signals in particular—seem unjustified: media attention does not correlate with protest. Only a small share of the protests is covered in the media and many other factors codetermine whether immigration gets attention in the news.

Analyses: We use negative binomial regression models to analyse the data as our dependent variable is a count variable characterised by overdispersion. We use lagged independent variables.[8] Two important considerations need to be taken into account when analysing time-series data. The first is autocorrelation: political agendas are relatively stable and MPs' attention for immigration in week x is probably influenced by the amount of attention for the issue in week x minus one. That is why we include a lagged dependent variable as well in all our models.[9] Secondly, we need to make sure that there is no trend in the dependent variable. Dickey fuller tests are significant, indicating that the series are stationary. In order to not artificially single out immigration from the broader political agenda, we control for attention to other issues by adding a simple count variable measuring the number of *other* issues (i.e. all CAP major topics, excluding *Immigration and integration*) that were raised in parliament that week.

4. Results

Our analyses proceed in two steps. First, we present a general model of attention to immigration in parliament, incorporating all societal signals and controls. This model does not test any of our hypotheses, but allows for a first basic stab at the data: do these signals generally have any effect on overall questioning behaviour? In a second step, we present analyses for different parties separately and assess our hypotheses: do some signals resonate especially with some parties?

[8]Most variables are lagged by one week. As an exception, for protest, we take the three weeks preceding the parliamentary meeting into account, assuming that this signal spills over to other agendas at a slower pace—just like Vliegenthart et al. (2016) do. In addition, 'Asylum requests' is lagged by five weeks because the number of asylum applications is only published monthly.

[9]This variable refers to the number of parliamentary questions about immigration asked in the preceding plenary meeting, which may have taken place more than one week before.

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Table 3 Predicting parliamentary attention for immigration

	Full model	**Extended protest model**
Parliament (t−1)	−0.034 (0.068)	−0.035 (0.068)
Television (t−1)	0.101* (0.040)	0.090* (0.041)
Applications (t−5)	1.041* (0.497)	1.134* (0.515)
Protest		
frequency (*t−[1−3]*)	0.126** (0.048)	0.115* (0.053)
size (*t−[1−3]*)	—	0.364 (0.475)
conflict (*t−[1−3]*)	—	0.125 (0.249)
Other issues (*t*)	0.103^{+} (0.056)	0.100^{+} (0.056)
Constant	−2.976*** (0.851)	−3.041*** (0.863)
Log-likelihood	−260.535	−260.137

Note: Estimations based on negative binomial regressions; $^{+}p < 0.10$; $^{*}p < 0.05$; $^{**}p < 0.01$; $N = 195$.

Table 3 presents the general results. All three of our societal signals prove to be significant agenda-setters. The coefficient of television attention is positive and significant. There is a general political agenda-setting effect of television on politics: when television news pays more attention to immigration, MPs subsequently ask more questions about immigration in parliament. The same holds for protest. If activity in the streets increases and protest frequency on immigration goes up, then MPs devote more attention to that issue in parliament in the following week(s). And, finally, also the real-world indicator—asylum requests—is a potent agenda-setter. An increase in asylum requests leads to an increase in parliamentary questions about immigration.

The effects of these societal signals come on top of two control measures: previous attention for immigration, which is not significant, and the number of non-immigration issues raised that particular week. The more other issues raised, the more likely it is that immigration is on the agenda as well. One plausible interpretation of this dynamic is that many other issues point to a 'diverse' political week, a week that is not dominated by a particular crisis or issue all parties pay attention to.

As an additional check, we extend our general base model by adding a number of protest features to the equation. We want to make sure that our theoretical expectations hold and that it is protest frequency, and not its size or disruptiveness, which sets the agenda. It turns out that both protest size and disruptiveness do not increase the explanatory power of our model. It is the frequency of the protests that engages politicians to react.

To account for the relationship between media and protest—large protests may be covered on television—we ran additional analyses with a modified *Television* variable excluding all news items about immigration protests (see

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Table 4 Predicting political parties' attention for immigration in parliament

	Left-wing parties	**Far-right parties**	**Liberal parties (responsible for asylum)**
Parliament (t−1)	−0.088 (0.160)	0.092 (0.357)	0.021 (0.408)
Television (t−1)	**0.098** (0.034)**	**0.097** (0.036)**	0.122 (0.077)
Applications (t−5)	0.731 (0.517)	**1.287^{+} (0.702)**	**1.998* (0.920)**
Protest frequency (t−[1 − 3])	**0.147** (0.045)**	0.038 (0.067)	0.055 (0.094)
Other issues (*t*)	0.130* (0.056)	0.097 (0.086)	0.133 (0.114)
Constant	−3.788*** (0.879)	−4.767*** (1.206)	−6.328*** (1.695)
Log-likelihood	−162.831	−89.444	−78.287

Notes: Estimations based on negative binomial regressions; $^{+}p < 0.10$; $^{*}p < 0.05$; $^{**}p < 0.01$; $^{***}p < 0.001$; $N = 195$. Left-wing parties: Green parties (Agalev/Groen & Ecolo) and socialist parties (SP/sp.a/spirit & PS). Far-right parties: Vlaams Belang & FN. Liberal parties (responsible for asylum): VLD/Open VLD & MR & LDD.

Supplementary Tables S2 and S3). This does not change any of the main conclusions. Media and protest matter, independently from each other. Furthermore, and interestingly, media attention for protest does not reinforce the effect of the protest: the interaction effect between *Protest frequency* and *Television* is insignificant (analysis not shown here). Apparently, in our case, protest does not necessarily need media attention in order to attract parliament's attention.

In all, our general models paint a picture of a *responsive* parliament; of politicians who keep track of the world around them and having this information steer their political behaviour. But does this finding hold across individual political parties? Table 4 presents analyses for different groups of parties—left-wing parties, far-right parties and parties delivering the minister responsible for the issue at hand—allowing us to test our hypotheses.

Hypothesis 1 stated that mass media signals would be significant agenda-setters for all different parties, but not for the party in charge of the immigration issue. Looking at Table 4, we find confirmation for hypothesis 1. The effect of television news on the responsible, liberal party is not significant (final column: $b = 0.122$; S.E. $= 0.077$; $p = 0.111$). Television news does resonate with other party groups, however: both left-wing and far-right parties significantly respond to media-signals about immigration (first and second column: $b = 0.098$, S.E. $= 0.034$; $p < 0.01$; and $b = 0.097$, S.E. $= 0.036$, $p < 0.01$, respectively). The size of the effect of television news is substantive. For instance, the predicted number of questions on immigration asked by left-wing parties, for any given week preceded by a week where media attention to immigration was zero, is 0.26 (based on model in Table 4); whereas in weeks where there were 7 news items on immigration,

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the predicted value increases to 0.52.[10] Or, differently stated: left-wing parties ask twice as much immigration questions in times of increased media attention for the issue—keeping real-world factors and protest constant. The numbers for right-wing parties are lower, but the ratio is similar: the predicted number of questions increases from 0.11 (when no media attention) to 0.21 (when a lot of media attention).

Hypothesis 2 expected protest signals to resonate significantly with left-wing parties. This expectation is straightforwardly confirmed by the data. Left-wing parties are directly affected by protest frequency (first column): the number of parliamentary questions about immigration asked by left-wing parties in a given week, is in part explained by the number of immigration demonstrations in the preceding week(s). In fact, checking the other party group models, it shows that left-wing parties are the *only* group that respond to protest signals. Moreover, analyses with standardised independent variables show protest to be the most potent agenda-setter for left-wing parties; having a more pervasive influence compared to media signals. Hypothesis 2 is therefore accepted. In substantive terms, the predicted value—for left-wing parties—increases from 0.22 in weeks preceded by three weeks without immigration protests to 0.54 in weeks preceded by three weeks with six protests.

Hypotheses 3 and 4, finally, expected the responsible party and far-right parties to respond to asylum applications. Results in Table 4 confirm our expectations. Liberal parties react to one signal only—real-world cues (final column). When there are only 950 applications in the preceding month, the liberals ask only 0.07 questions on the issue (predicted values from model in Table 4); when the number of requests rises to 1.450, the number of questions almost triples to 0.19. Finally, also hypothesis 4 is corroborated; far-right parties (second column) are more likely to address issues of immigration in parliament if more people request asylum in Belgium, though the effect is only marginally significant ($p < 0.10$). Additional analyses (not in Table) show television news and asylum requests to be about equally strong agenda-setters for far-right parties. Taken together, results from Table 4 paint a nuanced picture about responsiveness in Belgian parliament and the agenda-setting capacities of societal signals. Yes, parties are responsive to societal signals; but, not all parties react to all signals—or at least not to the same extent.

Before moving on to the conclusion, a final concern that deserves attention is causality. Like most agenda-setting research, our analysis departs from the assumption that parliamentary responsiveness to signals can be measured via

[10]All predicted probabilities (see also below) calculated for the following two values of the relevant independent variable: the mean plus one standard deviation and the mean minus one standard deviation. We kept all other variables in the model at their respective means.

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time-series analyses; that is, by looking at which signals temporally precede parliamentary questions. Although we think this makes sense in most cases, we are well aware of the difficulties related to make such causal claims (for an elaborate discussion about (media) agenda-setting and causality, see Sevenans (2018)). Foremost, there is the risk of endogeneity: we assume here that parliamentarians respond to media and protest signals, but it is well possible that media and protest attention are, on their turn, reactions to political decisions about immigration. Additional analyses (not shown here)—taking media and protest as the respective *dependent* variables—show that neither of these two agendas are significantly influenced by preceding parliamentary questions. This confirms the reactive nature of parliamentary questions, making them well suited to test our hypotheses.

5. Conclusion and Discussion

How do political parties react to different societal signals indicating the saliency of a particular social problem? Are all parties equally responsive to all signals or do some signals prove more effective in engaging some parties than others? Most previous political agenda-setting studies focused either on the *contingent* effect of media signals or on the *across-the-board* effect of multiple societal signals. Here, we combined the strengths of both research designs: we teased out how different political parties react to different societal signals.

Theoretically, we developed the argument that different societal signals allow parties to highlight different aspects of a social problem and are therefore differentially useful in terms of party competition. In other words, the *affordances* of societal signals—the properties that define their possible use—vary across parties and some signals 'fit' or 'match' better with some parties. Arguing that responsiveness is also very much a matter of strategic politicisation, we expected parties to be 'selectively deaf': especially engaging with those signals that are strategically beneficial.

Our results show that, on a general level, Belgian parliament responds to media coverage, protest activity and real-world developments on the issue of immigration. This general responsiveness does not hold across political parties, however. In line with our expectations, aspects related to government-opposition status, left-right positioning and issue-ownership influenced the extent to which parties address immigration in parliament. Our results confirm that media attention is considerably less useful as an input signal for parties in charge of the policy domain. Simultaneously, media attention clearly turns out to be a significant agenda-setter for both left-wing and far-right parties. Protest activity, next, only significantly resonates with parties of the left. And, asylum applications, finally, drive political action of both the party delivering the secretary as well as far-right parties, who tend to own the issue. These findings confirm our hypotheses on differential responsiveness by political parties, and clearly attest of parties'

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strategic politicisation of societal signals. Parties neither respond to their environment nor are they solely focused on their own set priorities. Their questioning behaviour is the product of both the supply of incoming signals and rational, strategic decision-making.

In terms of limitations, we studied a single issue in a single country and a likely case for selective agenda-setting effects to take place. What about the generalisability of our findings? In terms of the issue, we focused on a highly politicised issue that matters for all political parties. Although the main contribution of our article is that we looked at different *signals* within an issue, it is clear that the general scope of an issue likely determines the extent to which a diversity of parties is a priori interested in engaging with the issue. It might be that for certain issues, that are more 'niche', all signals only resonate with a single party. In these cases, however, we would argue that the affordances of all these signals simply benefit that single party, still confirming our general theoretical argument. Next, the country we focused on is Belgium. Belgium is a notorious partitocracy, with severe party discipline. This gives individual politicians little leeway to diverge from the general party line and facilitates coherent party reactions. In sum, the case we scrutinised is a most likely case of finding the effects we found, which is perfectly legitimate we believe to start exploring new empirical puzzles.

Having paid attention to the particularities of our study, we nevertheless believe the mechanisms behind the patterns we find to be present in most if not all parliamentary democracies. The game of opposition versus government, of left versus right, and of parties seeking to own and steal issues are far from Belgian idiosyncrasies. We hope that future research can extend our approach, by adding variation in issues, signals and countries, as such further disentangling whether different signals affect different parties differently. We expect that the elements put forward in this study—strategic politicisation and the respective affordances of societal signals—to play a major role in these studies too.

Supplementary data

Supplementary data are available at *Parliamentary Affairs* online.

Conflict of Interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest to report.

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