Media Effects on Politicians: An Individual-Level Political Agenda-Setting Experiment

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Abstract
Media attention is a crucial factor determining what issues make it onto the political agenda. However, studies have also shown that this political agenda-setting effect is not automatic. The present study conceptualizes the media's influence on politics as a function of the media message and the background of politicians and focuses on the moment a member of parliament (MP) learns about an issue through a news report. What aspects of a news report make politicians take action? And are some politicians more likely to take action than others? It introduces an innovative factorial survey experiment to isolate media effects by asking Swiss politicians ($N = 50$) to evaluate fictional news reports. Analyses show that news reports on an issue their party owns covering a negative development published in a quality newspaper are more likely to lead to action. However, negative news mainly affects junior MPs. In contrast to previous studies, issue specialization of the MP does not have a significant effect. Findings are discussed in light of the role of the political system and the power of the media in politics.

Keywords
political agenda-setting, media effects, parliament

Politicians always face a multitude of issues that compete for their attention, only some of which can make it onto the political agenda (Jones and Baumgartner 2005). This study focuses on the role of the media in how the political agenda is formed. Scholars refer to the effect of media on political agendas as the political or policy agenda-setting effect; when an issue receives more attention by the media, politics will follow. Studies show that this transfer of attention does not work automatically but depends on factors such as the type of coverage, the political agendas, and the (election) period studied (Walgrave and Van Aelst

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2006). At the same time, studies show that not all politicians are likely to be influenced by media in the same way. The current study uses an experimental design to investigate how media coverage can influence political actions by *individual* members of parliament (MPs). To date, political agenda-setting studies have mainly focused on the aggregate-level transfer of issue attention (e.g., Van der Pas 2014). However, in the past years, the contingency of the media's effects and the role of the background of the politicians have started to receive more and more attention by scholars. The present study contributes to the existing literature on political agenda-setting by simultaneously studying the influence of media content and politician and party characteristics in one research design. What is the influence of specific media content such as negativity on politicians' behavior? And is there a systematic variation between MPs in their reaction to media coverage?

A vast number of studies have looked at perceptive measures of influence via surveys, oftentimes combining data from journalists and politicians to investigate the "mediatization" of politics (e.g., Brants et al. 2010; Maurer and Pfetsch 2014; Van Aelst et al. 2008; Van Aelst et al. 2010). By contrast, few researchers explored the association between individual-level characteristics of MPs beyond the party and their behavior in parliament (for an exception, see Cohen et al. 2008). Although survey studies asking MPs about *general* media influence tend to conclude that the media have massive influence on politics, time series analyses attribute less influence to the media (Van Aelst and Walgrave 2011). This makes it particularly relevant to further investigate the media's influence on politics beyond perceptive measures. Yet a number of factors make studying the media's influence on individual politicians particularly challenging and perceptive measures of media influence not suitable for establishing a causal link between media reporting and politicians' behavior. First, political actors use many information sources in addition to the media, which are often confounded with the effects of media coverage. Some aggregate-level studies have included the influence of real-world developments to isolate the media's influence on politics from these developments (e.g., Wanta and Foote 1994). But they have mainly remained on the aggregate (party) level and thus provide only limited insight into the mechanisms of influence of specific media content beyond issues and parties. Second, MPs are embedded within a party structure and a specific institutional context. Deliberations within a party or in informal settings in the hallways of parliament that are oftentimes not accessible to researchers may influence their political decisions (Davis 2007). A politician who intends to take political action based on information from a news report may reverse his or her decision because of a change in the political setting. In such cases, research focusing on behavioral outcome will conclude, erroneously, that media reporting had no influence, simply because it was insufficient to overcome other factors. Yet politicians had been influenced by the coverage. The present study thus complements studies of political agenda setting that have thus far mostly focused on the party

organizational level. Across the board, party specialists emphasize the heterogeneity of parliamentary party groups and the fact that instead of parties and organizations, research should also investigate their individual members (Sieberer 2006). The factorial survey design this study applies shows that there are experimental designs particularly applicable to small elite populations to uncover the factors that drive their behavior. It allows zooming in on how specific media content and the individual politician affect whether issues from the media make it onto the political agenda.

Building on Kepplinger (2007) and Walgrave and Van Aelst (2006), this study investigates direct effects of media reporting on political behavior in an experiment. The controlled settings allow a much more stringent test of the causal relationship between media coverage and politicians' actions than studies to date have been able to provide. I conceptualize reactions to media coverage as a function of both the characteristics of the report itself (the message) and the background of the politician who is influenced and takes action (the receiver). With this conceptualization, the study lends from the sender, message, receiver distinction by Shannon and Weaver (1949) which is popular among media effects scholars. In a survey, members of the Lower House of Switzerland ($N = 50$) were shown news reports that had been systematically manipulated on a number of news values and asked whether they would take political action based on the report. This study thus zooms in on the crucial selection moment when politicians decide whether or not to pursue an issue that is brought to their attention through a media report. As actors with scarce resources exposed to a stream of information, politicians have to make these kinds of decisions constantly. Knowing more about the factors that influence whether an MP will pursue an issue after exposure to a media report is key for researchers and policymakers alike.

Findings show that there are considerable differences between MPs in how much importance they attribute to the media for their parliamentary work. Although one third considers media a crucial influence, another third rates the influence of the media on their work rather low in relation to other sources of influence. Results of the experimental study point to the importance of party issue ownership and a politician's political experience in explaining whether media affect politicians' actions. There are however stronger effects of message characteristics. Politicians are more likely to react to negative news published in quality outlets.

Influence of Outlet and News Report Characteristics

Media report according to a strict logic. Scholars often use the theory of news values (Galtung and Ruge 1965) to explain both which events journalists cover and how (Helfer and Van Aelst 2015; Shoemaker and Vos 2009). As a consequence, media reports often share common characteristics even when different events are covered. This study zooms in on a number of news values

most pertinent to political media coverage and which previous studies have identified as key factors in the transfer of attention from the media to politics. Those relate to both the media outlet and the content of the report.

First, not all kinds of media outlets have the same influence on politics (Walgrave and Van Aelst 2006). Newspapers are a central player, both because they can influence other media outlets (Gans 1979) and because they have been found to affect the political agenda more than television in the European context (Walgrave et al. 2008). However, not all newspapers exert the same influence on politics. Politicians value prestigious broadsheet papers and rely more on them (Kepplinger 2007). Reliable and respected news outlets have also been found to be more influential in the United States (Bartels 1993). Thus, politicians are expected to be more likely to take action based on a report published in a quality newspaper than in a popular one (Hypothesis 1 [H1]).

Next to the outlet publishing the report, the experimental nature of the study allows to study effects of more specific media content. One of the most important aspects of reporting is exogenous negativity, that is, the media portraying a negative development coming from outside the media (Lengauer et al. 2012). Negativity is one of the most important news values that determine journalists' selection of topics (Harcup and O'Neill 2001). There is vast evidence that news consumers process negative information differently from positive one (e.g., Meffert et al. 2006; Soroka 2006). Politicians are no exception. They are expected to be even more responsive to negative news because "political actors must consider that they might be held responsible for their actions or inactions—or how these are played out in the media" (Strömbäck 2009: 239; see also Yanovitzky 2002). This suggests politicians are more likely to say that they would take political action based on news reports covering negative developments (Hypothesis 2 [H2]).

However, reactions on negativity might depend on who is made responsible. Content analyses identified responsibility as one of the most important frames in political coverage (Gerhards et al. 2009; Semetko and Valkenburg 2000). A recent study by Thesen (2012) showed that parties react strategically to media coverage depending on the framing (see also Green-Pedersen and Mortensen 2009). Opposition parties react more if there are negative developments because it allows them to point out how government parties are not doing well. Government parties, in contrast, tend to lay low if there is negative news. A similar rationale likely applies to politicians. In cases where the media explicitly make parliament responsible, they will want to lay low in the hopes that the story will die. If the news is positive, however, they might be more inclined to draw additional attention and react to the coverage (Hypothesis 3 [H3]).

Influence of Party and Politician Characteristics

In election periods, where influence of the media and politics have often been studied, parties and politicians are responsive to news to gain more votes (Brandenburg 2002; Kleinnijenhuis and de Nooy 2011). However, politicians and policymakers adjust their behavior to account for changes in public opinion also between elections (Stimson et al. 1995). Although political scientists assume reelection is the strongest driver of MP behavior, structural factors can also influence their actions (Kingdon 1977). The experimental setting of this study isolates the influence of a number of crucial party and politician characteristics that have been found to moderate the media's political agenda-setting effects.

First, the parliamentary party group provides MPs with a social system within which their action takes place and which can limit their actions. Studies have investigated the effects of the size of the parliament on politicians' media access and found that MPs from bigger parliaments have less contact with journalists than those in small ones (Van Aelst et al. 2010). The effect of parliament size on the influence of media reports on politicians' actions are, however, not as clear. A recent comparative study of European countries did not find an effect of parliament size on self-reported parliamentary behavior (Midtbø et al. 2014). MPs from bigger parliaments were neither more nor less likely to say that media coverage had inspired their actions in the past year. However, it seems likely that a different mechanism affects the parliamentary party group as a whole. For one thing, the size of the party group will influence behavior as each MP in a smaller party group addresses a wider range of issues so that the party can present a broad agenda. Bigger groups typically have a more stringent division of labor among MPs (Andeweg and Thomassen 2010) leading to more specialist MPs. Also, MPs in bigger groups will avoid intervening with issues other members of their party own because such intrusion will threaten their position within the party if they are sanctioned, as there are many others ready to take their place. This suggests MPs from bigger groups will be less likely to take action based on media reports (Hypothesis 4 [H4]).

Another important aspect related to the party is issue ownership. Media oftentimes link parties and politicians with specific issues in their coverage (Walgrave et al. 2009). Scholars often refer to party issue ownership (Petrocik 1996) to explain why a party reacts to some issues covered in the media and not others (Green-Pedersen 2010; Vliegenthart and Walgrave 2011). These effects likely transfer to the individual politician. Reacting on a party's core issue allows MPs to capitalize on existing party profiles (Strøm 1998). Moreover, MPs within a party normally have a shared position on the party's core issue (Andeweg and Thomassen 2010; Owens 2003). Therefore, it is expected that politicians are more likely to take parliamentary action based on a news report that covers an issue their party owns than one their party does not own (Hypothesis 5 [H5]). However, politicians and parties of course not only react to "their" issues but have to take position on a wider range of issues. As mentioned, most parties have specialists who act as representatives of their party in parliamentary committees and often

also as the spokesperson on that same issue. MPs considering fostering a personal vote and gaining publicity for themselves (Carey and Shugart 1995) will be reacting to media coverage on "their" issue. Besides providing a starting point for gaining additional media coverage on the issue, such media coverage can be a stepping stone for them to influence the broader political process on that same issue (Davis 2007). Overall, politicians are more likely to take parliamentary action based on a news report covering an issue in which they specialize (Hypothesis 6 [H6]).

Zooming in further on the individual level, media coverage can provide MPs with an opportunity to build their (public) profile and show voters that they are active (Landerer 2014). To increase chances of reelection, they will want to get covered, and reacting to existing media coverage often pays off (Van Santen et al. 2015). Whereas senior MPs often have a solid voter base and are known among the public, new MPs have to work to gain such a profile leading them to be more inclined to react to media coverage (Cohen et al. 2008). The Swiss proportional open-list system, which provides incumbents, and among them even more the senior MPs, with an advantage in elections through name recognition (Hix 2004: 198), might magnify this effect. Consequentially, junior politicians are expected to be more likely to take parliamentary action based on news reports than senior politicians (Hypothesis 7 [H7]).

To date, studies have mainly either investigated what kind of issues were more likely to make it onto the political agenda or which actors were more likely to react to media coverage. As both have been found to affect the agenda-setting power of the media, the logical next step is to investigate whether those two interact; do some issues or media content effects depend on the politicians' background? In fact, junior MPs' reactions to media content might be accentuated by some media content. Specifically, it would be logical for these MPs to focus on the media content they know plays into journalists' existing news values and increases their chance of getting into the news. As mentioned, negativity is one of the most important news values in journalistic selection. As a consequence, junior MPs are expected to be more likely to take parliamentary action based on a media report covering a negative development than more senior MPs (Hypothesis 8 [H8]). While these junior MPs will jump to the possibility to take action, more senior MPs will be less influenced.

The Swiss Case

As a multiparty system with a tradition as a consensus democracy and a strong welfare state, Switzerland falls within the democratic corporatist model of West European countries (Hallin and Mancini 2004). The formerly historical ties between media and politics have loosened, and Swiss outlets cannot be attributed a specific political orientation anymore (Blum and Donges 2005; Hanitzsch and Mellado 2011). Political reporting is based on criteria of newsworthiness

comparable with pragmatic journalistic cultures of countries like Denmark or Germany (Van Dalen 2012). The media content variables tested in this study are in fact a feature of political reporting in countries beyond the one studied due to news values journalists share across the world (Harcup and O'Neill 2001). They always cover a specific issue and often mention a negative development for instance. The effects of these shared media content variables are thus expected to be applicable beyond the Swiss context.

Generalizability of effects of the background of politicians is likely to be more limited as the political system plays a more central role. Party specialists have long emphasized that the structural context provides MPs different motivational structures (e.g., Hix 2004), and there is evidence that the political culture affects the politics–media relationship (Tan and Weaver 2007). Although the Swiss political system can generally be understood as a typical West European multiparty system with independent political parties competing over political power, it does have a few peculiarities. In contrast to other multiparty systems, Swiss MPs show low party discipline (Lanfranchi and Lüthi 1999), and its open-list proportional voting system provides MPs with an incentive to foster a personal vote (Carey and Shugart 1995). This might accentuate effects of MPs' issue specialization. Another particularity of the Swiss case is that the major parties across the political spectrum are represented in government, and "coalitions" are formed on the spot, depending on the issue at stake (Linder et al. 2006). Studies have already shown that opposition MPs are more likely to react to media coverage than those from government parties (e.g., Midtbø et al. 2014; Thesen 2012; Vliegenthart and Walgrave 2011). Yet low party discipline and the fact that parties are not that central a player in the Swiss system might have some advantages for the present experimental study. They allow to focus on disentangling the influence of more fine-grained individual-level variables on politicians' reactions to media reports. By testing the effects of a number crucial political agenda-setting variables on a more fine-grained level than the mere transfer of issue attention and on the political-party level, the study can provide important insights of the complex political agenda-setting mechanisms on individual MPs beyond the Swiss case.

Table 1. Overview of News Values Associated with Experimentally Manipulated Variables and Their Operationalization.

Variable	Values
Development	Positive–negative (2)
Responsibility attribution	National parliament–not (2)[a]
Issue ownership	Owned–not owned (2)[b]
Media outlet	Broadsheet–popular (2)
Information source	Generally available–investigated (2)

a. Four values were included for this variable. National parliament was contrasted with responsibility to real-world developments, the European Union, and no responsibility attribution.
b. A total of five issues were included. See Table 2 for an overview.

Method

Politicians consume a vast amount of media content every day, reading multiple newspapers to keep up-to-date with the current developments both inside and outside of politics (Davis 2007). Hence, it seems likely that media influence politics. However, isolating this influence is complicated and calls for an experimental approach. Few studies have done so, however (for exceptions, see Clinton and Enamorado 2014; Protess et al. 1987). The present study uses the factorial survey design from sociology (see Wallander 2009), a variant of a conjoint design (Hainmueller et al. 2014). It samples experimental conditions based on criteria of statistical efficiency and uses a mixture of within- and between-respondent design by presenting several stimuli to each respondent.

Experimental Design of Media Reports

This study aims to measure the media's influence on political actions by individual politicians. Most substantive parliamentary actions such as motions require the support of other politicians. However, to give politicians a realistic case, a general formulation referring to a symbolic action they themselves can take was chosen. After having read the fictional news reports to members, respondents answered the following question: "Would you take parliamentary action (e.g., ask a parliamentary question) based on this news report?"[1] Responses for each news report respondents received were collected on a slider scale ranging from 1 to 7, with the starting position at 4. Within reports, five content variables were systematically manipulated. Table 1 gives an overview of the variables and their values.

   All the variables included in the experiment were carefully operationalized. First, the outlet publishing the report was manipulated. It was either the popular newspaper *Der Blick* or the broadsheet newspaper *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*. Those two outlets have the highest circulation numbers among the paid daily press in Switzerland with 179,000 and 115,000 readers, respectively (WEMF AG für Werbemedienforschung 2013). Like other daily newspapers, neither has a clear partisan leaning (Tresch 2009). A picture of the logo of the media outlet that had published the news report was included (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Example of a news report presented to respondents (translated).

Table 2. Operationalization of Issue Ownership and Development.

Issue Owner (Party)	Positive Development	Negative Development
Liberals (FDP)	The financial deficit is smaller than predicted	The financial deficit is bigger than predicted
Social democrats (SPS)	Fewer people are unemployed	More people are unemployed
Rightwing (SVP)	Fewer immigrants with the family reunion program	More immigrants with the family reunion program
Greens (GPS)	Air pollution has decreased since previous year	Air pollution has increased since previous year
Christian democrats (CVP)	Fewer women between ages 25 and 35 have had an abortion	More women between ages 25 and 35 have had an abortion

Note. Parties are Liberal Party (FDP), Swiss Social Democratic Party (SPS), Swiss People's Party (SVP), Swiss Green Party (GPS), Christian Democratic Party (CVP).

The operationalization of negativity was closely connected to the issue of the news report, and therefore valence issues (Stokes 1963) were chosen where possible. These are issues on which parties prefer the same outcome. For instance, decreasing unemployment or preventing the rise of abortion rates. No party would actively advocate higher unemployment numbers or abortion rates.[2] Although a party-level variable, party issue ownership was included as an experimental manipulation to ensure a balanced research design. To determine issue ownership, a measure of associative party issue ownership (Walgrave et al. 2009) was used based on data from a voter survey of the most recent Swiss election (Lachat 2014). The researcher defined one owned issue for each party MPs approached for the survey belonged to (see following section). Table 2 gives an overview of the owned issues by party and the corresponding positive/negative development formulation.

The effect of causal responsibility attribution was manipulated by including an actor that was made responsible for the described positive or negative development. This variable had four values including an empty reference category. It was either ascribed to decisions by the national parliament, decisions by the European Union, or real-world developments (e.g., financial deficit increased due to worldwide economic development). These four were collapsed into two categories for analyses, causal attribution to decisions by the parliament or to another actor.

The five variables with two and four values (Table 1) resulted in 64 possible combinations of experimental stimuli. Of these, a half fraction factorial sample of 32 conditions was drawn using SAS. Sampling of experimental conditions is a key characteristic of the factorial survey approach. Because the sample is drawn systematically and the conditions in a half fraction factorial sample are orthogonal and balanced, all main effects, as well as two-level interaction effects, can be estimated. If all experimental conditions were included, all possible interaction effects could be estimated. Only some of these interaction effects are theoretically interesting, however, based on previous research. In essence, this sampling of experimental conditions leads to a more efficient estimation of effects (for a detailed account, see Dülmer 2007). In this study, once experimental conditions were sampled, the thirty-two conditions, in this case, news reports, were distributed into eight decks of four news reports. Within each deck, the experimental conditions were again balanced, and each respondent was presented with only one of these decks within which media reports were presented in randomized order. Several respondents evaluated each deck to discern message from respondent effects. Overall, MPs judged the media reports as fairly realistic with a mean score of 4.4 ($SD = 1.47$) on a 7-point scale.

Data Collection and Respondents

Data were collected during June 2014 when the Swiss parliament was in session. German-speaking members of the Lower House of parliament (two hundred seats) were targeted. Previous elections had been held in 2011, the next ones were scheduled for October 2015, and campaigns had not started. The researcher approached respondents by two methods: personally in parliamentary buildings with a tablet computer ($n = 20$) and via e-mail containing a link to the online survey. MPs were informed that the study conducted by Leiden University investigated what made news reporting politically relevant.[3] This lead to an overall response rate of 47 percent, or sixty-one MPs.[4] Some MPs had not filled in the complete survey, resulting in an N of fifty for all analyses presented. This equals 39 percent of contacted MPs and 31 percent of the Swiss Lower House's membership. Both in terms of parliamentary experience ($M = 7.48$ years, $SD = 5.84$) and number of female respondents (32 percent), respondents reflected the

population of the Swiss Lower House at the time (experience $M = 7.6$ years, 31 percent female).

Information on party and politician characteristics were mostly obtained from parliament records. Issue specialization was coded as a dummy variable based on parliamentary committee membership. Parliamentary experience, which was coded in years, as well as gender, age, and the size of the parliamentary party group were obtained from official records too. Models control for issue importance to control for the momentary political relevance of an issue and isolate effects of party issue ownership and issue specialization. After they had evaluated the fictional news reports, in a survey, respondents were asked to indicate how politically important a specific issue was at the moment on a 7-point scale. These matched the issues used in the fictional news reports.

Statistical Models

Every respondent evaluated four news reports. This resulted in 198 observations from fifty respondents from five different political parties. To account for the clustering of observations, multilevel models were used, which are clustered at the respondent level. Because the model includes only one party-level variable, the size of the parliamentary party group, there was no need to define an additional party level.[5] The dependent variable showed a right-skewed distribution as politicians were more likely to not react to a media report than to do so. Because ordinal logit models produced similar results as linear models with random intercepts using maximum likelihood estimation, the latter were chosen for reasons of parsimony. When interaction effects are included, the according slopes were freed. The xtmixed command in Stata 13.0 was used. Visual inspection and the Shapiro-Francia W' test ($p = .26$) show that the residuals of the full model (Table 3 Model 2) are normally distributed. Correlations between explanatory variables are usually low, for instance, with issue importance and specialization ($r = .11, p = .113$).

Results

Media content plays an important role when it comes to the media's influence on politicians. The empty random effects model (Table 3, Model 0) shows that differences in the media reports drive approximately 80 percent of the variance in taking political action which is to be expected due to the experimental design. Yet not all aspects of a media message are equally likely to trigger politicians to take political action.

The first hypothesis focuses on the media outlet and expects that news reports published in a quality newspaper would be more likely to make MPs react than reports from popular newspapers (H1). Indeed, in line with previous research,

reports published in more credible quality newspapers are more likely picked up by politicians than reports published in a tabloid one ($b = .41$, $p = .033$, Table 3, Model 2). Next, we look at how the specific content of a media report might affect politicians. As expected (H2), negative developments are more likely to trigger a political reaction than positive ones ($b = 1.02$, $p < .001$). For instance, rising unemployment numbers prompt more action than falling ones. These findings show that politicians do care about the slant of the report. However, as strategic actors, they might not always be inclined to react to such reports of negative development. Particularly, when they are made responsible for the negative development, they might choose to lay low not to attract any additional attention (H3). An interaction effect was included (Table 3, Model 3a) to test whether such an effect is present. Results are, however, not significant ($b = .11$, $p = .811$), suggesting indifference to whether the report suggests parliament is responsible. Also, the main effect of responsibility attribution does not have a significant effect ($b = .10$, $p = .811$). This finding may reflect the general formulation of responsibility, as more direct mentions of the party or even the politician's own name might produce different results.

Table 3. Hierarchical Linear Regression Models of News Report and Politician Characteristics' Influence on Parliamentary Actions Taken by Swiss MPs.

	Model 0	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3a	Model 3b
		Fixed effects			
Constant	2.52***	−0.04	−2.68*	−1.43	−1.97†
	(0.15)	(0.58)	(1.13)	(1.12)	(1.11)
Experimentally manipulated message characteristics (Level 1)					
Quality newspaper (popular)		0.38* (0.19)	0.41* (0.19)	0.40* (0.18)	0.49* (0.19)
Negative development (positive)		0.99***	1.02***	1.00***	1.55***
		(0.20)	(0.19)	(0.23)	(0.30)
Responsibility politicians (other)		0.04 (0.22)	0.12 (0.22)	0.10 (0.27)	0.08 (0.21)
Newspaper source (government)		−0.16	−0.17	−0.19	−0.17
		(0.19)	(0.19)	(0.18)	(0.19)
Party owned issue (not owned)[a]		0.50**	0.43* (0.19)	0.43* (0.18)	0.39* (0.19)
		(0.19)			
Politician characteristics (Level 2)					
Specialization (not specialized)			0.37 (0.36)	0.53 (0.34)	0.35 (0.36)
Parliamentary experience in years			−0.09**	−0.07*	−0.05
			(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)
Issue importance (scale 1–7)			0.14* (0.06)	0.14* (0.06)	0.14* (0.06)
Gender (male)			0.46 (0.29)	0.39 (0.30)	0.46 (0.29)
Age in years			0.04* (0.02)	0.04* (0.02)	0.04* (0.02)
Party characteristics					
Parliamentary party group size			0.00 (0.01)	0.00 (0.01)	0.00 (0.01)
Interaction effects					
Negative development × Responsibility politicians				0.11 (0.45)	
Negative development × Parliamentary experience					−0.075*
					(0.03)
		Random effects			
Residual variance					
Message (Level 1)	2.24	1.75	1.31	1.20	1.28
Politician (Level 2)	0.51	0.63	0.64	0.00	0.65
Development (freed slope)				0.53	
Parliamentary experience (freed slope)					0.01
Likelihood ratio test					
χ^2		36	16	13	5
Probability		.000	.012	.000	.069

Note. N = 198 from fifty politicians. Answers to question "Would you take political action based on this news report (e.g., ask a parliamentary question)?" 7-point scale. MP = member of parliament. Reference categories for dummy variabels in brackets.

Media messages themselves of course do not have effects on politics; politicians must react to them. The low mean value of the dependent variable indicates that on average, politicians do not often react to media coverage ($M = 2.52$, $SD = 1.66$). When the Swiss politicians participating in this study were asked to rank sources of influence apart from the media, they however showed considerable variation.[6] Although on average politicians placed the media on the second last and last rank out of five, a quarter (26 percent) said media were their most important or second most important inspiration for their parliamentary work. Results of the experimental study confirm that there is considerable variation between politicians. Adding politician characteristics improves model fit significantly, $\chi^2 (5) = 16$, $p = .012$. We first look at effects of party-level variables before we turn to individual politician characteristics.

The size of the parliamentary party group does not affect individual MPs' propensity to react to media reporting ($b = .00$, $p = .850$).[7] They are not influenced by the size of their faction (H4). Party issue ownership, in contrast, is a party-level variable that does exert considerable influence as expected (H5). Swiss politicians are significantly more likely to react to media reports covering an issue their party owns ($b = .43$, $p = .024$). This finding is consistent across all models, even when respondent characteristics are added.

Controlling for these party-level characteristics and considering the low party discipline usually associated with Swiss politicians, the background of the MP might exert considerable influence compared with the party. However, MPs do not react significantly differently to news reports covering an issue in which they specialized than others (H6, $b = .37$, $p = .313$). Individual issue specialization also does not change the effect of *party* issue ownership (Table 3, Models 2 and 3). This indicates that, at least in the Swiss case, for MPs, party considerations might be of more importance than their own personal specialization. Issue importance, which was included as a control variable to be able to isolate effects of party issue ownership and individual issue specialization, shows a consistent significant effect (Model 2, $b = .13$, $p = .036$). How politically important an issue is at that moment is crucial, the individual issue specialization of the MP less so.

Finally, as expected, junior MPs are more likely to react to media reports (H7), or, put differently, seniority does have a negative effect. Results show a significant negative effect for every additional year of parliamentary experience ($b = -.09$, $p = .002$) when controlling for age. Although substantially small, with only a shift of half a point on the 7-point scale for every ten years of parliamentary experience, this finding may have important implications for the composition of parliaments and limitations of tenure. The fact that media have less influence with more senior MPs might provide an argument against limiting tenure for some.

The conditionality of the media's agenda-setting influence was expected to be dependent on both the tenure and whether negativity was included in the media coverage. Junior MPs are expected to react more to negative media coverage than their senior colleagues (H8). The analysis shows a significant interaction effect ($b = -.08$, $p = .020$). Junior MPs are more likely to take action based on a negative news report than more senior MPs (Figure 2). In fact, for senior MPs, it does not seem to matter whether the news report covers a positive or negative development. They do not care so much whether unemployment numbers are rising or declining, at least not when the information is disclosed in a media report. They may have learned that there are other
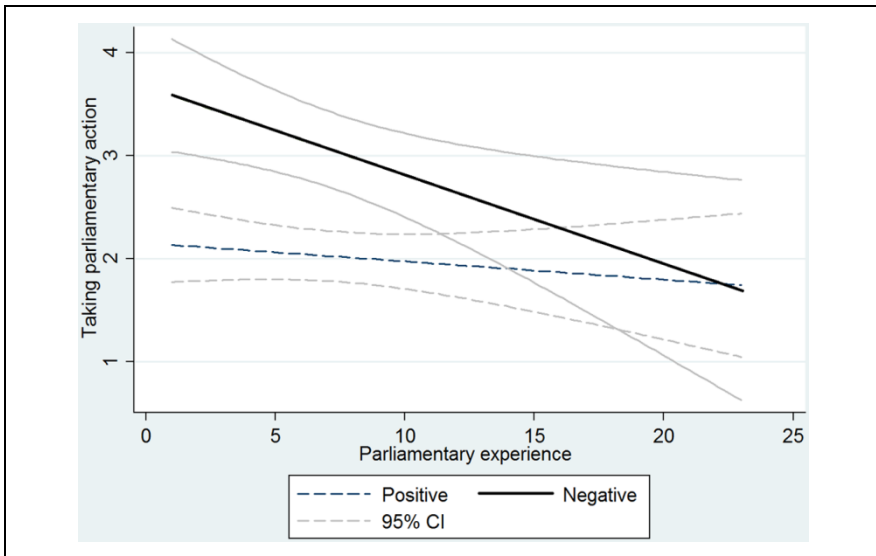

Figure 2. Influence of parliamentary experience on MP reaction to reports covering positive/negative developments.
Note. MP = member of parliament; CI = confidence interval.

sources of information that are more important to them than the media, which makes other aspects of a report more important. Although the effects of negativity vary across MPs depending on their seniority, other aspects of the message have a consistent influence on MPs with differing levels of parliamentary experience. Interaction effects with other message characteristics were not significant (results not in tables).

Conclusion

This study focused on immediate individual-level reactions to media content by politicians when they first learn about an issue through the media. Operationalizing the influence of the media on politics as a combination of both the message and the background of the politician receiving the message, it provided insight into the interplay of factors in those two realms and into how the effects of one might be influenced by the other. Using an innovative experimental design with politicians in the Swiss Lower House, it showed that the media's influence on politics is conditional. News reports covering issues an MP's party owns (H5) and covering a negative development (H2) were more likely to trigger politicians to take political action. This finding underlines the reciprocity of the relationship between politicians and journalists. Media are more likely to report messages on negative developments (O'Neill and Harcup 2009). At the same time, political response may be feeding a problematic spiral of negativity in political reporting because the mutual focus on negative news eventually affects both voters (e.g., Levi and Stoker 2000) and journalists (e.g., Brants et al. 2010). However, results also show that not all MPs react the same. Junior MPs were much more likely to react to negative coverage than positive, whereas senior MPs showed no systematic bias toward negative coverage (H8). These findings may have important implications for discussions on the limitation of tenure of MPs, but determining those implications rests on determining whether or not media responsivity suggests responsivity to the interests of voters. Seniority had a negative effect overall on the influence of media (H7), which is contrary to other studies. In a large survey study, more senior MPs reported that they were more likely to be inspired by media coverage in their work while there was a negative effect of age (Midtbø et al. 2014). Although results of a comparative study based on surveys with politicians are not directly comparable with the present single-country experimental approach, these diverging findings underline that more research is needed to establish whether there is a possible cohort effect in politicians' reactions to media coverage.

Because this study was limited to a single country, relating its findings to those of others only allows for speculation about the role of the political context. For instance, not finding an effect of the parliamentary party group (H4) could be explained by the weak role of the political party in the Swiss system. Due to low levels of party discipline and the fact that all major parties are represented in government, differences between party groups are smaller than those between individual politicians. Considering the weak role of the party, it might be surprising that individual issue specialization (H6) did not have a significant effect. Instead, when it comes to the issue, results show that the party suddenly matters. In light of the reelection goal of politicians and the small Swiss voting districts, this is, however, not surprising. Politicians mostly compete with opponents from other parties instead of fellow party members. Capitalizing on

existing party issue ownership profiles is thus advantageous for their reelection in their respective district.

The study for instance points to the centrality of the issue in the media's effects on politics. How would these findings translate to other political systems? It is plausible that in less federalized political systems with higher party discipline, individual issue specialization might play a more prominent role; politicians would not be influenced by their party's issue ownership but by their own role within the party as specialist on a particular issue. Those findings have implications for the ongoing discussion of the power of the media over politics and politicians. In line with other recent studies, the results here point to the central role of strategic considerations in politicians' reactions to media coverage (Melenhorst 2015). Only when the framing is right and an issue fits with their interest will media coverage have an influence on politics.

With these insights, the study provides a stepping stone to further investigate the role of political systems in political agenda setting. The factorial survey design is particularly suitable to flush out cross-national differences in media influence on politics. The extensive control over the stimuli means high levels of internal validity, and replicating this study in different political systems could provide important insights. In fact, such an avenue of research would have to truly combine theories of political behavior and the content of (political) reporting. The study furthermore shows that studying small elite populations experimentally is in fact possible, although not without its challenges as others have noted (e.g., Kepplinger 2007).

Of course, experimental approaches also have their limitations. The media reports respondents evaluated were brief. Besides naming a development and mentioning a responsible actor, they did not elaborate on possible solutions to the (negative) development. Because MPs are strategic actors, the additional information that real news reports often provide might significantly influence MPs' reactions and lead them to react to responsibility attributions (H3). Future studies might focus on effects of negative reports and variations thereof. Although there was significant variation between respondents, politicians were only asked a hypothetical question with no actual cost of taking action. The fact that even in this setting on average they were more likely *not* to react to media coverage shows that the media's influence on individual politicians might be rather limited. At the same time, the centrality of the issue of the report shows that each media report likely affects different politicians. Although the cumulative aggregate level of media on politics might be substantial, different politicians and parties use the media to further their goals each time, leading to more limited effects on the individual level.

Finally, this study focuses on the moment when an MP learns about an issue and decides to (maybe) take action. However, even if an MP has the intention to take action, others might influence the politician to refrain from doing so, and observational data would not be able to detect an effect. The albeit hypothetical

experimental approach allows to do so. In addition, measures of actual behavior will not capture if an MP brings an issue up at a parliamentary party group meeting or when an MP talks to fellow politicians, which are, however, important aspects of the media's influence (Kepplinger 2007). Knowing what triggers a politician's interest is therefore key if we want to gain a more in-depth understanding of the process of political agenda setting. This study has allowed to take a closer look at what happens when politicians first consume media reports and think about taking political action.

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Notes

1. Exact question wording: "Würden Sie basierend auf diesen Artikel einen parlamentarischen Vorstoss machen (z.B. eine Interpellation einreichen)?" In addition, respondents were asked to indicate for each news report whether they would bring it up if a parliamentary party meeting were held today. Responses to this question are not discussed here. Question order was randomized.
2. Although only the Christian Democrats strictly oppose abortion in Switzerland, no party would actively advocate for rising abortion numbers.
3. The low mean value of the dependent variable (see results section) shows that most likely the framing of the study did not lead to an overrepresentation of MPs who think media are particularly influential.
4. The survey was administered in German to the 129 German speaking MPs (65 percent of two hundred MPs in the Lower House) affiliated with the five biggest parties occupying more than 85 percent of the seats (for a list see Table 2). Response rate was between 47 percent and 65 percent for each party, except for one party (28 percent).
5. Although operationalized at the party level, party issue ownership was manipulated on the news report level to ensure a balanced experimental design and is therefore reported accordingly in the results tables.
6. The survey question following the experimental part of the study asked politicians to rank a number of factors that had inspired their parliamentary work in the past year based on importance. Those were personal experiences, their party, their constituents,

interest groups, and the media. For a similar question, see, for example, Walgrave et al. (2008).

7. Also, when party dummies were included in the models, there was no significant and systematic variation between parties (results not in tables).

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