How Mass Media Attract Political Elites' Attention

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Abstract. Political agenda-setting research has shown that policymakers are responsive vis-à-vis media priorities. The mechanisms behind this effect have remained understudied so far, though. In particular, agenda-setting scholars have difficulties determining to what extent politicians react to media coverage purely because of the information it contains (*information effect*), and to what extent the effect is driven not by *what* the media say but by *the fact that* certain information is in the media (*media channel effect*), which is valued for its own sake—for instance because media coverage is considered to be a reflection of public opinion. By means of a survey-embedded experiment with Belgian, Canadian and Israeli political elites (N = 410), this paper tests whether the mere fact that an issue is covered by the news media causes politicians to pay attention to this issue. It shows that a piece of information gets more attention from politicians when it comes via the media than an *identical* piece of information coming via a personal e-mail. This effect occurs largely across the board: it is not dependent on individual politician characteristics.

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Introduction

When issues receive more media attention, they are likely to rank higher on the political agenda afterwards as well. In the field of political communication, *political agenda-setting theory* describes this influence of the media agenda on the political agenda (Dearing and Rogers, 1996; Jones and Baumgartner, 2005). Scholars from a variety of countries have demonstrated that political agenda-setting effects indeed occur and that the strength of these effects is contingent upon the concrete media agenda, issue, political agenda and time period under study (Vliegenthart et al., 2016; Walgrave and Van Aelst, 2006). Studies relying on surveys and interviews with policymakers and journalists confirm the conclusions of agenda studies (Davis, 2007; Maurer, 2011). Politicians are, to varying degrees, responsive towards media priorities.

Explanations of why politicians react to media cues—and what role the media play exactly in this process—are diverse. In particular, one difficulty political agenda-setting scholars typically encounter is distinguishing between *information effects* and *media channel effects* (Soroka, 2003; Wanta and Foote, 1994). For one, it is possible that politicians undertake action in response to media coverage because they have an interest in the information provided by the media—which may or may not be available to them via other channels as well. In those instances, media effects are actually information effects. Political reaction is triggered by the information itself, and, on the condition that the politician is informed about it someway, would thus occur irrespective of whether the media covered the information (Delshad, 2012; Liu, Lindquist and Vedlitz, 2011). Alternatively, it is possible that the effect is driven not by *what* the media say, but by *the fact that* the information is transmitted by the media, which is valued for its own sake. Some agenda-setting scholars argue, for instance, that politicians react to the media because they presume things that are covered by the media to be important in the eyes of the public (Herbst, 1998; Pritchard, 1994). In other words, politicians' attention is attracted here not by the information *an sich*, but by the fact that the information is covered by the media, which

they believe to be related to public opinion (Cohen, Tsfati and Sheafer, 2008). We call this media channel effects.

While scholars have convincingly argued and demonstrated that the first mechanism exists—and that agenda setting effects are in part simply information effects—the second mechanism is more contested. The goal of this paper is therefore to put the second mechanism to the empirical test. We study *whether and to what extent—irrespective of the information itself—politicians pay more attention to information when it is in the media than when it is not in the media*. In other words, we try to find out whether the media matter in addition to what they do as a mere information provider; whether media channel effects exists. Additionally, we explore *whether there are differences between politicians in this respect.* Indeed, we know that some politicians are more responsive towards media coverage than others and that this is dependent on their partisan and individual political characteristics (Sevenans, Walgrave and Vos, 2015; Thesen, 2013). It may be that the informative value of news coverage is simply higher for these politicians; but it is also possible that they are more responsive because they care more about the mere publicness of the information.

The question is relevant from a scientific point of view. Not only the political agenda-setting literature, but also the broader media effects (communication science) and policy agendas (political science) subfields, struggle to prove that effects are not merely spurious—in this case, that the media and their audience are not simply simultaneously influenced by external factors such as real-world information (for a general discussion, see Marini and Singer, 1988). This paper tackles the matter by using a new methodology to study political agenda setting—namely an experiment—hence improving our understanding of which part of the relationship is spurious, and which part is not. This helps to gain insight into the precise role the media play in politics (Eissler, Russell and Jones, 2014). Our results have normative implications for democracy as well. The media's daily selection of which news to cover and which to ignore, may be more influential than we thought if it appears that information gets valued by policymakers purely because of it 'being in the media'.

Concretely, we rely on data from a survey-embedded experiment with Belgian, Canadian and Israeli political elites (N = 410). An experiment, we argue, is best suited to distinguish media channel effects from information effects, because it allows to manipulate the information channel while keeping the underlying information constant. As a consequence of this methodological choice, we do not study political agenda setting on the aggregate, behavioral level—as it is generally done—but we take an individual, cognitive approach. We look at how individual political elites' attention for a piece of information is dependent on the channel sending this information. This approach, we contend, is useful to strengthen the micro-level theoretical foundations of the existing macro-level empirical agenda-setting findings.

The paper shows that a piece of information coming via the media gets more attention from politicians than an identical piece of information coming via a personal e-mail. This basic effect applies across countries and issues. And, the experiment works the same way for different types of politicians. Politicians from the government as well as from the opposition; policy advocates as well as party warriors; older as well as younger politicians are sensitive to the experimental manipulation. In the concluding section, we discuss the consequences of our results for agenda-setting theory, and we elaborate on the normative implications of our findings.

Information effect vs. media channel effect

The idea that politicians are responsive to the saliency of issues in the media, is widely accepted. Both in the US and in Europe, political agenda-setting scholars have shown that issues, after receiving more media coverage, rank higher on the political agenda as well (see e.g. Green-Pedersen and Stubager, 2010; Van Noije, Kleinnijenhuis and Oegema, 2008; Wood and Peake, 1998). Policymakers themselves acknowledge that the media have impact on what they do in Parliament. In survey-based research, for instance, many of them agree that the media exert a substantial influence over the political agenda (Maurer, 2011; Sevenans, Walgrave and Vos, 2015).

While the empirical results of these studies are unambiguous—scholars generally agree that the media matter, at least to some extent—the interpretation of the results is less clear-cut. As Eissler and colleagues (2014) point out, the literature tends to remain superficial on the issue of how and why exactly the media influence policy processes. Different papers come up with various potential mechanisms (Voltmer and Koch-Baumgarten, 2010)—which we classify into two categories here: (1) media responsiveness can be driven by the *information* provided by the media (information effect); and/or (2) politicians may respond to media information *because of the fact that it is reported by a media outlet* (media channel effect).

In the case of 'information effects', politicians react to the media because the media provide them with information about what is going on in society (Van Aelst and Walgrave, 2016). Politicians' need for information is high: they must be informed about problems in society before they can deal with these problems. In a world where so much information is around that it is almost impossible to follow everything yourself, politicians—just like citizens (Ball-Rokeach and DeFleur, 1976)—may rely on media coverage to quickly and efficiently learn what's important—among other sources of information of course. Indeed, politicians consume news for several hours a day in order to be informed about what happens in the world around them (Van Aelst et al., 2008). When policymakers are confronted with issues they feel responsible for, problem-solving motivations may cause them to react.

'Media channel effects' imply that political agenda-setting is driven not by information in itself, but by the fact that the information is in the media, which increases its newsworthiness for politicians. According to this line of thinking, media effects on politicians are third-person effects (Gunther and Storey, 2003). Politicians know that other people in society follow the news closely. As a consequence they think that there is a link between media attention for an issue and the public's perceptions about the issue. This perceived link causes them to react to the coverage. Different motivations may underlie media channel effects. While we cannot analytically distinguish between these different motivations

in this paper, we think it is helpful to briefly discuss the two that are most prominent in the political agenda-setting literature.

First, a lot of authors suggest that media channel effects are a consequence of representational motivations (Edwards and Wood, 1999; Van Noije, Kleinnijenhuis and Oegema, 2008; Soroka, 2002; Jenner, 2012; Wood and Peake, 1998). On the one hand, some politicians consider the media to be a reflection of public opinion (Herbst, 1998). On the other hand, we know from public agenda-setting studies that the media also influence what the public deems important (McCombs and Shaw, 1972). Either way, the consequence is that politicians think that there is a connection between media attention for issues and the importance the public attributes to those issues. So the media may not only give factual information about an issue, they may also be an indicator of the importance of an issue according to voters. Since one of politicians' main tasks is to represent their voters, they may therefore be inclined to react to media coverage. It does not matter whether there is an actual relationship between public opinion and media content: it is politicians' perception of the relationship that counts (Cohen, Tsfati and Sheafer, 2008; Gunther and Storey, 2003).

Second, media channel effects may be driven by goals related to party competition (Thesen, 2013). Politicians play a constant 'attack and defense game', trying to generate positive attention for themselves and their party, while blaming and shaming their political opponents. When policymakers react to news issues in this context, their goal is to increase the salience of issues on which their party has an advantageous position, while trying to thwart attention for issues on which the party has a detrimental position. For instance, parties react more to media coverage about issues they are issue-owner of (Green-Pedersen and Stubager, 2010; Vliegenthart and Walgrave, 2011). They do this especially when the tone of the coverage is beneficial to them and when responsibility for problems is attributed towards other parties (Thesen, 2013), because they (think they) will receive electoral benefits when such issues become politicized. And, they know that the chances that their political actions will be covered in the media are higher when they react to a topic that already gets media

attention (van Santen, Helfer and van Aelst, 2013). Reacting to news coverage for party competition reasons—just like reacting to media for representational reasons—rests upon the idea that the media have influence on the cognitions of the public. It is the media which, according to politicians, (co)determine what people think about political parties and how important they deem various issues to be. But, in contrast to the representational motivation, the goal of politicians here is not to represent the people, but to *send* signals to the public about which issues are important and how the work of various political parties should be evaluated. The media are in this sense also a *tool* used by politicians to fight the party political game.

Going back to the more general distinction between 'information effects' and 'media channel effects', some authors think that political agenda-setting effects are mainly driven by the former mechanism: politicians learn from the media about problems in society and they respond because problem-solving is what they are supposed to do as politicians (Delshad, 2012; Liu, Lindquist and Vedlitz, 2011). These scholars argue that the role the media actually play in politics tends to be overestimated, because much of the information provided by the media is available elsewhere as well. Especially politicians, who generally get assistance to stay informed (staff, partisan research center,…) and who have large alternative information networks at their disposal, are often informed about issues via many different channels[1]. If this is the case, what seems to be an effect of media on political agendas, could better be interpreted as an effect of (real-world) information on media and politics simultaneously (Soroka, 2003; Wanta and Foote, 1994). In other words, the relationship between the media agenda and the political agenda would be spurious; and the actual role of the media in agenda-setting processes would be limited.

The challenge lies in identifying to what extent other mechanisms—such as the media's relationship with public opinion, or their relevance in the party competition—drive political agenda-setting effects.

[1] Exceptions are pieces of investigative journalism, whereby the information is produced by the media. These can indeed have impact on politics (e.g. Elmelund-Præstekær and Wien, 2008; Protess et al., 1987), but are rare.

If these alternative mechanisms matter, this means that whether or not the media cover an issue is fundamental in politicians' decision whether or not to react. It is not (only) the content, but the *publicness* of the information that is triggering politicians to react. The importance of the issue is amplified in the mind of the politician because of the perceived impact of the media on others. Politicians are motivated to react exactly because something is in the media. In this view, the media exert substantial impact on political agendas *on top of* what they do as mere information transmitters.

With our first hypothesis, we test whether the latter argument holds. Can the media indeed be decisive in whether or not a politician pays attention to an issue—irrespective of the information itself? And, is it thus correct to say that agenda setting effects are not only information effects but also (partly) media channel effects? We formulate the hypothesis as follows:

Hypothesis: Politicians pay more attention to a piece of information that is covered by the media, than to an identical piece of information that is sent to them privately.

The moderating effect of individual politician characteristics

Not all politicians are equally responsive to media priorities. The literature has found that both party and individual level factors explain variation in individual policymakers' susceptibility to agenda-setting influences. On the party level, the distinction between government and opposition is crucial. Opposition parties are more reactive to media cues than government parties (see e.g. Thesen, 2013). On the individual level, both structural factors, for example a politician's age, and attitudinal factors, such as political goals, play a role (see e.g. Midtbø, Walgrave, Van Aelst and Christensen, 2014). Younger politicians, and politicians with party warrior goals, are more responsive towards media coverage than their older and policy-oriented colleagues (Sevenans, Walgrave and Vos, 2015).

The assumption behind most of these studies on micro-level variation in political agenda setting is that the *informative value* of media coverage is larger for some MPs than for others. In other words, the

differences are ascribed to the first mechanism described above; they are considered to be a consequence of information effects. First, some politicians—for example opposition MPs, or young parliamentarians—simply have less alternative information sources at their disposal: they do not have access to inside information from the cabinets, or they cannot rely on an extensive network they built throughout the years. This would explain why they look more to the media for information in general. Second, the type of information that is in the news is probably more relevant for some politicians than for others. News reports are typically general and negative in tone—focused on *problems* rather than on solutions. They contain a lot of conflict and responsibility attributions, and are focused on the political horse race (Semetko and Valkenburg, 2000; de Vreese, 2005). The inherent usefulness of this kind of information is for instance higher for opposition members, who can use it as ammunition to attack the government, than for members from government parties who are often more conflict-avoiding and focused on policy making (Green-Pedersen and Stubager, 2010). Within parties, similarly, 'party warriors' who focus on the attack-and-defense game between parties view media information as more useful than 'policy advocates' who prefer other specialized, detailed information sources (Sevenans, Walgrave and Vos, 2015).

The question in this paper is whether these differences in media responsiveness between MPs are driven not only by the differential *informative value* of news coverage (information effect), but also by differential *motivations* (media channel effect). In other words, if we *disregard* the concrete content of the information, is it still the case that policymakers differ with regards to their inclination to pay attention to the media? On the one hand, it seems plausible that party warriors, for instance, care more about the mere publicness of information than policy advocates. Party warriors have a high need for constant interaction with the media; raising public attention for their own merits and the opponent's weaknesses is exactly their goal. Policy advocates benefit less from this media-politics ping-pong game. On the other hand, we can imagine that simply all politicians are more sensitive to information that comes from the media. Indeed, they almost unanimously state that the media have lots of political power and require their attention multiple hours per day (Van Aelst et al., 2008).

In short, certain features of individual politicians (age, party position, political goals) play a central role in explaining the conditionality of political agenda-setting. In the first place, this seems to be a consequence of differential *information* effects. We are ignorant as to whether it is also a consequence of differential media *channel* effects. Our goal is to explore the following research question:

Research question: Is the strength of media channel effects moderated by individual characteristics of politicians?

Country selection

The three countries studied in this paper—Belgium, Canada and Israel—differ a lot in terms of their media and political system. The main difference is the electoral system: Canada has a single member plurality system with one elected MP per small district, which creates a close link between a representative and his/her geographic constituency. Belgium and Israel are proportional systems causing the link between MP and voter to be weaker. Israel, which has only one national district, is probably most different from Canada. The countries differ also in terms of the degree of federalism, the strength of political parties, and so on. And according to the typology of Hallin and Mancini (2004) the countries are characterized by different types of media systems, in which political parties have varying degrees of control over media outlets.

Although the information and institutional contexts are very different, which is likely to affect the way in which politicians deal with information, we expect our findings to be applicable in all three countries. Our country choice constitutes a most-different-system-design in this respect: if we find media channel effects to exist in very different countries such as Belgium, Canada and Israel, they probably occur in many other countries in the (Western) world as well.

Data and methods

To answer the research questions, this paper relies on data from a survey-embedded experiment with political elites in three countries. Experimental research on political elites is rare (but see for instance Wouters and Walgrave, 2017), mainly because elites are very busy and often not interested in participating (Bailer, 2014). Still, experiments have great potential when it comes to testing causality, and disentangling the mechanisms underlying a causal effect (McDermott, 2002). For this paper we managed to successfully conduct a survey-embedded experiment with political elites in three countries. The experiment is part of a larger series of surveys/interviews with politicians about their information-processing behavior, conducted by the author and colleagues in Belgium, Canada and Israel between March and August 2015. All respondents were member of parliament, minister, and/or party leader at the federal or the regional competence level in one of the three countries. Information about the respondents and the response rate per country is provided in Table 1. The response rates vary between the countries, from 27% (Canada) over 41% (Israel) to 65% (Belgium)—which is moderate to high for elite research (for an overview see Bailer, 2014). We elaborate on the implications of the differential response rates in the results section below.

Each interview lasted about an hour in total. In the first part of the interview, which took approximately 35 minutes, the politician completed a survey on a laptop brought by the interviewer. The interviewer did not observe the answers given by the politician and did not intervene unless the politician asked clarification questions. The second part of the interview consisted of open questions.

[Table 1 about here]

The experiment presented in this paper was a component of the first, survey part of the interview. Concretely, politicians got to rate three fictional pieces of information—consisting of an *information*

channel and a *subject line*—that were presented to them in random order.[2] The Canadian (English) stimuli are shown in Table 2 (for stimuli in other languages, see the Online Appendix).

[Table 2 about here]

The three pieces of information that needed to be rated by politicians, are the experimental *trials*. As shown in Table 2, every trial consists of two *treatments*. Politicians are, in each trial, confronted with only one treatment (between-subjects design), which is randomly drawn. The treatments differ with respect to the *channel* of the information. One treatment says that the information is transferred via the media—it is an article in a newspaper—whereas the other says that the information is sent to the politician personally by e-mail. The treatments do not differ regarding the information given itself: the subject line is exactly the same in both treatments.

Politicians are first informed that they could encounter these short, fictional[3] pieces of information while surfing the internet, reading the newspaper, going through their inbox, and so forth. They are then asked to indicate, on a scale from 0 to 10, how likely it is that they would take a look at the full information attached to this source and subject line. So, we measure *the extent to which politicians are inclined to pay attention to a piece of information*. The goal is to test whether information provided by the media elicits more attention from politicians than information provided in a personal e-mail.

The three trials differ from each other with regards to the issue domain. Each politician rates each issue once. We opted for including three issues, instead of one, in order to increase the generalizability of our results. We want to test whether media channel effects exist *irrespective* of the underlying issue.

Before moving on, a few methodological choices may require some further consideration. First, media information is in our experiment juxtaposed with *information by e-mail* because we think that a

[2] The whole module consisted of 15 randomly ordered pieces of information that needed to be rated. The 12 other stimuli are irrelevant for this paper (they contained other experimental manipulations), yet they made it harder for politicians to see through the manipulation of this experiment.

[3] There is no deception: politicians know that the information is fictional and that we are interested in their attention for this information. They do not know what the experimental manipulations are, of course.

personal e-mail—just like the media—is a credible potential channel of much of the information, coming from a variety of sources, that reaches politicians every day. One limitation of the design is that media and personal e-mails do not only differ from each other in terms of the 'publicness' of information—which is the reasoning behind our hypotheses—but potentially also on other dimensions. For instance, one could argue that source credibility between media and personal e-mail is unequal. We solved this problem as follows: each of the three subject lines, in addition to containing real-world information, specifies who produced the information as well. The 'producer' of the information is some sort of expert institute (e.g. a university, a research center). The goal of reporting these 'original sources' is to keep source credibility constant over the two treatments. While we tried to deal with these drawbacks as well as possible, we cannot prove that there are no other differences between media and personal e-mails driving the effect of our experiment.

Second, our stimuli and the accompanying question (the dependent variable) have their limitations. We give politicians just one subject line and then ask them about their intention to pay attention to the information. Ideally, the information presented to them would be more elaborate; we would have asked about their attention for the information in more than one survey item; and we would not only have measured their attention for the information but also their inclination to act upon it (which comes closer to the behavioral approach generally taken in political agenda-setting research). Unfortunately, we were unable to do so because of politicians' severe time constraints. We chose the current item to minimize the required time investment, but maximize the external validity of the set-up. Our experiment resembles how politicians process information in real life. Some of them actually told us spontaneously when they started the experiment that this is indeed how they do it: scan a summary or subject line and then decide to consume the full information or not. We think the item suffices to test politicians' cognitive reflex to pay more attention to media information.

Third, we did not do a formal manipulation check. However, we think that our manipulation is obvious: the information channel is totally different. Furthermore, a pre-test of the survey with some colleagues of our research group (outsiders to this project) showed that they did notice the sender manipulations.

Finally, our issue choice may have implications. Although we tried to pick issues that apply to all countries—we think Belgium, Canada, and Israel are faced with similar housing, education and diversity problems—we cannot guarantee that the stimuli are equally newsworthy in all countries, or for all individual politicians. Still, we believe that this is no problem for the purpose of this paper. Country differences can be controlled for, and politicians (with potentially different interests) are randomly divided across treatment groups. We think the issues allow to test whether—across the board and irrespective of country or issue peculiarities—media channel effects occur.

One of the *independent variables* used to test whether media channel effects are moderated by individual politician features—see our research question—was assessed in the same survey (other battery of questions). We measured the extent to which a politician is a *Party warrior* by means of the following question: "*Parties have different goals. Within a faction, a division of labor may occur, whereby some members of the faction are focused more on one goal, whereas others deal more with another goal. Can you indicate the extent to which you, compared to your colleague faction members, focus on the following goal: Demonstrating the weaknesses of other parties*". The variable is measured on a slider (scale from 0 to 100) whereby 0 stands for '*Compared to my colleagues, I focus on this goal very little*' and 100 means '*Compared to my colleagues, I focus on this goal very much*'. Unfortunately, this question was only included in the Belgian survey, meaning that the moderating effect of being party warrior can only be tested for the Belgian MPs.

The other independent variables, namely a politicians' age and political party (for the government-opposition distinction) were retrieved from the parliamentary websites in the three countries.

Our final dataset is a stacked dataset with issues nested in politicians. As explained above, every politician was confronted with all three different issues. The total N is 1,206.[4] A dummy variable indicates which of the two experimental conditions the politician got to rate. Table 3 shows that both conditions are more or less equally well represented in the final dataset (52% vs. 48%). Balance tests further confirm that, for each of the three issues, the distribution of politicians over experimental conditions was random. Indeed, regression analyses explaining the experimental condition based on country, gender, age, function (MP/minister/party leader) and government party were not significant in their totality.

[Table 3 about here]

Descriptive statistics of our main variables are displayed in Table 4. Irrespective of the particular issue or experimental condition, politicians indicated that, on a scale from 0 to 10, the likelihood that they would take a look at the full information attached to source/title was 6.01.

To test our hypotheses, we perform multilevel regression analyses. The models include a random factor on the respondent level to control for the fact that the three ratings by one and the same politician are interdependent. And, country and issue dummies (fixed effects) are included as control variables to account for the variation on those levels.

[Table 4 about here]

Results

The basic results of the experiment are shown in Table 5. Model 1 includes the main effects. We see that our main hypothesis proves right: the coefficient of 'Media as channel' (shaded gray) is positive and significant. On a scale from zero to ten, politicians pay 0.59 more attention to information when it

[4] We asked all 410 respondents to rate 3 stimuli each. The expected N is thus 1,230. But 4 politicians had missings on all three experiments, and some other politicians rated only 1 or 2 out of 3 experiments. In total, there were 24 missings, reducing the final N to 1,206.

comes from the media than when it is sent to them personally by e-mail. Our independent variables explain about 15% of the unexplained variance in the model (R^2 of .1506). When we leave our main independent variable, 'Media as channel', out, the adjusted R^2 declines to .1377 (not shown in table). Our experimental condition explains thus a rather small, yet substantive, share of a politician's attention for a piece of information.

The issue dummies matter as well, though. Our third stimulus, on the issue of gender diversity, is considered to be less newsworthy than the other two stimuli on housing and education (irrespective of the experimental treatment): the information receives significantly less attention from politicians. The effect of the issue dummy is larger than that of our experimental stimulus. This is a clear indication that information effects also explain a substantial part of political agenda-setting effects. Apparently, the content of the information matters more than the sender. Media do not draw attention unconditionally: the information must foremost be deemed relevant.

With respect to the control variables, we see furthermore that—compared with Belgians and Israelis—Canadian politicians pay significantly less attention to all information in general. Although this does not affect the main findings of the paper, it is interesting to reflect on why this is the case. We think it has to do with the electoral system. As explained above, Canada has a single member plurality system with one elected MP per small district, which creates a close link between a representative and his/her geographic constituency. That is why 'national' issues, like those in the experimental stimuli, may *in absolute terms* be deemed less newsworthy than 'regional' issues (Soroka, Penner and Blidook, 2009). In Belgium (with its multi-member districts) or Israel (which has one national district), the proportional system causes the link between MP and voter to be weaker, which increases the relevance of national issues.

[Table 5 about here]

The interaction models (Model 2 and 3) serve as tests to check whether the effect of 'Media as channel' applies for all three countries (Model 2) and for all three issues (Model 3), or whether there are

differences between countries or issues. None of the interaction effects is significant, indicating that the effect is generalizable across the three countries and the three issues. This is confirmed when we run the analyses with case-wise deletion of issues/countries as an extra robustness check: the effect of the experimental condition remains significant on the .05 level in all models.

The effect sizes of 'Media as channel' for the three countries (predicted probabilities from Model 2) are visualized in Figure 1. We see that in Belgium, the chance that a politician would read the full information increases from 6.03 to 6.57 (on a scale from 0 to 10) when the information is covered by a newspaper article instead of sent to the politician personally. In Canada, the global level of attention for all pieces of information is about one point lower, but the increase between the two treatments is similar. Canadian politicians' attention for real-world information, when it is in the media, is 0.85 higher than their attention for exactly the same information that is not in de media. In Israel, the increase in attention is smallest, from 5.86 to 5.90. Apparently, Israeli politicians are not less responsive to media in general (Midtbø et al., 2014), but their responsiveness is more often caused by information effects and less often by media channel effects. We can only speculate about why this is the case. It could be, for instance, that Israeli politicians do not perceive the media to be a reflection of public opinion so much—which would take away the motivation to scrutinize media coverage for that reason. In any case, the confidence intervals for Canada and Israel are bigger, due to the lower N.

[Figure 1 about here]

Is the main effect of our experimental manipulation moderated by the characteristics of individual politicians that are known to moderate political agenda-effects more generally? The answer to our research question is no. As demonstrated in the grey-shaded areas in Table 6, the interaction effects between the media treatment (*Media as channel*) and politicians' age (Model 4), party position (Model 5) or focus on party warrior goals (Model 6; Belgian politicians only) respectively, are not significant. The finding that younger, opposition, party warrior MPs are generally more responsive towards the media can apparently not be explained by media channel effects. The pure effect of

information 'being in the media' is equally strong for all types of politicians. This makes us confident that the lower response rates in Canada and Israel—with a slight bias in favor of opposition participation—do not impact the results.

[Table 6 about here]

Interestingly, the assumption that these differences are instead due to differential *information* effects seems to find confirmation. The main effect of *Government party* in a model without interaction (not shown in table) is significant and goes in the expected direction (b = -.60; S.E. = .20; p = .003). Opposition politicians, in general, pay more attention to the kind of information provided in our experiment (short, diverse cues) than politicians from government parties. Similarly, the party warrior coefficient (main effect) in a model without interaction is positive—as one would expect—and just not significant (b = .01; S.E. = .00; p = .152).

Conclusion and discussion

In this paper, we tested whether a piece of information gets more attention from politicians when it comes via the media as opposed to an *identical* piece of information coming via a personal e-mail. This appeared to be true: the mere publicness of information causes politician to pay more attention to it, confirming our hypothesis. Media channel effects exist. Additionally, we explored whether these effects are moderated by the characteristics of individual MPs that are generally found to moderate political-agenda setting effects: age, party position and party warrior goals. We demonstrated that there is no moderation. Apparently, media channel effects occur across the board. All types of politicians are more inclined to pay attention to information when it is in the media than when it is sent to them privately. The fact that some politicians are more media responsive than others, seems to be a consequence of the kind of information provided by the media (information effect) rather than that it is a consequence of the mere publicness of this information (media channel effect).

The effects we found may seem small at first sight. When a piece of information is covered by the media, an average politician pays just a little bit more attention to it (about .6 on a ten-point scale) than when the information had not been in the media. Still, we think the implications for agenda-setting are substantive. The political agenda is the result of the actions and decisions taken by many different politicians. Each of these politicians is confronted with tens, maybe hundreds of pieces of information on a daily basis. As a result, it is likely that on an aggregate level, the media are a decisive factor for at least certain pieces of information, regarding whether they get attention or not. And political attention is an absolute precondition for any further political action.

This does not mean that content does not matter. 'Information effects' exist too, and they explain a significant part of politicians' attention to incoming information. The inherent newsworthiness of two of our stimuli (issues: housing and education) was larger than that of the third stimulus (issue: diversity) and the latter stimulus hence received less attention. Our experiment has shown that on top of this information effect—and irrespective of content—the mere fact that information is transmitted by the media matters too. For a variety of potential reasons—such as the relationship between media attention for issues and the public salience of these issues; or the usefulness of media information as a tool to fight the party competition—politicians are motivated to pay attention to information simply because it is in the media. The combination of information and media channel effects explains how political agenda-setting effects come about.

This means that news selection processes are consequential: they affect which information gets political attention, and even more importantly, which information does not. This is not new, of course. The media provide a filtered, simplified summary of the information landscape every day and often there is no alternative 'non-media' information available to politicians—they cannot receive all information by e-mail. But sometimes alternative information *is* available. For instance, interest groups send e-mails to politicians regularly, trying to attract politicians' attention to problems in society. When they manage to get this information in the media, we show here, the chance that the information will

be noticed by politicians increases. This is not necessarily a bad thing. If journalists have a good sense of which problems are most pressing for the public, and if the media fulfil their role of 'watchdog' well, the media may actually help increasing political elites' responsiveness to voters. However, if the media's representation of reality is biased—for instance because they prefer covering sensational issues over 'boring', technical issues—our political system runs the risk of over-attending to issues that play well in the media, while ignoring potentially important topics that receive less media attention.

As touched upon in the methodological section, due to political elites' time constraints, our design was necessarily limited. We only measured their intention to pay attention to an issue, not their inclination to take action upon it. The base of comparison was private e-mail only. The issues we chose, may have peculiarities we are not aware of. And, we only studied one media channel (a quality newspaper), while the media are diverse and quality newspapers may, for instance, trigger other reactions than popular newspapers. Still we think our new approach has some clear advantages and brings insight we could not gain via behavioral analysis. Extending the experiment is a query for future research.

The countries under study differ a lot in terms of media and political system. We are confident that our results can be generalized towards many other countries in the Western world. Still, it would be valuable to repeat the design, for instance, in non-Western countries. We would anticipate that media channel effects are much more limited in countries where political actors have more control over media outlets. Future research will have to point this out.

In summary, we have shown that whether or not an issue gets covered by the media, matters. We hope that our attempt to unravel the mechanisms behind political agenda-setting effects will be followed by other scholars in the field.

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Tables

Table 1 – Respondent information per country

	Belgium	Canada	Israel
Competence level of politicians interviewed	Federal competence level and regional competence level (Flanders and Wallonia)	Federal competence level and regional competence level (Ontario)	Federal competence level
Position of politicians interviewed	MPs, ministers and party leaders	MPs, ministers and party leaders	MPs, ministers, party leaders and some ex-MPs (right after 2015 election)
Number of politicians in total research population	413	416	159
Number of politicians contacted for interview[5]	413 (full population)	278 (sample of 171 federal politicians and 107 regional politicians)	159 (full population)
Number of politicians interviewed	269	76	65
Response rate[6]	65%	27%	41%

[5] In Canada, the research population is smaller than the total population, because politicians who refused to collaborate in an earlier round of interviews in 2013 were not contacted again. In the Israeli case, the interview period started right after the national elections of the 17th of March 2015. That is why we decided to contact ex-MKs (who just left the Knesset a few weeks before) as well, assuming they would respond to our questions as if they were still seated in the Knesset. As a result, 18 of the 65 respondents are actually ex-MKs.

[6] The response rate differs significantly between countries. Belgian politicians appeared to be much more accessible than their Canadian and Israeli colleagues. Furthermore, in Canada and Israel, the response is systematically higher among members from opposition parties (29% in Canada, 51% in Israel) than among members from government parties (8% in Canada, 30% in Israel) ($t=5.72$; $p<0.001$). Since our experiment does not appear to work differently for different countries/party positions, this response bias does not seem to be problematic. Besides that, there is no response bias: other features (gender, age, experience, member of government party) are no significant predictors of participation in our survey.

Table 2 – Canadian (English) stimuli

	Treatment 1 (e-mail as information channel)	**Treatment 2 (media as information channel)**
Trial 1 (Issue: Housing)	Report sent to you personally by e-mail – 'Research (UBC) shows that stricter downpayment requirements prevent many families from buying property'	Article in The Globe and Mail – 'Research (UBC) shows that stricter downpayment requirements prevent many families from buying property'
Trial 2 (Issue: Education)	Report sent to you personally by e-mail – '14% of youngsters do not obtain high school degrees (source: Canadian Research Centre on Inclusive Education)'	Article in The Globe and Mail – '14% of youngsters do not obtain high school degrees (source: Canadian Research Centre on Inclusive Education)'
Trial 3 (Issue: Diversity)	Report sent to you personally by e-mail – 'The GMMP national report registers a further decline in gender and cultural diversity on CBC'	Article in The Globe and Mail – 'The GMMP national report registers a further decline in gender and cultural diversity on CBC'

Table 3 – Occurrence of the various experimental conditions

	Frequency	N
Experimental condition		
1 – Personal e-mail as channel	52%	1,206
2 – Media as channel	48%	
Issue		
1 – Housing	33%	1,206
2 – Education	33%	
3 – Diversity	33%	
Country		
1 – Belgium	66%	406
2 – Canada	19%	
3 – Israel	16%	

Table 4 – Descriptive statistics

	Description	Mean	S.D.	Min.	Max.	N
Politicians' attention (DV)	On a scale from 0 (very unlikely) to 10 (very likely), how likely is it that you would take a look at the full information?	6.01	2.80	0	10	1,206
Age	Age of politician	49.26	10.81	25	84	404
Government party	Dummy variable with value 1 for members from government parties and value 0 for members from opposition parties	.53	.50	0	1	406
Party warrior	Focus on party political goals from 0 (very little, compared to colleagues) to 100 (very much, compared to colleagues)	38.77	23.03	0	96	244

Table 5 – Regression analyses predicting the likelihood that a politician would read the full information

	Model 1 Main effect	**Model 2 Interaction effects**	**Model 3 Interaction effects**
	Coef. (S.E.)	**Coef. (S.E.)**	**Coef. (S.E.)**
Media as channel (vs. personal e-mail as channel)	.59*** (.14)	.61*** (.17)	.36 (.24)
Issue (ref.: issue 1)			
Issue 2	-.04 (.16)	-.05 (.16)	-.11 (.22)
Issue 3	-2.05*** (.16)	-2.04*** (.16)	-2.33*** (.23)
Country (ref.: Belgium)			
Canada	-1.13*** (.24)	-1.29*** (.30)	-1.13*** (.24)
Israel	-.40 (.26)	-.17 (.32)	-.41 (.26)
Media as channel * Canada	-	.31 (.37)	-
Media as channel * Israel	-	-.50 (.40)	-
Media as channel * Issue 2	-	-	.11 (.34)
Media as channel * Issue 3	-	-	.57 (.34)
Constant	6.71*** (.16)	6.70*** (.17)	6.82*** (.19)
Variance (politician)	1.36	1.35	1.36
Variance (residual)	2.20	2.19	2.20
N (observations)	1,206	1,206	1,206
N (politicians)	406	406	406
R^2 (overall)	.1506	.1501	.1512

Note: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

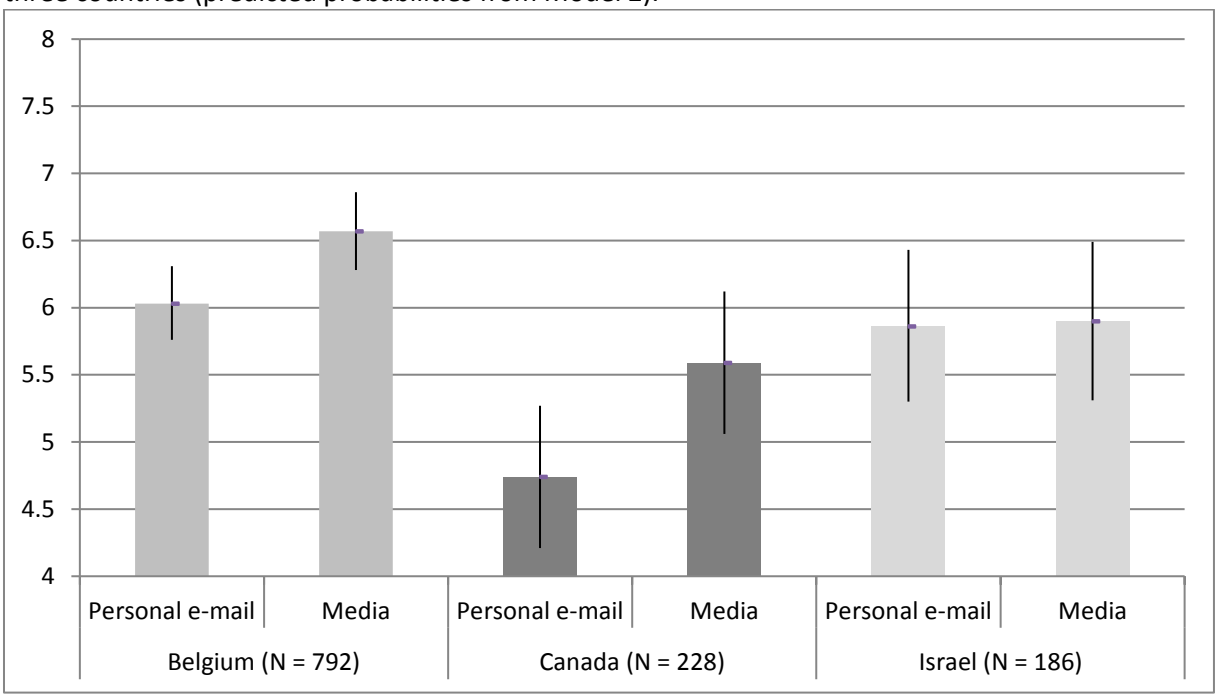
Table 6 – Regression analyses predicting the likelihood that a politician would read the full information

	Model 4	**Model 5**	**Model 6**
	Coef. (S.E.)	**Coef. (S.E.)**	**Coef. (S.E.)**
Media as channel (vs. personal e-mail)	1.65* (.67)	.43* (.20)	.70* (.35)
Issue (ref.: issue 1)			
Issue 2	-.07 (.16)	-.05 (.16)	-.29 (.20)
Issue 3	-2.07*** (.16)	-2.05*** (.16)	-2.06*** (.20)
Country (ref.: Belgium)			
Canada	-1.06*** (.25)	-1.37*** (.25)	—
Israel	-.39 (.27)	-.60* (.27)	—
Age	.01 (.01)	—	—
Government party	—	-.72** (.24)	—
Party warrior	—	—	.01 (.01)
Media as channel * Age	-.02 (.01)	—	—
Media as channel * Government party	—	.25 (.28)	—
Media as channel * Party warrior	—	—	-.00 (.01)
Constant	6.38*** (.54)	7.18*** (.22)	6.43*** (.30)
Variance (politician)	1.36	1.33	1.19
Variance (residual)	2.20	2.20	2.18
N (observations)	1,200	1,206	723
N (politicians)	404	406	244
R^2 (adjusted)	.1519	.1610	.1310

Note: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

Figures

Figure 1 – Likelihood that politician would read the full information, by experimental condition, in three countries (predicted probabilities from Model 2).



Online Appendix: Experimental stimuli

In the following questions we will show you different fictional pieces of information. We will only present the title and the source, similar to how you may encounter them while surfing the internet, reading the newspaper, going through your inbox, and so forth. We expect that you, as a political expert, browse through a lot of information by just looking at the title and the source. A sufficiently interesting piece of information will trigger your attention and you will read the full information attached to it. Therefore, can you indicate for each of the pieces of information how likely it is, on a scale from 0 to 10, that you would take a look at the full information?

Very unlikely that I will read all of the information

Very likely that I will read all of the information

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Table A1: Canadian (English) stimuli

Stimulus 1	Report sent to you personally by e-mail – 'Research (UBC) shows that stricter downpayment requirements prevent many families from buying property'	Article in The Globe and Mail – 'Research (UBC) shows that stricter downpayment requirements prevent many families from buying property'
Stimulus 2	Report sent to you personally by e-mail – '14% of youngsters do not obtain high school degrees (source: Canadian Research Centre on Inclusive Education)'	Article in The Globe and Mail – '14% of youngsters do not obtain high school degrees (source: Canadian Research Centre on Inclusive Education)'
Stimulus 3	Report sent to you personally by e-mail – 'The GMMP national report registers a further decline in gender and cultural diversity on CBC'	Article in The Globe and Mail – 'The GMMP national report registers a further decline in gender and cultural diversity on CBC'

Table A2: Canadian (French) stimuli

Stimulus 1	Un rapport envoyé personnellement à votre courriel – "Une étude (UdeM) démontre que des exigences plus strictes en matière de mise de fonds empêchent de nombreuses familles d'acheter leur propre maison."	Article dans Le Devoir – "Une étude (UdeM) démontre que des exigences plus strictes en matière de mise de fonds empêchent de nombreuses familles d'acheter leur propre maison."
Stimulus 2	Un rapport envoyé personnellement à votre courriel – "14 % des jeunes n'obtiennent pas de diplôme d'enseignement secondaire (source: Le Centre d'intervention pédagogique en contexte de diversité)."	Article dans La Presse – "14 % des jeunes n'obtiennent pas de diplôme d'enseignement secondaire (source: Le Centre d'intervention pédagogique en contexte de diversité)."
Stimulus 3	Un rapport envoyé personnellement à votre courriel – "Un rapport national du GMMP enregistre un nouveau recul de la diversité culturelle et de genre sur radio Canada."	Article dans La Presse – "Un rapport national du GMMP enregistre un nouveau recul de la diversité culturelle et de genre sur radio Canada."

Table A3: Belgian (Dutch) stimuli

Stimulus 1	Rapport, persoonlijk naar u gestuurd via e-mail – 'Onderzoek (KULeuven) toont aan dat de verminderde woonbonus veel families belet om een eigen huis te kopen.'	Artikel in De Standaard – 'Onderzoek (KULeuven) toont aan dat de verminderde woonbonus veel families belet een eigen huis te kopen.'
Stimulus 2	Rapport, persoonlijk naar u gestuurd via e-mail – ''CLB stelt vast dat 14% van de jongeren geen diploma secundair onderwijs behaalt'	Artikel in De Standaard – 'CLB stelt vast dat 14% van de jongeren geen diploma secundair onderwijs behaalt'
Stimulus 3	Rapport, persoonlijk naar u gestuurd via e-mail – 'Diversiteitsmonitor registreert opnieuw een daling in gender- en culturele diversiteit bij het federale overheidspersoneel'	Artikel in De Standaard – 'Diversiteitsmonitor registreert opnieuw een daling in gender- en culturele diversiteit bij het federale overheidspersoneel'

Table A4: Belgian (French) stimuli

Stimulus 1	Un rapport, envoyé personnellement à votre adresse mail – "Une étude (UCL) démontre que la diminution du bonus logement empêche de nombreuses familles d'acheter leur propre maison."	Article dans Le Soir – "Une étude (UCL) démontre que la diminution du bonus logement empêche de nombreuses familles d'acheter leur propre maison."
Stimulus 2	Un rapport, envoyé personnellement sur votre mail – "Le centre PMS constate que 14 % des jeunes n'obtiennent pas de diplôme de l'enseignement secondaire"	Article dans Le Soir – "Le centre PMS constate que 14 % des jeunes n'obtiennent pas de diplôme de l'enseignement secondaire"
Stimulus 3	Un rapport, envoyé personnellement sur votre adresse mail – "L'analyseur de diversité enregistre à nouveau une baisse dans la diversité du genre et culturelle parmi les employés du gouvernement fédéral."	Article dans Le Soir – "L'analyseur de diversité enregistre à nouveau une baisse dans la diversité du genre et culturelle parmi les employés du gouvernement fédéral."

Table A5: Israeli (Hebrew) stimuli

Stimulus 1	דו"ח שנשלח אליך לתיבת הדוא"ל - 'מחקר של בנק ישראל מגלה: דרישות מחמירות להון עצמי על לוקחי משכנתאות מונעות ממשפחות רבות לרכוש דירה'	כתבה ב"הארץ" - 'מחקר של בנק ישראל מגלה: דרישות מחמירות להון עצמי על לוקחי משכנתאות מונעות ממשפחות רבות לרכוש דירה'
Stimulus 2	דו"ח שנשלח אליך לתיבת הדוא"ל – 'שיעור נמוך מאוד בזכאות לבגרות בקרב בוגרי תיכון בישראל' (מקור: המכון הישראלי למחקרי מדיניות)	כתבה ב"הארץ" - 'שיעור נמוך מאוד בזכאות לבגרות בקרב בוגרי תיכון בישראל' (מקור: המכון הישראלי למחקרי מדיניות)
Stimulus 3	דו"ח שנשלח אליך לתיבת הדוא"ל - 'המכון לתקשורת פוליטית: ירידה בהשתתפות נשים בתוכניות אקטואליה בערוצים המסחריים'	כתבה ב"הארץ" - 'דו"ח המכון לתקשורת פוליטית מגלה: ירידה בהשתתפות נשים בתוכניות אקטואליה בערוצים המסחריים'