Article

How Politicians' Attitudes and Goals Moderate Political Agenda Setting by the Media

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Abstract
The media's role in shaping the priorities of politicians, known as political agenda setting, is usually examined at the institutional level. However, individual politicians' goals and attitudes are also expected to shape their level of responsiveness to the media. This study is the first to explore how individual politicians' goals and motivations moderate their real-life level of responsiveness to the media. We examine this by using a unique sample of 197 incumbent politicians in three countries (Belgium, Canada, and Israel) and an automated content analysis of parliamentary speeches ($N = 45,574$) and news articles ($N = 412,112$). We find that politicians who view themselves as a conduit of the public (delegates) are more responsive to the media than those acting on their own judgment (trustees). Politicians involved in many issues (generalists) are also more responsive than specialists. Finally, no association is found between politicians' negativity bias and their media responsiveness.

In the literature dealing with the effect of the media on politicians, the former's role in shaping the priorities of political actors has received considerable attention. This effect, called political agenda setting, concentrates on the earlier phases of policy making, when the media have the ability to focus the attention of politicians within an

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environment overloaded with information (Baumgartner and Jones 1993; Kingdon 1984). However, many factors come to play in the media's capacity to set the political agenda (Walgrave and Van Aelst 2006).

Political agenda setting has largely been examined at the *institutional level* by investigating the agenda of collective entities such as political parties and parliaments (Green-Pedersen and Stubager 2010; Van Noije et al. 2008). However, the institutional-level approach tells us little about *individual-level* explanations of political agenda setting, meaning what drives an individual member of parliament (MP) to be more or less responsive to the media agenda. Institutions can naturally define constraints, but politicians' behavior is determined by the relationship between individual goals and preferences on one hand and institutions on the other (Searing 1991). Because, in the end, it is individual politicians who make the decisions to attend to issues that have been signaled in the media, it is essential to look into which individual-level factors shape their responsiveness to the media agenda.

Although several studies have indeed focused on the relationship between individual politicians and the media agenda (Davis 2007; Helfer 2016; Kingdon 1984; Sevenans et al. 2015; Walgrave 2008), none has taken into account how the politicians' "soft" features—their *attitudes and political goals*—moderate their *objective* behavior, meaning their real-life responsiveness to the media agenda. As far as we know, this is the first study to make this connection.

We first try to provide an individual-level mechanism for a known aggregate-level explanation for the contingency of political agenda setting: the impact of negative media information. Second, we offer two new individual-level explanations, which bring the known contingency down to the level where individual goals and motivations play a role: the representational role a politician adopts, and whether she is a generalist or a specialist. All of these explanations lean on an information-processing perspective for studying agenda setting at the micro level (Miler 2009; Sevenans et al. 2016; Wolfe et al. 2013; Wood and Vedlitz 2007). Because the modern political environment is characterized by information abundance, politicians allocate their limited attention and prioritize issues and information sources according to their predispositions and goals.

To examine these individual-level explanations of political agenda setting, we use a unique data set that combines the attitudes and goals of 197 MPs from three countries (Belgium, Canada, and Israel), their parliamentary activity, and the media agenda. Our findings show that, at the individual level, there is no relationship between politicians' tendency toward preferring negative information and their media responsiveness. But politicians who view themselves as a conduit of the public's demands (delegates) are more responsive to the media agenda than those who act upon their own judgments (trustees). Finally, generalists—those who are involved in a wide range of issues—are also more responsive to the media than specialists.

Individual Politicians and the Media Agenda

Although political agenda setting is usually examined at the institutional level, the focus on the individual level has increased in recent years. Some studies address the

contingency of political agenda setting at the individual level by using surveys and field experiments with MPs. The moderators used in these studies are either politicians' "hard" (seniority, gender, etc.) or "soft" (political goals) characteristics. We borrow the terms "hard" and "soft" characteristics from the fields of international relations and public diplomacy, which use the terms *hard* and *soft* power. While soft power is based on values, culture, and policies, hard power is based on more tangible capabilities (military and economic power; see, for example, Gilboa 2008). In our context, soft characteristics of politicians are derived from their values, attitudes, and goals—which are internal factors, shaped in the politician's own mind and cannot be easily observed by an outside observer. Therefore, we refer to politicians' attitudes on how to deal with the political and information environment as soft characteristics. In contrast, hard characteristics consist of more objective and structural features (seniority, gender, etc.) and can be externally observed.

Political agenda setting was found to be moderated by individual politicians' hard characteristics (especially seniority; see Helfer 2016) and soft features, that is, their motivations and goals. For instance, politicians who emphasize competition with other political actors ("party warriors"), as opposed to realizing policy goals, are more responsive to the media (Sevenans et al. 2015). Moreover, politicians who try to reach publics that did not vote for them are also more media responsive (Midtbø et al. 2014). However, the dependent variable in all of these studies is the *self-reported* behavior of MPs. It can derive from self-rationalization, inaccurate recall, or social desirability.

Another group of studies indeed focuses on the *observed* responsiveness (e.g., speeches) to the media agenda and therefore eliminates the possible subjectivity in self-reported behaviors (Davis 2007; Edwards and Wood 1999). However, these studies do not examine the contingency of political agenda setting nor combine individual-level "soft" moderators that are essential for understanding this contingency because politicians' behavior is, *inter alia*, a product of their individual goals and motivations (Searing 1991). The current study is the first to make a connection between the "soft" features of political actors and their real-world responsiveness to the media.

The Moderating Effect of Politicians' Attitudes and Goals

The information abundance today forces politicians to decide how to allocate their limited attention and which issues and sources are most important (Baumgartner and Jones 1993; Walgrave and Dejaeghere 2017). The filters used by politicians to process information depend on the information itself and on their predispositions and goals. They rely on heuristic cues, frequently those provided through the media coverage, to manage their priorities. Understanding the *interactions* between the information coming from the media and the filters politicians use for processing information is hence crucial (Jones and Baumgartner 2005; Sevenans et al. 2016; Wolfe et al. 2013).

We elaborate three individual-level explanations that explain how politicians act within this information abundance, and specifically the role of the media in shaping their political agenda. First, we use a known aggregate-level mechanism—the impact of negative media information—and translate it into an individual-level analysis.

Then, we suggest two new individual-level factors that can moderate the political agenda setting effect: representational roles and being a generalist or a specialist.

Negativity Bias

Previous aggregate-level studies find that negativity in news coverage increases politicians' media responsiveness. This is because negative coverage can be a strategic tool that political actors can use to tackle their opponents (Thesen 2013; Walgrave and Van Aelst 2006). We suggest an underlying individual-level mechanism for this negativity effect: politician's inherent bias toward negative information, regardless of their political role or demographic features. Some politicians, just as any other human being, may emphasize negative information over positive. Because the journalistic coverage of politics is mostly negative (Galtung and Ruge 1965; Harcup and O'Neill 2001; Soroka 2014), we argue that politicians who are more prone to negative information are more responsive to the media. This is attributable to the correspondence between the supply (negative media information) and the demand (a politician's bias toward negative information).

> **Hypothesis 1 (H1):** The more politicians prefer negative information, the more responsive they will be to the media agenda.

Representational Roles

One way of dealing with information abundance is to filter in only information sources that are relevant to those whom the politician is representing. The classic representation literature views political representation as a continuum (Converse and Pierce 1986; Eulau et al. 1959): At one pole, politicians may feel responsive to citizens' immediate demands and preferences (delegate model). At the other pole, they act upon their own judgment and aim to defend citizens' interests in the long run (trustee model).

We argue that these two concepts of representational roles affect the politicians' level of responsiveness to the media agenda. Politicians who view themselves as delegates are expected to be more responsive to the media agenda. This is because the media are widely seen by politicians as representative of the public agenda because journalists greatly influence the issues that the public consider as most important (Davis 2007; Walgrave 2008). To gauge the public's immediate preferences, delegates use the media as a shortcut and act upon the media agenda. In contrast, trustees are expected to put their platform first, believing that this best serves the people in the long run. Therefore, we expect trustees to be less responsive to the media.

> **Hypothesis 2 (H2):** The more politicians adopt a delegate role conception, the more responsive they will be to the media agenda.

Generalists or Specialists

Politicians' responsiveness to the media agenda is also expected to vary according to whether they are generalists or specialists. The latter specialize in a narrow set of

issues, while the former are involved in many issues. Decision making and information processing differ according to these types (Searing 1991; Tetlock 2005).

Media coverage usually lacks depth and context (Galtung and Ruge 1965; Harcup and O'Neill 2001). This characteristic corresponds with generalists' preference for simple and brief information on a variety of issues, as they do not have the time or resources to deal with more detailed information. Thus, generalists are expected to be more dependent on media cues to keep abreast of the most important issues. In contrast, specialists have expertise in a few policy issues and are subsequently less dependent on, and hence less responsive to, the media agenda. Because they specialize in technical issues, which are considered by journalists as less attractive for coverage, it is less likely that the media will affect the specialists' agenda. Instead, the specialists are expected to consult with experts or use other information laden with expertise. Moreover, because specialists a priori pay attention to fewer issues, their range of topics to respond to is much narrower.

> **Hypothesis 3 (H3):** The more generalist politicians are, the more responsive they will be to the media agenda.

Method

We combine three data sets for testing our hypotheses. The first is a content analysis of national newspapers from three countries: Belgium, Canada, and Israel. The second is a content analysis of speeches by federal MPs in these countries. And the third is an elite survey with MPs from the three countries ($N = 197$). These data types are combined into one unified data set, as explained in the following sections.

We chose these three countries because they are all developed parliamentary democracies, but also differ in their electoral systems: Canada's single-member plurality system (SMP) is based on local representatives who are elected by their geographic constituency; Belgium has a multimember system in which eleven districts elect 150 MPs; Israel has a multimember system with extreme proportionality (the entire country is one single district). Due to the variance between these countries, we believe that our case selection is suitable to make inferences on the relationship between politicians and the media in other developed democracies as well. Different electoral systems may provide different incentives for MPs regarding their level of responsiveness to the media. However, due to the relatively small sample size and the small number of countries (which limits our ability to make wider inferences on the differences between electoral systems), we are cautious in formulating hypotheses on cross-country differences.

Dependent Variable: Political Agenda

The political agenda of MPs was examined through a dictionary-based content analysis of speeches in the plenums of the three parliaments. Oral activities were chosen for three reasons: First, they are considered an important tool for politicians to promote their issues, monitor parliamentary activity, and set the agenda in parliament (Akirav 2010; Soroka 2002; Vliegenthart and Walgrave 2011). Second, the media generally

have a stronger impact on more immediate political activities, such as speeches and rhetoric, than on longer-term political activities, such as legislation and budget allocation (Walgrave and Van Aelst 2006). Third, it is very hard to assess effects of the media on these longer-term political activities.

We analyzed only speeches for which the initiative was independent as much as possible of institutional constraints: oral questions and interpellations, and one-minute speeches.[1] The collection of these speeches was done in varying time spans according to the parliamentary activity in each country: In Belgium, we used speeches from the 53rd federal parliament between July 6th, 2010 until the end of the legislature on April 24, 2014 ($N = 4,042$). In Canada, speeches were collected during the 41st federal parliament between June 2, 2011 until June 19, 2015 ($N = 35,685$[2]). In Israel, we collected speeches from the beginning of the 20th Knesset between March 31, 2015 and January 13, 2016 ($N = 5,847$).

To build our dependent variable, we calculated the weekly percentage of references by each MP to any of seventeen topics (discussed below). During each week, the relative attention of an MP to all of the topics adds up to 100 percent. The low mean of the dependent variable ($M = .01$, $SD = .07$) is not surprising because of the fact that we examined individual politicians, who naturally do not raise an oral question or give a one-minute speech on a weekly basis on all seventeen topics. In total, there are 332,860 units of analysis,[3] that is, 332,860 weekly opportunities for politicians in our sample to address one of the seventeen issues.

Independent Variable: Media Agenda

To construct the independent variable, we used newspaper articles. In Belgium, we used a Dutch-speaking newspaper (*De Standaard*). In Canada, we used three national newspapers (*Globe and Mail*, *National Post*, *Toronto Star*), and in Israel, we used two newspapers (*Ha'aretz* and *Yedioth Aharonot*).[4] The criteria for selecting these newspapers were that they are leading newspapers in the country and are distributed at the national level.

For each newspaper, we collected all articles from the main section of the daily edition over the same time span as the speeches' data ($N_{BE} = 203,691$,[5] $N_{CA} = 144,145$, $N_{IL} = 64,276$). Similar to the dependent variable, the media agenda variable was also calculated as a weekly percentage of the articles' references to any of the seventeen topics. However, here, we used a lagged variable.

Automated Content Analysis

We coded the topics in the media and the political speeches through a dictionary-based approach for automated content analysis. We used Lexicoder, a Java-based program,[6] and conducted the analysis using validated dictionaries in four different languages: Dutch and French in Belgium, English in Canada,[7] and Hebrew in Israel (see Online Appendix A for the dictionaries' validity measurements). Each dictionary included unique keywords, common terms, and synonyms that represent a topic. We used the topic classification system of the Comparative Agendas Project[8] with several adjustments according to the three countries. In the end, we identified seventeen topics in the texts.[9]

Table 1. Biographical Features of MPs Participating in the Study.

	Number of MPs	Male	Age (M)	Year First Elected (M)
Belgium				
Sample	106	68 (64.2%)	48.2	2007
Parliament	150	91 (60.7%)	49	2005
Canada				
Sample	45	32 (71.1%)	53.4	2006
Parliament	308	232 (75.3%)	49.9	2005
Israel				
Sample	46	31 (67.3%)	52.7	2009
Parliament	120	91 (76%)	53	2008

Note. MP = member of parliament.

We ran the four dictionaries on all texts from the media and parliaments in all three countries. Each text was given a frequency score for each topic. This score represented the number of times a topic's keywords appeared in the text. As each text can naturally address several issues, we did not set the "winning topic" (the most frequent one) as the only topic of the text, but rather used the entire distribution of topics in the text to represent its full agenda. Thus, each text was given seventeen scores representing the frequency of the seventeen topics it contained.

Moderators

The moderators are based on survey interviews with 197 politicians from the three countries. Our elite survey was conducted in the three countries simultaneously between March and August 2015. In Belgium, we contacted all MPs and interviewed 106 members of the 54th federal parliament (70.6 percent response rate).[10] In Canada, we contacted a representative sample (in terms of partisanship) of half of the MPs and interviewed 45 members of the 41st federal parliament (26.3 percent response rate). In Israel, we contacted all MPs and interviewed 46 members of the 20th national parliament (38.3 percent response rate). Table 1 provides summary statistics for the sample. In the presence of a researcher, all MPs answered a 40-minute-long survey on a computer supplied by the researcher. The survey—which was administered in the native language of each MP—included a variety of questions for the purposes of different projects and asked MPs about their preferred information sources, decision-making preferences, and representational goals.

Negativity bias. This measure was developed by Soroka and Guggenheim (2014) and is based on a battery of headlines that were given to the respondents, with the following introduction: "Imagine that you are going to read a news story about [economy/environment/health care/politics/foreign affairs]. You have four headlines from which you have to choose one article to read. Which of the following would you read?" The

MPs were then given four headlines for each of the topics above (full headlines are in Online Appendix B). Two headlines were positive, and two were negative.

We estimate that introducing five different topics would provide us with an MP's general tendency toward negativity rather than just her specific interest in a certain topic. For every topic, MPs were given the value 1 if they chose a negative headline and 0 if they chose a positive one. The final measure was the sum of the scores for each of the five topics, which ranged between 0 (bias only toward positive headlines) to 5 (bias only toward negative headlines). The politicians in our sample have a slight tendency toward negativity ($M = 2.88$, $SD = 1.09$).[11]

Trustee/delegate. We asked the MPs the following question:

> Some people believe that elected officials should do exactly as citizens demand. Others argue that citizens want MPs to act on their behalf, but make their own decisions. What do you think is the right balance a politician should have?

The MPs positioned themselves on a scale between "Act on citizens' behalf" (0, trustee) and "Respond to citizens' demands" (10, delegate).

Specialist/generalist. We used the following question: "Some politicians specialize in one or two policy areas, while others prefer to speak and act upon a wide range of issues from different policy areas. Where would you place yourself on the following scale?" The MPs positioned themselves on a scale between "Small number of policy issues" (0, specialist) and "Large number of policy issues" (10, generalist).

Control Variables

We controlled for variables known in the literature to affect the relationship between politicians and the media: gender, age, parliamentary experience (in years), whether the politicians belonged to a coalition or an opposition party, political power, ideology, field of expertise, media importance, election period, and country. To control for *political power*, we created three dummy variables: one for being a minister, one for being a party leader, and one for being the house speaker. We measured *ideology* by using a binary "conservatism" variable. In all three countries, members of right-wing parties were coded 1, while politicians from Left and Center parties were coded 0. The coding of the Belgian parties was based on data from the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES) of European political parties' ideology (Bakker et al. 2015). Right-wing parties were those with a Left-Right value higher than 7 (on a ten-level Left-Right scale): the New Flemish Alliance (N-VA), Vlaams Belang ("Flemish Interest"), and PP ("The People's Party"). In Canada, the Conservative Party was coded 1, and all other parties were coded 0 (New Democratic Party, Liberal Party, Green Party, and Bloc Québécois). In Israel, the coding was based on the ideological positions of parties as described in Hazan and Diskin (2015). Politicians from conservative parties (HaLikud, Jewish Home, Israel Beitenu, Shas, Yahdut HaTorah) were coded 1, while all others were coded 0.

We measured *field of expertise* based on the committees of which the MPs were members at the time they gave speeches. We created a dummy variable that indicated whether the MPs' committees matched the topic concerned in each of their speeches. Moreover, because *election periods* may have an effect on MPs' parliamentary activity (Vliegenthart and Walgrave 2011), a dummy variable was created for the three-month period before the elections in each country. Finally, the measurement of *media importance* was based on two questions: First, we asked politicians to write their three most important issues, and afterward, we asked, "How are you informed about the three top issues you just indicated above?" Politicians were shown a list of twelve sources. Those who marked "Mass media" were given the value 1, while others were given 0.

Estimation Method

Our final data set includes three levels: Weeks are nested in issues, which are nested in MPs. To assess the different effects of the media on the political agenda, we estimated multilevel regression models with random slopes, which accounts for the hierarchical dependency of the observations. The model includes three levels: MPs, issues, and weeks. The main claim is that politicians' agenda in a single week (t) is affected by the media agenda in the previous week (t–1), and, thus, we use lagged variables according to a weekly time span. We decided on a weekly time span because political agenda setting by the media is known to be a short-term effect (Vliegenthart and Walgrave 2011). An even shorter time span is inappropriate on account of institutional constraints (e.g., question time mostly occurs on a weekly basis), and longer time spans will make it difficult to distinguish between media effects and other institutional factors (Walgrave and Van Aelst 2006). Moreover, the media's tendency to rapidly replace old stories with new ones (Boydstun et al. 2014; Wolfsfeld and Sheafer 2006) makes it difficult for politicians to follow old news items.

We also included a lagged dependent variable as independent variable because the political agenda is affected by inertia and incrementalism (Vliegenthart and Walgrave 2011).

Results

Table 2 presents the results of the multilevel models. We first present an empty model (Model 1), and then add the main effects (Model 2) and the interaction effects (Models 3–5). The models allow a random slope for the media agenda variable on both the issue and MP level, as we expect the media effect to vary across issues and MPs. Model 2 indicates a clear political agenda setting effect at the individual level, as the coefficient of the media agenda variable is positive and significant ($b = .151, p < .001$). In other words, when a topic changes its status from not being in the news coverage at all (media agenda value 0) to fully controlling the media agenda (value 1) in $t − 1$, this leads to a 15 percent increase in the shared attention of a politician to this topic in week t. Because of the reciprocal relationship between politics and the media, we also tested for a reverse effect of politicians' agenda on the media agenda. The reverse effect is positive but not significant (results are available upon request).

Table 2. Three-Level Hierarchical Linear Model Predicting Politicians' Agenda.

	Model 1 (Empty Model)	Model 2 (Main Effects)	Model 3 (Negativity Interaction)	Model 4 (Delegates Interaction)	Model 5 (Generalists Interaction)
	b (SE) p value	b (SE) p value	b (SE) p value	b (SE) p value	b (SE) p value
Political agenda (t–1)		.040*** (.002) <.001	.040*** (.002) <.001	.040*** (.002) <.001	.040*** (.002) <.001
Media agenda (t–1)		.151*** (.014) <.001	.100** (.037) .008	.097*** (.028) .001	.092** (.031) .003
Female		.000 (.001) .809	.000 (.001) .802	.000 (.001) .778	.000 (.001) .803
Age		−.000 (.000) .43	−.000 (.000) .425	−.000 (.000) .448	−.000 (.000) .431
Seniority		.000† (.000) .085	.000† (.000) .083	.000† (.000) .086	.000† (.000) .081
Coalition		−.002** (.001) .002	−.002** (.001) .002	−.002** (.001) .001	−.002** (.001) .002
Minister		.003† (.001) .056	.003† (.001) .054	.003† (.001) .054	.003† (.001) .053
Party leader		−.002 (.001) .185	−.002 (.001) .179	−.002 (.001) .199	−.002 (.001) .191
House speaker		−.000 (.002) .94	−.000 (.002) .954	−.000 (.002) .928	−.000 (.002) .965
Conservatism		−.002*** (.001) <.001	−.002*** (.001) <.001	−.002*** (.001) <.001	−.002*** (.001) <.001
Field of expertise		.015*** (.001) <.001	.015*** (.001) <.001	.015*** (.001) <.001	.015*** (.001) <.001
Media importance		.001 (.001) .292	.001 (.001) .293	.001 (.001) .293	.001 (.001) .29
Delegate MP		.000** (.000) .004	.000** (.000) .004	.000† (.000) .053	.000** (.000) .004

(continued)

Table 2. (continued)

|	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
	(Empty Model)	(Main Effects)	(Negativity Interaction)	(Delegates Interaction)	(Generalists Interaction)
	b (SE) p value	b (SE) p value	b (SE) p value	b (SE) p value	b (SE) p value
Media agenda (t−1)* Delegate MP				.016* (0.008) .031	
Negativity bias		.000 (.000) .725	−.000 (.000) .866	.000 (.000) .705	.000 (.000) .736
Media agenda (t−1)* Negativity bias			.018 (0.012) .141		
Generalist MP		−.000 (.000) .933	−.000 (.000) .93	−.000 (.000) .933	−.000 (.000) .420
Media agenda (t−1)* Generalist MP					.011* (.005) .034
Election period		.000 (.001) .379	.000 (.001) .379	.000 (.001) .379	.000 (.001) .379
Canada		.005*** (.001) <.001	.005*** (.001) <.001	.005*** (.001) <.001	.005*** (.001) <.001
Israel		.007*** (.001) <.001	.007*** (.001) <.001	.007*** (.001) <.001	.007*** (.001) <.001
Constant	.004*** (.000) <.001	.001 (.002) .596	.001 (.002) .465	.001 (.002) .461	.001 (.002) .446
Level 3 N (MPs)	197	174	174	174	174
Level 2 N (Topics)	3,349	2,958	2,958	2,958	2,958
Level 1 N (Weeks)	332,860	300,645	300,645	300,644	300,645
Variance Level 3 (Intercept)	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000
Variance Level 3 (slope)	.062	.021	.018	.02	.02
Variance Level 2 (Intercept)	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000
Variance Level 2 (slope)	.068	.067	.067	.067	.067
Variance Level 1	.005	.005	.005	.005	.005

Note. MP = member of parliament.
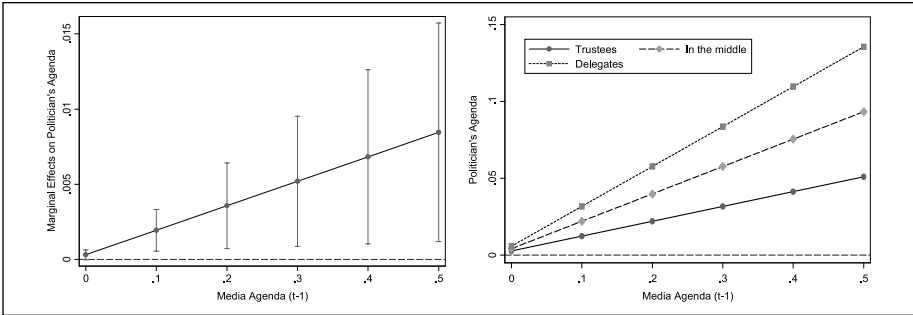
Figure 1. The interactive effect of media agenda and being a delegate/trustee on a politician's agenda.
Note. (1) The left graph indicates how a one-unit increase toward being a delegate affects political agenda, when the media agenda is held constant at different values and while controlling for the other covariates (with 95 percent confidence intervals). The *y*-axis presents the marginal effects on the politicians' agenda. (2) The right graph presents predictions of political agenda within different values of the trustee–delegate moderator. The *y*-axis presents the politician's agenda. (3) Results are derived from Model 4 in Table 2.

According to H1, the more politicians favor negative information in general, the more responsive they will be to the media agenda. Model 3 estimates the interaction between the media agenda and politicians' negativity bias. The interaction coefficient is positive but statistically insignificant ($b = .018$, $p = .141$). We, therefore, reject H1. Model 4 introduces the interaction effect of the media agenda with the tendency to be a delegate rather than a trustee. According to H2, the more politicians adopt a delegate role conception, the more responsive they will be to the media agenda. This hypothesis is confirmed as the interaction term is positive and statistically significant ($b = .016$, $p = .031$). To facilitate the interpretation, the left graph in Figure 1 shows the interaction effects, indicating how a one-unit increase toward being a delegate affects political agenda, when the media agenda is held constant at different values (and while controlling for the other covariates). According to the left graph, the positive effect of the media agenda on the political agenda *increases* for each one-unit increase toward being a delegate (higher values in the trustee–delegate moderator indicate a movement toward the delegate model). In other words, when a topic becomes more prominent in the news (higher values on the *x*-axis), delegate politicians are more responsive to the media agenda than trustees.

For the sake of simplicity, we present an additional graph for interpreting this interaction at the right side of Figure 1. This graph shows the effect of the media agenda (*x*-axis) on the politicians' agenda (*y*-axis) within different values of the trustee–delegate moderator: the lowest value (trustee), the middle value (some trustee, some delegate), and the highest value (delegate). According to the right graph, the positive effect of the media agenda is strongest for delegates (the steepest slope); it is smaller for politicians who are in the middle category; and it is the lowest for trustees. This supports H2.

Finally, according to H3, the more generalist (vs. specialist) politicians are, the more responsive they will be to the media agenda. Model 5 presents the estimations when including the interaction between the media agenda and being a generalist MP. The
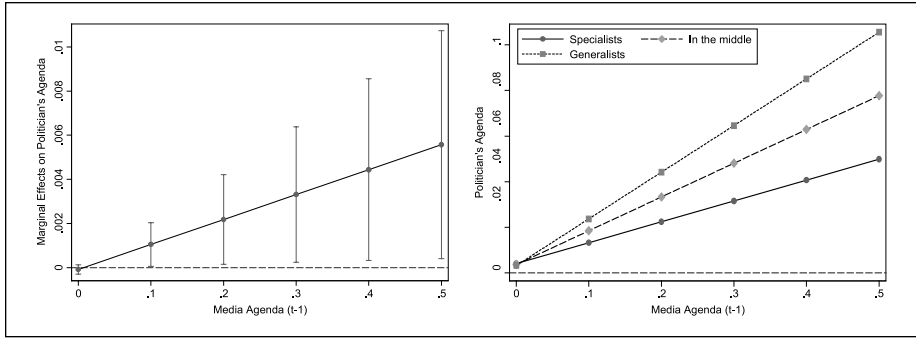
Figure 2. The interactive effect of media agenda and being a generalist/specialist on a politician's agenda.

Note. (1) The left graph indicates how a one-unit increase toward being a generalist affects political agenda, when the media agenda is held constant at different values and while controlling for the other covariates (with 95 percent confidence intervals). The *y*-axis presents the marginal effects on the politicians' agenda. (2) The right graph presents predictions of political agenda within different values of the specialist–generalist moderator. The *y*-axis presents the politician's agenda. (3) Results are derived from Model 5 in Table 2.

interaction term is positive and significant ($b = .011$, $p = .034$). The left graph in Figure 2 plots the interaction effects, indicating how a one-unit increase toward being a generalist affects the political agenda, when the media agenda is held constant at different values (and while controlling for the other covariates). According to the left graph, the positive effect of the media agenda on the political agenda *increases* for each one-unit increase toward being a generalist (higher values in the specialist–generalist moderator indicate a movement toward being a generalist). In other words, when a topic becomes more prominent in the news (higher values on the *x*-axis), generalist MPs are more sensitive to these changes in the media agenda than are specialists.

The right graph in Figure 2 presents a simpler interpretation of the interaction. It shows the effect of the media agenda (*x*-axis) on the politicians' agenda (*y*-axis) within different values of the specialist–generalist moderator: the lowest value (specialist), the middle value (some specialist, some generalist), and the highest value (generalist). According to this graph, the positive effect of the media agenda on the political agenda is strongest for generalists; it is smaller for politicians who are in the middle category; and it is the lowest for specialists. This confirms H3.

Robustness Checks

To test the robustness of our findings, we measured the dependent variable (political agenda) as the absolute counts of politicians' references to a topic (rather than the weekly share). The independent variable (media agenda) was also calculated based on absolute counts (full results are in Online Appendix C). The results support the findings of H2 (delegate MPs) and H3 (generalist MPs). H1 is rejected, as above. We can conclude that our results remain stable under different measurement of the agenda variables.

We further examined whether our results are robust when we apply different time lags: $t-2$ weeks, $t-3$ weeks, and $t-4$ weeks (full results are in Online Appendix D). Results show that the interaction term of H2 (trustees–delegates) remains significant at $t-2$ and $t-3$ at the 95 percent confidence level, but becomes insignificant at $t-4$. This decay is not surprising due to other sources of information that turn up in this longer period that can shape the politicians' agenda during a period of four weeks. Moreover, the interaction term of H3 (specialist–generalist) remains significant at $t-2$ and $t-3$ at the 90 percent confidence level, and becomes insignificant at $t-4$. The negativity interaction remains insignificant in all cases. These results indicate that our findings remain generally stable when we use different time lags. Additional robustness tests, based on more simplistic models, provide additional support to our findings.[12]

We also tested our models in each country separately (full results available upon request). As for the main effects, we find a statistically significant political agenda setting effect in each country. However, the interactions become statistically insignificant in most cases. Please note that these separate analyses strongly reduce the *N* in each model. The small sample size, along with the complexity of our multilevel models with interactions, decreases the statistical power of the models. Thus, we are cautious in making comparative inferences regarding differences between electoral systems, based on these single-country results.

Discussion

This study examines the contingency of the political agenda setting effect at the individual level. While previous studies have begun focusing on the individual level, none examined how politicians' "soft" characteristics are translated into media responsiveness. The current study is the first to do so by predicting politicians' *real-life* (rather than self-reported) behavior with individual goals and motivations. This connection allows us to link political agenda setting to actor-centered approaches that focus on the motivations and goals of political elites and consider politicians not just as passive media consumers, but also as strategic rational actors who know how the media work and adapt their behavior accordingly for their own goals (Sheafer 2001; Sheafer et al. 2014; Van Aelst and Walgrave 2016). Our findings reveal that politicians' real-life media behavior is shaped by their individual needs rather than solely by the goals of collective political entities, as found in previous studies.

First, we examined how a known aggregate-level mechanism of political agenda setting is translated into the individual level. However, we did not find any significant relationship between politicians' individual negativity bias and their level of media responsiveness. This finding can be explained by the fact that the media are not the only source of negative information to which politicians are exposed. Second, we find two new individual-level explanations that do affect the level of politician's responsiveness to the media agenda: a politician's representational role and whether she is a generalist or a specialist. This emphasizes that the behavior of political elites—specifically their responsiveness to the media—is determined not just by institutional constraints but also by individual goals and preferences. We,

thus, promote the understanding of the contingency of political agenda setting at the individual level by showing how individual filters for processing information are important in shaping politicians' real-life responsiveness to the media.

Specifically, we see that political role conceptions—whom politicians aim to represent—moderate a politician's media responsiveness. Previous studies indeed found that individual political goals were important for explaining the contingency of political agenda setting. For example, politicians who emphasize political competition ("party warriors") and those who try to reach a wider public are more media responsive (Midtbø et al. 2014; Sevenans et al. 2015). Many questions in the vast representation literature focus on whether public preferences are properly translated into political decisions (Ezrow et al. 2011). But because the media today are an integral part of political decision making (Strömbäck and Esser 2014), one must take into account how the politicians' media responsiveness varies according to their representational role. We find that those who view themselves as a conduit of the public's demands (delegates) are more responsive to the media than politicians who act upon their own judgment (trustees). There is a correspondence between the goals of delegates and media coverage. In addition, we find that MPs who are involved in a wide range of issues (generalists) are also more responsive to the media agenda. Generalists rely on news coverage for orientation on a wide set of issues.

Our study has several limitations. First, as each MP was only interviewed once, it may be the case that some individual-level attitudes and political goals changed during the period in which we sampled articles and speeches. This is specifically relevant to the Belgian case, where we collected the texts during a period that preceded the interviews with the Belgian MPs. However, we do not believe this undermines the results because the three moderators (negativity bias, representation role, and being a generalist or a specialist) are most likely stable characteristics unlikely to change during our short research period. Individual politicians typically enter the parliament when their preferences, priorities, and role conceptions are already shaped (Searing 1991). Another limitation is our use of speeches for measuring the political agenda. Although oral activities are an important part of politicians' behavior, this operationalization overlooks other substantial behaviors (legislation, budget allocations) individual politicians can perform. However, distinguishing the effects of the media from those of other institutional factors on these long political processes has its own limitations (Walgrave and Van Aelst 2006). Despite these limitations, we believe that our results contribute to the understanding of the contingency of political agenda setting by incorporating politicians' individual-level factors and their real-life behavior.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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Notes

1. All of these oral activities can be conducted by opposition or coalition members. In the Israeli case, we included also personal motions for the agenda.

2. The Canadian total speech number is significantly greater than in Belgium and Israel for two reasons: Its parliament contains more MPs (338) than Belgium (150) or Israel (120), and it is active for more weeks a year. For instance, the Canadian parliament was active 128 times during 2014, compared with the Knesset's 92 times in 2014 and Belgium's 49 times in 2013 (we counted the plenum meetings in 2013 rather in 2014, as the Belgian elections were held in April 2014).

3. For Belgium: 106 (MPs) × 17 (topics) × 125 (weeks) = 225,250 units of analysis. For Canada: 45 (MPs) × 17 (topics) × 110 (weeks) = 84,150 units of analysis. For Israel: 46 (MPs) × 17 (topics) × 30 (weeks) = 23,460 units of analysis. The number of weeks varies between countries because we collected speeches at different time spans and excluded the weeks in which there was no parliamentary activity.

4. Because we performed an automated content analysis, we had to collect plain texts of each newspaper. This limited the availability of newspapers in Belgium and Israel and forced us to collect varying numbers of newspapers in each country. Therefore, we ran separate regression models, each containing one newspaper per country. Results are mostly the same as in our main analyses (some of the interaction terms are not significant but in the same expected direction). Full results are available upon request.

5. The Belgian newspaper data included many articles on account of the many pages in *De Standaard* (42.9 pages on average), compared with the average in their Canadian (19.8) and Israeli counterparts (31.8).

6. http://www.lexicoder.com

7. As the Canadian federal parliament is available in both English and French, we used only the English dictionary for the political texts. As for the media, we used three English-speaking newspapers.

8. http://www.comparativeagendas.net

9. The seventeen topics were the following: Macro Economy; Human Rights; Health; Agriculture; Labor and Employment; Education; Environment; Energy; Immigration; Transportation; Law and Crime; Social Welfare; Banking, Finance and Domestic Commerce; Defense and Foreign Policy; Foreign Trade; Government Operations; Public Lands and Water Management.

10. We should note that the parliamentary speeches from Belgium were collected from the previous 53rd parliament. However, our specific moderating variables are expected to be stable throughout the two successive parliaments. (We address this issue in the section "Discussion.")

11. Although the Cronbach's alpha score for the final negativity measure is low (1.7), we do not find it surprising. We did not expect high internal consistency between the items because the negativity measurement includes topics representing different concepts. As politicians have varying fields of interest and expertise, their tendency for negativity is

also expected to differ across topics. For example, a politician who is an expert in foreign-affairs issues is expected to be interested in all sorts of news headlines—including the positive ones. However, if this politician is not interested in environmental issues, we expect her to be attracted mostly to negative headlines because negativity is a well-known news value that attracts nonspecialized audiences. We performed additional analyses and used separate regression models for each topic (full results are available upon request). Results show that negativity bias in economic issues is the only significant moderator of political agenda setting (negativity bias in political issues is nearly significant). In other words, the more politicians are biased toward negativity in economic issues, the more responsive they are to the media agenda.

12. We performed additional robustness tests and used different regression specifications (one with basic demographic variables, and another with both demographic variables and basic political career variables, such as seniority). Our findings remain generally stable: The main effect and the specialist–generalist interaction are significant at the 95 percent confidence level, the trustee–delegate interaction is significant at the 90 percent confidence level, and the negativity bias interaction remains insignificant (results are available upon request).

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material is available for this article online.

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