How political elites process information from the news : the cognitive mechanisms behind behavioral political agenda-setting effects

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The cognitive mechanisms behind behavioral political agenda-setting effects

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ABSTRACT — Political agenda-setting studies have shown that political agendas are influenced by the media agenda. Researchers in the field of media and politics are now focusing on the mechanisms underlying this pattern. This paper contributes to the literature by focusing not on aggregate, behavioral political attention for issues (e.g. parliamentary questions or legislation), but on MPs' individual, cognitive attention for specific news stories. Drawing upon a survey of Belgian MPs administered shortly after exposure to news stories, the study shows that MPs are highly selective in exploiting media cues. They pay more attention to both prominent and useful news stories, but a story's usefulness is more important for cognitive processes that are closely linked to MPs' real behavior in Parliament. In other words, aggregate political agenda-setting effects are a consequence of the way in which individual MPs process media information that matches their task-related needs.

KEYWORDS — Political agenda setting; media; political elites; information-processing; Belgium

News media play an important role in the work of policymakers. Research in the field of political communication has shown that politicians consider media access to be crucial to gain popularity and public support (Cohen, Tsfati, & Sheafer, 2008; Wolfsfeld & Sheafer, 2006). Mediatization scholars argue that politicians have adapted their behavior to match the media logic, being constantly aware of how something will play out in the media (Elmelund-Præstekær, Hopmann, & Nørgaard, 2011; Strömbäck, 2008). Political agenda-setting scholars, on their turn, have focused on the agenda interactions between the media and politicians. They have demonstrated that after issues get more media attention, they get more political attention as well (for an overview see Walgrave & Van Aelst, 2006). Politicians are somehow influenced by media cues. This is the basic finding this paper aims to explore further.

Most extant research has studied political agenda-setting effects from a macro-level perspective. Concretely, the focus has been on the *issues* politicians together take *action* upon in the *aggregate*—e.g. when asking questions, initiating bills, or giving speeches (see e.g. Edwards & Wood, 1999; Walgrave, Soroka, & Nuytemans, 2008). Heightened media attention for an issue, followed by an increase in political institutional action upon the issue, has been regarded as an indicator of media impact. Extant studies have done a good job describing the circumstances under which the media influence the political agenda. They have, for instance, found that some political actors are more responsive to the media (Green-Pedersen & Stubager, 2010; Vliegenthart & Walgrave, 2011a) or that some news coverage has a larger chance to make it onto the political agenda (Soroka, 2002; Thesen, 2013).

However, little work has been devoted to providing insight into the mechanisms underlying the macro level findings: What mechanisms explain the political agenda-setting effect? Which concrete news stories attract politicians' attention? Which rules-of-thumb do politicians use to decide whether or not to devote attention to a news story and to take action upon it afterwards? And, why do they adopt media cues in the first place? While agenda-setting scholars did theorize and speculate about these questions (see e.g. Van Aelst, 2014; Voltmer & Koch-Baumgarten, 2010), they

have had difficulties tackling them empirically because the cognitive considerations that politicians make inevitably precede the recorded public action and are hard to capture directly. Attentional and decisional processes cannot be measured by looking at parliamentary output or behavioral records. In particular, it is impossible to tap them on an aggregate, institutional level—we cannot study what institutions think or decide. It is individuals within institutions who read the news and make decisions. Micro level research on individual politicians is needed to get beyond what we know so far (for a similar argument see Wood & Vedlitz, 2007). Yet, studying individual political elites in a rigorous and systematic way is hard and, as a consequence, rare.

Some scholars tried to overcome these problems by surveying or interviewing politicians about their *perceptions* of political agenda-setting effects (e.g. Davis, 2007, 2009; Maurer, 2011; Midtbø, Walgrave, Van Aelst, & Christensen, 2014; Sevenans, Walgrave, & Vos, 2015; Walgrave, 2008). While such research is valuable to get a better understanding of politicians' media responsiveness, the main drawback is that politicians have difficulties with judging the media's agenda influence because they are not well able to distinguish agenda power from other forms of media power. This causes the survey- or interview-based studies to generally find much larger media effects than those demonstrated by 'objective' designs tapping actual behavior (Van Aelst & Walgrave, 2011).

This paper proposes a novel method that overcomes some of the limitations of previous approaches. It studies *individual* politicians' *cognitive* attention for *specific* news stories. Concretely, during a week we analyze the universe of media information in the small country of Belgium (Flanders) and, immediately after that week, via a face-to-face survey of legislative branch members, test whether MPs recall, have talked about, and have considered to take action upon a random sample of media stories. This way we try to lay bare the cognitive, attentional process between exposure to news stories and formal, institutional action upon news stories, as to gain a better understanding of how media effects actually come about.

Conceptualizing politicians' media responsiveness from an information-processing perspective, we find that behavioral, aggregate political agenda-setting effects most likely stem from a process of selective adoption on the cognitive, individual level. On the one hand, politicians consume the news much like other people do, paying more attention to the most *prominent* news stories. On the other hand, they are selective in the sense that they pay more attention to news that is already political in nature and news that matches their interests. In other words, news must be *useful* for their job as a politician in order to draw their attention. Interestingly, cognitive processes that are closer connected to politicians' real behavior are less driven by sheer cue-taking (prominence) and more by strategic selectivity (usefulness). Politicians have the best recall of the most prominent stories; they talk more with colleagues about news stories that are useful from a partisan point of view; and they intend to take action upon stories that have institutional usefulness. In sum, when political elites react to news coverage it is mostly because this coverage fits their cognitive and task-related needs.

Attention to news from an information-processing perspective

Both in Europe and the US, political agenda-setting scholars have found that media coverage has an influence on political issue attention (see e.g. Bonafont & Baumgartner, 2013; Edwards & Wood, 1999). They speak of media influence when an increase (or decrease) in media attention for an issue is followed by a similar increase (or decrease) in political action about the issue and mostly use time-series analyses to search for such a temporal precedence. The majority of recent studies agrees that the media exert influence on the political agenda, yet that the impact size depends on the circumstances (for an overview see Walgrave & Van Aelst, 2006).

But, which mechanisms produce this effect? How does media responsiveness work on the individual level? Not only the political agenda-setting literature itself has shown interest in such micro level questions. Scholars within the broader media and politics research field have called for studying agenda-setting in a more insightful way, for instance by disentangling individual policy

makers' cognitive attention patterns from their aggregate, behavioral attention (Eissler, Russell, & Jones, 2014; Yanovitzky, 2002).

A fruitful way to think about the micro level link between media and political elites is taking an information-processing perspective (Brown, 2010; Wolfe, Jones, & Baumgartner, 2013; Wood & Vedlitz, 2007). Such an approach avoids viewing the media as an actor that actively influences politics; rather, the decisions made by political actors are put central stage. The idea is that the news media—amongst many other sources of information—are one possible source of information that politicians can use in their daily work (Kingdon, 1973). Politicians themselves decide whether or not to pay attention to, and actively use, information from the news for various reasons.

From this point of view, the relevant question is not *whether* politicians pay attention to the media; we know they do, at least sometimes. The question is rather *when* they do so, and *why*. Indeed, one thing we can be sure about, is that politicians cannot pay attention to all information that appears in the media. There is simply too much of it. Politicians—just like ordinary people—have to use heuristics, i.e. mental shortcuts, to select only relevant bits of information out of the full spectrum (cf. bounded rationality theory; see e.g. Jones, 1999). If we can lay bare the heuristics they employ when deciding what news to pay attention to, and what news to eventually act upon, we will better understand what role the media actually play in politicians' work.

While there is not much work on political elites' cognitive attention allocation to news, journalism scholars—relying on theories about the psychology of selective attention—have examined 'ordinary' citizens' attention to news (Eilders, 1996). Citizens use two types of heuristics to quickly judge what is relevant. First and foremost, they pay attention to the most *prominent* news. Assuming that journalists decide on the prominence of a news story based on how relevant they think it is for the public—a practice that is institutionalized in news values (Galtung & Ruge, 1965)—prominence is an easy rule of thumb for a citizen to determine what is worth looking at. Additionally, people take into account specific news factors, such as the issue of a story or the degree of controversy in an

article, to judge its potential impact on their lives. This perceived applicability of a news story is the second indicator of relevance.

Our theory of attention by political actors is related to this cognitive psychological framework, but we apply it to political elites specifically. Since our ultimate interest is better understanding how politicians *behave* in parliament—whereas for citizens it is merely what they *think* that matters (Walgrave & Van Aelst, 2006)—we make some changes compared to studies focusing on 'ordinary' citizens. First, we conceptualize 'individual attention for news stories' more broadly than is usually done. We develop three indicators of attention that form the full link between exposure to news stories and potential real action on the underlying issues. Second, we use existing media and politics literature to hypothesize about what news factors make a news story applicable for political elites specifically. We think that for politicians, who are in the position to do something about certain news stories, news must be concretely *useful* in the political arena. Third, since we have three different indicators of attention for which various mechanisms may be at play, we theorize about how some determinants of political attention may matter more for some indicators of attention than for others.

Conceptualizing individual political attention for news

We first clarify how we define the concept of 'individual attention for news stories'—the phenomenon we try to explain in this paper. Cognitive psychology defines attention as "… *the cognitive process of selectively concentrating on one aspect of the environment while ignoring other things*" (Anderson, 2009, p. 519). This makes attention hard to measure directly except by actually observing people while they are exposed to signals. This study deals with *political* attention of elites and we employ a broader definition. We conceptualize it here as the cognitive process *following* exposure to a news story and *preceding* (potential) formal political action upon the news story—the independent and dependent variable of aggregate agenda-setting studies respectively. We present

three concrete, empirically measurable indicators of attention that tap different aspects of politicians' processing of media information.

First, attention for news leads to the storage into memory of the information that was in the news. Being exposed to loads of news, only a small part really gets through and sticks in politicians' minds. It is a recurring finding in cognitive psychology that higher levels of attention lead to more retention (Johnson & Proctor, 2004). Therefore, our first indicator of attention for news stories is *recall* of these news stories. We label the second indicator of individual political attention *conversation with colleagues*. Of all the stories a politician recalls, due to scarcity of time, he can only talk with colleagues about a fraction. Politicians' conversational behavior, even informal, is more constrained than their recall. Talking about news with colleagues signals a broader political interest for the news story and indicates higher levels of political attention. Attention is in this case actual, yet still informal, behavior. Third, attention for a news story may materialize in plans for formal action, we label this *intended action*. Planning action, and definitely saying that one plans formal action, is entirely costless. But, it is the form of attention measured here that probably comes closest to actual formal action. One needs to plan to take action before one can effectively act. Planned action, in cognitive psychology also called 'planned behavior', forms the link between beliefs and action (Ajzen, 1991).

[Figure 1 about here]

Including a cognitive (recall), a behavioral (conversation with colleagues) and an intentional aspect (intended action) of attention, our three indicators present an encompassing measure of individual political attention for the news. The relationships between the indicators of attention are summarized in Figure 1. We consider *recall* as the necessary first stage of the attention process: it is a precondition to know about a story before one can talk about it or intend to act upon it. Recall is, however, not only caused by direct exposure to the news (e.g. by reading a newspaper); it can also be produced by indirect exposure, for instance via inter-personal communication (e.g. a friend

mentioning the story during a conversation). Even then recall occurs before the politician starts conversing about the story himself. Recall can lead to *conversation* and/or to *intended action*. Conversation and intended action are not preconditions for each other, but they may affect each other: informal conversation can inspire a politician to undertake formal action; and vice versa, a politician intending to take action may want to discuss it first with colleagues. Yet, intended action always is a precondition for real, formal political action.

Determinants of individual political attention

Which heuristics do political elites employ to evaluate the relevance of a news story? As touched upon above, the prominence of a news story probably plays a crucial role. From a cognitive psychology point of view, stronger media signals should draw more attention, not only from politicians, but from all news consumers (Wood & Vedlitz, 2007). The more news coverage about an issue or event, the larger the chance that political elites are being (multiple times) exposed to it: the story becomes 'top of mind'. In a sense, prominence refers to the passive role of the information receiver—in our case: the politician—who cannot help but attend to an ubiquitous story.

Prominence is probably not only a trigger of political attention from a 'passive' point of view. Politicians may deliberately aim to be informed about prominent news as they consider it to be important. This is the basic premise of agenda-setting research: the more media attention an issue gets, the higher the presumed importance, and the more it is prioritized by the audience (Dearing & Rogers, 1996; Jones & Baumgartner, 2005). Moreover, politicians may view media attention for topics as a proxy of how important the public considers these issues to be (Voltmer & Koch-Baumgarten, 2010). This works in two directions: some politicians may think that media coverage reflects public opinion (Pritchard, 1994); others may think that the media affect what the public deems important (Cohen et al., 2008; Gunther & Storey, 2003). In both cases, politicians presume that the public cares most about the big news stories of the day. So, they have good reasons to be

attentive to prominent news themselves if they want to show they are responsive to public concerns. Our first hypothesis is:

> H1:   *Politicians pay more attention to news that is more prominent.*

We know from psychology that a second crucial heuristic, next to prominence, is the perceived applicability of information (Higgins, 1996). Citizens, for instance, pay more attention to news that is conflictual because conflict may result in changes in the status quo, which could have an impact on their lives (Eilders, 1996). Politicians, who attend to large chunks of information from society—their job is to represent society—need an even more efficient selection procedure to deal with the constant information influx (see Zaller, 1992 for a similar account of how citizens process information). As politicians are in the position to take action upon information, we argue that the perceived applicability of information is determined by its concrete *usefulness*. For example, elites' staffers predigest information and consciously filter out what is not concretely usable. Kingdon (1973), in his seminal study about congressmen's voting decisions, extensively elaborates on how information should be 'politically relevant' to be used by politicians. Similarly, recent aggregate agenda-setting studies, though implicitly, focus on information usefulness as well when they find that politicians mostly use those bits of media information that fit their political task and strategy (see e.g. Green-Pedersen & Stubager, 2010; Thesen, 2013; Vliegenthart & Walgrave, 2011a). Usefulness, thus, refers to the active role the information's recipient plays by deliberately filtering what comes in.

The literature mentions two types of information, provided by the media, that may be relevant for politicians: (1) substantial information about policy issues; and (2) information about politics (Van Aelst, 2014; Voltmer & Koch-Baumgarten, 2010). With respect to the former, we can safely assume that politicians can use information about issues they have an interest in. Daily, the media report about problems in society—and possible solutions for these problems—related to different policy domains. Moreover, journalists may have been covering a topic for a long time,

making their expertise and opinions valued by MPs (Davis, 2009). We expect such issue-related news to be useful for politicians dealing with the topic in their daily work.

We identify three ways in which information can match politicians' issue interests. First, many countries in the world are federal states with multiple competence levels. Different parliaments exercise their authority within a specific geographic region (in our case: Flanders in Belgium) and within certain policy domains. Politicians probably devote more attention to news about the region their Parliament is responsible for as they can actually do something with this information.

> *H2:   Politicians pay more attention to news about the region their Parliament is responsible for.*

Second, politicians belong to political parties with certain partisan issue preferences. Issue competition is an important aspect of the party competition in many countries (Green-Pedersen, 2007). Parties profile themselves on certain issues in order to gain a strategic advantage over other parties on these issues; they deliberately ignore issues on which they have a detrimental position. For instance, parties may focus on issues they are the 'issue owner' of, which means that voters consider the party to be the best able to handle the issue, or on issues that currently concern voters (Wagner & Meyer, 2014). Extant work found that MPs react more on news about issues that are salient for their party, such as owned issues (Green-Pedersen & Stubager, 2010; Thesen, 2013; Vliegenthart & Walgrave, 2011b). In short, we expect MPs to pay more attention to news about issues with high partisan salience.

> *H3:   Politicians pay more attention to news about issues that are salient for their party.*

Third, there is a division of labor within parties and MPs specialize in a few specific policy domains, often being member of the parliamentary committees corresponding to these domains. They are in constant need for information about the issues they are specialized in. Accordingly, the more a news

story's issue content fits the specialization of an MP, the higher its usefulness for this MP's institutional task.

> *H4:* *Politicians pay more attention to news about issues they are personally specialized in.*

In addition to news about policy issues, the media provide a second type of information useful for politicians: information about politics itself. Indeed, the news is not only an exogenous source of information for politicians; it is simultaneously a channel via which politicians themselves communicate (Wolfe et al., 2013). Politicians are an exceptionally important source of information for journalists and a lot of news is political in nature (Bennett, 1990). Politicians sometimes 'go public' with their plans before they announce them in Parliament in order to create support amongst their colleagues (Kernell, 1997). Consequently, politicians can also learn from the media about other political actors' plans, priorities, and tactics (Davis, 2007). The news is a means to gauge the political 'mood' (Sellers, 2009). Whether a news story provides information about politics is a criterion for its usefulness.

> *H5:* *Politicians pay more attention to news about politics.*

An important consideration worth mentioning here is the possible endogeneity of the media's political agenda-setting effect. If politicians simply react on news that was produced in the political sphere itself, this would confirm Wolfsfeld's (2013) argument that there is a 'PMP-cycle' whereby "*politics comes first*" and influences the media sphere which, on its turn, influences politics again. This does not mean that politicians know about all political news before it appears in the media: it is likely that the media mostly offer them new information coming from *other* political actors. But it could mean that some stories, apparently affecting the political agenda, already received political attention from some political actors before. We will come back to this later.

Drawing on an information-processing perspective, we formulated five general hypotheses about which news draws politicians' attention. We did not differentiate between indicators of

attention. The next section contains expectations about how the five determinants of attention influence the various indicators of attention (recall, conversation and intended action) to a different extent.

Recall, conversation, and intended action

Our hypotheses so far are based on two mechanisms we claim to drive political attention effects: prominence and usefulness. Due to the interrelatedness of our three indicators of political attention—recall, conversation, and intended action—we believe that all determinants specified above may influence all three indicators of attention. For instance, if prominence affects recall, we expect it to also affect conversation and intended action, as recall is a precondition for the latter two. And, if politicians intend to act more upon news about issues they are specialized in, they probably also notice this kind of news more, leading to better recall. Still, we theorize that the strength of the effect of the various determinants of attention differs across our indicators of attention.

The prominence of a news story should matter most when it comes to recall, as recall simply is a matter of storage in memory. When a politician frequently encounters the same news fact, the chance increases that he or she has noticed it and remembers it. For conversation and intended action, prominence may still matter but we think it will be less important because other factors, related to the usefulness of the information, take the upper hand.

> H6: *The prominence of a news story matters more for recall than for conversation and intended action.*

Conversation and especially intended action are attentional processes connected more closely to real behavior and we expect politicians to deliberately pick, in a selective way, which news stories to talk about or act upon. The usefulness of news stories should become more important here. Politicians are strategic actors who will probably only spend time on a news story if they have an interest in doing so.

Two factors discussed above signal the relevance of a story for a politician's task generally: whether the news is about politics, and whether it is about an issue that is salient for the party. These factors define the *partisan* usefulness of a story. We anticipate them to be particularly important when it comes to conversation about news stories, because this is where the shared interest in a news story between a politician and his colleagues matters most. The two factors of partisan usefulness may also have an influence on recall or intended action, but less so.

> H7: *The partisan usefulness of a story matters more for conversation than for recall and intended action.*

The two final determinants of attention, an individual's specialization and a matching competence level, signal the *institutional* usefulness of a news story. While MPs are probably interested in a broad range of news stories not directly matching their institutional position—which they may recall, and about which they may even talk—they cannot, and are not supposed to, turn those stories into action in Parliament. Concretely, we theorize that individual specialization and parliamentary competence are particularly important determinants when it comes to intended action upon a news story.

> H8: *The institutional usefulness of a news story matters more for intended action than for recall and conversation.*

Data and methods

MEDIA CONTENT ANALYSIS — During one week (8-14) in May 2013, Belgian (Flemish) mass media coverage was content analyzed. Every day, eight news outlets were fully coded: five newspapers (*De Standaard*, *De Morgen* and *De Tijd*, all broadsheets, and *Het Laatste Nieuws* and *Metro,* popular papers), two television news broadcasts (7 p.m. news from *VRT*, the public channel, and *VTM*, the commercial channel) and one radio news broadcast (7 a.m. news from *Radio 1*, the public radio). One

week fits the weekly parliamentary cycle—committee and plenary meetings take place once a week. We expect recall, conversation and intended action to occur quickly after media exposure (see Walgrave & Van Aelst, 2006). With about 6 million inhabitants, the Belgian (Flemish) media market is relatively small and not very fragmented making it possible to content-analyze almost all news during a week[1]. We chose this particular week in May mainly for pragmatic reasons; we took a 'routine' week that was long enough after the Easter recess and before the summer break so that enough MPs would attend the plenary session. Without coding a lot of additional media stories, we cannot prove that the week we picked is representative for Belgian (Flemish) media coverage in general, but it appeared to us as a normal week far from any election campaign with a small number of large stories and a great deal of minor stories.

In a first phase, all individual news items (e.g. each newspaper article) were attributed to 'news stories'[2]. Two news items belong to the same news story when (1) they deal with exactly the same topic and when (2) the event they cover, is set on the same geographical location (see Thesen, 2013 who followed a similar procedure). The reason for grouping news items into broader news stories is that humans process different bits of information about the same news fact as a whole. For example, different outlets, over different days, covered a news story about two boys who went missing. When asked about their attention for the disappearance, people do not distinguish between different details of the story, but consider the different aspects as one larger news fact. Our units of analysis are thus news stories. The 1,847 individual news items that appeared in the eight outlets, were grouped into 769 separate news stories. This is the universe of news during that one week in May 2013.

[1] There are some more national newspapers (*Het Belang van Limburg*, *Gazet van Antwerpen, Het Nieuwsblad*) and news websites, but their agenda largely overlaps with that of the outlets covered.

[2] A random subset of news items was coded by two coders to test the reliability of the attribution of individual news items to news stories. The overlap was 93 per cent, indicating sufficient intercoder reliability.

Then, from these 769 stories, a stratified random sample of 150 news stories was taken. News stories appearing in one outlet only, foreign news stories, and soft news stories were undersampled (Appendix 1). Non-prominent and politically irrelevant news stories would otherwise take a disproportional share of the news agenda compared to their agenda-setting potential. A Belgian politician would never intend to act upon, for instance, a transfer of a soccer player or to the fact that the fire alarm in the White House went off.

Third, to construct our independent variables, every news item belonging to one of the 150 selected news stories was coded in-depth[3]. The individual news items' codings were then aggregated on the news story level. *Media wideness* indicates how many different news outlets covered the story. *Story size* is the average number of individual news items these outlets spent on the story. *Political news* gives the share of news items per news story that are political, i.e. that mention an action or statement by a Belgian political actor. The variables assessing an MP's party's issue salience and matching specialization were constructed by coding the main topic of each news story according to the topic codebook of the Comparative Agendas Project (CAP). We calculated *Party issue salience* via the party manifestos of the last Flemish elections of 2009, by measuring the proportion of each party manifesto devoted to each issue. The issue salience variable represents, for each MP-story combination, the proportion of the manifesto of the MP's party devoted to the issue the story was about. Such a measure of issue salience has been used before in agenda-setting research (see e.g. Vliegenthart & Walgrave, 2011b; Wagner & Meyer, 2014). Two independent MPs were excluded from the analyses as they did not belong to a party. *Matching specialization* is a dummy variable indicating '1' when the issue the news story is about, matches one of the parliamentary committees the MP is member of. We retrieved committee membership from the official website of the Flemish

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[3] To test the intercoder reliability of the in-depth codings, 50 items were coded by two coders. All Krippendorff's alphas exceeded .70, indicating sufficient reliability.

Parliament. *Regional setting* gives the share of news items per news story playing in the Flemish region (and not exclusively on the national, local or European level).[4]

SURVEY OF FLEMISH MPS — The face-to-face MP survey (administered on iPads and laptops) took place on 15 May 2013 in the Flemish Parliament during the plenary session. In total, 93 out of 124 MPs participated in the survey. A response rate of 75 per cent is exceptionally high for elite research[5]. All MPs were informed beforehand. We received support from the chairman of the Flemish Parliament, who encouraged all members to participate. Parliament ushers helped us to target the MPs that had not participated yet. MPs were surveyed in the hall and the lobby when they left or entered the plenary meeting.

Belgium is a strongly federalized state with large competences (education, environment, culture, foreign trade…) situated at the regional level (Deschouwer, 2009). The Belgian regions (Flanders, Wallonia and Brussels) manage about half of the total government's budget and the Flemish Parliament deals with more than half of the Belgian population. There is a lot of mobility from national to regional parliaments in Belgium, and regional elections are by no means second order elections but are as 'national' as the general elections, with media devoting equal levels of attention. In a sense, Belgium is a two-nation country and studying one of the regions comes very close to studying a state-wide, national system.

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[4] In Belgium, the jurisdictional division is complex, causing many policy topics to potentially lead to action on various competence levels. This is not only problematic theoretically, also practically it makes reliable coding of jurisdiction difficult. That is why we opt for the geographic location of an event as a good and clear-cut proxy of jurisdiction, that often goes hand in hand with 'real' jurisdiction.

[5] Moreover, there is no selection bias. Sixteen MPs were abroad during the plenary meeting and could therefore not complete the survey. Respondents do not significantly differ from non-respondents in terms of gender, age, years of experience in Parliament, standing (chairs of committees and caucuses), and party.

Thirty news stories were presented to every MP. Our dependent variables—*recall*, *conversation with colleagues*, and *intended action*—were assessed by asking them three questions for every story: (1) *Have you seen or heard about this story during the last week, yes or no?* If yes, (2) *Have you talked about this story with colleagues, yes or no?* (3) *Have you considered to undertake action about this story, yes or no?* For each MP, the thirty stories were randomly selected out of 160 news stories: the sample of 150 real news stories plus ten *fake* news stories, made up by the researchers. The fake stories were included to test for recall error and reliability. The respondents were informed about the inclusion of these fake stories at the beginning of the interview which may have made them complete the survey more attentively. They did not know how many stories would be fake; on average, 2.1 out of the thirty stories presented to an MP were fake.

CONTROLS — Apart from the independent variables of interest—gauging prominence (media wideness and story size), partisan usefulness (political news and party issue salience) and institutional usefulness (regional setting and matching specialization)—we use five control variables. Since the information-gathering behavior of specialist and generalist MPs may differ (Tetlock, 2005), we control for degree of specialization by asking: *Some politicians specialize in one or a few policy domains, while others focus on a lot of different domains. Where would you place yourself on a range from 0 (I focus on one domain) to 10 (I focus on a lot of different domains)?* Second, we include a dummy for whether a story is foreign or domestic. The Flemish Parliament has both domestic and international competences so we expect Flemish MPs to attend to all types of news. Third, we include a dummy for soft news. Fourth, there is a measure of the recency of the story—the number of days between the last news item on a news story and the MP survey—to test whether a decay effect occurs. Finally, to control for possible party effects, we incorporate party dummies in all analyses. For all descriptives, we refer to Appendix 2.

ANALYSES — We run three separate models with recall, conversation and intended action as dependent variables (N = 2,448)[6]. The models are crossed random-effects logistic models[7] because the data are nonhierarchical (news stories are not nested in MPs or vice versa): every unit is cross-classified by the factors 'MP' and 'news story'. Since our three dependent variables are binary, we estimate logistic models. All three models include the same independent variables[8]. Because the number of observations and the independent variables in the models are identical, we can compare the strength of effects across models.

Before moving on to the results we briefly discuss the issue of causality in our models. Political agenda-setting research typically encounters two causality problems. First, as noted above, politicians are prominent news sources themselves and they attempt to get their preferred issue agenda in the news. Considering political attention for such politically produced news as a pure media effect is wrong when the news has its origin in the political sphere itself. We try to explicitly model this by including the variable *Political news* in our models[9]. Interestingly, the political news

[6] From all 2.790 cases (93 MPs x 30 stories), there are 83 cases where the answer on one of the survey questions (dependent variables) is missing; 193 cases are about fake stories; there are 56 cases of independent MPs for whom we do not have party issue salience data; and 10 cases for which the generalist-specialist measure is missing. Thus: 2,790 – 83 – 193 – 56 – 10 = 2,448 cases.

[7] These models include random components both on the level of the respondent and on the level of the news story. We run the models in STATA, using the 'xtmelogit' command as described by Rabe-Hesketh and Skrondal (2012). For the estimation of the parameters, Laplace approximation is used.

[8] There is no problem of multicollinearity in the models. The highest correlation between two independent variables (*Media wideness* and *Story size*) is 0.51.

[9] Although this variable is based on mentions of political actors in the news, while political actors are not necessarily mentioned in all news they are involved in (often journalists do not mention their sources), we think the variable does a reasonable job in distinguishing politically inspired news from non-political news.

stories in our dataset are almost always exogenous to the specific MPs rating the story: they refer to *other* political actors. In our dataset, there are only two instances where an MP was confronted with a news story in which he himself was mentioned.

Second and relatedly, it is hard to distinguish the 'net' effect of media coverage from the direct effect of underlying events in the real world. When politicians react to a news story, such as for instance a train accident or a statement by another politician, we cannot be sure whether the media coverage is responsible for this reaction or whether the politician reacts to the event or statement itself. He or she may even have known about the story before it appeared in the media. This could lead to an overestimation of the role of the media. We cannot empirically solve this issue in this study. We are confident, however, that the media have at least some 'net' effect on top of the real world effect, as one-issue media studies controlling for real-world indicators generally show (see e.g. Boomgaarden & Vliegenthart, 2007; Vliegenthart & Mena Montes, 2014). Also, we account for this problem theoretically, by not making assumptions about the 'influence' of the mass media (attributing a passive role to politicians) but rather viewing news stories as bits of information that 'are around', that one can often also learn about in other ways, and that politicians—dependent on the conditions—deliberately pick up or ignore.

Results

We first discuss the relationships between the dependent variables. In 49 per cent of all 2,448 cases a story was not recognized by the MP: (s)he indicated that (s)he had not heard or read about it. Of the stories that were recalled, 63 per cent did not lead to conversation nor to intended action; 26 per cent sparked conversation (but did not lead to intended action); 2 per cent led to intended action (but not to conversation); and 10 per cent led to conversation and intended action. Apparently, when MPs consider to undertake action upon a story, they mostly discuss it with their colleagues as well.

Note that MPs seldom claimed to have paid attention to fake stories; this reinforces confidence in the reliability of our measures[10].

A cursory look at Table 1 shows that almost all independent variables seem to matter for some type of attention; but there are differences between models. In any case, all three full models perform better than the empty models: the Akaike Information Criterion (AIC) decreases when adding independent variables. The empty models show that there is more variance on the level of the news story than on the MP-level. When explaining attention for stories, the difference between stories is larger than the difference between MPs. Our models, focusing mostly on features of the *message*, succeed in considerably reducing this unexplained variance.

[Table 1 about here]

PROMINENCE — Two of the three dependent variables are significantly affected by both indicators of prominence. *Story size* and *Media wideness* are crucial variables in explaining recall and conversation with colleagues. When stories are covered by more news outlets, and when they are covered more prominently, they are recalled by more MPs and MPs talk more about them. Prominence matters less for intended action: only *Story size* has a significant effect and the size of the coefficient is much smaller than in the other two models. Hypothesis 1 is confirmed: more prominent signals draw more attention. It is not the case, however, that the effect is stronger for recall than for conversation: the size of the coefficients is comparable in the two models. Hypothesis

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[10] Of the 193 fake stories presented to MPs, recall occurred in 15 cases (8 per cent), conversation occurred twice (1 per cent) and intended action only once (0.5 per cent). A considerable number of these incorrect answers were related to one specific fake story that, unfortunately, was very similar to a news fact that had truly happened. The fake story said 'Referee assaulted a soccer player, who was brought to hospital', while two weeks before, a soccer player had attacked a referee. The confusion caused by this mix-up explained almost half of the incorrect answers: 6/15 for recall, 1/2 for conversation, and 1/1 for intended action.

6 is therefore not corroborated: prominence does not primarily matter for mere recall; it equally affects MPs' conversational behavior.

PARTISAN USEFULNESS — All four indicators of usefulness matter as well, at least at some point during the attentional process. First, the issue interests of a politician's party (*Party issue salience*) play a role. The effect is positive and significant for the model explaining conversation. If a story deals with an issue prioritized by their party, MPs tend to talk more about it. Hypothesis 3 gets confirmation for one indicator of attention. For recall and intended action, party issue salience does not have a significant effect. Second, the *Political news* variable matters, confirming Hypothesis 5. Political news sparks chatting with colleagues and it is also a significant predictor of recall, but it does not determine whether a politician intends to take action upon a story. The indicators of the partisan usefulness of a news story, *Political news* and *Party issue salience*, matter most for explaining conversation with colleagues, confirming Hypothesis 7.

INSTITUTIONAL USEFULNESS — The variable tapping politicians' individual specialization, *Matching specialization*, proves to be crucial to explain politicians' attention for news stories. It is the only variable with a positive and significant coefficient in all three models. We can confirm Hypothesis 4. Whether or not a news story plays in Flanders or not—an indicator of whether the Flemish Parliament is responsible for the matter—also plays a role both for conversation and for intended action (confirming Hypothesis 2). Recall is not affected by the geographical setting of a story: Flemish MPs pay attention to news stories about the federal level as well. But their (intended) behavior, taking place largely within one specific parliament, is constrained by the formal jurisdiction of this parliament. The effects of the two indicators tapping institutional usefulness, *Regional setting* and *Matching specialization*, on intended action are both significant and the size of the coefficients exceeds those of the other models, confirming Hypothesis 8. Institutional usefulness is most important for intended action.

CONTROLS — Some control variables exert influence on recall as well. Generalist MPs recall more stories. Domestic news leads to better recall and to more conversation and intended action,

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than foreign news. Soft news has no effect. There also is no decay effect: the most recent stories are not more recalled than then slightly less recent stories. Finally, there is no effect from parties.

INTERACTIONS — The theoretical model we tested in Table 1 is a simple, direct effects model. One may wonder whether reality is really that straightforward or whether prominence and usefulness *interactively* determine recall, conversation and intended action. For example, the effect of usefulness may be multiplied by prominence. Therefore, we tested models including interaction effects of the two prominence indicators with the four usefulness indicators[11]. Only two of the interaction effects reached significance (only on .05 level; results not shown in table). First, we found a positive interaction effect between *Story size* and *Party issue salience* on recall, indicating that issue salience does matter for recall when a story is big enough. Second, there is a negative interaction effect between *Story size* and *Matching specialization* on intended action: apparently, when a news story is really big, the role of specialization decreases and a larger group of politicians plans to undertake action. However, because most tested interaction effects are insignificant and the two found effects are small[12], we conclude that our straightforward, additive model grasps the underlying reality relatively well.

The empirical results mostly match our theory. The prominence of a news story (H1), the extent to which it matches a politician's issue interests on different levels (H2-4), and whether or not it is about politics (H5), all matter to explain at least one indicator of a politician's individual cognitive attentional process. Prominence matters for recall but also for conversation (H6 not confirmed), partisan usefulness plays a crucial role for conversation only (H7), and institutional usefulness is most important for intended action (H8). A politician's individual specialization in particular appears to be a key determinant of all three attention indicators.

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[11] We tested the interaction effects one by one, in separate models.

[12] Note as well that the likelihood of finding effects 'by chance' increases because we test so many different models.

The models in Table 1 only inform us about significance and give no indication of effect sizes. What does our theory mean in real numbers? To get a better sense of what the effects actually mean, we calculate predicted probabilities of the three dependent variables (for the fixed part of the model), for different values of the most relevant independent variables, keeping all other independent variables at their mean.

Figure 2 presents the results. The effect of story size, our first indicator of prominence, on recall is huge. When outlets reporting a story spend on average six items on the story instead of one, the chance of recall increases from 48 per cent to 95 per cent—approximating almost perfect recall. Figure 2 (upper left pane) shows how the marginal effect of one additional news item about a story decreases as the total number of items increases. A similar logic applies to media wideness: a story appearing in all eight news outlets has a chance of 91 per cent of being picked up (recalled) by an MP; for a story mentioned in only one outlet this chance is only 32 per cent. The predicted probabilities underscore the fact that prominence is crucial for recall, especially because size and wideness may often go hand in hand, possibly resulting in a real 'media storm' that is as good as impossible for MPs to ignore.

[Figure 2 about here]

The middle part of Figure 2 displays the effect of the two partisan usefulness indicators on conversation. MPs talk a lot more about political news. When every news item that covers a story contains statements and/or actions by political actors, the chance that an MP talks about the story with his/her colleagues is 27 per cent, which is much higher than the 5 per cent chance when not a single news item mentions a politician. The salience of an issue for the MP's party also leads to increases of conversations by this MP, from 5 per cent to 18 per cent, but this effect appears to be weaker, as the confidence intervals slightly overlap.

For intended action (lower panes of Figure 2), the indicators of institutional usefulness seem to exert smaller effects. This is especially true for *Regional setting* where the confidence intervals of

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the probabilities also overlap—which is partly due to the fact that there are not so much news stories about which MPs intend to take action. Matching specialization is a substantive predictor of intended action (1 per cent to 5 per cent).

All in all, the predicted probabilities suggest that four out of six of the key effects found in the models are substantial and represent considerable shifts in MPs' attention allocation. In terms of effect sizes, the independent variables used in this study perform particularly strong with regards to recall; whereas their explanatory power is somewhat weaker with regards to conversation and intended action.

Conclusion and discussion

The paper examined the cognitive mechanisms underlying behavioral political agenda-setting effects. Drawing upon a broad conceptualization of individual political attention—with recall, conversation with colleagues and intended action as indicators—we tried to disentangle the determinants of political attention for news stories. We argued that the prominence and usefulness of a news story—to varying degrees—affect whether a news story is noticed, whether it is informally talked about by elites, and whether elites plan to follow-up by undertaking formal action.

By and large, our theory gets support from the evidence. Prominent news gets more attention (H1 confirmed): the more news there is about a story, the more it is remembered and the more it leads to conversation among elites. The partisan usefulness of a news story matters as well (H3 and H5 confirmed). When stories are about politics and inform MPs about what other parties are doing, and when they address issues on which a party has a strategic advantage, elites especially tend to talk more about them. Finally, institutional usefulness plays a role (H2 and H4 confirmed). News stories that are situated in the specialized field of an MP and that are related to the parliament's geographic region are more easy to transform into formal action; they lead to more plans to act. Whereas partisan usefulness has the largest effect when it comes to conversation (confirming H7) and institutional usefulness is most important for intended action (confirming H8),

the effect of prominence is not stronger for recall than for conversation (rejecting H6). One factor plays a role throughout the entire cognitive political attention process: individual specialization. This strongly suggests that politicians selectively pick information that they perceive to be relevant for their specialized task.

We know from existing political agenda-setting studies that political agendas tend to be responsive to media agendas, but that this effect is highly contingent upon a whole range of factors. Our study confirms this basic finding—political elites indeed adopt media cues—and makes a beginning with uncovering how this contingency of media effects comes about. It shows that the adoption of news stories is a selective process whereby elites' political attention allocation is partly determined by the specific partisan/institutional environment in which they operate. In particular, intended action is restricted to stories that are useful for a specific MP. This may explain, for instance, why on the aggregate level some agendas are influenced more by media than others: in general, the usefulness of news coverage for these agendas is probably higher.

For less consequential attentional processes like recall, however, usefulness matters less. Politicians pay attention to many remarkably different news stories; about half of *everything* that appears in the mass media is noticed by politicians, and almost *every* politician pays attention to the 'big' stories of the day. They also use the media to be informed about political developments, and talk about these stories with their colleagues. This may explain why studies asking politicians about their perception of media impact often show much larger media effects than 'objective' studies based on content analysis. Politicians pay lots of attention to the media (cognitive aspect), even if not all news stories appear to be useful for everyone in parliament (behavioral aspect).

Note that this study did not look into formal political action, only into attention (potentially) preceding action. We expect that the usefulness filter would even be stronger, due to more constraints and costs, had we assessed actual behavior and not just intended behavior. Taking a step back and looking not at action but at preceding political attention has helped us to unravel the process leading to political action and partly opening the black box of political agenda-setting. We do

not claim that our approach does any better than the aggregate level research studying formal action, but we do believe that our approach explains better, both theoretically and empirically, why previous studies found what they found.

Interestingly, the regularly voiced concern that political agenda-setting effects are the consequence of politicians only reacting to the news they themselves initiated, proves to be untrue. While political news draws indeed special attention from politicians—they recall and talk about it more than non-political news—it is no determinant of their (intended) actions in Parliament. 'Exogenous' news that is not political in nature also triggers reactions from politicians.

The study only draws on one country and one level of government. The Belgian state structure is special and there is no doubt that some factors studied here are of no importance in other political systems. Though many states have some sort of multi-level structure in place with competences dispersed over different levels, the regional competence level effect we found, for instance, may be an idiosyncratic Belgian phenomenon. Having comparative data of elites in different countries would be useful. However, we hold that our results are generalizable in the sense that our broader theory about prominence and usefulness applies comparatively. The precise features making information relevant and applicable differ between political contexts but we believe the mechanisms to be generic. Politicians, just like all information-processors, are boundedly rational in what they let come through. They pay attention to the most important developments in their environment (prominence) but they attend more actively when information is relevant for their party and for their own political position (usefulness).

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Table 1 – Crossed random effects logistic models explaining recall, conversation with colleagues and intended action

	Recall				Conversation with colleagues				Intended action			
	(1) Empty		(2) Full model		(1) Empty		(2) Full model		(1) Empty		(2) Full model	
	Coef.	S.E.	Coef.	S.E.	Coef.	S.E.	Coef.	S.E.	Coef.	S.E.	Coef.	S.E.
Story size			0.60**	(0.17)			0.61**	(0.18)			0.43*	(0.20)
Media wideness			0.43***	(0.06)			0.49***	(0.10)			0.19	(0.12)
Political news			0.78*	(0.31)			1.87***	(0.44)			0.59	(0.54)
Party issue salience			2.19	(1.72)			6.70**	(2.33)			2.24	(3.31)
Regional setting			0.49	(0.27)			0.81*	(0.38)			1.27**	(0.44)
Matching specialization			0.74***	(0.16)			0.67**	(0.20)			1.39***	(0.25)
Generalist MP			0.09**	(0.04)			0.08	(0.05)			0.09	(0.07)
Soft news			-0.31	(0.35)			-1.36	(0.75)			-1.28	(1.17)
Foreign news			-0.61**	(0.23)			-0.96*	(0.41)			-1.24*	(0.61)
Recency			-0.06	(0.05)			0.04	(0.07)			0.10	(0.09)
Party (ref.: Christian Democrats)												
Liberals			0.17	(0.23)			-0.27	(0.35)			-0.91*	(0.46)
Socialists			0.29	(0.28)			-0.17	(0.42)			0.03	(0.49)
Far-right			0.36	(0.25)			0.25	(0.38)			0.10	(0.44)
Flemish Regionalists			-0.27	(0.26)			0.27	(0.39)			0.15	(0.46)
Right-wing Liberals			0.02	(0.34)			0.08	(0.51)			-0.75	(0.66)
Greens			-0.51	(0.34)			0.23	(0.51)			-0.63	(0.67)
Constant	0.09	(0.14)	-2.42***	(0.47)	-2.69*	(0.24)	-5.95***	(0.71)	-4.28*	(0.32)	-6.28***	(0.88)
Number of stories	150		150		150		150		150		150	
Number of MPs	89		89		89		89		89		89	
Number of observations	2,448		2,448		2,448		2,448		2,448		2,448	
Variance parameter (MP)	0.65		0.55		0.87		0.87		0.96		0.88	
Variance parameter (story)	1.42		0.82		2.14		1.20		1.76		1.23	
AIC	2,913		2,776		1,780		1,677		952		899	

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

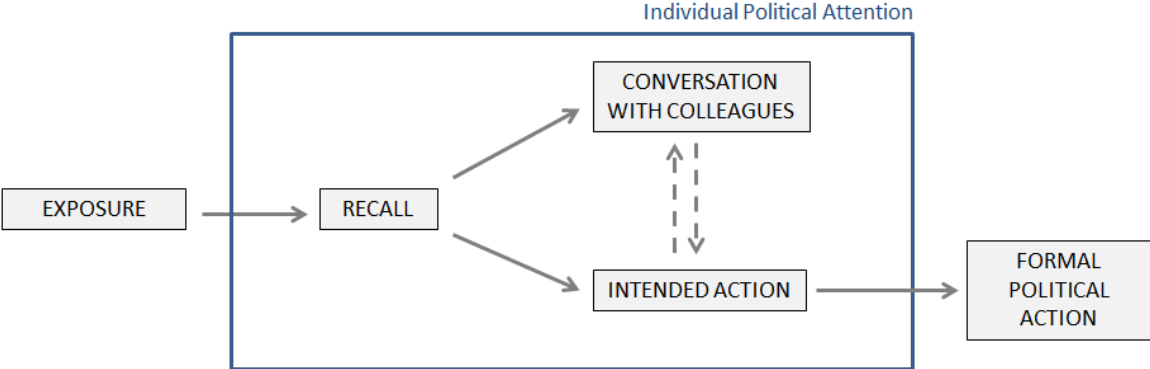Figure 1 – Relationship between indicators of individual political attention

Figure 2 – Predicted probability of recall (for indicators of prominence), conversation with colleagues (for indicators of partisan usefulness) and intended action (for indicators of institutional usefulness) with 95% confidence intervals