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## **Lawmaking and news making: different worlds after all?**

A study on news coverage of legislative processes in the Netherlands

### **Abstract**

Over the last decades the importance of the media for understanding the functioning of democracy in the contemporary world has become evident. Yet despite the developing body of knowledge on political communication and newsworthiness there is little research about why and how the media cover legislative processes in a European context. Therefore this study analyses media coverage of lawmaking in the Netherlands and investigates which characteristics of legislation influence the amount of news coverage. It shows that only one out of five laws is covered at all and that no more than one out of ten laws receives substantial media attention. This leads to the question why some laws do get extensive news attention, whereas most laws are completely ignored. Press coverage for the legislative process turns out to be both selective and predictable. Traditional news values such as political conflict and significance are good predictors of media coverage for lawmaking. In addition, laws are largely ignored when they are part of the budgetary cycle.

**Keywords:** lawmaking, media coverage, legislative processes, Dutch politics

## Introduction

In advanced Western democracies the mass media have become the most important source for citizens and voters to get informed about what is going in politics. It is deemed crucial for the electorate to have accurate political knowledge in order to be able to hold its representatives accountable (Arnold, 2004). People of course can learn about politics in many ways, yet politics in fact has become highly mediated (Strömbäck, 2008). Despite being abundant, however, political news is highly selective. Journalists focus on a narrow selection of specific actors and actions, while most of what politicians do and communicate on does not pass the media gates (e.g. Berkowitz & Adams, 1990). It is for example an established fact that top political leaders have a high chance of getting reported while backbenchers and ordinary politicians are only occasionally covered (Bennett, 1990; Gans, 1979). Also some specific political events, such as election campaigns and processes of cabinet formation, receive ample attention, while routine inter-elections periods are much less reported on. Esser and Matthes (2013, p. 177) refer in this respect to the mediatization of the “power- and publicity-gaining” as compared to the “policy- and decision-based” aspects of politics. Attention for the daily work of parliamentarians is limited and even seems to decrease over time (Jones & Wolfe, 2010; Negrine, 1999).

Moreover, research on media and politics is predominantly directed at the symbolic political agenda, which has only limited substantive consequences for the daily life of citizens, and much less at the more fundamental decision making processes, the ‘substantial’ political agenda (Brants & Voltmer, 2011). The question to what extent these more important aspects of parliamentary work, such as the legislative process, are covered by the media is underexplored. Considering that one of the key functions of political journalism is to inform the general public about political decision-making, so that citizens can make informed choices (Eveland Jr, Hayes, Shah & Kwak, 2005) and hold their representatives accountable (Carpini & Keeter, 1996), it is important to gain insight into the information that is provided to the people by the media.

We address this shortcoming in the literature by studying media attention for lawmaking and laws. Legislative outcomes can have a strong impact on citizens’ everyday life and the functioning of society as a whole. If there is any truth in the definition of David Easton of the political process as ‘the authoritative allocation of values for society’ than it can easily be argued that lawmaking is at the heart of politics. We investigate press coverage for the legislative process of 603 laws<sup>i</sup> that were introduced in the Netherlands in the period

2006-2011. Our analysis shows that only one out of five new laws did receive any media attention at all. Media attention for laws is the exception, not the rule. This leads to the follow-up question why some laws do get ample news attention, whereas most laws are (almost) completely ignored. There is yet little scholarly knowledge of the aspects or characteristics that at occasion make the legislative process newsworthy. Using the concept of news values, we explore and identify several factors that increase a law's chances of gaining media attention. In the conclusion we discuss the implications of our findings for both legislators and journalists as central players of contemporary democracy.

### **Media attention for lawmaking**

The relationship between media coverage and parliament is mainly studied at the actor level. For instance, scholars have tried to explain why certain members of parliament or congress get more attention than others. They consistently showed that (relative small) status differences between parliamentarians are crucial to explain differences in exposure (Cook, 1986; Sellers & Schaffner, 2007; Sheafer, 2001; Tresch, 2009). The added value of legislative work on media visibility is, however, contested. Some studies suggest that working hard in parliament leads to more coverage of the politicians involved (Bowler, 2010; Midtbø, 2011), while others show no such positive effect (Fogarty, 2008; Tsfati, Markowitz Elfassi & Waismel-Manor, 2010).

Previous studies on the newsworthiness of parliamentary activities mostly focus on what has been called the 'symbolic' political agenda. This concept refers to aspects of the parliamentary work that have limited political or practical consequences, such as asking parliamentary questions (e.g. Van Aelst & Vliegthart, 2013; Van Santen, Van Aelst & Helfer, 2013). The influence of the media on legislative processes has been given scholarly attention in the US (e.g. Cook, 1989; Sellers, 2010; Wolfe, 2012), however, studies that focus systematically and exclusively on news coverage of legislation are next to non-existent. An interesting exception is the study of Shoemaker and colleagues (2001) on the news attention for 50 major congressional bills. These authors studied the influence of individual characteristics of journalists on selecting and devoting attention to bills.

As a result of the meagre scholarly attention we know little on the amount and dynamics that determine media attention for the legislative process, particularly in a European context. So as a first step it is relevant to know how many laws receive press coverage during the lawmaking process, if they receive any attention all. We do not focus on the effects of

media coverage, but if a law does not receive any coverage, it is extremely unlikely that the media do influence this particular legislative process or that they fulfil their task of informing the public on this bill (see also Coglianesi & Howard, 1998, p. 40). Although there is debate about whether the media should cover politics more (e.g. Bennett, 2003) or less extensively (Schudson, 1998; Zaller, 2003), in any case journalists have to be selective, because they cannot report on everything that is happening in the political arena. This leads to the following general research question:

RQ1: How much press coverage have recently developed laws in the Netherlands received during the lawmaking process?

Secondly, we analyse the variation in media attention for different laws. We build upon the literature on news values (sometimes called news factors) to guide this empirical exploration and analysis (O'Neill & Harcup, 2009). Since Walter Lippmann (1922) almost a century ago introduced the idea of news values, these have been seen as the key features that make a story worth reporting (Donsbach, 2004, p. 134). For instance, events that feature personalization or negativism have a greater chance of being reported by the mass media than events that do not feature these aspects (Lengauer, Esser & Berganza, 2012). More generally, news values refer to common views, particularly among journalists, about what is believed to be intrinsically relevant and interesting for the public (McQuail, 1993). As Shoemaker & Reese (1991, p. 90) state: “news values provide yardsticks of newsworthiness and constitute and audience-oriented routine”. This means that news values concern collective routines and criteria grounded in an organizational context that determine the news production (Galtung & Ruge, 1965; Tuchman, 2003).

Although news values always played a role in the news coverage of politics, scholars suggest that their importance has grown over time. The mediatization of politics literature states that news media nowadays work more autonomously according to their own logic and are less guided by a traditional political logic (see Strömbäck & Esser, 2014). This means that for the selection and production of news stories, journalists follow less what political actors consider important to report, but are rather guided by their own routines and standards of newsworthiness. This study acknowledges that there are some crucial steps in journalism between observing newsworthy events and actually reporting them (Strömbäck, Karlsson & Hopmann, 2012). However, we are particularly interested in the characteristics of laws and

the legislative process and less in newsroom practices, so our analyses focus on the former. Therefore the second research question is:

RQ 2: Which characteristics of laws or the legislative process increase their chances of receiving media attention in newspapers?

There is an extensive list of elements that may trigger the attention of journalists (O'Neill & Harcup, 2009). They consider stories containing some of the following elements worthy of pursuit: timeliness, proximity, drama, novelty, unpredictability, conflict, controversy, violence, and significance (Barrett, 2007; Cook, 1996; Cook & Ragsdale, 1998; Davis, 2001; Fuller, 1996; Graber, 2002; Paletz, 2002). This long but also rather general list of news factors is applicable to all sorts of events that might become news. For the purposes of this study on lawmaking, we select and relate three key news values to specific characteristics of laws and the legislative process: political significance, proximity and political conflict.

### *Political significance*

Besides gaining power by winning votes and office, influencing policy is one of the major aims of every political actor (e.g. Müller & Strøm, 1999; Strom, 1990). Politics in the end has developing laws as one of its *raison d'être*, since the distribution of 'who gets what, when, and how' (cf. Lasswell, 1936) is largely decided upon in lawmaking processes. In that sense every law has political significance, even more so because of their general character: laws refer to the people or citizenry at large. There is little consensus in the literature, however, on how exactly to empirically determine the degree of political significance of laws. When is a law really consequential or very important or not, and when and how exactly do we come to know about its significance and relevancy? In his study on American 'important laws' Mayhew (1993) used expert judgements of leading journalists for analysing the political significance of laws (see also Binder, 1999; Howell, Adler, Cameron & Riemann, 2000). Since media attention for laws is our dependent variable this particular operationalization is highly problematic; for our study the Mayhew approach would probably introduce a strong tautological element. We therefore prefer to follow the approach suggested by Baumgartner and Jones (2002), who measured the attention in more objective terms of column lines, that are devoted to each enactment. They argue that a law is politically more important and significant if legislators spend more vocal attention and likely time and energy to it. Our first hypothesis springs from this line of reasoning.

*H1: Laws that get more attention in parliament receive more media attention than laws that get less attention.*

### *Political conflict*

Conflicting ideas about the organization of society and conflicting interests are at the heart of democratic politics (e.g. Schattschneider, 1960). From this perspective, it is almost a truism that conflict is one of the most popular news frames used in political news coverage (Neuman, Just & Crigler, 1992). Several scholars have argued that the news media in the US are biased towards conflict and negativity and frame political coverage largely in terms of rivalry and friction (Capella & Jamieson, 1997; Patterson, 1993). Moreover, Van Dalen (2012) shows in a comparative study that conflict is a prominent news value across countries, but that the exact amount of conflict coverage differs according to political system characteristics and journalistic cultures. Also the Dutch news media pay extensive attention to political conflict (Heijting & De Haan, 2005; Kleinnijenhuis et al., 2007).

We can thus expect that political friction with regards to a specific bill enhances its newsworthiness, just as the absence of friction decreases a proposal's chances of receiving media coverage. We use parliamentary voting as our operationalization of political conflict: laws that were carried unanimously or that were dealt with as a formality, meaning the law was not discussed plenary, are considered to be absent of any real political conflict.<sup>ii</sup>

*H2: Laws that were carried unanimously or that were dealt with as a formality receive less media attention than other laws.*

### *Proximity*

Proximity is a complicated concept. Laws can be considered more proximate regarding both their objective geographic distance and their subjective psychological distance. As a result of this ambiguity of the concept proximity, this characteristic of laws can be operationalized as more or less distant in both ways.

First, studies on international events and news have found that overall geographic proximity affects news coverage (Chang, Shoemaker & Brendlinger, 1987; Galtung & Ruge, 1965; Jones, Van Aelst & Vliegenthart, 2013). The general argument is that most journalists are more likely to cover events that arise literally closer to home, because they are both easier to cover and easier for news audiences to understand and follow. Regarding geographic

proximity, it can be argued that the ‘political capital’ The Hague is no longer the exclusive centre of Dutch politics and lawmaking since binding decisions are increasingly made in Brussels, i.e., the centre of EU policy making (Steunenberg, 2011, p. 502; Thomassen & Andeweg, 2011, p. 499). And as the prominence of EU-politics compared to domestic politics has increased over the years, we would expect the media to intensify coverage of the European political arena (Van der Eijk, 2000, p. 339). However, studies have found that this in fact is not or only to a very limited extent the case: European issues still receive minimal media attention and if there is any attention, this is concentrated around exceptional and particular key events (Boomgaarden, Vliegthart, de Vreese & Schuck, 2010; Norris, 2000). Similarly, we expect that laws stemming from the European Union receive less media attention. The so-called EU directives define specific ends and results that must be achieved within individual EU member states. National authorities have freedom to choose how they adapt the domestic laws in accordance with the directive, but there is always an ultimate implementation date specified (e.g., Mastenbroek, 2007). As the EU directives are decided upon outside of the Netherlands, these Dutch laws that are based upon the directives themselves are considered geographically less proximate to citizens and therefore expected to be less likely to get reported upon by the media.

*H3: Laws based on EU directives receive less media attention than truly domestic laws.*

Regarding the more subjective, psychological proximity, an analysis of the newspaper coverage of regulatory policy in the United States clearly shows that media coverage increases when policy has an effect on people’s everyday lives (Coglianese & Howard, 1998). Because our data do not allow us to analyse how proximate the general public perceives specific laws in this respect, we employ in our first exploration of this topic a very rough dichotomy and expect laws that deal with domestic issues to be more proximate to citizens. Therefore we expect laws on domestic policy to receive more media attention. Laws that deal with foreign affairs are expected to be less newsworthy because they are assumed to be psychologically more distant from citizens’ everyday life.

*H4: Laws concerning foreign issues receive less media attention than laws concerning domestic issues.*

## **Lawmaking in the Netherlands**

In general, the Dutch legislative procedure does not differ substantially from the situation in other European parliamentary systems (Van Schagen, 1997). The procedures are in part set in the Constitution and other laws and in part based on customs and conventions that often are laid down in the standing orders of Parliament. The Dutch Parliament, officially called the States-General, has a bicameral structure: legislation is first discussed in the Lower House of Parliament (illogically and rather confusingly named the ‘Second Chamber’, *Tweede Kamer*), and once passed it is sent to the Upper House of Parliament (known as the ‘First Chamber’, *Eerste Kamer*, or Senate). The formal legislative process starts at the Lower House, which is in terms of political powers and democratic legitimacy superior to the Upper House. A bill is introduced into Parliament – after the Council of State has been consulted – by Royal Message. The parliamentary phase starts with the bill being consigned to a parliamentary committee. From that moment on members of the Lower House can introduce amendments and motions. Until the final vote the minister can send a government amendment to the Lower House as well. As soon as the Lower House passes a bill (by a majority vote), it is sent to the Upper House. In this phase Parliament is less powerful, because formally senators can only propose motions, not full amendments. Also, bills cannot be sent back to the Lower House: the Senate either passes or rejects the proposed bill. The vote in the Upper House however is decisive, because once a bill is passed it is signed and published in the Government Gazette.<sup>iii</sup>

In two respects relevant for this paper, the Dutch case differs from most other Western countries. First, although both ministers and members of the Lower House can initiate legislation, compared to other countries only very few private member’s bills are introduced in the Netherlands and almost all bills emanate from government (Andeweg & Irwin, 2009; Bovend'Eert & Kummeling, 2010, p. 198). Over the last four decades private member’s bills never comprised more than two per cent of the total number of passed bills (Andeweg & Nijzink, 1995; State, 2012). Compared to its neighbouring countries – e.g., Belgium, France, Germany and the United Kingdom – this is very low. MPs in these other countries are much more active in introducing bills (Bräuninger & Debus, 2009, p. 819). Because the number of private member bills in the Netherlands is so extremely low, both in relative and in absolute figures, it is not possible to check in a robust way whether there is a significant difference between the amount of media attention government bills and private member’s bills receive.

A second peculiar feature of Dutch lawmaking is that the process on a specific bill does not side and this process can take ‘forever’ (Andeweg & Irwin, 2009; Van Schagen, 1997; Voermans et al., 2012, p. 115). Nearly all other West-European countries apply a

legislative discontinuity principle, i.e., pending legislation is dropped at the end of a parliamentary term and/or when there is a change of government. Since in the Netherlands the discontinuity principle was abolished in 1917, there is no such constraint to the length of the legislative process. The record for a single bill still pending is at 26 years (Andeweg & Irwin, 2009, p. 153). As a consequence, only a very small number of bills eventually never reaches 'law-status', either because they have not been passed or because the initiator withdrew the bill. It is plausible to expect that laws that go through a lengthier process receive more media attention than short-lived processes, if only because there is more time to pay attention to the on-going process. Therefore, the duration of the legislative process is added as a control variable in our analysis.

## **Method and data**

We explore our research questions and test our hypotheses using quantitative content analysis of laws and newspaper articles that deal specifically with those laws. Using the official database of the Upper House of Parliament,<sup>iv</sup> we collected information on all bills that were initiated during the parliamentary years 2006-2007, 2008-2009 and 2010-2011. A total of 603 laws have been enacted in those three periods, with respectively 224, 214 and 165 laws during the three parliamentary years.

To assess its *significance*, we counted the number of parliamentarians (ranging from 0 to a maximum of 14) who have spoken in the Lower House on a specific bill. This information was mined from a dataset with all proceedings of the Lower House.<sup>v</sup> The dataset also contained information on the number of words that was devoted to each law. As this measure correlated positively and strongly with the number of speakers ( $r=.84$ ), for the analysis we selected the number of speakers as the single indicator of significance.

In order to measure *proximity* we coded both the key issue of each law. We did so on the basis of the issue codebook of the authoritative Comparative Agenda-setting Project (see <http://www.policyagendas.org/page/datasets-codebooks>). For this analysis we dichotomized the established issue codes in foreign versus domestic issues. In addition, we coded whether reference was made to an EU directive or not. Both measures are not related; almost all EU directives (62 out of 71) in effect appear to deal with domestic policy.

Based on the information in the Upper House database on parliamentary voting behaviour, we constructed a dummy variable for political *conflict*, indicating if a law was

either unanimously voted (or not voted on at all) or whether at least one party voted differently.

In addition to these key variables, we entered two control variables to the analyses. In order to control for the duration of the lawmaking process, the Upper House database was used to count the number of weeks between introduction of the bill and the official publication of the law. Another dummy variable is constructed to distinguish between regular and so-called budget laws. Whereas the former can concern any kind of policy, the latter specifically concern budgetary policy. These latter laws are part of the standard, annual budgetary cycle and determine or change the statuses of budgets – which are overviews of the state of receipts, expenses and obligations – and the annual reports of the various budget chapters.

The main dependent variable in our analyses is the amount of press attention for each law. The Netherlands belong to the cluster of Northern and Central European countries with high levels of newspaper readership and newspapers are still considered a very important as sources for (political) news (Bakker & Scholten, 2009) Dutch “[d]ailies reach about 70 percent of the population, a large majority of which spends more than half an hour a day reading a daily paper” (Van der Burg et al., 2011, p.56). Articles were searched for in all 15 Dutch national newspapers, including typical broadsheet papers, popular newspapers, free dailies, and two smaller religious papers.<sup>vi</sup> These two small papers can be seen as a result of the original Dutch media system that was characterized by a high degree of political parallelism (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). Newspapers openly supported a certain party or religious group. Since the period of so-called depillarization and deconfessionalization in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there are no longer institutionalized linkages between the main newspapers and political parties or religious groups (e.g. Brants & Van Praag, 2006). Although “the Dutch media market has no tabloids” (Deuze, 2005, p. 864), the newspapers vary slightly in content, focus, terms of readership and circulation figures.

Based on the title of the law and its short database description, search strings were created. These strings were used in the LexisNexis database to collect all newspaper articles that dealt *specifically* with the bill or an issue central or directly related to the bill. These articles thus deal with the key issue of the bill and mention either a) (parts of) the bill, b) direct consequences of the bill when accepted, c) the positions of both political or non-political actors regarding the bill, or d) references to (parts of) the lawmaking procedure, such as parliamentary debates or voting rounds. We searched for newspaper articles within a period ranging from two years before introduction of the proposed law until one year after its

publication in the Government Gazette. This procedure resulted in a total of 3,539 articles that were collected and coded.

To test the reliability of search string construction by coders almost one third of the laws (183 laws) were checked using the same instructions, with specific attention for cases in which no media attention was found at all. This showed that in those cases where no media attention has been found, this was not due to a too narrowly formulated search string but a valid reflection of coverage absence. In only 18 cases (i.e., 3 per cent) the reliability check found a slightly different number of relevant articles than the initial coder did.<sup>vii</sup>

In order to answer the first research question, some important characteristics of the laws under consideration are described. Since only one out of five laws receive media attention (see below), the dependent variable does not adhere to a normal distribution. Instead it behaves as discrete data over an unbounded positive range, similar to a Poisson distribution. The dependent variable is a count of success: the amount of media attention as measured by the number of newspaper articles. Because the sample variance exceeds the sample mean, the negative binomial distribution is more appropriate to construct an explanatory model of media attention. Therefore the hypotheses are subsequently tested using negative binomial regression.

## **Results**

How much press coverage have recently developed bills and accepted laws in the Netherlands received during their full legislative process? The findings (presented in first row of table 1) show that only about one out of five lawmaking processes (22 per cent) received attention in the national press.<sup>viii</sup> This means that the very large majority of laws never receive any attention at all directly prior to, during, or in the direct aftermath of the legislative process. Moreover, if we exclude laws that received attention in less than 5 newspaper articles the amount of media-attention even drops to 11 per cent. This indicates there is very little substantial attention for a very large majority of new laws in Dutch national newspapers. There are some differences between the different years under study<sup>ix</sup>, but no major differences in the amount of coverage of the legislative processes between the biggest national newspapers<sup>x</sup>.

The uneven distribution of media-attention is also shown by focussing on those cases that got ample media attention. For instance, the law that liberalized the Dutch postal market received a staggering number of 793 newspaper articles, which is about one fourth of all press

attention (N=3060 articles). Also, the law that abolished the ‘no-claim return’ for health insurance and replaced it with an excess clause received impressive media attention: 392 newspaper articles on this bill were found (13 per cent of all media attention).

What characteristics of bills and the legislative process increase the odds of gaining attention in the written press? We hypothesized that political significance, political conflict and proximity would all positively impact the newsworthiness of bills and the lawmaking process. Table 1 presents a first indication of a relationship between our independent and dependent variables. First of all, the political significance of a law does indeed seem to matter. Almost half of the laws (47 per cent) on which more than five MPs joined the parliamentary debate received press coverage.<sup>xi</sup>

A second aspect taken into account is political conflict, as indicated by whether a bill was dealt with as a formality/carried unanimously or had a divided vote. Table 1 shows that 80 per cent of all bills considered became laws without a vote taken or by unanimous voting. Of these laws 18 per cent received media attention, whereas of the laws that were voted upon in the Lower House 39 per cent received newspaper attention. Of the laws that were decided upon by a divided vote, 26 per cent even received substantive newspaper coverage. Third, the descriptive results regarding the proximity of a law are less straightforward. Laws that deal with domestic policy are more newsworthy compared to laws related to foreign policy, but only because less foreign laws get real substantive media attention. Laws that are initiated by the EU receive even more attention than laws that are home grown. However, this surprising finding should be treated with caution, since both the number of EU-initiated bills and laws that deal with foreign policy are relatively modest.

about here: Table 1

Finally, we see substantial differences with regard to our control variables. The difference between the amount of media attention that budget laws get as compared to ‘regular’ laws is highly relevant. The analysis shows that of all budget laws in the database, 96 per cent does not receive any attention in Dutch national newspapers. By contrast, one third of the regular laws does get at least some media coverage. The duration of the lawmaking process also matters in terms of media attention, as was expected. If the process lasts less than half a year (25 weeks), chances are extremely low that these laws do get substantial attention in the press (6 per cent).

To actually and more thoroughly test the relative impact of these different characteristics of laws and the legislative process on media attention we use a negative binomial regression analysis. Since our dataset contains a handful of deviant cases that have a disproportional large amount of coverage, we have established a cut-off point and as a result 11 cases that are obvious outliers were left out of the general analysis.<sup>xii</sup> As a result values of media attention vary between zero and fifty in our count model. Table 2 shows the relevant coefficients and the exponential parameter estimates (Exp(B)) that the model yields.<sup>xiii</sup>

about here: Table 2

Our first hypothesis is based on the news value of ‘significance’ and states that laws that get more parliamentary attention are more likely to receive more media attention. We find empirical support for this expectation. For every additional parliamentarian that spoke on the bill in the parliamentary debate, levels of media coverage increase with 12 per cent (Exp(B)=1,12). Political journalists are more willing to cover a bill when it is discussed by multiple politicians in Parliament.<sup>xiv</sup>

Our second hypothesis predicts the impact of political conflict, operationalized as divided voting in Parliament. Our model clearly shows that bills that ultimately did not get an unanimous vote are much more likely to receive higher levels of media attention than laws that were accepted unanimously or dealt with as a formality (Exp(B)=1,87). Indeed, disagreement between parties and parliamentarians appears to be an important factor in explaining journalistic attention and coverage.

Our third and fourth hypotheses refer to the news value proximity, in particular foreign and EU-initiated legislation. In the case of laws that deal with foreign affairs, the model confirms our expectations. Such law proposals are 65 per cent *less* likely to receive the same level of media coverage as laws that deal with national issues. Our model does, however, not show any significant difference between the levels of coverage for EU-based laws and laws that originate from national politics.

The two control variables also prove to be significant. The analysis shows that the length of the lawmaking process does matter: every week increase in the duration of the legislative process results in 0.7 per cent more media attention (Exp(B)=1,007). This at first sight small effect should not be underestimated since duration has a median value of 20 weeks and a maximum value of 255 weeks. As a result, the overall effect may be rather strong. As expected, the difference between budget laws and ordinary laws improves the explanatory

value of our model. We already noted that budget laws are seldom discussed in the national press. This concurs with the finding that a law's chances of receiving newspaper attention strongly decrease when it is part of the yearly budgetary cycle ( $\text{Exp}(B) = 0,16$ ).<sup>xv</sup>

## **6 Conclusion and discussion**

We already referred to the classical definition of politics by Easton as 'the authoritative allocation of values for society' and to the well-known definition of Lasswell: 'politics is on who gets what, when, and how'. These of course are broad definitions of politics and the political process, but there can be no doubt that lawmaking is at the core of both. The media are assumed to play an important role by informing citizens about political decision-making, so they can make informed decisions and hold their representatives accountable. Therefore this study examines the attention of the national press for the legislative process and its outcomes. Our study of media attention for lawmaking in the Netherlands during several parliamentary years shows that a large majority of laws is *not covered at all* in the work of national newspaper journalists. At a time that scholars and laymen alike worry about the growing or even dominant role of the media in the political process (e.g., Mazzoleni & Schulz, 1999), this finding comes as a surprise. Almost four out of every five Dutch laws never receive any coverage in national newspapers; only one out of ten gets more than just a few articles. About 25 years ago Timothy Cook (1989) suggested that in the US congress, the processes of making news and making laws were getting highly intertwined. At least in the Dutch case, for a majority of laws, this seems not to be the case: lawmaking and news making are oftentimes different worlds.

Almost four out of every five Dutch laws never receive any coverage in national newspapers; only one out of ten get more than just a few articles. There is a diverse range of bills that do not get any coverage. Not only budget bills and technical bills, but also bills that have consequences for the daily life of citizens are passed without any media attention. For instance, a bill about the reintegration of people that are on sickness benefit, as well as a bill that introduced the individual pupil funding scheme in intermediate vocational education never received any journalistic attention. How should this lack of media attention for the core business of the political process be explained? Our study suggests that traditional news values matter. The characteristics of laws and the lawmaking process explain to a large extent whether journalists will devote attention to it or not. In particular, political significance and political conflict are important factors to explain the newsworthiness of the legislative

process. This means that more general ideas about news values are applicable to understanding the media coverage of lawmaking processes as well. Laws that get ample attention in parliament and about which there is no consensus have a higher chance of making it into the news. This seems to indicate that journalists are not ignoring legislative processes, but rather that journalistic attention is only triggered when there is political debate and friction going on.

These findings can be interpreted in two distinct ways. On the one hand, from a democratic perspective this finding is reassuring. If the stakes are high and political actors debate intensively about their conflicting views in parliament, the media will notice and report on it. This suggests that newspaper journalists monitor politics closely and report about important or discordant laws. In this way the media logic that guides journalists in their reporting partly overlaps with a political logic of party competition. When parties have different views about the content of a law, they might even look for public attention or strategically use the media by leaking information (Van Aelst et al, 2014). This finding is also in line with the ideas of for instance Zaller (2003) and Schudson (1998) that the media should mainly inform the public selectively on the issues that matter, and not on everything that is happening in politics. Although this view is somewhat controversial (e.g. Bennett, 2003), probably nobody expects a newspaper to be a copy of the Government Gazette, which means that journalists have to be selective when it comes to reporting on the political process in general and on legislation and the lawmaking process in particular.

On the other hand, it means that the impression that citizens get of politics in general, and more specifically of lawmaking, is that of heated debate and frequent conflict. Politicians disagree with each other and they debate about their views in Parliament, which in turn is reflected in the press. However, in reality daily politics is not only about disagreement and political fights, although this is suggested by the biased image as created by the media. Only 7 per cent of all laws that are passed unanimously or dealt with as a formality are covered extensively in the press, as opposed to 26 per cent of the laws about which there is no consensus. As a result, the public might get a biased impression of the legislative process and of politics in general. In addition, debates about budgetary legislation are almost completely ignored by the media, which means that the public is not informed about this rather crucial aspect of politics and lawmaking.

In sum, this study shows that media attention for legislative processes is both highly selective and at the same time to some extent predictable. When looking at the characteristics of laws and how they come about, we are in a good position to predict which laws will make

it into the news. Still, two important questions are left unanswered. First, we cannot determine whether the media focus most on the laws that really matter for the public. Our results show that (the small number) of laws on foreign, less 'proximate', issues receive less attention, but this is only a rude distinction that tells us little about the large majority of laws that deal with domestic issues. Is something like public importance measurable at all? Coglianesse and Howard (1998) note that in the US the quality press devoted most attention to those parts of regulatory policy that matter most for peoples' everyday lives, but their operationalization of importance remains somewhat unclear because they do not explicitly define a criterion that says when policy directly affects features of everyday life. More in-depth (qualitative) research may be necessary to explore and determine how and to what extent the media are fulfilling their democratic role of informing the public on the most important news (by some sort of general and 'objective' standard).

Second, this study raises questions on the role of the media in the legislative process when there is ample media attention. The fact that laws are often left (hardly) unreported does not tell us much about what happens when the press does get involved. Some laws were covered so extensively that it raises questions on whether this media attention flowed back in the lawmaking process. It is hard to imagine that legislators are not influenced, one way or another, by such extensive media attention. Again, this requires additional, more in-depth research that focuses on an aspect of the lawmaking process that is limited in scope, but potentially important in terms of explaining legislative outcomes.

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**Table 1: Characteristics of laws and media attention for lawmaking (in per cent)**

	Media attention: number of articles			Total (laws)
	0	1-4	5 >	
<b>All laws</b>	78	11	11	100 (N=603)
<b>Significance: Number of speakers</b>				
0	86	10	4	100 (N=406)
1-5	80	10	10	100 (N=60)
+5	53	16	31	100 (N=137)
<b>Proximity: origin of law</b>				
- EU-initiated	66	20	14	100 (N=71)
- national initiated	80	10	10	100 (N=532)
<b>Proximity: focus of law</b>				
- foreign policy	78	15	7	100 (N=46)
- domestic policy	78	11	11	100 (N=557)
<b>Conflict: final decision</b>				
- no/unanimous vote	82	11	7	100 (N=483)
- divided vote	61	13	26	100 (N=119)
<b>Duration</b>				
0- 25 weeks	84	10	6	100 (N=372)
+ 25 weeks	69	13	18	100 (N=231)
<b>Type of law</b>				
- regular law	67	16	17	100 (N=372)
- budget law	96	4	0	100 (N=231)

**Table 2: Negative binomial model predicting amount of media attention**

Independent Variable	B	Standard Error	Exp (B)
(Intercept)	-,057	,1375	,945
<b>Political significance</b>			
Number of speakers (0-14)	,115	,0169	1,122***
<b>Proximity</b>			
Origin (1= EU directive)	-,168	,1774	,845
Policy area (1=foreign policy)	-1,061	,2704	,346***
<b>Conflict</b>			
Voting (1=unanimous/no vote)	,629	,1475	1,876***
<b>Control variables</b>			
Duration	,007	,0018	1,007***
Type of law (1= budget)	-1,834	,2127	,160***
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup> (N=591)			0.32

*Note:* \*\*\* p<.000. \*\* p<.01. \* p<.05. Reported figures are unstandardized regression coefficients, standard errors, and exponential parameter estimates.

## Notes

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<sup>i</sup> This means we only take into account the lawmaking processes of bills that ultimately have become laws, i.e., that have passed both the Lower House (Lower House) and subsequently the Upper House (Senate) of Parliament and are then signed by the Queen with countersignature of the relevant minister(s) and published in the official law gazette (*Staatsblad*).

<sup>ii</sup> This means that we do not take into account conflicts that have occurred in an earlier stage of the process, and probably underestimates the level of conflict. Parties may initially disagree on a bill, leading to friction and conflict at an earlier stage, although they eventually all vote in favour of the law. It might also be the case that voting is unanimous because of party discipline. However, in the absence of information on standpoints of parties and parliamentarians during the various early phases of the entire lawmaking process, we adhere to using the ultimate voting information.

<sup>iii</sup> Although the King or the minister formally may refuse to sign the law, this almost never happens in practice (Bovend'Eert & Kummeling, 2010, p. 203).

<sup>iv</sup> Accessible via [www.eerstekamer.nl](http://www.eerstekamer.nl), *Kamerstukken*.

<sup>v</sup> We extend our gratitude to Tom Louwse for putting this dataset to our disposal and to Harmen van der Veer for his assistance on the automatic data subtraction.

<sup>vi</sup> The 15 national newspapers included in the study are (ordered alphabetically) *Algemeen Dagblad*, *Boerderij Vandaag*, *DAG*, *Dagblad De Pers*, *De Telegraaf*, *De Volkskrant*, *Het Financieele Dagblad*, *Het Parool*, *Metro*, *Nederlands Dagblad*, *NRC.NEXT*, *NRC Handelsblad*, *Reformatorisch Dagblad*, *Spits*, *Trouw*.

<sup>vii</sup> With one exception, the difference in number of articles found was between one to five articles. The sole exception featured a difference of 18 newspaper articles, a result of an additional keyword added to the search string.

<sup>viii</sup> Since newspaper journalists have more opportunities to report on a much broader spectrum of issues and topics compared to television journalists, who have to deal with more restraints in time and space, it is very likely that an analysis of television news would show even less coverage of the legislative process.

<sup>ix</sup> Comparing the three parliamentary years under study, the high amount of coverage for laws that were initiated during the parliamentary year 2006-2007 stands out. This turns out to be mainly law-specific: eleven out of the total of 224 laws have received no less than 80 per cent of all media coverage in this period.

<sup>x</sup> The in terms of subscription small and specialized financial paper (*Het Financieele Dagblad*) devotes most attention to lawmaking, while the attention is lowest in the free dailies. The differences between other broadsheets and major national newspapers are extremely limited. For instance, the more right-wing newspaper *De Telegraaf* and the more left-wing *De Volkskrant* have an equal number of articles on legislative processes.

<sup>xi</sup> In most cases there was no plenary debate at all (N=406), which means that the number of speakers is zero.

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<sup>xii</sup> To establish a cut-off point we use the evaluations of model fit of negative binomial modelling. We estimated five models using the same factors and covariates, but using a different cut-off point for case exclusion. Setting the cut-off point at 50 drops out 11 cases out of 602 (1,8 per cent) and yields a decrease in deviancy of almost 500 points. In addition, the Bayesian Information Criterion decreases by almost 600 points: i.e., a substantial improvement of the model fit. Dropping more cases does not improve the model enough to warrant setting the cut-off point at a lower level.

<sup>xiii</sup> For numeric variables, every decimal increase or decrease from 1,0 indicates that for every additional unit of the variable, the dependent variable increases or decreases by 10 per cent. For dichotomized variables, this corresponds roughly with the percentage in- or decrease in the dependent variable in comparison to the reference category.

<sup>xiv</sup> We cannot, however, completely rule out the possibility that the influence runs (at least partly) in the opposite direction: because the media devote more attention to a law, more MPs and more parties feel the need to participate in the debate.

<sup>xv</sup> Since the effect of budget versus regular laws is so strong we also ran the model for regular laws only, but this did not change our main findings.