How politics becomes news and news becomes politics. A comparative experimental study of the politics-media relationship

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Chapter 4

Politicians' selection: How news becomes politics

Studies on political agenda-setting have shown that, sometimes, issues from the media make it into politics and lead to political action (for an overview see Walgrave and Van Aelst, 2006). Indeed, in politics, there are always many issues competing for attention by politicians, and only some of them will make it onto the political agenda (Jones and Baumgartner, 2005). How do politicians select the news reports they react to? What are the criteria they apply to judge media coverage? This chapter investigates these questions more in-depth by building on past studies of political agenda-setting and agenda-building. Results show that the effect of the media on politics is not automatic. Whether a news report leads to political action largely depends on the content of the report, with the issue of a report as one of the most important variables. Both on the level of the individual politician and the party the issue is key.[1]

4.1 Introduction

Today's politics is mediated. Constituents learn about what is going on in politics through the media. But not only for citizens, also for politicians media coverage has become an important source of information which has led some to see politics as mediatized (Mazzoleni and Schulz, 1999). Through the media, politicians learn about the issues at play in society. Often, media reporting also provides them with a summary of the most important aspects of an issue. Thus, although politicians are exposed to a constant stream of information from other sources, too, (e.g. their party, interest groups or civil servants), the media are key (Davis, 2007, p. 185).

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4.1. Introduction

Many politicians feel that the media have more power over the political agenda than political parties or interest groups (Walgrave, 2008). Indeed, media influence has been proven extensively on various levels of policy making (e.g. Tan and Weaver, 2009, on the US state level) and on different political issue agendas (e.g. Van Noije et al. 2008 on EU integration, Joly 2014 on foreign aid), supporting the impression that the media agenda co- determines the political agenda. Scholars also refer to this effect as the political or policy agenda-setting effect: when an issue receives more attention by the media, politics will follow. However, research shows that the influence of the media on politics is not automatic. Politicians do not react to all media reports. For instance, which media outlets communicate which kinds of messages matters, and not every political agenda is equally susceptible to media influence. Moreover, different mechanisms are at play during election and non-election periods (Walgrave and Van Aelst, 2006).

This chapter investigates which criteria politicians apply to decide what news reports are valuable for their work. As explained in the introductory chapter, the selection moment when a politician first learns about an issue through a news report and when he or she has to decide whether or not this merits more attention is crucial for the whole process that follows (see subsection 1.2.1). Sometimes, the decision by an individual politician that an issue should be pursued is enough to lead to policy change in the long run. To date, studies that investigated the effect of media on individual politicians' actions focused on parliamentary questions (e.g. Van Santen et al., 2015; Thesen, 2012; Bailer, 2011; Vliegenthart and Walgrave, 2011). These are an instrument that can be used by politicians with relative ease in many countries (for an overview see Russo and Wiberg 2010). Usually, they do not require approval by their party to do so, while many other political instruments do require the support of other MPs.

Politics is however characterized by a complex interaction of varying agendas and not all of them are as easily accessible for researchers. Many important political decisions are made behind closed doors, in "private" (Davis, 2007). During parliamentary party group meetings the party usually decides how to vote. Also in these settings media coverage likely has an influence on politicians' actions, possibly an even more consequential one because decisions that apply to the whole party are taken. Yet, these settings are usually not accessible to researchers.

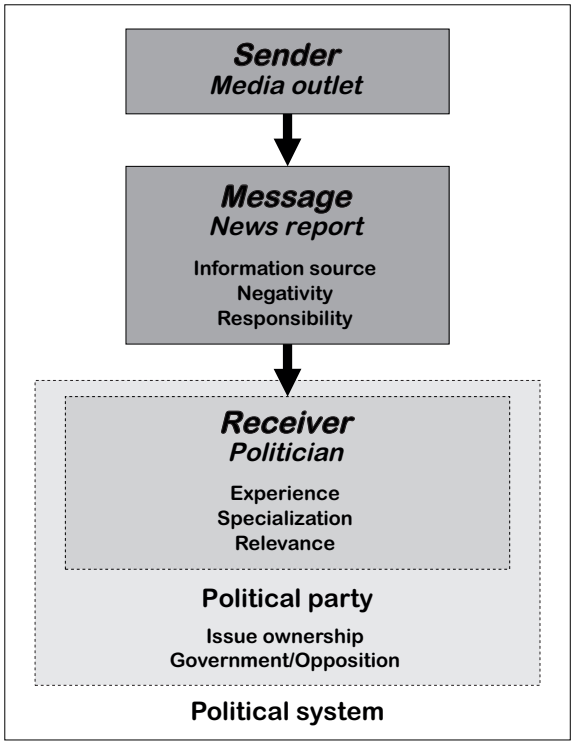
In this study, I compare how politicians select which news reports to react to in two settings: the private party group setting just mentioned and the more public setting when a politician asks a parliamentary question. In an experimental design, politicians are confronted with experimentally manipulated news reports. They are then asked to answer two questions with regards to each report. One question captures whether they would take political action on the report. The other question studies the more private setting within a party. Politicians are asked whether they would bring up a news report during a parliamentary party group meeting. Because both measures of intended

behavior use the same news reports, the results are directly comparable. With this, the study provides a first step to understand how media might influence politics also via the more indirect route of party meetings.

4.2 Expectations

Media report according to a strict logic. The theory of news values is often used to explain both which events are covered and how they are covered by journalists (Shoemaker and Vos, 2009b). As a consequence, news reports often share common characteristics, even when completely different events are covered. To test which features of a news report influence politicians' selection of news, five of the most important features common in political coverage are tested. Clearly, there are other aspects that characterize a specific news report but here we focus on a few important aspects. However, not only the content of the news report is expected to affect politicians. As I will explain below, the provenance of a message likely matters, too, as well as which media outlet publishes a report and where it obtained the information. In sum, both the sender and the message will affect the selection by politicians. Figure 4.1 gives an overview of the research design of the study.

Figure 4.1: The research design of the study of politicians' selection



As already mentioned, politicians have to make constant decisions whether information they receive should be pursued or can be dismissed. This study focuses on the starting point of any legislative change, namely that at least one politician's interest is sparked by a news report. Not all politicians are the same, however: they belong to different political parties and come from a different personal background which influences their parliamentary activities. Consequentially, next to the sender and the message, also the receiver of a message who makes a selection will affect whether a news report has political consequences. In line with the hypothesized influences on the journalists' selection of political messages (see chapter 3 and subsection 3.2.3 in particular), these influences on the receiver are broadly situated at the individual politician's level (micro). Because those politicians are embedded in a broader institutional context, the political party (meso) and the political system (macro) should also be taken into account.

While political agenda-setting studies have investigated how media coverage can lead to political actions such as asking a parliamentary questions (e.g. Van Santen et al., 2015; Thesen, 2012; Bailer, 2011; Vliegenthart and Walgrave, 2011), much less is known about how politicians might react in the more private setting of the parliamentary party group. A recent study with Finnish MPs shows that almost 50% of MPs say that issues receive attention at their parliamentary party group meeting because of media attention often or even very often (Vesa et al., 2015, p. 287). Although lower than for question hour (91.4%) and discussion in corridors (77.7%), it shows that media likely have a considerable impact on what is discussed at these meetings. Yet, to my knowledge no other study has yet investigated when and how politicians discuss media coverage at those meetings. As I hypothesize below, there are some instances where a different mechanism is expected in this more private setting. For example, because of the division of labor within a party, issue specialization probably matters more for taking political action than when they mention a report at a meeting. However, if nothing else is mentioned, the same hypotheses apply thus in both the private parliamentary party group setting and for taking political action.

4.2.1 Media outlet influences

Who publishes a news report is important for politicians because it also affects how relevant a message is perceived to be. Not all kinds of media have the same influence on politics. Studies in the European context have shown that newspapers not only influence other media outlets, but also affect the political agenda more than television (Walgrave et al., 2008). Building on these findings, this study compares different newspaper titles. Quality newspapers have been found to be able to set the agendas of other media outlets, an effect also referred to as the New York Times effect (Gans, 1979). These outlets have also been found to cover politics differently (Akkerman, 2011). However, less is known

about how they influence politics. We focus on differences between quality and popular newspaper titles. In the American context, reliable and respected news outlets have been found to be more influential on politics (Bartels, 1993). Politicians value prestigious broadsheet papers and rely more on them (Kepplinger, 2007). Likely, Dutch and Swiss politicians are no exception.

H 4.1: Politicians are more likely to react to news reports from quality newspapers than to those from popular newspapers.

4.2.2 News report influences

Next to the publisher of a news report and the source from which the information was obtained, clearly also the content of the news report will matter for politicians. Here, as with journalists (see section 3.2), news value theory provides a theoretical framework for the choice of these variables. In her overview of studies, Eilders (2006) convincingly shows how news value theory has repeatedly been used by scholars to study the selection of news by the audience. Conflict/negativity and unexpectedness are among the news values she identifies as key in the selection by audiences (Eilders, 2006, p. 11) and are tested here too.[2] Those news values have been found to predict political reactions to news too as will be shown below. Additionally, responsibility attribution affects party's reactions to news coverage and the study here will test its applicability on the level of the individual politician.

Negativity Media reporting is often criticized for being too negative. Negativity is an important news value (Shoemaker and Vos, 2009b) and it seems that media often report on negative developments. While some argue that this preference of the media is due to economic considerations, namely that negativity sells, others contend that this is due to more general psychological mechanisms. All humans are drawn to negative stories because those signal potential danger. In an experimental study, the physiological effects of negative news coverage was tested on a student sample (Soroka and McAdams, 2015). Indeed, the study shows that people are more reactive and attentive to negative news than they are to positive news.

In this study I investigate whether politicians are also more likely to react to coverage of negative developments than of positive ones. Politicians are, after all, expected to solve societal issues if they arise: "political actors must consider that they might be held responsible for their actions or inactions — or how these are played out in the media" (Strömbäck, 2008, p. 239). Indeed, there is evidence that politicians react more

[2] Other news values that matter for selection by the audience accroding to Eilders are the relevance/reach of a message, elite persons/prominence, continuity and unexpectedness.

to negative developments (Soroka 2006). One reason might be that politicians want to avoid being accused of inaction (Yanovitzky, 2002). This leads us to expect that politicians make a conscious distinction in their reactions:

H 4.2: Politicians are more likely to react to news reports of a negative development than to coverage of a positive development.

Responsibility attribution In political agenda-setting studies, scholars often focus on issues from which they derive responsibility for (political) action based on issue ownership theories (Pritchard, 1992). However, news reports often also directly attribute responsibility for an outcome. Content analyses identified responsibility as one of the most important frames in political coverage (Gerhards et al., 2009; Semetko and Valkenburg, 2000). While studies have theorized about the role of responsibility attribution for parties' reactions to media coverage (see below), how it affects individual politicians is less clear. There is evidence that media stories focusing on political actors are more likely to be chosen by politicians than those that are not politicized (Sevenans et al., 2015). Therefore, I expect that politicians are more likely to take political action if a news report holds a national political actor responsible than if another actor is held responsible.

H 4.3: Politicians are more likely to react to news reports making national political actors responsible than to those that make other actors responsible.

Investigative reporting Politicians need to stay up to date on issues and can be expected to know about an official government communication before it is published in the media. And indeed, often media publish information in line with official government communication, merely indexing the official story line without using any additional material (Bennett, 1996). However, in some cases, investigative reporting by media outlets brings to light new information. In these cases, the media's influence on politics has been found to be particularly strong (Graber, 2006; Protess et al., 1987). This study tests whether politicians make a distinction between news reports that are based on official government communication and those that signal that the information has been uncovered by the media outlet.

H 4.4: Politicians are more likely to react to news reports based on information uncovered by media outlets than to official government information.

4.2.3 Politician, party and political system influences

Whether an individual member of parliament decides to react to a news report depends on the sender and the message of the report was argued in the previous section. However, also the actor making this selection, the politician, likely affects this process. There is considerable variation between politicians. When the politicians participating in this

study were asked to rank the sources of influence on their work, almost 50% of Dutch MPs put the media on the first or second rank of five. In Switzerland, only 25% of these politicians put media first or second however.[3]For a substantial share of politicians, the media are thus an important player in their parliamentary work. To further our understanding of how media matter for politics, we should further investigate these differences. What explains these differences between politicians? And are there differences depending on whether the private parliamentary party group setting or a public political action is concerned? Building on Kingdon (1977) who put politicians in a broader context, next to the individual politician on the micro level, party configurations (meso) and the political system (macro) play a crucial role (see also subsection 1.2.2 for an elaboration of the levels of influence).

Parliamentary tenure (micro) Politicians with less experience have been found to be more reactive to media coverage (Landerer, 2014). One might argue that this is because they want to again obtain media coverage and know that reacting to existing media coverage is one of the most efficient ways to get into the media (Van Santen et al., 2015). One could also argue that junior members of parliament are more dependent on the media for their work. While more experienced politicians have an established network of sources, ranging from interest groups to civil servants and local governments, junior politicians are more dependent on the media for their information. A recent study with Finnish members of parliament found that age was negatively correlated with perceptions of media power (Vesa et al., 2015). Thus, a negative effect of tenure is expected: the longer a politician has been in parliament, the less likely she or he will react to media coverage. This effect is expected to apply when it comes to both taking parliamentary action and mentioning a news report at a parliamentary party group meeting.

H 4.5: Politicians with less experience are more likely to react to news reports than those with more experience.

Political relevance (micro) Simply put, politicians have to choose what issues they react to and it therefore seems intuitive that they would only react to media coverage on issues they deem politically relevant. In line with journalists who would also only select those party messages for coverage that they deem politically relevant at the time (see subsection 3.2.2), politicians are expected to do the same. Including this variable is, however, not only important from a methodological perspective ensuring a parallel research design (see also section 1.3). There are two additional reasons for including this variable. First, studies on the consequences of agenda-setting for voting show that if a

[3] The survey question following the experimental part of the study asked politicians to rank a number of factors that had inspired their parliamentary work in the past year based on importance. Those were personal experiences, their party, their constituents, interest groups, and the media. For a similar question, see, for example, Walgrave et al. (2008).

party's issue is more salient in the media, members of the public will think this issue is more important which has important effects on their voting behavior too (Scheufele and Tewksbury, 2007). Voters of Green parties for instance often think that environmental issues are important, while those who sympathize with right-wing populist parties think that issues related to immigration are more important. Similar differences are expected between the politicians of different parties. Depending on their party, they will have different ideas about what issues are politically relevant and would thus, possibly, merit taking political action. Second, the issue of a news report is an important aspect in political agenda-setting. Studies have pointed to differences between issues in their agenda-setting powers (Soroka, 2002). However, effects of these other important aspects related to an issue can only be isolated in this study if also *individual* political relevance as perceived by the politician is included. I will elaborate below how I expect the role of the judgment of political relevance to be contingent on the electoral system.

H 4.6: Politicians are more likely to react to news reports covering an issue they think is politically relevant than to one they think is less relevant.

Issue specialization (micro) One of the most important effects that the media have is putting new issues on the political agenda. They do this sometimes through investigative reporting (e.g. Graber, 2006; Protess et al., 1987). Under normal every-day circumstances, their influence is likely to be nuanced. Studies have analyzed the role of the media on specific political issues, for instance with regards to immigration (Van der Pas, 2014b), EU integration (Noije et al., 2008) or economic issues (Soroka, 2002). These and other studies often conclude that the media's influence on the political agenda as a whole is conditional, and not deterministic. One of the reasons why the influence is conditional might be because of the division of labor within parties.

MPs are often representatives of their party in specific parliamentary committees, act as the party's spokesperson on those specific issues and largely define the party's position on the issue which gives an MP bargaining power vis à vis the party (Patzelt, 1999, p. 31). As a consequence, they are likely to react differently to news reports covering issues in which they are specialized. Often, members of a party agree that only the MP specialized in an issue will take parliamentary action on that issue. They do not want to invite other members of the party, or even beyond their own party, to react to "their" issue in parliament. Thus, issue specialization is particularly important when it comes to taking political action.

Possibly, issue specialization plays a less central role for members of parliament when they speak during parliamentary party group meetings. In this more closed setting, specialized politicians might be less likely to bring up a news report on "their" issue, for instance because they most likely already know about an ongoing issue before it reaches the media. For politicians who do not know much about an issue on the other hand, this private party setting might be a good, possibly the only, moment to raise an issue to others. If they think

something is important and merits attention by their party, they can speak up in this setting without raising flags and causing a media frenzy about divisions within their party.

In sum, issue specialization on the level of the individual politician is expected to have different effects depending on whether it concerns a private or more public setting. Therefore, two separate hypotheses are formulated below. Whether issue specialization also has different effects in the Swiss and Dutch political systems however is less clear. Some tentative expectations are formulated below in the relevant section.

H 4.7a: Politicians are more likely to take political action based on a news report that covers an issue they are specialized in than one that they are not specialized in.

H 4.7b: Politicians' issue specialization does not affect whether they mention a news report at a parliamentary party group meeting or not.

Party issue ownership (meso) Party issue ownership (Petrocik, 1996) plays a crucial role in elections (Bélanger and Meguid, 2008) and it is therefore only logical to assume that politicians will take it into account when they decide to take action.[4] This concept is often used by scholars to explain why parties pay attention to some issues from the media and not others (e.g. Vliegenthart and Walgrave, 2011; Walgrave et al., 2008). Issues in the media that fit this "issue competition game of politics" (Green-Pedersen and Stubager, 2010, p. 676), meaning that they emphasize a position the party is already taking, are more likely to make it onto the political agenda and parties have been found to be more likely to react to issues they "own" (e.g. Elmelund-Præstekær et al., 2011; Green-Pedersen, 2010). Identifying whether the issue covered in a news report is owned by a party is only possible, once the respective party has been identified. Therefore, it is treated as a characteristic of the receiver although strictly speaking, it is a combination of message and receiver characteristics.

Most likely, party issue ownership also plays a role for individual politicians in their selection of news. First, because politicians within a group often share an understanding of broad salient issues. Second, politicians were found to vote more unified on issues that are important to their party than on other issues (Traber et al., 2014). Finally, as vote-seeking actors competing against MPs from other parties, it would be rational for MPs to make sure they capitalize on existing party profiles by reinforcing existing issue ownership (Strøm, 1998). Therefore, party issue ownership is expected to have an independent effect on politicians' reactions to media reporting, in addition to the variables already discussed. Politicians are expected to be more likely to both take political action and mention a report at a meeting that covers an issue their party owns, rather than mention one their party does not own.

H 4.8: Politicians are more likely to react to news reports covering an issue their party owns than to one on an issue their party does not own.

[4] See also subsection 3.2.2 for how party issue ownership affects selection by journalists.

Coalition membership (meso) Another variable at the party level is coalition membership. In most parliamentary democracies, parties can broadly be divided into two groups; those in power and those with less political power. However, as explained before, the distinction is only expected to apply in the Dutch case (see subsection 2.2.2 for an elaborate account).[5] This difference in political power potentially leads to different reactions to media coverage. It is important for coalition parties to show that they are unified. Therefore, they are less likely to react to media coverage. Depending on the margin by which they hold a majority in parliament, any deviation by a member of the party can have costly consequences and lead to a vote of non-confidence and perhaps new elections. Therefore, politicians from coalition parties are under more control from their party and less free to take action based on media coverage. A recent study by Van Vonno (2016, p. 59) comparing 15 European countries and their behavior in parliament shows a positive effect of coalition membership on politicians' party loyalty. For politicians from opposition parties, media coverage provides a good platform to advocate their issues and bring them on the political agenda largely controlled by the coalition parties. Moreover, politicians from coalition parties have more (official) information sources while their colleagues from opposition parties have to rely on the media much more.

Results from previous studies focusing on politicians' reactions to media reports confirm this expectation. When asked what inspired their work, a third of the opposition MPs say that the media play an important role, while the number of coalition politicians admitting that the media play an important role is much lower; only one fifth of those politicians claim that they are mostly inspired by the media (Walgrave et al., 2008). Politicians of opposition parties judge the media as more important than politicians of coalition parties (Van Aelst et al., 2008). In terms of their actions in parliament, politicians from opposition parties usually ask more parliamentary questions and are more likely to react to media coverage (Green-Pedersen and Stubager, 2010; Vliegenthart and Walgrave, 2011; Walgrave et al., 2008). Overall, opposition politicians are thus more likely to ask parliamentary questions based on media reporting than their colleagues from coalition parties.

H 4.9a: Dutch opposition politicians are more likely to take political action based on news reports than Dutch politicians from coalition parties.

[5] Because the effect is only expected to be present in the Netherlands, once could argue that it is an interaction effect between a party characteristic (coalition/opposition mebership) and a country's political system. For clarity it is however conceptualized at the party level here, in line with the results section.

Table 4.1: Overview of hypothesized effects on the selection by politicians

Sender effects
H 4.1: Politicians are more likely to react to news reports from quality newspapers than to those from popular newspapers.

Message effects
H 4.2: Politicians are more likely to react to news reports of a negative development than to coverage of a positive development.
H 4.3: Politicians are more likely to react to news reports making national political actors responsible than to those that make other actors responsible.
H 4.4: Politicians are more likely to react to news reports based on information uncovered by media outlets than to official government information.

Receiver effects
H 4.5: Politicians with less experience are more likely to react to news reports than those with more experience.
H 4.6: Politicians are more likely to react to news reports covering an issue they think is politically relevant than to one they think is less relevant.
H 4.7a: Politicians are more likely to take political action based on news reports cover an issue they are specialized in than one that they are not specialized in.
H 4.7b: Politicians' issue specialization does not affect whether they mention a news report at a parliamentary party group meeting or not.
H 4.8: Politicians are more likely to react to news reports covering an issue their party owns than to one on an issue their party does not own.
H 4.9a: Dutch opposition politicians are more likely to take political action based on news reports than Dutch politicians from coalition parties.
H 4.9b: Dutch coalition politicians are more likely to mention a news report in a parliamentary party group meeting than politicians from opposition parties.
H 4.10a: In Switzerland, politicians are more likely to take political action on a news report because of perceived relevance and party issue ownership than because of individual issue specialization.
H 4.10b: In the Netherlands, politicians are more likely to take political action on a news report because of individual issue specialization than perceived relevance and party issue ownership.
H4.10c: In the Netherlands, politicians are more likely to mention a news report at a parliamentary party group based on its perceived relevance than individual issue specialization or party issue ownership.

Interaction effects
H 4.11: Less experienced politicians are more likely to react to news reports of negative developments than their more experienced colleagues.
H 4.12: In the Netherlands, opposition politicians are more likely to react to news reports of negative developments than politicians from coalition parties.
H 4.13: In the Netherlands, opposition politicians are more likely to react to news reports making government responsible than politicians from coalition parties.

This effect is likely to be conditional on the setting. While opposition politicians can be expected to take more political actions based on media coverage, it is not clear how coalition-opposition membership affects whether politicians mention a report at a party group meeting. Possibly, because coalition politicians are not "allowed" to react publicly, they are more inclined to bring up a news report at a parliamentary party group meeting. One indication that such an effect might be present comes from a study by Van Vonno (2016, p. 53). She shows that members of coalition parties more often disagree with their party's position than those of opposition parties and explains this with coalition parties' requirement to support positions of the coalition rather than of their own party (p. 44). The only setting in which politicians from government parties can (safely) voice their concerns is in parliamentary party group meetings. Therefore, a positive effect of coalition membership is expected when it comes to reacting to media coverage in parliamentary party group meetings.

H 4.9b: Dutch coalition politicians are more likely to mention a news report in a parliamentary party group meeting than politicians from opposition parties.

Electoral system (macro) One of the most important aspects of a news report refers to the issue covered. The political relevance as perceived by politicians depends on their issue specialization on the individual level and on party issue ownership on the party level. The influence of issues is expected to vary, not only across the settings of the public or more private, but also across the two countries included in this study. More specifically, re-election is seen as the primary goal of incumbents and *the* rationale explaining politicians' behavior. The path to gain re-election is, however, different in the two countries which means other aspects are expected to matter in the Netherlands and in Switzerland with regards to politicians' reaction to media coverage.

Concerning politicians' propensity to take political action based on a news report, the perceived political relevance of an issue is expected to matter mainly for Swiss politicians. As already elaborated in subsection 2.2.2, what matters is that they appeal to the electorate in their own respective district. Within those voting districts, the saliency of issues often shifts, which means that politicians cannot simply build a profile based on an individual issue. Rather, they are expected to react to issues they deem politically relevant at that point. If the media cover an issue politicians think is important to the public, they are more likely to take action as well as mention the news report at a parliamentary party group meeting. Issue specialization on the other hand will be less important, the division of labor within the party is not that relevant for their re-election chances. Swiss politicians do not have to fear any consequences from their fellow party representatives even if they enter into another MPs' (issue) territory.

H 4.10a: In Switzerland, politicians are more likely to take political action on a news report because of perceived relevance and party issue ownership than because of individual issue specialization.

For Dutch politicians, other considerations will be key. Because preference votes only play a marginal role, party and not individual electoral considerations are central (Louwerse and Otjes, 2016). Van Vonno (2016, p. 54) finds an effect of candidate selection procedures on how much politicians agree with their party line. More centralized procedures are linked with more agreement with the party. Therefore, it is expected that when reacting to media coverage, Dutch incumbents will make sure to adhere to the division of labor within their party. In other words, issue specialization will predict whether a Dutch politician will take action based on a news report. Political relevance or party issue ownership will not be as important.

The electoral system thus has an important influence to predict whether a politician will take political action based on a news report. In the more private party setting, however, electoral considerations will play a much smaller role and adhering to the division of labor in their party is probably not as important for Dutch politicians. They can act more freely and say what they think about the issues they deem relevant, leading to a more central role of the judgment of political relevance than in the more public setting.

H 4.10b: In the Netherlands, politicians are more likely to take political action on a news report because of individual issue specialization than perceived relevance and party issue ownership.

H4.10c: In the Netherlands, politicians are more likely to mention a news report at a parliamentary party group based on its perceived relevance than individual issue specialization or party issue ownership.

4.2.4 Interaction effects

In the previous sections I argued that, first, not all media content affects politicians the same way and, second, that not all politicians are equally prone to be influenced by media reporting in their actions. In several cases, I expect different aspects of the news report to be of importance depending on whether politicians would take political action, or they bring up a news report within their party at a parliamentary party group meeting. Specifically, the effects of media content might be contingent on the tenure at the level of the individual politician and on the political position of a politician's party on the party level.

Tenure and negativity Negativity is expected to play a key role for politicians as hypothesized above. However, it might affect politicians differently depending on their standing in parliament. More specifically, junior politicians' reactions to media content might be accentuated for two reasons. First, as was argued above, junior members of parliament have a less established network of sources available for their work. They rely more heavily on the media in their work. In addition, they will be eager to show that

they are responsive and take care of problems if they arise. As a consequence, junior MPs are expected to be more likely to take parliamentary action based on a media report covering a negative development. Because of their lack of additional information sources and because they want to do well, they are much more responsive than their senior colleagues. This likely applies to both mentioning news reports at parliamentary party group meetings and taking political action.

H 4.11: Less experienced politicians are more likely to react to news reports of negative developments than their more experienced colleagues.

Coalition membership and media content Previous research on the party-level has shown that the opposition wants to use media coverage to point out the incompetence of the government, while the government wants to demonstrate their competence. They will react to positive coverage to show how well they are doing. This is an argument that has been brought forward in a study conducted in the Danish context (Thesen, 2012). Thesen showed that parties make strategic use of media coverage that can benefit them. In the present study, I am able to test some of these findings. I expect them to hold when politicians are asked whether they would take (public) political action based on a report. Likely, effects are less pronounced in the more hidden setting of the parliamentary party group meeting. Because their fellow party MPs share the perception that the government should be scrutinized (or praised), it is less important for politicians to signal this.

First, it is expected that politicians from opposition parties are more likely to take action based on a report that covers a negative development. A good way to get political power is for parties to show the incompetence of those in power at that moment. Therefore, it will be important for these parties (and the politicians of these parties) to draw attention to negative developments.

H 4.12: In the Netherlands, opposition politicians are more likely to react to news reports of negative developments than politicians from coalition parties.

Second, based on the findings by Thesen, it is also expected that opposition politicians are more likely to react to coverage that holds the government responsible in any way. If media already signal that the government is responsible, it might provide some politicians with a welcome opportunity to link them to other issues. Responsibility attribution is one of the most important frames in political reporting as shown above. The framing of the media coverage could potentially enforce the difference between reactions from coalition and opposition parties. Thus, it is expected that opposition politicians are more likely to react to coverage which holds the government responsible for a development.

H 4.13: In the Netherlands, opposition politicians are more likely to react to news reports making government responsible than politicians from coalition parties.

These expectations are formulated with regards to politicians taking action based on a news report. Whether comparable mechanisms are at play when politicians mention a

report at a parliamentary party group meeting, is not clear. Assuming that opposition politicians' main goal is to signal to the public that the government is not competent, these effects are probably less pronounced in the inner party setting.

4.3 Methods

This study asks members of the Lower Houses in the Netherlands and Switzerland to rate fictional news reports. In an online survey, they were asked to judge whether they would take political action based on the news report and whether they would mention the report if a parliamentary party group meeting was held the same day. After this experimental part, politicians were asked a number of more general survey questions, for instance on the political relevance of issues.

The methodological section (see section 2.1) introduced the factorial survey method in more detail. Below, I present an account of how the stimuli and the survey were drawn up, how respondents were contacted, and what analytical strategies were used.

4.3.1 Experimental design

Short fictional but realistically formulated news reports were used as experimental stimuli. Within these reports, a set of content variables was systematically manipulated to test the influence of the type of media outlet, the message itself and the issue at hand on politicians' reactions to news reports (see table Table 4.2 for an overview).

Table 4.2: Overview of experimentally manipulated variables in news reports

Variable	**Values**
Media outlet	Quality – popular
Information source	Government – investigated
Negativity	Present – not present
Responsibility attribution	Politics – other
Party issue ownership	Owned – not owned

The first variable was the origin of the report, either published by a quality or a popular newspaper. In the Swiss case, *Der Blick* is the one popular newspaper known across the German speaking part of the country, while the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* is considered a quality outlet. Those two outlets have the highest circulation numbers among the paid daily press in Switzerland with 179,000 and 115,000 readers respectively (AG, 2013). Like other daily newspapers in Switzerland, neither has a clear partisan leaning (Tresch, 2009). Comparable newspapers in the Dutch case were chosen with the popular *De Telegraaf* and the quality newspaper *NRC Handelsblad* with 544,000 and 192,000 readers respectively (Nieuwsmedia, 2013). A picture of the logo of the

media outlet that had published the news report was included with an example of an experimental stimulus (see Figure 4.2). The source of the information covered by the news report was also manipulated. The report either claimed that the government had published the information or that it had been obtained by the media outlet itself.

Table 4.3: Operationalization of issue ownership and development in news reports

Issue owner (party family)	*Positive development*
Liberals	The financial deficit is smaller than predicted
Social Democrats	Fewer people are unemployed
Rightwing	Fewer immigrants with the family reunion program
Greens	Air pollution has decreased since previous year
Christian Democrats	Fewer women between 25 and 35 have had an abortion
	Negative development
Liberals	The financial deficit is bigger than predicted
Social Democrats	More people are unemployed
Rightwing	More immigrants with the family reunion program
Greens	Air pollution has increased since previous year
Christian Democrats	More women between 25 and 35 have had an abortion

The manipulation of negativity was closely connected to the issue used for the report. Therefore, valence issues (Stokes, 1963) were chosen. These are issues on which all the major parties prefer the same outcome. For instance, decreasing unemployment or preventing the rise of abortion rates. No party would actively advocate higher unemployment numbers or abortion rates. Table 4.3 gives an overview of the issues owned by each party and the corresponding positive or negative development formulation for each party. At the same time, to be able to test for the effects of party issue ownership, one owned issue per party was included. The measure of associative party issue ownership (Walgrave et al., 2009) was based on data from a voter survey of the most recent elections in Switzerland (Lachat, 2014) and the Netherlands (Kleinnijenhuis and Walter, 2014).

Finally, the effect of causal responsibility attribution was measured by including an actor who would be held responsible for the positive or negative development. This variable had four different values. The development was either ascribed to decisions of the highest legislative political power in the country,[6] decisions by the European Union, or real world developments (e.g. financial deficit increases due to worldwide economic developments). One control condition where no responsible actor was mentioned, i.e. the sentence was missing, was also included. These four were collapsed into two categories for analysis: causal attribution to politics or to another actor.

After reading a news report, respondents were asked to evaluate the news reports on two aspects. To measure direct effects of media content, politicians were asked to indicate

[6] To ensure functional equivalence in the two countries, in the Swiss case this is parliament and in the Netherlands this is government. In Switzerland a reference to the government ("Bundesrat") which has a purely executive function would have been a reference to several parties (see for an elaboration subsection 2.2.2).

Figure 4.2: Example of a fictional news report shown to politicians (translated)

whether they would take political action based on a news report.[7] To measure indirect effects of news reporting, they were also asked to rate whether they would mention the news report if, today, a meeting of their parliamentary party group would be held.[8] The question order was randomized and for both the dependent variables, results were collected on a slider scale ranging from 1 to 7, with the starting position at 4. This was done separately for each news report that respondents received.

These five variables with two and four values resulted in 64 possible combinations of experimental stimuli. Of these, a half fraction factorial sample of 32 conditions was drawn. Those were distributed into 8 decks of 4 news reports. Within each deck, the experimental conditions were balanced again, and each respondent was presented with only one of these decks. In both countries, taking the experiment, including the subsequent survey questions, took respondents 5 to 10 minutes. Overall, MPs judged the news reports to be fairly realistic, with a mean score of 4.5 (SD = 1.43) on a 7-point scale.[9]

[7] Translated wording: "Would you take parliamentary action (e.g. ask a parliamentary question) based on this news report?" Original question wording: "Würden Sie basierend auf diesen Artikel einen parlamentarischen Vorstoss machen (z.B. eine Interpellation einreichen)?" (Switzerland) and "Hoe groot is de kans dat u naar aanleiding van dit artikel zelf politieke actie zou ondernemen (bijv. Kamervragen stellen)?" (Netherlands) The examples of political action given in brackets were chosen to ensure functional equivalence in the two countries and a parallel resarch design with the study of the selection by journalists presented in the previous chapter. The Swiss *Interpellation* refers to a parliamentary question in the literal translation and not to the direct English translation of an interpellation, a more consequential political instrument.

[8] Translated wording: "Would you mention this news report if, today, a meeting of your parliamentary party group was held?" Originial question wording: "Würden Sie diesen Artikel zur Sprache bringen, wenn heute eine Fraktionssitzung stattfinden würde?" (Switzerland) and "Zou u dit artikel ter sprake brengen als er vandaag een fractievergadering zou worden gehouden?" (Netherlands) Because Swiss parliament is in session only a few weeks a year, to ensure equivalence politicians were asked to think about a situation in which *today* a parliamentary party group would be held.

[9] There was no significant difference (t(74) = -0.60, p = 0.553) between scores from Swiss (M = 4.39) and Dutch (M = 4.60) politicians.

4.3.2 Politician and party variables

To study how politicians differ in their reactions to media coverage, a number of other measures were included in addition to the experimental variables. Perceived issue importance was, for instance, included in a survey part following the experimental stimuli. After they had evaluated the fictional news reports, respondents were asked in a survey to indicate how politically important a specific issue was at the moment on a 7-point Likert scale. These matched the issues used in the fictional news reports. Other variables were coded based on official parliamentary records that were publicly available. Issue specialization was coded as a dummy variable, based on parliamentary committee membership. The same approach was chosen for parliamentary experience, which was coded in years.

4.3.3 Data and respondents

Representatives elected to the Lower House in the Netherlands and Switzerland formed the population studied. The first step in the data collection process involved establishing contacts within each of the parties. In both Switzerland and the Netherlands, I held interviews with the secretary general of each party (Switzerland) or the head of press relations in each parliamentary party group (Netherlands) at the start of 2014. None of these actors holds a seat in parliament. Next to establishing a contact within a party, these interviews also provided some background knowledge to draw up the study. While I did not use those contacts for data collection among politicians in Switzerland, the situation presented itself very differently in the Netherlands. The country-specific sections below elaborate on how data were collected.

Switzerland Data were collected during three weeks during which the Swiss parliament was in session in June 2014. Previous elections had been held in 2011, the next ones were scheduled for October 2015 and campaigns had not yet started, making this a study of politicians' routine-time behavior. Politicians from the biggest four parties plus the party with a clear profile on environmental issues were contacted for this study. These were the SVP, SPS, CVP, FDP and the Greens, which together held more than 85% of seats at the time of data collection. Selecting only the MPs who were representatives of a German speaking or bilingual region resulted in a population of 125 Swiss politicians of the Lower House.

Two methods of data collection were used. First, I approached politicians directly in the parliamentary buildings. The parliamentary bureau had granted me access to the buildings during the three weeks that parliament was in session. In the lobby of the Lower House, I approached politicians directly and asked them to participate on a tablet computer ($n = 20$). With some parties, a snowballing method worked best. After an MP had participated, I would ask her or him to approach another person of their

party. As the number of MPs I was able to approach personally was limited, I also used a second method. After the first week I sent politicians I had not yet talked to an e-mail containing a link to the survey. Reminders were sent once or twice, depending on the number of MPs that had already participated from the specific party.[10] Because some MPs had not filled in the complete survey, the results reported here include the responses of a total of 50 respondents. This is 39% of all politicians contacted. Both in terms of parliamentary experience (M = 7.48 years, $SD = 5.84$) and number of female respondents (32%), respondents reflected the population of the Swiss Lower House (experience $M =$ 7.6 years, 31% female). A total of 198 evaluations of news reports were obtained, the same amount of each of the two dependent variables.

Table 4.4: Overview of number of respondents and response rates by party

Party	MPs in Lower House	Response (%)
Switzerland		
SVP (gov)	44	16 (36)
SPS (gov)	30	14 (47)
FDP (gov)	18	4 (22)
CVP (gov)	23	10 (43)
GPS	10	6 (60)
Total	125	50 (40)
Netherlands		
VVD (gov)	41	17 (41)
SP	15	3 (20)
GroenLinks	4	1 (25)
D66	12	4 (33)
CDA	13	3 (23)
CU	5	0 (0)
SGP	3	2 (67)
Total	93	30 (32)

Note. Seats in parliament at time of data collection (2014). For Switzerland only German speaking MPs included as explained in subsection 2.2.2.

Netherlands Data collection in the Netherlands proved a lot more challenging than in Switzerland. MPs in the Lower House from a total of six of the 12 parties in the Dutch government, or 62% of the 150 MPs, were contacted for the study (see Table 4.4 for an overview). Data collection took place throughout 2014. Previous elections had been held in 2012, the next ones were scheduled for 2017. Shortly after the interviews with the press officers, which were mostly held in February and March of 2014, I sent them an email containing some general information about the study, which they had agreed to forward to the MPs of their party. A few hours after this email had been forwarded,

[10] There were no significant differences between responses of different modes of data collection.

I would send MPs a personal email containing a link to the survey. A couple of weeks later, a reminder was sent to MPs. While this strategy proved to be very fruitful with the first party I had contacted (41% response rate for the VVD), the situation was very different with the other parties. These efforts led to 17 coalition MPs and only 8 MPs from opposition parties taking the survey: not enough to estimate differences between the two groups of respondents. As a last resort, a paper version of the survey was sent to 38 MPs from opposition parties that had not yet taken (part of) the survey in January 2015. This led to seven more MPs taking the survey.[11]

Overall, 32 MPs of the Lower House participated in the survey, which equals to 34% of MPs who were contacted, or 21% of the representatives in the Dutch Lower House. Response rates varied by party (see Table 4.4). Two responses had to be excluded because they did not complete the whole survey, leading to an N of 30 for the results reported here. Respondents had 4.2 years of parliamentary experience ($SD = 3.11$), 30% ($n = 9$) were female. This distribution is comparable to the composition of the Lower House at the time of data collection with 38% ($n = 57$) female members. A total of 118 evaluations of news reports were obtained, which form the dependent variable of the study.

Analyses Results below are based on the 198 and 118 evaluations of news reports by Swiss and Dutch members of the Lower Houses respectively on two separate dependent variables (see Table 4.5). Each news report was evaluated by up to 9 different politicians allowing for independent estimations of effects of the experimentally manipulated news reports and the respondents' background.[12] For a more elaborate account of analysis strategies with factorial survey data see Figure 2.1.1. The regression models with results for each country separately are reported in Table 4.7 for Swiss data and Table 4.8 for Dutch data at the very end of this chapter. For significant variables, marginal effects are reported in the text or in tables within the chapter.

[11] There were no significant differences between responses in the different methods of data collection. To estimate the expected differences between government and opposition MPs it was crucial that none of these two groups consisted of substantially more respondents. I therefore chose not to contact the second party in government at the time of data collection, the PvdA. Although this strategy might have led to a higher overall response rate, the respondent groups would have been more imbalanced. This has consequences for the generalizability of the findings on coalition/opposition differences, a point I raise in the discussion section of this chapter.

[12] For Swiss data each was evaluated by between 5 and 9 different politicians, in the Netherlands most news reports by between 3 and 5 politicians. In both countries, one deck of news reports was evaluated by only one politician. Because most other news reports were judged by more respondents, effects of the experimental stimuli can still be isolated from respondent effects in the analyses.

4.4 Results

Findings show that the effects of the media outlet and content are fairly constant, both across the two settings studied as well as the two countries. In line with the argument that taking action in a public setting is potentially more costly for MPs than mentioning a news report at a parliamentary party group meetings, MPs in both countries give lower overall scores in the first case (see Table 4.5). As expected, they are less likely to take political action based on a news report than to mention the same report at a parliamentary party group meeting. The mean value of the likelihood of taking political action is the same in the two countries, although in the Netherlands there are more differences across politicians in their evaluations as indicated by the high variance. Overall, descriptives of the dependent variables show that there are many differences among politicians in their evaluations of which news reports merit their attention and have political consequences.

Table 4.5: Descriptives of the dependent variables

	Switzerland		Netherlands	
	Meetings	Taking action	Meeting	Taking action
Mean	2.69	2.53	3.69	2.53
Standard Deviation	1.82	1.66	2.09	1.77
N	198	198	117	118

Note. Dependent variable formulations: Meetings: Would you bring up the news report if today a meeting of your parliamentary party group would be held? Taking action: Would you take political action based on the news report?

4.4.1 Media outlet influences

Politicians received an article from either a quality or a popular newspaper of the respective country. Because their reporting is more credible, quality newspaper coverage was expected to be more likely to lead to political reaction than coverage in the popular press (*H 4.1*). Results only partially confirm this expectation. Swiss politicians do make this distinction, but only when it comes to taking political action. They are more likely to take political action on coverage published in the quality newspaper *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* than the popular newspaper *Der Blick*. While a news report from the quality outlet is evaluated with a score of 2.73 on the 7-point scale, the report in the popular newspaper scores lower with 2.32 estimation of the marginal effects shown. The effect is, however, not significant for mentioning a report at a parliamentary party group meeting. Additionally, no significant difference is present in the Netherlands for either talking about a report or taking action. Dutch politicians do not make a difference between reports published in the popular print outlet *Telegraaf* and those published in the quality newspaper *NRC Handelsblad*. Hypothesis 4.1 is only partially supported by the data.

Overall, effects of the sender of a news report are not consistent across countries or

settings. While the type of media outlet has an effect on Swiss politicians' likelihood to take political action, it does not in the Dutch case.

4.4.2 News report influences

The influence of a number of news report characteristics derived from news value theory was tested. First, coverage of negative developments catches the public's attention and negativity is an important news value for journalists. Are politicians also more likely to react to news reports covering negative developments (*H 4.2*)? Results of this study show a strong effect in support of the hypothesis. Across the two countries, and both for taking action on a report and talking about it, negativity is a significant predictor. Politicians are much more likely to react to a report covering a negative development than a positive one. This is in line with expectations and earlier studies. The marginal effects of news reports covering positive and negative developments for each of the dependent variables are reported in Table 4.6. The values reported in this table illustrate the considerable effect of the type of development described in a news report on politicians' selection. For Swiss politicians, the difference between positive and negative developments is particularly relevant when it comes to taking political action based on a news report. For Dutch politicians, however, the difference between the (marginal) effects are bigger in absolute terms in the parliamentary party group setting. The different political systems provide a possible explanation for these diverging findings as I will elaborate below (see section 4.5).

MPs were expected to react more when a report is explicitly made politically relevant via the attribution of responsibility to government (Netherlands) or parliament (Switzerland) (*H 4.3*). The findings show that MPs did not make such a distinction and that the hypothesis needs to be rejected. There is no significant effect of the attribution of responsibility to national politics. There is no evidence that it makes a difference for politicians whether a news report explicitly mentions a responsible political actor.[13] Other aspects of a news report are more prevalent in their judgment to take parliamentary action. This holds not only across countries, but also across the two dependent variables.

The media sometimes uncover new information by publishing investigative reports which can reveal unexpected information to politicians. This study looked at whether claiming that a report contained information uncovered by the media outlet, thus signaling an investigative report, made a difference for politicians (*H 4.4*). Results again show that this is not the case across the board, although small sample sizes mean that significance levels are lower. In most cases, there is no difference between reports mentioning an official

[13] Additional analyses including each of the four operationalizations of responsibility showed a significant effect in cases where Dutch politicians were asked to take political action. When real-world developments are made responsible (as opposed to no mention of responsibility), Dutch politicians are less likely to take political action (b = -.65, p = .026, results not in tables). Effects were not significant in any other condition however.

Table 4.6: Marginal effects of the significant effect of the type of development described in news reports on Swiss and Dutch politicians' selection

	Switzerland		Netherlands	
	Meeting	Political action	Meeting	Political action
Positive	2.40	2.02	3.13	2.25
Negative	2.98	3.04	4.26	2.79

Note. Answer scale 1-7, higher values indicate higher chance of selection. Estimations based on models 1 reported in Table 4.7 and Table 4.8.

government source and those underlining that the information had been uncovered by the media outlet. Only when Dutch politicians consider taking political action based on a report this variable has a significant effect (see Table 4.8). While a news report based on an official government communication is evaluated with a score of 2.35, the same report credited to investigative reporting by the newspaper is evaluated with a score of 2.70 on the response scale by Dutch politicians. As I already mentioned, however, the variable had no effect in the parliamentary party group setting in either country.

In sum, the findings show that some aspects of news reports are more important than others. Negativity is a strong predictor for politicians' actions. The next section investigates whether different politicians are triggered by different kind of media content.

4.4.3 Politician, party and political system influences

Parliament is composed of politicians who have varying backgrounds and interests and belong to different parties. Because of this heterogeneity, it is likely that not all politicians are equally susceptible to the media's influence. This section aims to answer the question whether some politicians are more likely than others to select news reports and to react on them. To study these effects, the characteristics of the respondents were added to the hierarchical models (for a detailed account of the models see Appendix C).

Politician influences First, at the level of the individual politician, a number of variables are expected to influence selection. Research shows that senior politicians are less likely to take political action than their junior colleagues (*H4.5*). However, with regards to reactions to media coverage, the effect is not as pronounced and clear as expected. On the one hand, in Switzerland, seniority is significantly (and negatively) linked to taking political action on the basis of a report. For instance, a politician with 25 years of experience in parliament gives half the score to a news report, 1.54 to be precise, than his junior colleague who just entered parliament who scores the same news report at 2.93 on the 7-point scale. The more experienced politicians are, the less likely it is that they will take political action. This is in line with expectations. In most other conditions however, tenure does not have an effect. In the Netherlands, for instance,

no such effect is present on the level of the individual politician. Overall, there is only partial support for this hypothesis.

Next, it was hypothesized (*H 4.6*) that the perceived political relevance of an issue will increase chances of selection. This expectation is only confirmed in the Swiss case and the hypothesis needs to be partially rejected. For Swiss politicians, how politically important they think an issue is that a news report covers at that moment, is key; both when it comes to mentioning a report at a parliamentary party group meeting and when they consider taking political action. I will discuss at the end of this section how these differences might be explained by the electoral systems of the two countries as the effects are not the same in the Netherlands.

At the level of the individual politician, issue specialization likely also plays a key role in explaining politicians' reactions to news. Politicians are expected to be more likely to react to a report covering an issue they are specialized in than to one they are not (*H 4.7a*). Issue specialization should however not affect whether they mention it at a parliamentary party group meeting (*H 4.7b*). Results are only partially in line with these expectations. In fact, the hypotheses only find support in the Dutch case but need to be rejected for Swiss politicians. There is a remarkable difference in scores for Dutch politicians. If they are specialized in the issue of a report, they score the news report at 5.44 which is relatively close to the maximal score of 7. If the same news report is on an issue they are not specialized in however, they score it at a low 2.04 estimation of marginal effects show, which is rather close to the lowest value of 1. The large effect of issue specialization in the Dutch case is also illustrated by the high beta value in the regression in Table 4.8. No such significant effect was found when it comes to raising a news report in the parliamentary party group meeting. This finding might partially be explained by the political system as I will elaborate below (see subsection 4.4.3).

Party influences So far, we see that in some cases, issue specialization and a politician's perceived political relevance of an issue make a difference. These are measured at the individual level. However, these politicians are also embedded in party structures. These parties are often known for certain issues, issues they "own". How does this party characteristic matter for individual politicians? More specifically, is there an isolated effect of party issue ownership, next to the issue specialization of the individual politician? Each respondent received two news reports on issues the party owned, and two reports on issues the party did not own.[14]

Results are different across the two countries and thus only partially in line with expectations. There is evidence that party issue ownership matters for mentioning a news report at a parliamentary party group (*H 4.8*). In both countries there is

[14] This variable was experimentally manipulated and in this study operationalized at the individual level to ensure balance in the design (see chapter section 2.1 for an elaborate account of the method).

a significant positive effect of party issue ownership. For a politician from a social democratic party, for example, when the report covers employment issues, she or he is much more likely to bring it up at a party meeting than if the report would cover the financial deficit, an issue owned by liberal parties. However, the effect of the same variable is not as consistent across countries for taking political action. On the one hand, *H 4.8* finds support because Swiss politicians are more likely to say that they would take action if a report covers an issue their party owns with almost half a point on the answer scale. However, for Dutch politicians this party level variable does not matter when they think about taking political action. They do not make a significant difference between news reports covering an issue their party owns and one their party does not own (see also results in Table 4.8). This shows that, while for Swiss politicians party issue ownership plays a key role, for Dutch politicians, its effect depends on the context (see also subsection 4.4.3). Overall, this hypothesis is thus only partially supported as it does not apply across countries and contexts.

Another important party-level variable is coalition/opposition status. Expectations are, however, not the same across the two countries and settings. While politicians from opposition parties are expected to take more political action based on news reports (*H 4.9a*), their colleagues from coalition parties are expected to bring up a news report more at internal parliamentary party group meetings (*H 4.9b*). Results are indeed in line with expectation and mainly apply to the Dutch case. Politicians from opposition parties are significantly more likely to say that they would take political action based on a news report. They score the same report at 3.06 while their colleagues from coalition parties score the reports at a low 2.12. The situation is, however, reversed in parliamentary party group meetings. There, coalition party membership actually has a *positive* effect; coalition politicians score much higher (4.33) than their colleagues from opposition parties (2.86). This difference of more than one point is substantial and supports the impression that the position of their party, either in the government or in the opposition, has an important effect on politicians' response to media coverage.

As there is no such clear distinction in terms of political power between parties represented in government and those who are not in Switzerland, the hypothesized effects were expected not to be present. However, models show a significant negative effect for coalition membership when it comes to talking at parliamentary party group meetings (see Table 4.7). Closer inspection of these results provide some tentative explanations for this finding. In fact, the only non-governmental party included in Switzerland is the Green Party (GPS), simply because all major Swiss parties are represented in government. On average, the Greens are more likely to talk about news reports at their meetings than politicians from the other parties results show. This might be due to the fact that as an opposition party, the media are an important source of information for the members of this party. Because they do not participate in

government, it is more difficult for them to obtain information. Another explanation might be that the effect is confounded with party size. The Swiss Green Party is much smaller with its 15 seats than the governmental parties with their 29 to 54 seats (elections 2011). This suspicion is confirmed by additional analyses. Once models control for the number of seats (models not in tables), there is no significant effect of coalition membership anymore. Thus, the effect of coalition/opposition membership can be explained by party size in the Swiss case.[15]

Political system influences Finally, we turn to the effects of the political systems level on politicians' reactions to media coverage. Different expectations were formulated for the two countries on how a number of politician and party variables will interact depending on the electoral system. First, in Switzerland individual political relevance and party issue ownership were expected to play a more important role for politicians than their issue specialization (*H 4.10a*). Results are in line with this expectations as Table 4.7 shows. The division of labor within Swiss parties apparently does not play such an important role. The momentary political relevance as perceived by the politician and the more long term party issue ownership are important predictors of Swiss politicians' responses to news coverage. These effects are consistent across settings; they apply to both, raising an issue in the closed party setting and taking parliamentary action in a more publicly visible setting.

In the Netherlands, however, the effects of these politician and party variables are not as consistent across settings. We had expected issue specialization to be key and other individual and party considerations to be less important (*H 4.10b*). Findings with regards to politicians' likelihood to take political action are in line with these expectations. The division of labor within a party predicts whether a politician will react to a news report. This effect is also the most substantial in size in the model. However, a different mechanism takes place in the more closed party group setting (*H 4.10c*). In this closed setting, much like in the case of Switzerland, the political relevance of an issue and party issue ownership predict reactions to news reports. This divergent finding can be explained by the internal party workings in the Netherlands where politicians are expected to adhere to party lines and division of labor in a public setting. Within the party, however, they can act (and speak up) more freely and are not as bound by party considerations. In sum, hypothesis 4.10c is supported.

[15] A similar argument could be made in the Dutch case. Yet, this is not the case across the board. When models control for the number of seats in parliament, effects of coalition/opposition membership on mentioning a news report at a parliamentary party group meeting remain significant and positive. However, effects on taking political action become not significant while party size does have a significiant negative effect (results not in tables). This is not surprising considering that the Dutch coalition parties have more than twice the number of seats of the largest opposition party. Influences of government/opposition and party size variables are thus highly correlated ($r(117)=.89$, $p<.001$ for Dutch data) which can explain these findings.

Table 4.7: Hierarchical regression models of Swiss politicians' selection of news reports

	Mentioning at PPG meeting			Taking political action		
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Constant	1.630*	0.091	0.766	-0.108	-0.939	0.409
	(0.76)	(0.87)	(1.20)	(0.73)	(0.74)	(1.09)
Sender effects						
Media outlet	0.246	0.307	0.266	0.415*	0.490**	0.364#
	(0.21)	(0.20)	(0.21)	(0.19)	(0.18)	(0.20)
Message effects						
Negativity	0.588**	0.989**	0.52	1.019***	1.558***	0.878
	(0.20)	(0.33)	(0.62)	(0.19)	(0.31)	(0.58)
Conflict	-0.167	-0.169	0.063	0.111	0.122	-0.713
	(0.23)	(0.22)	(0.72)	(0.22)	(0.20)	(0.68)
Investigative report	0.239	0.222	0.241	-0.165	-0.196	-0.176
	(0.20)	(0.19)	(0.20)	(0.19)	(0.17)	(0.19)
Receiver effects						
Tenure in years	-0.026	0.001	-0.03	-0.056*	-0.02	-0.065**
	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.02)	(0.03)	(0.02)
Political relevance	0.194**	0.199**	0.189**	0.129*	0.122*	0.129*
	(0.07)	(0.07)	(0.07)	(0.06)	(0.06)	(0.06)
Issue specialization	0.586	0.688#	0.571	0.393	0.593#	0.449
	(0.40)	(0.39)	(0.41)	(0.37)	(0.33)	(0.36)
Party iss. ownership	0.332#	0.322#	0.330#	0.429*	0.420*	0.453*
	(0.20)	(0.19)	(0.20)	(0.19)	(0.17)	(0.19)
Coalition party	-0.978#	-1.049#	-0.937	-0.199	-0.216	-0.491
	(0.55)	(0.54)	(0.65)	(0.43)	(0.43)	(0.53)
Interaction effects						
Development x Tenure		-0.056			-0.074*	
		(0.04)			(0.03)	
Government x Development			0.078			0.148
			(0.65)			(0.62)
Government x Responsibility			-0.27			0.933
			(0.77)			(0.72)
			Random effects			
Politician level	1.05	.91	1.05	.73	.73	.73
Media report level	1.38	1.36	1.37	1.31	1.28	1.30

Note. $N = 198$ from 50 Swiss Members of Parliament.
#p < .10. *p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.

Table 4.8: Hierarchical regression models of Dutch politicians' selection of news reports

	Mentioning at PPG meeting			Taking political action		
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Constant	-3.289***	-2.762**	-3.139**	-0.277	-0.357	-0.598
	(0.93)	(1.01)	(1.02)	(0.85)	(0.91)	(0.91)
Sender effects						
Media outlet	0.397	0.316	0.408#	0.18	0.212	0.158
	(0.25)	(0.25)	(0.25)	(0.21)	(0.21)	(0.21)
Message effects						
Negativity	1.126***	0.813#	1.022**	0.542**	0.480	0.779*
	(0.24)	(0.43)	(0.37)	(0.21)	(0.37)	(0.31)
Conflict	-0.034	0.004	-0.136	0.075	0.101	0.661#
	(0.29)	(0.28)	(0.44)	(0.24)	(0.24)	(0.37)
Investigative report	0.207	0.249	0.223	0.350#	0.390#	0.241
	(0.24)	(0.24)	(0.25)	(0.20)	(0.20)	(0.21)
Receiver effects						
Tenure in years	0.122	0.084	0.122	0.105	0.100	0.105
	(0.08)	(0.08)	(0.08)	(0.08)	(0.08)	(0.08)
Political relevance	0.354***	0.346***	0.357***	0.119	0.121	0.1
	(0.10)	(0.10)	(0.10)	(0.09)	(0.09)	(0.09)
Issue specialization	0.392	0.463	0.382	1.064*	1.046*	1.159*
	(0.53)	(0.52)	(0.53)	(0.48)	(0.47)	(0.48)
Party iss. ownership	0.758**	0.790**	0.742**	0.332	0.344	0.403#
	(0.28)	(0.27)	(0.28)	(0.24)	(0.23)	(0.24)
Coalition party	1.474**	1.426**	1.341*	-0.942*	-0.895#	-0.485
	(0.47)	(0.46)	(0.57)	(0.48)	(0.46)	(0.54)
Interaction effects						
Development × Tenure		0.074			0.015	
		(0.08)			(0.07)	
Government × Responsibility			0.17			-1.005*
			(0.59)			(0.49)
Government × Development			0.176			-0.379
			(0.49)			(0.41)
			Random effects			
Politician level	1.03	1.03	1.04	1.11	.00	1.10
Media report level	1.29	1.28	1.28	1.10	1.11	1.08

Note. $N = 117$ (PPG meeting) and 118 (action) from 30 Dutch Members of Parliament.
#p < .10. *p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.

Taken together, these differences between the two countries studied show that the electoral system together with the internal division of labor within a party play an important role in politicians' reactions to media coverage. As I will elaborate in the discussion section below (see section 4.5) as well as in the concluding section of this book (see section 5.2), this influence of the political system is particularly relevant in the study of the media's effects on politicians and one of the main contributions of the study presented here.

4.4.4 Interaction effects

The previous sections have shown that the content of a news report as well as the background of the politician are important aspects that explain why politics react to media reporting. However, it is also likely that media content does not affect all politicians in the same way. A number of interaction effects were thus tested, first with an individual-level micro variable and next also with a party-level variable.

With regards to the individual politician it was expected that politicians with less experience will be more likely to react to news reports on negative developments (*H 4.11*). Analyses show that there is a significant interaction effect, but only in the Swiss case and when it comes to taking political action (see Model 2 in Table 4.7). For interpretation, a figure was plotted illustrating this interaction effect (see Figure 4.3). It shows that for senior politicians, it does not matter whether a news report covers a positive or negative development. They do not care so much whether unemployment numbers are rising or declining, at least not when the information is disclosed in a media report. For more junior politicians, however, the type of development covered in a news report is crucial. Even after one term (usually lasting four years), Swiss politicians still make a significant distinction between news reports on positive and negative developments (see Table 4.9).

Table 4.9: Marginal effects of tenure depending on the development covered in a news report for Swiss politicians

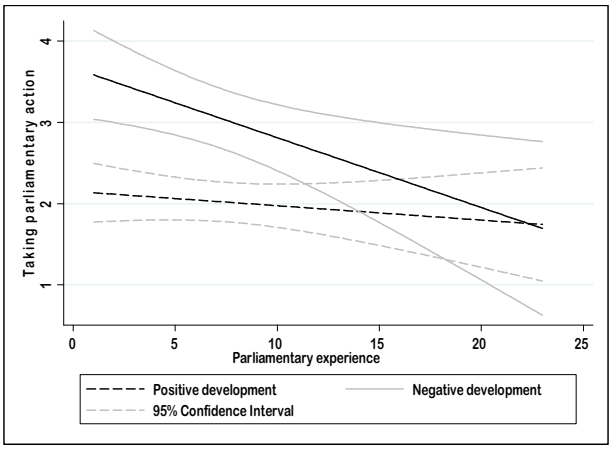
Development	Positive	Negative
Tenure in years		
0	**2.17**	**3.73**
4	**2.09**	**3.35**
8	**2.00**	**2.97**
12	1.91	2.59
16	1.83	2.20
20	1.74	1.82

Note. Answer scale 1-7, higher values indicate higher chance of selection. Significant differences in bold. Estimations based on model 2 in Table 4.7.

However, the effects of the type of development were only conditional in the Swiss case and only when it comes to taking political action. For Dutch politicians the interaction effect was not significant in either setting (see Table 4.8). This shows that although there is some moderating effect of a politicians' background, it likely does not apply across contexts. Possibly, other country-level factors help explain the absence of such an effect. In sum, there is only limited evidence in support of *H 4.11*.

Another important variable that might moderate the effect of some media content is situated at the party level. Because the opposition will want to show to the public that the government is incompetent, they are expected to be more likely to react to media coverage of negative developments than positive ones (*H 4.12*). The interaction

Figure 4.3: Influence of parliamentary experience on Swiss politicians' reactions to reports covering positive/negative developments



effect is however not significant in either country or setting (see models 3 in Table 4.7 and Table 4.8). Based on the results of this study, there is no indication that politicians from opposition and coalition parties would react differently to reports of negative and positive developments.

Additionally, it was expected that opposition and coalition politicians would react differently when the government was held explicitly responsible in a news report (*H 4.13*). Indeed, findings point in this direction. There is a significant interaction effect in the Netherlands. If a news report mentions that the government is responsible, opposition politicians are more likely to take parliamentary action than government ones. This is in line with expectations that opposition jumps at the possibility to underline government responsibility for issues. As expected, there are no differences between coalition and opposition members in the Swiss case.

4.5 Discussion

This study investigated the media's influence on politicians. Because there are varying political agendas that the media can influence, effects on two different dependent variables were investigated in which mechanisms of media influence might be different. First, the study asked politicians whether they would mention a news report at a parliamentary party group meeting. Second, politicians were asked to evaluate the same news reports on whether they would themselves take political action. It was expected that the more hidden party setting would bring to the fore different mechanisms of media influence than the more publicly visible political actions politicians take. To date, studies on political agenda-setting effects have indeed mainly focused on the latter political agenda, mostly due to practical reasons. The inner party setting is usually not accessible to researchers.

Because of the experimental nature of the present study, it is in a unique position to shed some light on what takes place in these settings. Through an experimental design in which politicians in Switzerland and the Netherlands were asked to systematically judge news reports, the effects of the contents of the report, the background of the politician, and the political systems themselves were investigated in both settings. Overall, findings show that the media's influence on politics is complex and characterized by a vast number of influential variables. The background of the politician and the party setting are crucial factors. At the same time, the mechanisms of media influence on politics depend on the political system.

Effects of the issue of the news report Explaining whether and why an issue makes it from the media into politics or not is the central question of political agenda-setting studies. Previous studies have shown that in politics, there are a number of useful characteristics an issue can have. Firstly, an issue can be owned by a party, or not, which has significant effects on the party's electoral success and has been found to explain parties' reactions to media coverage. Secondly, an individual politician can be specialized in a specific issue, for instance through parliamentary committee membership. Division of labor is an important aspect of parliamentary work and specialization means that a politician has built a profile on an issue within the party. Both party issue ownership and individual issue specialization are characteristics that remain largely stable over time. However, issues can also increase in relevance, both in the eyes of the public and for politicians. Therefore, a third characteristic of any issue is its perceived political relevance. In this study, this refers to how politically relevant an issue is perceived by a politician.

Because an issue can have three broad characteristics, it can be owned by a party, a politician can be specialized in an issue and an issue can be perceived as politically relevant, the question then becomes whether and in what way these three alternatively affect politicians' reaction to news. Hypotheses were formulated on the country level that tapped into this distinction and linked it to a country's electoral system (see *H 4.10a/b*). Results show that as expected, there is some variation between political systems in the relative influence of each of these aspects related to the issue of a news report.

Particularly with regards to the Dutch case where different mechanisms were found depending on the setting, the study shows that the media's effects on politics are more complex than expected. The politicians who will mention a news report at a parliamentary party group meeting are different from those who will take action based on a report. In the closed party setting, politicians who think an issue is particularly relevant at that moment will speak up. The party specialists however are less likely to mention a report. Therefore, it is likely that if enough politicians from a party signal that they think action should be taken on an issue, the politician specialized in the issue and acting as a spokesperson on that issue indeed has to. How exactly these inner party processes work can only be speculated about. Results here do, however, show that this is a fruitful route of investigation for future studies.

These diverging mechanisms across settings in the Netherlands might be an illustration of what Kepplinger (2007) labeled direct and indirect effects of media coverage (see also section 1.2). Direct effects are observable and result directly from consumption of media coverage. Indirect effects, however, are present when one politician raises an issue with another one. The effect is indirect because the politician who is influenced by the report has not consumed the news report him- or herself. Based on the results of this study we can expect that it is plausible that some political actions are in fact a result of indirect influence. Because fellow politicians signal that an issue covered in the media is important, the specialized politician then in turn has to take action. Future studies, possibly based on interview data, could shed light on the frequency of such mechanisms.

The mechanisms of influence are much more consistent across settings in the Swiss case. In both settings, party issue ownership and the perceived political relevance of an issue play a key role. Individual issue specialization does not matter. Swiss politicians are thus likely to take action if a report covers an issue their party owns and if they consider it relevant at that point in time. One possible explanation could be that these variables are highly correlated. This is, however, not the case ($b = .11$, $p = .113$). A more substantive explanation is related to the electoral system. In Switzerland, politicians are elected in relatively small voting districts in an open list system. This means that if they want to get re-elected, Swiss politicians will have to build a profile in their respective small voting districts. The one issue they are specialized in on the national level is not that important, because they have to show that they can solve the problems that arise within their district. Consequently, it makes sense for them to react to an issue they consider politically relevant at that moment. At the same time, they benefit from their party's profile on an owned issue.

Overall, these findings show that the issue a news report covers is indeed a core aspect if we want to study the media's influence on politics. However, these issues do not have an automatic influence on politics. Rather, they influence only some politicians of some parties, depending on the politicians' background and the electoral system within which these actors are behaving. Politicians act strategically. With their re-election goal in mind they adapt to the electoral system at hand.

Seniority and opposition/coalition membership The findings above thus show that media coverage does not have an automatic influence on politicians. Rather, they make use of the coverage that fits their goals. This study also tested whether senior politicians were more or less likely than their less experienced colleagues to react to media coverage. Findings are not consistent across the two countries. While in the Swiss case, the more senior politicians are less likely to take action based on media coverage, no such effect was present in the Dutch case. A possible rather methodological explanation for this finding is the limited variation in tenure among Dutch politicians. In fact, less than 25% of the Dutch politicians that participated in the study have been in parliament

for more than 8 years, while in Switzerland almost half the respondents have been in parliament for longer. There might simply not be ample variation in the Dutch data to isolate effects of tenure. From a substantive point of view, we can conclude that in the Netherlands tenure does not affect reactions to media coverage, simply because politicians leave parliament again before these differences could develop.

The study also investigated whether opposition and coalition politicians react differently to media messages. Findings from earlier studies were confirmed when these effects were tested in the Netherlands by contrasting reactions of politicians from the government party VVD with those of the other parties. In the Netherlands, where parties in government hold considerably more political power than in Switzerland, politicians from opposition parties are indeed much more likely to take action based on media coverage. Interestingly, if we look at whether a news report would be mentioned at a parliamentary party group meeting, findings are reversed. In this case, politicians from government parties are actually more likely to mention a report. This could be explained by the fact that while they are under pressure not to react publicly, they use the opportunity in these internal party meetings to nevertheless signal to the party leadership what they think the public considers important.

It was also tested whether opposition politicians are more likely to react to some type of media coverage. Do politicians from opposition and coalition parties react to different kind of media content as Thesen (2012) found? His findings were only partially confirmed. Opposition MPs were indeed more prone to react to news reports mentioning the government as responsible. This is in line with the ongoing competition between coalition and opposition. While the latter jumps at any chance, whether provided by the media or not, to depict the government as incompetent, members of a government party will want to react when there is a chance to illustrate the opposite to the public. However, another central part of Thesen's (2012) study of reactions by parties could not be confirmed. There was no evidence that opposition and coalition MPs react differently to descriptions of negative developments, as he had found. In this study, coalition MPs were not more likely to react to reports of positive developments than opposition MPs. Rather, the pattern of opposition MPs reacting more to news reports persisted. This, of course, corroborates many more individual-level studies that have found that opposition MPs were more free in their actions, while coalition MPs are often bound by coalition agreements of their parties.

Effects of the media outlet and the message content Media content can thus have different effects on different politicians. The study, however, also tested the independent effects of the media coverage's content. Are some media messages more likely to lead to a political reaction, independent of the background of the politician? The strongest effects were found for negativity. News coverage of negative developments was more likely to trigger a political reaction than coverage of positive developments across countries and

settings. This finding is hardly surprising. First, positive developments do not require action. Negative developments however indicate a potential problem which politicians are expected to solve. This is in line with previous studies with politicians and in line with news values theories for journalists. Media too more likely report messages on negative developments (O'Neill and Harcup, 2009).

Another important aspect of political reporting is attributing responsibility or the potential for conflict. In the context of this study, no effects were found. There are two possible explanations. In the Swiss case, because responsibility is shared across all major parties, politicians from Swiss parties will not feel responsible very quickly. Most of the time, there is another political actor they can hold responsible. Another possible explanation regarding the absence of an effect in the Netherlands is the experimental nature of the study. The news reports covered issues that are already politicized in any national context, for example unemployment, or the number of asylum seekers. Consequently, adding a sentence that underlines the responsibility of the political sphere in a setting where all are considered responsible anyway might simply not be a strong enough manipulation. Possibly, if MPs themselves would be mentioned directly, results would be very different like Kepplinger (2007) expects.

Finally, also the media outlet publishing the report and the information source did not matter. Politicians did not make a significant difference between news reports published in broadsheet or in popular newspapers in one country only. Only in the Swiss case were reports published in the broadsheet newspaper more likely to lead to political action. Although I made sure to compare quality and a popular newspaper in both countries, they might not differ to the same extent in both countries. In the Netherlands, the popular newspaper used for this study also has a good reputation in its political reporting, similar to that of quality newspapers. However, in Switzerland the two newspapers are likely perceived as much more distant from each other. The quality newspaper *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* has a longstanding reputation as being a source of information for politicians. Consequentially, the two outlets are likely to be perceived as being more distant, leading to a significant difference in politicians' reactions. In Switzerland, the respected broadsheet newspapers probably still have a considerable influence on political elites. They read those and expect others to be up to date about what is reported. Particularly when parliament is in session, politicians all consume a vast number of media outlets as the secretary general of one Swiss party told me during an interview. That no significant effect of the media outlet was found in the Netherlands, however, shows that more research is needed. To date, political agenda-setting studies have often compared print with broadcast media, but less frequently made comparisons between different print outlets. Results of this study show that, at least between different print outlets, the differences might not be as pronounced and might not travel well across countries.