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Mass Media Occurrence as a Political Career Maker

Annelien Van Remoortere¹, Stefaan Walgrave¹, and Rens Vliegenthart²

Abstract
Ample work in political communication showed that high-level politicians get more media attention than their lower ranking colleagues. With power comes media attention. More than hard work, charisma, or experience, it is the political function performed by politicians that is the crucial factor in explaining how much media attention they receive. But what about the opposite relationship: does media attention also generate power? In this paper, we examine the media path leading to power. Basically, two important career steps of politicians are assessed: becoming a party leader and becoming a minister; we test whether, compared to those who did not make a top career, the politicians who came to take these steps were more prominent in the media before they moved up and became elite politicians. We draw on the case of Belgium here and leverage on a longitudinal automated media content analysis (2000–2020) combined with a data set of 532 national/regional politicians and their careers. The study finds that media occurrences matters for being promoted to a top function in Belgium, more so for becoming a minister than for becoming a party leader. Furthermore, rejecting our initial idea based on political mediatization theories, the influence of media occurrence does not seem to increase through time for both functions.

Keywords
political careers, media attention, elite politicians, minister, party leader

¹Department of Political Science, Media, Middenveld en Politiek (M2P), University of Antwerp, Antwerpen, Belgium
²Amsterdam School of Communication Research (ASCoR), University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, the Netherlands

Corresponding Author:
Annelien Van Remoortere, Department of Political Science, Media, Middenveld en Politiek (M2P), University of Antwerp, Lange Nieuwstraat 55, Antwerp 2000, Belgium.
Email: annelien.vanremoortere@uantwerpen.be

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Ample work in political communication showed time and again that high-level politicians get more media attention than their lower ranking colleagues. With power comes media attention. More than hard work, charisma, age, gender, or experience, it is the political function performed by politicians that is the crucial factor in explaining how much media attention they receive (e.g., Tresch 2009; Vos 2014). In parliamentary systems, two functions stand out: party leaders and ministers; politicians in those positions soak up a good deal of all media attention for politics. We know that power generates media attention. But what about the opposite relationship: does media attention also generate power? Does being in the media spotlight increase the chance that a politician will capture a powerful position? Or, more concretely, do the media (co-) determine who will become a party leader or minister? No research has tackled this question, while it is plausible that the causal relationship between power and media attention is bidirectional and mutually reinforcing.

The attention for individual-level factors contributing to politicians’ successes has increased in the last decennia. Research found specific qualities of candidates that explain why some politicians succeed and others fail (Mondak 1995; Norris 1997). Rarely do those studies include media-related variables in addition to political variables and those that do, focus only on electoral success as the outcome variable (Sheafer and Tzionit 2006). Ministers and party leaders are the most powerful political actors in the Belgian political system, as in many other systems, but until now we do not really know why some politicians become a minister or party leader and how media occurrence influences this. Therefore, in this paper, we examine the media path leading to power. Basically, two important career steps of politicians are assessed: becoming a party leader and becoming a minister; we test whether, compared to those who did not make a top career, the politicians who came to take these steps were more prominent in the media before they moved up and became elite politicians. We draw on the case of Belgium here and leverage a longitudinal media content analysis of three newspapers (2000–2020) spanning two decades combined with a data set of 531 national/regional politicians and their careers.

We find that media occurrence matters for being promoted to a top function in Belgium, more so for becoming a minister than for becoming a party leader. Furthermore, rejecting our initial idea based on political mediatization theories, the influence of media occurrence does not change over time.

Why Media Attention Leads to Power

Party leaders and ministers are often studied as they have a central role in the political system. But the comparative literature on what it takes to become a top politician is fairly limited. For some countries, there is some early work about ministerial careers that focuses on whether ministers first were in parliament or not and to what extent their ministerial function was preceded by an important function within their party (e.g., de Winter 1991). Also, some recent attention has been given, in different systems, to the social background characteristics of ministers and to various factors such as their education and occupation (e.g., Turner-Zwinkels and Mills 2020), their
political preferences and their match with that of the caucus (e.g., Kam et al. 2010), or even the political careers of their relatives (e.g., Smith and Martin 2017). Yet, even in recent, large-scale comparative analyses of the selection of ministers the approach has been institutional and party focused, and no substantial, empirical attention has been given to the role of media proficiency in making it to a ministership (see, for instance, Dowding and Dumont 2008, 2014). More specifically, with regard to the Belgian case we study here (see below), the factors that have been put forward as determining ministerial selection are the distribution of ministerial mandates over internal party factions, the balance between continuity and innovation, geographic representation and gender balance (Dumont et al. 2009). Scholars did speculate about the soft skills needed to make a viable minister—such as “political skills” (de Winter 1991: 51), the capacity of handling many policy fields, or good working relationships with other members of parliament (MPs) (Dumont et al. 2009: 134)—but none of these studies speculated, or even simply mentioned the possible role media proficiency might play in ministerial selection. Remarkably, when it comes to ministerial resignations, the role of the media and of public opinion is sometimes mentioned as being of importance in different countries (Brändström 2015; Dumont et al. 2009: 139). However, it is not very likely that the media would only matter negatively (for ending careers) and not positively (for making careers).

The work on party leader selection devoted just a little more attention to broad media access as an asset of leaders. But the comparative work on party leader selection mostly deals with how leaders are selected rather than why (e.g., Pilet and Cross 2014). Still, it explicitly recognizes that party leaders are the external face of their party in the media (e.g., Pilet and Cross 2015: 2) and thereby implicitly acknowledges that good media skills are a prerequisite for being chosen. Some even argue that we witness a “presidentialization” of election campaigns whereby party leaders are evolving into the sole embodiment of their party in the mass media (e.g., Balmas et al. 2014; Mughan 2000). Yet, again, as far as we can tell, no systematic empirical analyses are conducted, which test the simple proposition that media prominence breeds party leadership.

In sum, comparative political science scholarship examined the selection of ministers and party leaders from a predominantly institutional and party perspective largely neglecting the communicative aspect that comes with the highest office. This is remarkable, especially because ample research into elite perceptions has shown that politicians themselves strongly believe in the career-controlling power of the media.

Studies in various Western European countries find the same pattern with politicians perceiving the media as very powerful in making or breaking their political careers (Lengauer et al. 2014; Van Aelst et al. 2008a). Work in communication science has devoted a lot of attention to the media skills exhibited by politicians (e.g., Sheafer 2001, 2008). This work has found, for instance, that media skills indeed yield media coverage (e.g., Wolfsfeld and Sheafer 2006) but it failed to examine whether media skills determine whether politicians come to be part of the small circle of elite politicians in the first place (but see the work by Sheafer (2008) finding that media skills affect electoral success).
It does not require extensive argumentation to make a plausible case that elite politicians are partly chosen because they have the qualities to make it in the media. In fact, there is a large literature on the mediatization of politics making the point that politics has become permeated by a “media logic” pushing the previous “political logic” aside (Strömbäck 2008). Many things that political actors do and undertake are deeply affected by the need to get covered by the media and, this way, to connect with the ever more volatile electorate. Many scholars have written about how political actors have come to adapt their communication and even their decision making to fit the media’s story-telling techniques and formats (Esser and Strömbäck 2014). In a similar vein, others have written about the permanent campaign (Blumenthal 1980) as the borders between election campaigns and routine times are getting blurred and political actors are continuously thinking about how things will play out in the media. If these mediatization scholars have a point, and there is ample reason to think they do, then it is not more than natural that the capacity to play the media, the ability to play by the media rules and to wrap up one’s points into an attractive media format, is an essential feature of a successful elite politician.

Media skills, although very often mentioned in the literature, are not easily measured (Sheafer 2001). Therefore, in this study, we employ past media occurrence as a proxy of media proficiency. The best proof of possessing media skills is, naturally, past performance, that is, whether a candidate top politician already attracted media attention before being chosen to become a member of the small club of the powerful. In general and all other things being equal, we expect the media prominence of politicians to be a determinant of their being selected into higher office. Since we measure media prominence and not media skills in this paper, we refer, from now on, to media prominence as a driver of political careers.

The two higher office positions we are talking about here, ministership and party leadership, do probably not require media prominence to the same extent. This makes us expect that media prominence plays a larger role for being promoted as party leader compared to becoming a minister. Ministers are in the first place policy makers; they develop, implement, and defend their policies. This definitely requires media presence, especially when policies are not technical and controversial, but foremost a great deal of expertise and political skills. Party leaders are much more than ministers, and at least in the Belgian polity we are dealing with here, the central party soldiers who play the attack and defend game in the media arena (Thesen 2011). They are the prime gladiators who confront other party leaders in the media and who spearhead their parties’ electoral campaigns. Comparative research showed that party leaders generally are among the most mediatized politicians (Vos and Van Aelst 2018) and are, in Belgium, only outmatched in political power by the prime minister and vice prime ministers (Dewachter and Das 1991). Party leaders have important internal management tasks as well, and they are the guards of the ideological party line. But their main task is external and consists of embodying the party in the public realm. So, first, because of the different tasks they perform, we expect that media prominence is more important to be selected as a party leader than as a minister.
There is a second reason. The selectorate, the group of people who make the selection decision, is different for both positions. In Belgium, as in many countries, it is the party leader who singlehandedly selects the cabinet ministers of his/her party (Wauters et al. 2015). Although electoral outcomes play a role, it is not always the most popular politician that is chosen to be a minister. Being a senior politician knowing all possible ministerial candidates personally, it can be expected that the party leader to a lesser degree relies on the candidates’ media appearances to evaluate their fitness for the job. Expertise, specialization, loyalty, personal friendships, together with all the intra-party balances that have to be respected, all play a role (Vandeleene et al. 2016) and this reduces the weight of media proficiency in the selection decision. Party leaders themselves, in contrast, are, in Belgium as in many other West-European countries, elected by a larger and open group of people, being all party members or all party delegates attending a national party congress (Wauters et al. 2015). It is to be expected that this much more inclusive selectorate, not knowing all candidates personally, relies more on the candidates’ media appearances when making up their mind. Of course, in reality, the party establishment sometimes publicly supports one candidate and very often this “recommended” candidate wins the contest. Hence, party leader elections may appear more open than they actually are. But, in general, it is clear that a much wider group of people is involved in selecting the party leader than in selecting a party’s ministers. We expect that the smaller and more senior the selectors the less media prominence plays a role (Sheafer and Tzionit 2006). So, the diverging selection procedure, as well, points in the direction of media occurrence playing more of a role for party leadership selection than for ministerial selection.

**Hypothesis 1:** The more prominent the media coverage an MP receives, the more likely it is that he/she will acquire a top function (party leader/minister).

**Hypothesis 2:** The effect of media prominence on acquiring a top function is larger for party leader selection than for minister selection.

Mediatization is, as mentioned above, a key phenomenon within political communication. Researchers generally assume some degree of the mediatization of politics in most Western countries without empirically assessing its presence and consequences, for example, on political processes. For most countries, we have no idea how big the influence of mediatization on politics exactly is. The few studies dealing with mediatization in Belgium do confirm that Belgian politics increasingly follows a media logic (Driessens et al. 2010; Ketelaars and Van Aelst 2020; Van Aelst et al. 2008b); these studies suggest that Belgian politics would momentarily be situated in the third or fourth phase of mediatization. However, these studies are not longitudinal, which makes it hard to assess whether and how the mediatization process unrolled over time.

The question for this study is whether the process of becoming a minister or party leader has changed in the past twenty years and whether the role of media prominence has increased or decreased. The gradually further developing mediatization process would make us expect that media prominence has become more important for making a top career in politics.
Yet, the emergence of social media could have played a role as well, and maybe in the opposite direction. Social media, especially Twitter and Facebook, form an alternative channel for politicians to reach voters independently from traditional media. Politicians are less dependent on journalists and can directly communicate and engage with their followers. This way, politicians can bypass the traditional gatekeepers (Van Aelst et al. 2017). An additional advantage for politicians is that social media use demands few resources; using Facebook and Twitter are free and sending out Tweets or Facebook messages require little technical knowledge or time (Vergeer 2013). Considering all this, the social media breakthrough has sparked the idea that social media now provides a more equal playing field with more politicians getting a share of the attention. Less known or lower ranking politicians can compensate for their lack of traditional media attention by being more present online (Lilleker et al. 2011). This way, backbenchers can strengthen their position in the party and traditional media occurrence might be less of a prerequisite to become a top politician.

Focusing on the Belgian case, we expect the effect of social media on mitigating the effect of media prominence on top careers to be limited. Van Aelst et al. (2017) showed that only about half of all Flemish candidates had an account on Twitter in 2014 and of those who were on social media only about one out of ten candidates sent >100 tweets and could be considered as active users. Belgium seems to be a late adaptor when it comes to social media, leading us to believe that traditional media are still important in impacting who will become minister/party leader. Thus, we hypothesize that the ongoing mediatization of politics outweighs the possibly countervailing force of social media adoption over time and that media prominence became more important over time instead of less important.

**Hypothesis 3:** The effect of media prominence on minister/party leader selection has increased over time.

**Data and Methods**

**Country Case**

In this paper, we look at the case of Belgium, more specifically at Flemish politicians originating from the Northern, Dutch-speaking part of the country. For this paper, we only focus on MPs, both the national and the Flemish parliament. The Belgian political system is known to be a strong multiparty system where individual politicians are loyal to their party. The communication and voting behavior of politicians is very much dictated by the party top and deviations from the party line are rare (Depauw 2003). Individual politicians are subordinates to the party and do not have many opportunities to develop their own profile in the media. Personalization in Belgium is relatively low. This makes Belgium an interesting case to study. In fact, it rather is a least, or less, likely case to find strong media prominence effects. If we find an effect of media prominence in Belgium, we can assume that we will find similar effects, and probably even
stronger, in other countries where politics is more personalized and where media attention may even be more important in a politician’s career.

The two (biggest) language regions in Belgium have a completely independent media system. The Francophone media only serve the Francophone citizens (Wallonia and Brussels) the Flemish press only Flanders, independently of each other. In this paper, we only study Flanders. The Flemish media system has been categorized as democratic-corporatist, implying strong professionalization of the journalistic profession and a considerable level of state intervention to protect press freedom; it is comparable with the Scandinavian and other Western European countries (Hallin and Mancini 2011). The Flemish media system has historically been characterized by political parallelism, but today the affiliations between press outlets and parties have disappeared (De Bens and Raeymaeckers 2007).

For the period under study (2000–2020), the share of Belgian party leaders who first occupied an MP position is 69 percent, for ministers this is 78 percent. So, top politicians in Belgium are mainly recruited out of parliament. The top politicians that were not first MPs are mainly recruited from the private sector and were not involved in politics before. They were probably selected because of their expertise (e.g., doctors) or because they were a celebrity or the children of well-known politicians. Most of them never appeared in the news before and their appointment as minister/party leader has very little to do with previous media appearances. Other mechanisms are at play for this minority of top politicians and previous media prominence could not have been important for them becoming minister/party leader.

Because it is hard to take into account these politicians who were not first in parliament—with whom could we compare their media prominence with—we basically compare the media prominence of MPs who later became minister/party leader with those MPs who did not. The media occurrence of MPs is determined by analyzing newspapers. Although television news is often seen as the driving force behind mediatization (Van Aelst et al. 2012), the choice for newspapers was made because television coverage is more narrowly focused on top politicians. This study is interested in the differences in media coverage between MPs, often back benchers. These lower ranking politicians appear on television news very rarely and this makes television less suited for this study. We need the more fine-grained newspaper coverage to find nuanced differences between the large group of backbench MPs.

On top of that, our choice of three newspapers is justified because these newspapers are a good proxy for all news coverage in Belgium. The coverage in newspapers strongly correlates with other (online) outlets (CIM 2020). For this paper, we look at a good sample of three of the most relevant newspapers. Two broadsheet papers, one being left-wing (De Morgen), the other being more of the center (De Standaard), and one popular newspaper (Het Laatste Nieuws). These newspapers have a high readership (Het Laatste Nieuws) and are considered to be most politically influential (De Morgen, De Standaard). Further, these papers represent the two biggest (and almost only remaining) media houses in Belgium. Moreover, previous research found that Flemish elite newspapers (De Standaard and De Morgen in our study) have a significant impact on Flemish television agendas (e.g., Golan 2006;
Vliegenthart and Walgrave 2008). We thus expect that MPs who appear (very) often in the studied newspapers also have a bigger chance of appearing on television.

Finally, due to the political relevance of the three selected newspapers, we are confident that the selectorate—the other politicians selecting ministers and party leaders—reads these three newspapers on a daily basis. A study in the news consumption of Belgian elites found that politicians spend on average three hours every day on catching up with the media and that they read especially newspapers (Van Aelst et al. 2008b). So, it is likely that occurrence in these three specific newspapers is noticed by the selectorate.

**News Articles**

News articles were collected by scraping Gopress (www.gopress.be), the official repository of all Belgian newspaper publishers, using Python. We decided to first collect every news article starting the first of January 2000 until 31 October 2020. To minimize the chance of false positives when coding for political actors, we decided to filter out all articles about sports, lifestyle, cooking, weather, etc. This was done by first training student coders to manually code these articles as “junk.” When acceptable reliability was reached (Krippendorff’s $\alpha = 0.85$) an algorithm was trained to automatically filter out all these articles. After this automatic selection, we were left with 1,241,867 articles, the distribution between the newspapers is 362,132 articles for *De Morgen*, 430,005 articles for *De Standaard*, and 449,730 articles for *Het Laatste Nieuws*. The collected articles were, in a next step, automatically coded for political actors.

**Actors**

First, a database was put together including the names of all Flemish MPs that were active on the national or Flemish political level for the studied period (2000–2020). Concretely, this means that we collected data for all Flemish politicians seated in the national and Flemish (regional) parliament. For every politician, personal information was collected by consulting the personal website of the politicians or their Wikipedia page. Age, gender, function, and period they acted in that function and party were added to the database for every political actor. This way, we constructed the career path of all MPs. Next, an algorithm autonomously identified the names of the different politicians in the collected news articles. Every occurrence of a politician was coded using the actorID assigned to the specific politicians. In the next step, the actor database was updated with the media occurrence of each actor, based on the coded articles, for all 531 politicians.

**Variables**

The dependent variables are “becoming minister” and “becoming party leader.” They were constructed by looking at the careers of the MPs in the database. If they became
minister or party leader during the studied period, they were coded as “1”. Politicians who never made it to minister or party leader received “0”. To make the data comparable, MPs who had been party leaders or ministers before the research period or who occupied these positions at its start were filtered out. This decision was made because former top politicians generate more media attention even after they step down from their elite position and including these politicians would give a distorted image. The final database consists of “normal” MPs with no previous experience as a minister or party leader. From these 531 MPs, 304 are male and the average age of MPs when being first elected in parliament is forty-three years. The average length of the parliamentary career of the MPs in our database is 5.5 years. When we compare the average length of the parliamentary career of future party leaders and future ministers, we see that future party leaders are MPs for an average of 2.8 years. For future ministers, this average is higher with 4.9 years. It requires a longer parliamentary career to become a minister than to become a party leader.

The main independent variable we are interested in is, as stated above, media occurrence. This variable is the average media occurrence for every MP, that is, the sum of all occurrence for each MP divided by the months (s)he resided in parliament. We decided to not count several mentions in the same newspaper article but simply counted in how many articles an MP was mentioned (at least one time).

Becoming a party leader or minister is determined by numerous factors, media coverage definitely is not the only path to power. By adding control variables we account for some of these factors. The first control is gender, a dummy variable (being female = 1). Age is controlled for as well. This variable was collected by retrieving the birthdate of the politicians from their personal site. The third control variable is seniority measured as the number of months an MP has been seating in parliament. Next, preference votes for every MP were added. We collected the election outcomes for individual politicians held in the period of 2000 until 2020 for both the national and Flemish elections. This gave a total of nine elections in the studied period. These data were collected by scraping the official governmental election site and automatically adding the preference votes to the actor database. Next, whether the MP was a caucus leader is included as well (being a caucus leader = 1). Caucus leaders are, in the Belgian political context, the most important MPs of their caucus and are the spokesperson of their parliamentary parties. Lastly, we included a measure of whether MPs were members of the party executive (being a member = 1). These data were difficult to collect because this information is not available to the public. The different parties were contacted and access to their archives was acquired in order to collect this information. Since the party executive is the beating heart of the party that meets on a weekly basis, being a member of this exclusive group can have an effect on becoming a minister or party leader. Members of the party executive are above average powerful politicians that codetermine the party line.

Model

We aggregated the data on the level of the individual politicians and thus took the average media occurrence for every MP for the period they were in parliament in
our studied period. To estimate the influence of media occurrence on becoming a party leader or minister (binary-dependent variables), logistic regressions were estimated. To test Hypothesis 3, in a second model, the variable “year” was included to look at the time aspect of our data. This variable indicates for each politician when (s)he becomes MP and thus enters the data set. We considered using alternative models, such as event history models. We are, however, not interested in the time it takes (when) MPs to become a minister/party leader but whether and why they get promoted at all. Second, the opportunities to become a minister/party leader are highly constrained and limited to a few points in time. They depend on the formation of the government after elections (ministers) and the stepping down of the predecessor. This makes the dynamic nature of the data of less importance and the cross-sectional variance (i.e., difference between MPs) the most important to focus on.

**Results**

MPs were grouped based on their career path. The first group of MPs went on to become a minister, a second group became party leader, and a third remained MP and never reached one of these top positions. The third group, normal MPs, is by far the largest group.

Comparing the mean media occurrence of the three groups of MPs in Table 1, we notice that, on average, MPs who later become party leaders or ministers are covered more by the media than MPs who never get a top function. For MPs who become ministers, the average occurrence per month is 4.64, whereas for future party leaders the average is 6.70. For normal MPs, the average is 1.58, which is considerably lower. The outspoken differences in mean media occurrence between the three groups suggest that MPs who later become a minister or party leader are, even before their promotion, on average covered more in the media. Media coverage thus seems to matter for promotion. In Supplemental Information file A, more information can be found about the distribution of media occurrence in the three studied groups.

We perform a logistic regression to estimate which variables have a significant effect on becoming a minister or party leader. For the logistic regression, we aggregate the data to the individual level for every politician for the whole period (or thus the period they were in parliament). We run two separate analyses, one for future ministers and one for future party leaders, each time comparing them with people who remained MP. Table 2 presents the results. Occurring in the media, being a caucus leader and

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1. Media Occurrence (No. Times per Month) of the Three Studied Groups of Members of Parliament (MPs) (Based on Absolute Media Occurrence).</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Occ. future ministers</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Occ. future party leaders</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Occ. normal MPs</strong></td>
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being a member of the party executive all have a positive effect on the odds of becoming a minister or party leader. Preference votes only matter for future ministers, not for future party leaders.

Most importantly for our study is that media occurrence has a positive, significant effect and the size of the effect is comparable for ministers and party leaders. For every single extra average media mention per month, the odds of becoming a minister or party leader increase by 17 and 15 percent, respectively. Being a caucus leader in parliament has a substantial effect on becoming a minister or a party leader too. It more than triples the odds of becoming a minister and even increases the odds of becoming a party leader with a factor 9. Preference votes are only significant predictors for future ministers and every 1 percent increase in average preference votes increases the odds of becoming a minister by 5 percent. Furthermore, age has a negative effect on future ministers, but no significant effect on future party leaders. Becoming older lowers the odds of becoming a minister by 5 percent. The data set only consists of MPs who, prior to being in parliament, never had a higher function. These MPs are mostly new and young(er), and for them being in parliament too long decreases the odds of becoming a minister. Being a member of the party executive has a large effect on becoming a party leader. It increases the chance of becoming a minister with a factor 3 and increases the chance of becoming a party leader with a factor 7. This, in combination with the strong effect of being a caucus leader, indicates that being popular within the party matters above all for becoming a party leader. The caucus leader is elected by the other MPs of the party and internal elections determine who will become a member of the party executive. With regard to how party leaders are elected, this result makes sense. Party leaders are elected by the party members, while ministers are appointed by the party leader. Overall, being a caucus leader or member of the party executive seems to be less important for becoming a

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Predictors</th>
<th>Odds ratios</th>
<th>CI</th>
<th>p</th>
<th>Predictors</th>
<th>Odds ratios</th>
<th>CI</th>
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</table>

The bold values indicate $p < 0.05$.
Our first hypothesis can be confirmed. Media occurrence has a significant effect on becoming a minister and on becoming a party leader. Those who appear often in the media overall stand a much better chance of getting top positions. Importantly, these results hold even when we control for a whole array of other potential drivers for getting a promotion. Many things matter for being promoted, but even if we take these other factors into account, media prominence stands. Based on this, Hypothesis 2 needs to be rejected. The effect of media occurrence is similar for future ministers and party leaders, based on the marginal effects (see Supplemental File B), media seem to play a more important role in becoming a minister than becoming a party leader.

To test whether the influence of media occurrence on becoming a top politician has increased over time, we again perform a logistic regression. This time the year was added and interaction between year and media occurrence was included. Results are presented in Table 3. For both future party leaders and future minister, the interaction is not significant. Hypothesis 3 cannot be confirmed. This opposes our initial idea of the political logic being increasingly replaced by the media logic.

**Conclusion and Discussion**

Previous research found that high-level politicians get more media attention than their lower ranking colleagues. With power comes media attention. In this paper, we focus
on the opposite relationship: does media attention also generate power? Based on data from the Belgian case, the answer to this question is “yes”, media occurrence matters for becoming a top politician. Although the nuance is that a minority of MPs in our data (16 percent) became minister without any media attention, both for being promoted to a minister or being elected as a party leader preceding media coverage is a substantial asset. If an MP wants to enlarge his/her chances of being promoted to minister or party leader, investing in media prominence is a good bet.

Based on the difference in function and in the selection method between ministers and party leaders, we expected media occurrence to matter more for party leaders than for ministers. But the data proved us wrong. Media occurrence matters more for ministerships than for party leaderships. This diverging result with regard to party leaders is puzzling. Maybe our theoretical expectation that media prominence is more important for leaders than for ministers does not hold the track? A plausible explanation can be that ministers, these days, need to be fully equipped with all the necessary media skills while party leaders are, more than we think, internal party managers and organizers. Another explanation could be that selectors attach great importance to past media performances when debating who is fit for a ministerial position. This is in line with the idea of the mediatization of politics. Strömbäck (2008) described this process of change as many little shifts eventually ending with the internalization of media logic in politics. One important structural change that Strömbäck and Van Aelst (2013) mention is that parties select leaders and other political candidates based on media logic and thus based on the skills potential candidates and leaders have. Past media performance is a good indicator of media skills. Our findings might show that media logic dictates who will get a promotion.

Additionally, in this paper, we looked at how the importance of media occurrence changed in 20 years. We found no evidence that media occurrence has increased in importance. Hence, getting into the media is beneficial for a political career but the influence of media attention did not increase. This contradicts our initial idea on the mediatization of politics. Maybe the emergence of social media during the research period forms an explanation that has cancelled out the influence of ongoing mediatization. In the early 2000s, appearing in the traditional news outlets was crucial for a politician and the Belgian political system could have been considered mediatized to a considerable degree already. Since social media, politicians have heavily invested in social media presence as an alternative for mass media presence. Consequently, the impact of media did not increase as one would expect based on the idea of ongoing mediatization.

Our study was limited in that not all possible control variables could be included. Criteria such as expertise or party loyalty could play a role, but we could not measure them in this study. One way to further explore the intricacies and complexities of political career steps, and the role that is played by sheer (un)luck, is to complement quantitative research with in-depth interviews with top politicians gauging their perception as to why they made it and what role media skills played therein. Another limitation is that we only look at media occurrence in newspapers and do not consider television news. This methodological choice was made because television coverage
is more narrowly focused on top candidates, which made television news less suited. Adding television news would, we believe, not significantly change our results. The politicians who appear more often in newspapers are also more likely to appear in television news. Nevertheless, a future study should include television news considering that it is often seen as main driving force behind mediatization and personalization of politics. Lastly, this study only focused on MPs. The 30 percent of ministers and party leaders who were not first in parliament were not studied. Future studies should try to include these ministers/party leaders to compare how important media occurrence is for this group.

Although we only focused on Belgium, we do believe that our findings have some generic quality. The Belgian context is a rather “conservative” case when studying the influence of media on politics. Political parties are the main political actors with a lot of internal party discipline and there is not much room for individual politicians to position themselves without their party’s approval. Ministers are, like in most countries, not directly chosen by the electorate but are appointed by the party leader who knows the candidates much better than just via their media appearances. This decreases the likelihood that media prominence is the main reason someone is selected. In general, the personalization of the Belgian polity seems to be limited, which should decrease the impact of media skills on political careers. So, the fact that we find, in a country like Belgium, that media prominence clearly matters makes us expect that it would even matter more in other countries.

Being the first study to focus on whether media attention actually generates power instead of the other way around, our results beg for more research. Further study is needed, including more countries, parties, and maybe a longer time frame and a wider selection of media, to test the generalizability of our findings. For instance, the role of social media in reaching the highest positions could be an interesting avenue for further research too as well as focusing on extremer or populist parties (that did not enter government in Belgium in the period of study). But we think our results are promising and show that the relationship between media and politics is deeply bidirectional. Political power breeds media power, but the opposite is the case as well.

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ORCID iD

Annelien Van Remoortere https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1610-2661
Supplemental Material

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Notes

1. We study ministers and party leaders because our data is not suited to study the Prime Minister. In the past twenty years only one Flemish politician became PM, the others were Walloon politicians. Considering that our database only contains Flemish politicians, studying the PM was not possible. In addition, no prime minister went directly from being an MP to being Prime Minister in our studied period. All PMs first held another senior position before they became Prime Minister. Seeing that the aim of this paper is to compare the media prominence of normal MPs before getting a top position, we decided to only focus on ministers and party leaders.

2. This was done by using the manually labelled articles to train a random forest classification model using a term frequency-inverse document frequency (TF-IDF) vector as features. This model was then applied to the uncoded articles.

3. Our model has been rerun without the last month before the appointment to control for the effect of a potential media buzz. Similar results were found.

4. To make sure that the fluctuations in the total number of articles don’t influence our results we ran our analysis after weighing the number of occurrences based on the total number of articles for every month in our study. The findings for the analysis with weighted media occurrence are very similar to the ones reported in this paper (see Supplemental Information file C).

References


**Author Biographies**

**Annelien Van Remoortere** is a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Antwerp. She is a member of the research group Media, Movements and Politics (M2P) at the Department of Political Science.

**Stefaan Walgrave** is a full-time Professor at the Department of Political Science, University of Antwerp. He works at the research group Media, Movements and Politics (M2P).

**Rens Vliegenthart** is a full-time professor in the Department of Communication Science at the Univerity of Amsterdam. He is also a scientific director of the Amsterdam School of Communication Research (ASCoR).