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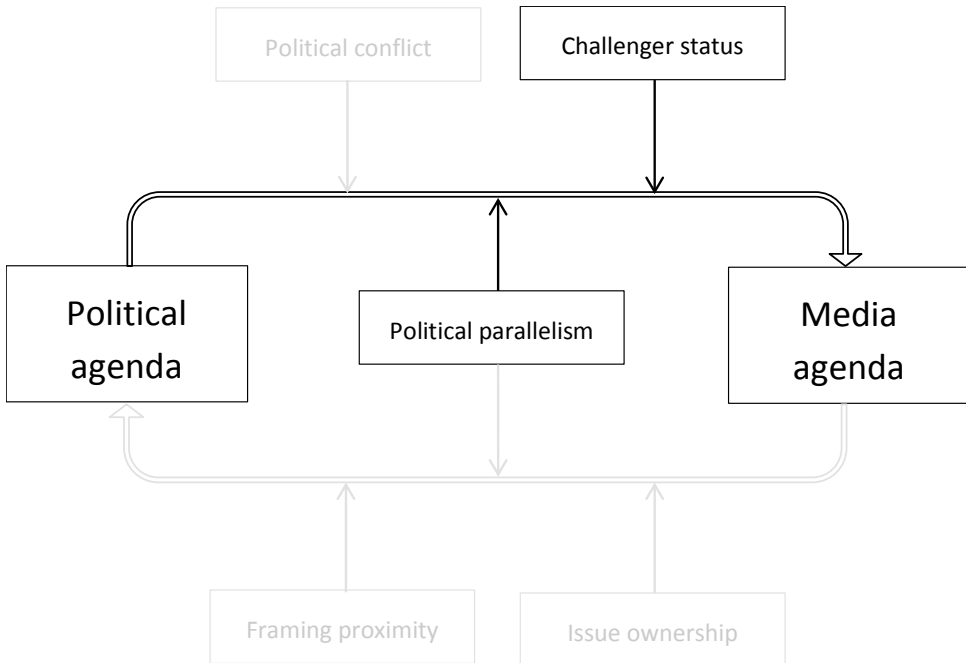
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Chapter IV

Watchdogs or Lapdogs?

*Partisan and Structural Bias in the Media Coverage of
Parliamentary Questions in the Netherlands, 1995-2010*



Abstract

In many parliaments, MPs have a weekly opportunity to ask government ministers questions, however, most of these parliamentary questions (PQs) are ignored in the media, while only some receive coverage. This chapter examines when journalists pay attention to the issues brought up in PQs and when they do not, and hypothesizes the presence of a *structural bias* and of a *partisan bias* in the coverage of questions. A structural bias results from the norm of watchdog journalism, which makes journalists focus on questions that put pressure on the government, that is, questions of challenger parties. A partisan bias results from the partisan ties that newspapers and parties have, which make journalist only pay attention to the questions of linked parties, but not the rest. The hypotheses are tested with pooled time series analyses on PQs on the issue of immigration and of European integration in the Netherlands from 1995 to 2010 and the coverage of these two issues in two daily newspapers, De Telegraaf and the Volkskrant.

Introduction

Much of the political competition in Western democracies is fought over which issues should dominate the political agenda (Carmines and Stimson 1989; Green-Pedersen 2007; Schattschneider 1960). Also in parliament, parties strive to ensure that their preferred topics are salient while diverting attention away from topics that might harm them (Riker 1996). Parliamentary questions in particular are a means for parties to place issues on the political agenda and generate more widespread attention for them in the public debate. Surprisingly, however, we know very little about whether the issues parties introduce in their parliamentary questions are actually picked up by the media. In other words, we do not know whether parties' efforts to call attention to issues by asking questions in parliament are in vain. Moreover, even less is known regarding which parliamentary questions successfully attract media attention to an issue and which are ignored. News media must be highly selective in selecting what to cover, but we do not know which issues from parliament are deemed newsworthy and which are not.

This chapter fills part of this lacuna by examining which parliamentary questions are more likely to inspire newspaper coverage and which fail to produce media attention. It argues that not all parliamentary questions are equally interesting for journalists to respond to and hypothesizes the presence of a *structural bias*, whereby journalists respond more to questions posed by challenger parties, and a *partisan bias*, whereby newspapers devote greater attention to parties that are overrepresented among their readers. Two issues, European integration and immigration, in the Netherlands over the period from 1995 to 2010 are used to study this subject.

The findings have important implications for our understanding of the media as perpetuators of existing power structures. Many studies show that journalists consider powerful actors more newsworthy and consequently devote the most attention to actors holding the highest government offices (De Swert and Walgrave 2002; Hopmann, De Vreese and Albæk 2011; Green-Pedersen, Mortensen and Thesen 2013; Van Dalen 2012; Wolfsfeld 1997). As Tresch notes (2009, 71), 'formal power in the policy-making process easily translates into discursive power', thus leading to a virtuous cycle for already powerful politicians. I argue, and empirically substantiate, that the very mechanism that

leads journalists to focus on government parties in political news in general, namely the watchdog norm, leads them to concentrate on challenger parties in the coverage of parliamentary questions. In so doing, the chapter demonstrates that the media do not always amplify political power but may also function as ‘weapons of the weak’.

Furthermore, by combining the literatures on party competition and political communication, this study demonstrates that the distinction between mainstream opposition and challenger parties (De Vries and Hobolt 2012) is also relevant for our understanding of the interaction between politics and the media. Research in political communication thus far distinguishes government and opposition parties (e.g., Thesen 2013; Vliegthart and Walgrave 2011), but the divergent roles and incentives within the opposition lead to very different journalistic responses to challengers and mainstream opposition parties. Finally, the chapter also contributes to our knowledge of the partisan nature of the Dutch media landscape after ‘depillarization’. Since 1960, the formerly strong ties between newspapers and political parties have steadily (and famously) eroded. This chapter documents that even in recent ‘depillarized’ decades, newspaper journalists, at least in their selection of parliamentary activity for coverage, remain partisan.

The chapter proceeds by first discussing extant research on the media coverage of parliamentary questions and then argues that we should expect a contingent relationship. Then, the hypotheses of structural bias and partisan bias are introduced, followed by a brief discussion of the cases used in this study, which are the issues of immigration and European integration in the Netherlands from 1995 to 2010. Next, the data, content analysis and statistical methods are presented, followed by the results on the two hypotheses. Finally, the conclusion discusses the implications for our understanding of the interactions between political and media agendas.

Theory and hypotheses

Although agenda-setting research has made considerable progress in explaining the mass media’s power over the political agenda, few studies examine whether and how political actors can influence what is on the media agenda. Those studies that do examine this topic primarily focus on campaign periods, explaining how,

through public speeches, TV ads and press releases, parties can influence election news coverage (Brandenburg 2002; Lancendorfer and Lee 2010; Hopmann et al. 2012). As a result, we know very little about the influence of politics over the media agenda in routine periods. Recent research, moreover, reveals that long before campaigns begin, voters gradually form electoral preferences, suggesting that setting the media agenda during routine periods is of crucial importance for parties (Jennings and Wlezien 2013). In addition, because campaign studies often look at press releases, we know even less about the media agenda-setting power of *parliament* during routine periods. This is surprising, because much parliamentary activity –i.e., speeches and questions– is largely symbolic in nature and intended to influence the broader public debate. In particular, by asking parliamentary questions, parties attempt to attract public attention to their specific issues, either to set the electorate’s issue priorities through the media or to use the media to force government parties to address an issue.

Furthermore, of the studies that consider media agenda-setting by parliament during routine periods, most examine the US context. Bartels (1996) shows that the US congressional agenda has both positive and negative effects on the media agenda, depending on which political issue is involved. Edwards and Wood (1999) study both congress and the presidential agenda for five issues and find that congress did not affect weekly media attention on any of them. A study by Eshbaugh-Soha and Peake (2004) on three policy issues also concludes that the president, but not congress, exerts influence over the media agenda. Outside the US, in a study of the issue of immigration in the Netherlands, Vliegenthart (2007, 64) finds ‘limited evidence for the claim that media tend to follow politics.’ A long-term agenda-setting effect was detected, but this effect was minimal and barely significant, while there was no effect in the short run.

In summary, very few studies have addressed the question of whether the legislative agenda affects media attention, and the conclusion thus far is that the influence is either limited or nonexistent. A negligible overall agenda-setting effect is not very strange, however, because not all issues discussed in parliament are likely to have equal news value for journalists and the audience. As a wealth of communication research has demonstrated, the media have a limited ‘carrying capacity’ (Hilgartner and Bosk 1988) and newspapers must be very selective in prioritizing potential news stories. To do so, journalists employ ground rules for

deciding what is news (see Harcup and O'Neill 2001), such as the news value of *power*, leading newspapers to allocate disproportionate space to elite actors, particularly those holding the highest government offices (Hopmann, De Vreese and Albæk 2011). Whether an issue from the parliamentary agenda appears in the news is likely to depend on whether journalists assign it such a news value.

The news value of power and the incumbency bonus

Bennett's (1990) influential work on the indexing hypothesis and subsequent studies (e.g., Althaus et al. 1996; Bennett, Lawrence and Livingston 2006) have shown that the range of views presented by the media tends to mirror the range of views that exist in the elite debate. Put differently, matters discussed by political elites are considered relevant news, and views that are not voiced in the elite debate tend to be ignored in the news as well. However, the journalistic focus on power extends further, by prioritizing the more powerful among the political elites, as is documented in the numerous studies demonstrating the existence of a so-called 'incumbency bonus' (Brants and Van Praag 2006; Hopmann, De Vreese and Albæk 2011; Van Aelst et al. 2008). Politicians that participate in government are mentioned more frequently and prominently in the news than their colleagues in opposition. The result is that the media reproduce (and possibly reinforce) existing formal power structures in their coverage, by granting already powerful actors more exposure (Tresch 2009).

As Green-Pedersen, Mortensen and Thesen (2013) argue, it is important to understand what mechanism causes the media to focus disproportionately on powerful politicians. According to these authors, the news *value* of power should be understood in light of the news *norm* of the media as a "watchdog". This norm implies that journalists are responsible for monitoring the performance of actors with a particular responsibility, i.e., those in political power holding office. Thus, the watchdog norm explains why government actors are generally more prominently featured in the news. However, when journalists cover parliamentary activity, this norm might have a different effect than it does in the case of general political coverage. Parliamentary questions are primarily an instrument by which the opposition holds the government accountable. As a case in point, opposition parties are responsible for the vast majority of questions in the parliaments of Denmark, Belgium and the Netherlands (Van Aelst and Vliegthart 2013; Vliegthart and Walgrave 2011). By asking the government

questions, opposition MPs can both confront the government with issues that the latter wishes to avoid and directly hold ministers responsible for societal problems. A watchdog journalist, therefore, also seeking to hold government officials responsible, should have a particular interest in covering the questions of opposition parties seeking to fulfill precisely the same role.

Thus, there is reason to expect journalists to be more responsive to questions posed by the opposition, as they pressure those formally in power. However, the opposition is a heterogeneous group, and not all parties have an equal incentive to put pressure on the government. This is especially the case in multiparty systems. In these systems, De Vries and Hobolt (2012) differentiate between two types of parties within the opposition: mainstream opposition parties and challenger parties. Challenger parties are defined as parties that have never participated in government, and the distinction from the mainstream opposition is relevant here for two reasons. First, challenger parties are more likely to be issue entrepreneurs, i.e., to attempt to restructure political conflict by mobilizing previously non-salient issues (De Vries and Hobolt 2012). This makes them more likely to introduce issues in parliament that are ignored by the government. Mainstream opposition parties, by contrast, are reluctant to do so in fear of jeopardizing potential future governing coalitions. As the coalition potential of challenger parties is low anyway, they have little to lose, but much to gain from agitating matters by introducing new issues.

Second, mainstream opposition parties have been in government and are likely to be responsible for part of the policies that are in force, or at least still have some effect. Problematizing issues fiercely can therefore potentially backfire, as mainstream opposition parties themselves might be held responsible for not having addressed the problem when they were in office. Challenger parties, with no past government responsibility, are free to press the government hard on issues. In brief, the professional norm of watchdog journalism and the different incentives of government, mainstream opposition and challenger parties lead to the following expectation²³:

²³ This hypothesis relies on the assumption that challenger parties more fiercely pressure the government through their parliamentary questions, i.e., the content of their questions is more conflictual than those of other parties. We know from previous research that challenger parties employ more extreme discourse in their manifestos (Van de Wardt 2014), but there is (to my knowledge) no research demonstrating that the parliamentary questions of challengers are more

H1 Challenger Bonus Hypothesis: Parliamentary questions of challenger parties, i.e., parties that have never assumed governmental responsibility, are more likely to receive media coverage than those posed by mainstream opposition or government parties.

Partisan bias

The mechanism proposed above would produce a structural bias in the news. Structural bias is a reflection of news production routines that in principle applies to all journalists and is not the result of ideological decisions (van Dalen 2012, 34). Partisan bias or slant, by contrast, occurs when political color or party affiliation, which differs for every newspaper or even journalist, shines through in the selection of sources, opinions, or entire news stories. Many, primarily American, studies on the coverage of election campaigns center on the question of whether such partisan bias exists in the reporting of various outlets (e.g., D'Alessio and Allen 2000; Entman 2010). Partisan bias is studied much less in the West-European context, but a survey of journalists in four European countries (Great Britain, Germany, Italy and Sweden) confirmed that journalists are 'partisan actors whose beliefs affect their news decisions' (Patterson and Donsbagh 1996). Yet, in an empirical study on the content of five German newspapers, Eilders (1999) found very similar issue repertoires in the different outlets, suggesting little or no politically biased issue selection.

Traditionally, the media in North and Central Europe were marked by strong political parallelism. Hallin and Mancini (2004) describe this group as 'Democratic Corporatist' countries, where organized social groups played a central role in structuring social, political and cultural life, as well as important components of the media system. Newspapers were directly linked to organized

confrontational toward the government. In this study, the content of the questions was not coded; however, I could draw on another dataset of coded written parliamentary questions in the Netherlands to test this assumption to some extent. This dataset covers the same period (1995-2010) and contains approximately 500 randomly selected written parliamentary questions per year, coded for their frames. The presence of 'conflict framing' provides an indication of whether the interrogator seeks to introduce conflict (see De Vreese 2005). Challenger parties indeed use this frame the most often in their questions: they do so in 54% of cases, while the mainstream opposition does so in 50% and the government in 45% ($\chi^2(df=2)=39.10, p=0.000$). I am thankful to Rens Vliegthart for providing these data.

social groups and were consequently highly partisan. Since the 1960s and 1970s, this system has largely eroded and newspapers have lost their immediate connection to political parties. This is not to say, however, that papers may not be associated with specific parties or ideologies (Patterson and Donsbagh 1996). In the Netherlands, for example, most national dailies gradually redeveloped substantively distinct profiles with recognizable ideological positions (Van der Eijk 2000).

For two related reasons, one could expect journalists to be more prone to adopt an issue raised in the parliamentary questions of an ideologically affiliated party. The first is that news editors and journalists have their own policy positions and will consider the parliamentary questions of parties that hold similar positions to be more newsworthy or interesting because they view them through a partisan lens. Possibly, as a response to such reporting, newspapers would attract readers who also hold similar views. The second is that newspapers have a historical legacy of ties with certain parties, and even though the current editors might no longer be partisan, the particular audience still is (or partly is). It would then still be sensible from a market perspective to cater to the partisan preferences of the newspaper's audience and devote particular attention to the questions of certain parties while ignoring those of others. Both reasons lead to the same expectation, which is laid down in the following hypothesis:

***H2 Partisan Bias Hypothesis:** Parliamentary questions of parties that are ideologically linked to the newspaper are more likely to receive media coverage than those of parties that are ideologically distant.*

Methods

These hypotheses are tested by tracing two issues over a period of fifteen years (1995-2010) in newspapers and in parliament in the Netherlands. The Netherlands, with its democratic corporatist media system and multiparty political system with relatively easy entry for political newcomers, provides a suitable testing ground for the hypotheses. The issues under scrutiny are immigration and European integration. Both are part of the 'new politics' dimension (Hooghe, Marks and Wilson 2002, Kriesi et al. 2008), which in this

research period provided parties with fresh potential issues to politicize. As such, European integration and immigration both meet the minimal requirement that they *could* have been politicized; yet they vary greatly in the extent to which they actually were in the Netherlands. Immigration was politicized spectacularly from the early 2000s onwards, while European Union (EU) integration only received limited attention in response to the 2005 referendum on the Constitutional Treaty but generally remained off the political and out of the media limelight until 2010 (De Vries 2009). Therefore, the two issues represent *diverse cases* (Gerring 2006) in terms of political attention and media attention, which strengthens the generalizability of the findings to a wider range of issues. The EU issue shows whether the challenger bonus and partisan bias pertain to issues for which attention (both politically and in the media) is generally low, and conversely, the immigration issue will reveal whether the hypotheses hold for issues that receive ample attention.

The amount of media coverage a parliamentary question inspires is measured in two newspapers: one quality paper, the *Volkskrant*, and one tabloid-styled paper, *De Telegraaf*. It is important to include –and separately analyze– each type of newspaper, because news norms such as the watchdog function may weigh very differently for quality and tabloid editors. The number of articles that follow a question is measured via automated content analysis on the newspaper database LexisNexis. Previously developed search strings for each of the issues were used (Vliegthart 2007; Vliegthart et al. 2008) as were search strings for each party’s name or abbreviation (Appendix A). The resulting variable measures the number of articles in the seven days following the question hour in parliament that mention the party name at least once *and* mention at least one issue search string word. Question hour in the Dutch lower house is held on Tuesday afternoons, and both papers are morning papers, so using the papers from Wednesday to the following Tuesday ensures that the articles always appeared *after* the question was asked.²⁴ For the *Volkskrant*, weekly data from January 1995 to 2010 week 36 were used. Unfortunately, the availability of *De Telegraaf* in the database only begins in 1999, so for this newspaper data from January 1999 to 2010 week 36 are used.

²⁴ *De Telegraaf* introduced a Sunday paper in March 2004 and discontinued it in January 2010; these Sunday papers were discarded to keep the weekly article count consistent over time.

The main independent variable taps whether a party asked questions on the issue in the oral parliamentary question hour. This is measured by applying the previously described issue search strings to the text of parliamentary proceedings with the title 'Vragenuur' (question hour).²⁵ As this search count was done per week per party, and because most parties use zero issue search string words in most weeks, the resulting variable is highly skewed. For this reason, a dichotomized version is used in the analyses, with 0 indicating that no issue words mentioned by the party in that week's question hour and 1 indicating that one or more issue words were used.

The first hypothesis posits that the parliamentary questions of challenger parties have a stronger impact on media coverage, and this is tested by introducing party type as a moderator on the effect of parliamentary questions. Challenger parties are operationalized as parties that have never participated in government; mainstream opposition parties are parties that have been in government but are currently in opposition; government parties form the reference category for these two dummy variables. A list of the parties included in the analyses and their types can be found in Appendix D.

The second hypothesis states that media are more likely to cover the parliamentary questions of parties to which they are ideologically linked. As described above, newspapers with a particular party affiliation apparent in their reporting probably attract readers with similar partisan views. Alternatively, newspapers that have a partisan audience might adapt their news selection to their readers. The editorial office's party affiliation is thus either reflected in the paper's readership or is itself a reflection thereof. Therefore, to measure the ideological tie between a paper and a party, the voting behavior of the newspaper's readers is employed. Specifically, the extent to which voters of a particular party are overrepresented among the readers of the paper is used, based on the Dutch National Election Study from the most recent election. The measure is calculated as follows:

$$Tie(part, paper) = \ln\left(\frac{O}{E} + 1\right)$$

²⁵ The text of the proceedings is made digitally available by Maarten Marx and can be accessed at <http://search.politicalmashup.nl/?q=vragenuur&order=rchrono>. The proceedings from 2002 week 27 to 2003 week 35 are missing from the database and are therefore not included in the analyses.

where O is the observed frequency of voters for the party in the election study and E is the expected frequency if the voters were distributed independently across newspapers. A natural log is taken such that, for example, twice as many voters in the readership and half as many have the same effect size. Finally, one is added before taking the log because the log of 0 has no outcome, so by adding 1, the parties with zero voters among the readers of a newspaper also receive a score. The measure is computed using the election studies of 1994, 1998, 2002, 2003 and 2006, and each observation was coded with the most recent election study score. Figure IV.1 plots the resulting newspaper-party tie scores averaged over all years, with the De Telegraaf ties on the x-axis and Volkskrant ties on the y-axis. As the figure shows, parties that are tied to the Volkskrant tend to not be tied to De Telegraaf, which is also reflected in a correlation of -0.62 ($p=0.04$) between the two.

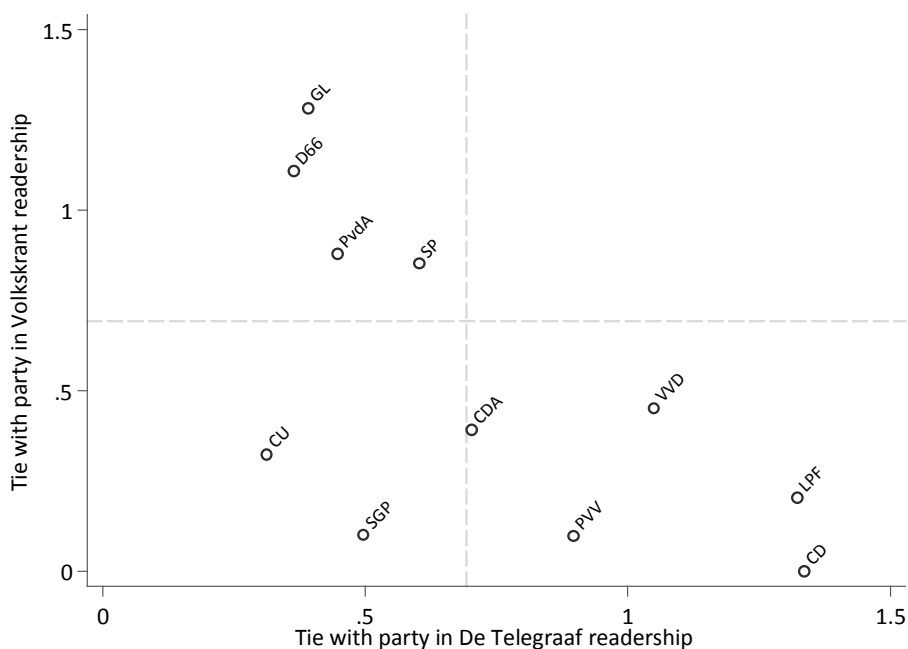


FIGURE IV.1. Mean tie between parties and the two newspapers, 1995-2010.

Note: The dashed line indicates the turning point from underrepresentation of the party voters to overrepresentation.

As discussed above, previous research has indicated that incumbents receive a bonus in terms of media coverage: they are mentioned more often in the news. It is likely, however, that larger parties, with more parliamentarians and staff at their disposal, are also featured in the news more frequently than small parties. To account for this, party size in parliament is included as a control. Appendix D provides a descriptive overview of the dependent and independent variables.

Finally, the second hypothesis suggests that journalists have a partisan bias in their news selection, and as explained above, this would lead them to only cover parliamentary questions of parties to which they are ideologically close. Yet, there is an alternative explanation that could account for newspapers covering questions posed by particular parties to a greater extent, and that is not a partisan bias on the part of newspapers, but a newspaper bias on the part of parties. Research has demonstrated that –at least in the Netherlands– many parliamentary questions are based on very recent news items (see Chapter V). Furthermore, journalists are likely to report on parliamentary questions that are based on an article in their paper. So it could be the case that newspapers do not prefer the questions of certain parties but merely prefer questions in which they are mentioned, and thus the link between a party and newspaper is completely the result of the parliamentarian’s source selection. This alternative explanation is explored in two different ways in Appendix E.

Estimation technique

The issues of immigration and European integration are studied in two newspapers, leading to a total of four cases that are separately modeled. The dependent variable in every model is the number of newspaper articles that mention both the party and the issue, measured weekly for 11 parties over a period of 15 years. As a consequence, there are two types of dependence within the data that must be dealt with: observations following one another in time might be correlated, and observations of the same party (panel) could be correlated. In addition, the number of articles is a count variable exhibiting overdispersion, making linear regression inappropriate. To address these issues, pooled time series models were estimated using generalized estimating equations (GEE), specifying a negative binomial distribution with a log link for the

dependent variable (Hilbe 2011; Rabe-Hesketh and Skrondal 2005). This type of model includes a parameterized within-panel correlation structure, through which the autocorrelation in the observations of the same party can be modeled. For the analyses in this chapter an AR10 correlation structure was selected, thus accommodating any possible correlation in newspaper coverage up to ten weeks in the past. This rather large number of lags was selected because media attention on issues tends to be quite persistent through time and an explorative inspection of the data revealed dependence over this time span. Further, a Huber-White sandwich estimator of variance was used to account for the clustering within party (the panel variable).²⁶

Both hypothesis 1, regarding the media agenda-setting power of challenger parties, and hypothesis 2, regarding partisan bias in newspaper reporting of parliamentary activity, imply an interaction effect. To test the first hypothesis, an interaction between the questions posed on an issue in parliament and the party type is included, and to test the second hypothesis, an interaction between the questions and party overrepresentation among the newspaper readers is included. Because interaction effects are often small in magnitude and therefore difficult to detect in observational studies (Aiken and West 1991), the interactions for hypothesis 1 and 2 are included in separate models. For completeness, analyses including both interactions simultaneously can be found in Appendix F.

Results

The evidence pertaining to hypothesis 1 (H1) is presented in the first four models in Table IV.1 for each of the cases. Before addressing the hypothesis, we note that in all four models, the main effect of the challenger party dummy is negative, while the main effect of the mainstream opposition dummy is negative for the immigration issue and positive for the EU. This provides some preliminary evidence that the distinction between mainstream opposition and challenger

²⁶ The analyses were performed in Stata 12 using the `xtgee` command and specifying the options `family(nbinomial α)` `correlation(ar10)`, `vce(robust)` and `force`. The last option is necessary because the dataset is unbalanced, as certain parties were not in parliament throughout the whole period. As described by Hilbe (2011), `xtgee` cannot estimate the dispersion parameter α simultaneously with the model, so following the recommendations of Hilbe, this parameter was first estimated in a negative binomial regression (using the `nbreg` command) and then inserted in the command.

TABLE IV.1. Effects of parliamentary questions on newspaper agenda, 1995-2010.

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4		Model 5		Model 6		Model 7		Model 8	
	Volkskrant		De Telegraaf		Volkskrant		De Telegraaf		Volkskrant		De Telegraaf		Volkskrant		De Telegraaf	
	EU	Immigration	EU	Immigration	EU	Immigration	EU	Immigration	EU	Immigration	EU	Immigration	EU	Immigration	EU	Immigration
Issue in parliamentary questions	0.139*** (0.027)	-0.019 (0.019)	0.417* (0.179)	0.045 (0.064)	0.015 (0.160)	0.049 (0.044)	-0.414 (0.495)	-0.047 (0.052)								
Mainstream opposition	0.013 (0.208)	-0.105 (0.113)	0.068 (0.196)	-0.156 (0.207)												
Challenger party	-0.458 (0.338)	-0.262 (0.372)	-0.548 (0.454)	-0.452 (0.402)												
Issue in questions x mainstream opposition	-0.211*** (0.058)	0.150*** (0.039)	-0.145 (0.438)	0.039 (0.154)												
Issue in questions x challenger party	0.404* (0.167)	0.145*** (0.025)	-0.675 (0.475)	0.053 (0.080)												
Tie between party and newspaper									0.396 (0.336)	0.351 (0.280)	0.887* (0.413)	0.766+ (0.394)				
Issue in questions x tie									0.265 (0.225)	0.03 (0.048)	0.952 (0.637)	0.171* (0.084)				
Party size	0.027** (0.008)	0.031** (0.011)	0.029** (0.009)	0.034** (0.010)	0.037*** (0.008)	0.036*** (0.007)	0.036*** (0.007)	0.037*** (0.008)								
Constant	-1.380*** (0.283)	0.630+ (0.380)	-2.359*** (0.360)	-0.051 (0.349)	-2.019*** (0.466)	0.181 (0.384)	-3.253*** (0.404)	-0.812* (0.353)								
N (parties)	11	11	10	10	11	11	10	10								
N (parties x weeks)	6721	6730	4882	4882	6721	6730	4882	4882								
Adjusted deviance	0.703	0.787	0.468	0.862	0.708	0.782	0.463	0.844								

Note: Unexponentiated coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. The reference category for the mainstream opposition and challenger dummies is government party. †p<.10 *p<.05; **p<.01; *** p<.001 (two-tailed).

parties is meaningful, as challenger parties seem to be most noticeably at a disadvantage in terms of visibility in the news when they are not actively putting an issue on the agenda in parliament. In addition, the control for the size of a parliamentary fraction has a positive and significant effect, meaning that larger parties are indeed more prominently featured in discussions of the EU and immigration in the media.²⁷

Regarding H1, we see that the interaction between raising an issue in parliamentary questions and the challenger party dummy is positive and significant for both immigration and European integration in the Volkskrant but not significant for either issue in De Telegraaf. The notion that watchdog journalists devote greater attention to parliamentary activities that pressure those in power, i.e., the questions of challenger parties, therefore seems to hold for the journalists and editors of the Volkskrant but not for the Telegraaf. A tentative explanation is that a quality paper, such as the Volkskrant, places greater weight on the watchdog news norm than a tabloid, such as De Telegraaf. However, pending further evidence to check this, we can only conclude that there is partial support for H1.²⁸

The interaction terms and their significance provide a good understanding of the differences between the two types of opposition parties with respect to the reference category, government parties, but indicate less directly what the net agenda-setting effect of the various parties is. Table IV.2

²⁷ Models excluding the control for party size were also estimated, and in these the main effect of the challenger party variable was negative *and* significant in all four cases, while the main effect of the mainstream opposition party variable was negative and not significant. Thus, when excluding party size, we see a clear 'incumbency bonus', as government parties are mentioned more often in the coverage of the EU and immigration, but when the control for party size is included the effect is smaller and no longer significant. These analyses are available upon request.

²⁸ One might wonder, in particular regarding the immigration issue, whether the results on challenger parties are driven by issue ownership. It could be that media find the mostly right-wing, anti-immigrant parties that own the issue more newsworthy, and only seemingly respond to challenger status because this coincides with issue ownership. To assess this, CD, LPF and PVV were marked as immigration issue owners and the CD, PVV and SP as EU owners. For both De Telegraaf and the Volkskrant, a model was estimated with an interaction between issue ownership and the questions on the issue, along with the interaction between questions on issue and party type. The interaction term between challenger status and parliamentary questions barely changed however: for the EU in the Volkskrant, it increased from .404 to .539 (stronger support for H1), for immigration in the Volkskrant from .145 to .154, for the EU in De Telegraaf from -.675 to -.648 and for immigration in De Telegraaf from 0.053 to 0.013. In conclusion, the results remain unchanged even when controlling for issue ownership, meaning that this cannot be the actual driving factor.

TABLE IV.2. Expected increase in media coverage following parliamentary questions.

	Volkskrant		De Telegraaf	
	EU	Immigration	EU	Immigration
Government	15% (9%–21%)	-2% (-5%–2%)	52%(7%–116%)	5%(-8%–19%)
Mainstream opposition	-7% (-14%–1%)	14% (5%–24%)	31%(-32%–154%)	9%(-11%–33%)
Challenger	72% (23%–140%)	13% (10%–16%)	-23%(-67%–83%)	10%(1%–21%)

Note: Bold indicates that the effect of parliamentary questions is significant at $p < 0.05$; numbers in parentheses are the 95% confidence interval. The entries are calculated from the marginal effects via $(e^{\beta}-1)*100\%$, yielding the expected percentage increase in newspaper articles mentioning both the party and the issue if the parliamentary questions variable goes from 0 (issue not mentioned in questions) to 1 (issue mentioned in parliamentary questions) for the specific party type.

newspaper articles on the party and issue when the party includes the issue in parliamentary questions, relative to when it does not. For example, when a government party asks parliamentary questions on the EU, the number of articles mentioning both the EU and the party goes up by 15% (with a 95% confidence interval ranging from 9 to 21%) compared to when the party does not bring up the EU during the parliamentary question hour. Also regarding the EU issue in De Telegraaf, the parliamentary question agenda of government parties affects the media agenda, but for the immigration issue no significant increase (or decrease) can be observed in either paper in response to questions of government parties. Challenger parties, in contrast, bring about significantly heightened media attention with their questions in three out of the four cases, with the predicted increase ranging from 10 to 72%. Only regarding the EU issue in De Telegraaf do they fail to bring about a significant effect. Finally, the questions of opposition parties lead to more newspaper articles on the topic of immigration in the Volkskrant, so in one out of the four cases.

Hypothesis 2 (H2) proposes that newspapers are more likely to report on the parliamentary questions of ideologically proximate parties, and models 5 to 8 in Table IV.1 provide the tests of this proposition. Again, we first look at the main effect, in this case tie between party and newspaper. For both issues in both newspapers, the effect is positive, while for the EU and immigration in De Telegraaf it is also significant. This indicates that at least De Telegraaf reports

more extensively on the parties their readers vote for in their coverage of the EU and immigration when the parties are not asking parliamentary questions about these issues.

Regarding the interaction between party overrepresentation and parliamentary questions, we see that -as expected- the effect is positive in all four cases, but significant only in the case of the issue of immigration in *De Telegraaf*. This means that only for this issue and newspaper does the effect of asking parliamentary questions differ significantly depending on the extent to which the party is supported among the newspaper's readers. However, as Brambor, Clark and Golder (2005) point out, even if the interaction term itself is insignificant, the combination of the main effect of X and the interaction between X and Z might nevertheless depend on Z, implying an important conditionality in the relationship. Concretely, regarding the results discussed here, this means that whether parties can successfully put issues on the media agenda by bringing them up in the question hour might still depend on whether their voters are sufficiently represented in the newspaper's audience. This is displayed graphically in Figure IV.2, where the net effect of asking parliamentary questions on an issue is plotted for different values of the overrepresentation variable, along with 95% confidence intervals.

Figure IV.2 shows that, as expected, both newspapers ignore the parliamentary questions of parties that are severely underrepresented among their readers, as for low values of the newspaper-party tie variable, the marginal effect of parliamentary questions is insignificant in all four cases. However, at approximately the 0.69 mark, the point at which a party is neither under- nor overrepresented in the paper's readership, the marginal effect of parliamentary questions reaches significance for both issues and newspapers. In other words, a parliamentary question only causes an issue to rise on the newspaper's agenda if there is sufficient support for the party among the newspaper's audience. Thus, in line with H2, there seems to be a partisan bias in the selection of these daily newspapers. It is worth noting, however, that though this clearly holds for three out of four of the cases presented here, the evidence on the EU issue in the *Volkskrant* is slightly less compelling, as at higher values of the tie variable, the

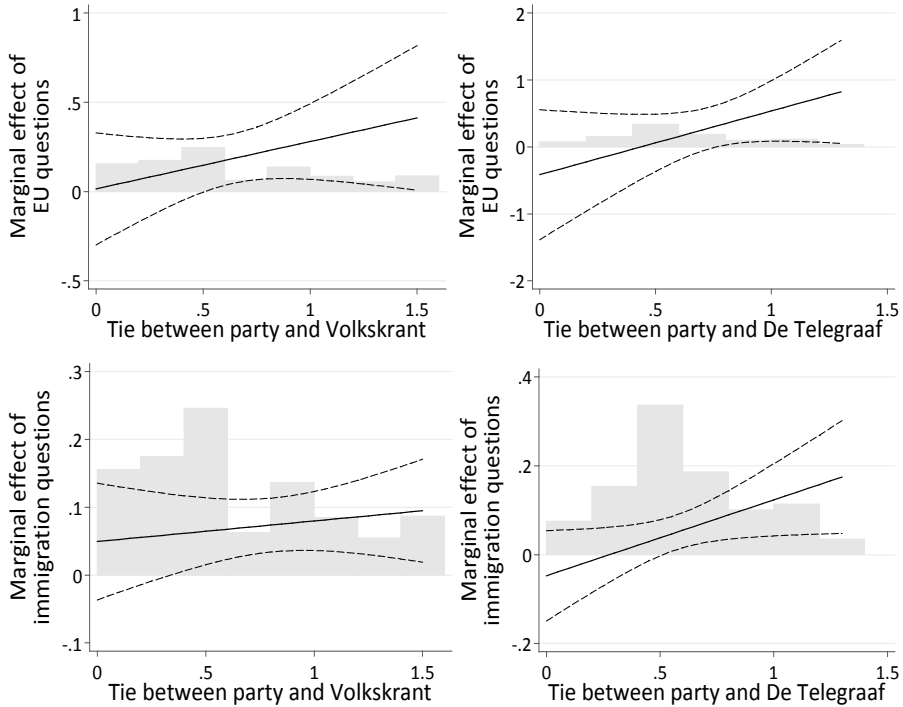


FIGURE IV.2. Marginal effects of parliamentary questions on newspaper agenda.

Note: The scale of the y-axis differs across graphs. The solid line indicates the value of the coefficient of the variable ‘issue in parliamentary questions’ at different values of the variable ‘party overrepresentation among the readers of the newspaper’; the dashed lines display the 95% confidence interval; the histograms represent the values of the newspaper-party tie variable that are in the dataset (in fractions, meaning that a bar of .3 represents 30% of the data).

uncertainty in the model increases to such an extent that the marginal effect again becomes insignificant.

Finally, both Table IV.1 and Figure IV.1 present the results in terms of unexponentiated coefficients, and these are not readily interpretable in terms of the effect size due to the log transformation in the model. To remedy this, Table IV.3 presents the expected increase in the number of articles covering an issue and party if a party asks parliamentary questions on the issue compared to when it does not. In the first row, which presents the expected increase in the outcome in the case of extreme underrepresentation of the party among the newspaper’s readers, none of the increases/decreases are distinguishable from zero. As noted

TABLE IV.3. Expected increase in media coverage following parliamentary questions.

Tie between party and paper	Volkskrant		De Telegraaf	
	EU	Immigration	EU	Immigration
0	2% (-26%–39%)	5% (-2%–12%)	-34% (-75%– 74%)	-5% (-14%–6%)
midpoint (≈ 0.69)	22% (6%–40%)	7% (3%–12%)	28% (-7%– 75%)	7% (3%–12%)
maximum	52% (0%–131%)	10% (2%–19%)	138% (5%–441%)	20% (5%–37%)

Note: Bold indicates that the effect of parliamentary questions is significant at $p < 0.05$; numbers in parentheses are the 95% confidence interval. The maximum value of the parallel tie variable is 1.53 for the Volkskrant and 1.35 for De Telegraaf. The entries are calculated from the marginal effects via $(e^{\beta}-1)*100\%$, yielding the expected percentage increase after parliamentary questions goes from 0 (issue not mentioned in questions) to 1 (issue mentioned in parliamentary questions) while the tie between the party and paper is held at the given level.

above, if a party has no ideological link with a newspaper's readers, the paper will not respond to its activity in parliament. At higher levels of the overrepresentation variable, an increase in articles covering the issue and party becomes visible, with expected increases in the number of articles ranging from a modest 10% to 138% (although the latter is accompanied by substantial uncertainty, as reflected in the confidence interval).

Overall, some support was found for both hypotheses. The structural bias hypothesis, which posits a 'challenger bonus' for parliamentary questions, appeared to be most relevant for the quality paper the Volkskrant and less so for De Telegraaf. Specifically, challengers have significantly more agenda-setting power on both issues in the Volkskrant (see Table IV.1) and can significantly set the Telegraaf agenda on immigration, while government parties cannot (see Table IV.2). Contrary to expectations, challengers are unable to influence De Telegraaf's reporting of the EU issue. More uniform results were found for the partisan bias hypothesis, as in all four cases, journalists ignore the questions of parties that their readers do not vote for, while they are positively responsive to questions from parties with substantial support among their audience. All findings are summarized in Table IV.4.

TABLE IV.4. Summary of findings.

	Volkskrant		De Telegraaf	
	EU	Immigration	EU	Immigration
Structural bias (H1)	Significant interaction	Significant interaction	-	Marginal effect is conditional
Partisan bias (H2)	(Marginal effect is conditional)	Marginal effect is conditional	Marginal effect is conditional	Significant interaction

Conclusion

This chapter examined whether and how parliamentarians can place issues on the media agenda through their parliamentary questions. It hypothesized that the media agenda-setting effect of parliamentary questions is conditioned by both a *structural* and a *partisan* bias. A structural bias should arise because journalists, governed by the norm of the media acting as the watchdog of democracy, critically follow actors with much political responsibility in order to hold them accountable. Challenger parties, with no past government responsibilities and low coalition potential, tend to put pressure on the government with their parliamentary questions, and their questions are therefore more likely to garner attention in the media. The analyses reveal that this is the case for both issues in quality paper the Volkskrant and to a lesser extent for one issue (immigration) in the tabloid paper De Telegraaf. The partisan bias, which simply posits that journalists are more likely to cover the parliamentary questions of ideologically associated parties, was observed in the form of a precondition in all four cases: only if a party is supported by the readers of the newspaper will the paper devote column space to questions posed by the party.

Overall, this study underlines that the media are not merely passive reflectors of existing power structures in three ways (see Green-Pedersen, Mortensen and Thesen 2013). First, supporting evidence was obtained that newspapers' responses to the political context are guided by media norms such as watchdog journalism. As such, the incentives and norms of the media interact with, rather than merely follow, the political context (see also Van Aelst et al. 2008). This also is also reflected by the fact that quality and tabloid newspapers apparently differ in the weight they put on the watchdog norm, suggesting that editors have a choice in whether and how to respond to political power.

Second, while government parties are featured more in the news, challenger parties can influence which topics are on the agenda of the public debate in the media, and this is a valuable asset in light of the growing importance of issue competition (Budge and Farlie 1983, Green-Pedersen 2007) and early voting decisions in the election cycle (Jennings and Wlezien 2013). Specifically, although the norm of watchdog journalism leads to an incumbency bonus in political news in general, in the coverage of parliamentary questions, it actually results in a ‘challenger bonus’ or ‘incumbency penalty’. This means that formally less powerful challenger parties have more power to set the media agenda through their parliamentary questions.

Third, the results indicate that newspapers report on the questions of parties they are close to, while they ignore the questions of ideologically unconnected parties, thus leading to a different selection of issues from parliament in each newspaper. If the news media were merely reflecting political power in their selection, by contrast, issue prioritization would not vary across newspapers. In this way, the partisan preferences of the newspapers and their audiences divide up the newspaper landscape in ways that are incompatible with the pure ‘reflection of power’ thesis.

These contributions notwithstanding, further research is needed to test the generalizability of these findings. Both issues studied here are part of the cultural dimension of political competition, and during this period it might have been particularly profitable for challenger parties to expand political conflict on this dimension. It is possible, therefore, that economic issues are employed as frequently as immigration or European integration to pressure the government and that there is no ‘challenger bonus’ in economic issues. Yet, this remains a question that can only be answered by further research, as one could equally argue that any policy issue can be used to hold the government accountable. Similarly, further research is necessary to determine whether the challenger bonus, which in theory applies to any multiparty system, also holds in other countries. It can be expected that in countries with similar journalistic cultures (see Van Dalen, De Vreese and Albaek 2012), similar patterns could be observed, but again this is an empirical question. Finally, only print media were considered, while parties have an interest in influencing the agenda of the media and public discussion in general, including television, radio and new media. By expanding to

additional countries and media types, future research can further our understanding of parliamentarians' failures and successes in setting the agenda of the public debate.