Congrès de l'AFSP, Strasbourg, 2011

ST33. Communication politique et mobilisation électorale. Bilan et perspectives des dispositifs d'enquête
ST33. Political communication and electoral mobilization. State of the art and perspectives for research design

Lefevere Jonas, University of Antwerp, jonas.lefevere@gmail.com

Priming of Politicians and Issues in the 2009 electoral campaign in Belgium

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Abstract
Studies of priming have established that information from the mass media affects the way voters decide on election day. Considerations regarding certain politicians or issues become more important for voters who are exposed to campaign communications, potentially altering the outcome of their decision-making (Althaus & Kim, 2006; Druckman, 2004). Most existing studies looked at politician (candidate) and issue considerations, both of which are featured extensively in most campaigns. In this study I improve upon the existing literature in two ways; first, I test whether the presence or absence of politician- or issue considerations at the start of the campaign influences the priming effect. Thus far, priming effects were taken to occur on a 'blank slate', and the pre-existing considerations got little to no attention. Second, I test whether certain features in the media coverage itself mediate the priming effect by increasing applicability and accessibility of the information. Results indicate that prior considerations matter, but not as one would expect. Absence of either issue- or politician considerations increase the odds of priming, and vice versa. Regarding the mass media coverage itself, the link with elections and politics in the coverage (applicability) matters, as does the tone of the coverage (accessibility).

Priming theory predicts that considerations that receive more media attention during an electoral campaign become more important in the voter's electoral judgments and decisions. Priming, framing and agenda setting are well established media effects theories in political communication (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007, p. 10). Whereas there is an abundance of evidence that substantiates the priming effect, the literature is divided on the underlying causes. Do the mass media prime because they make considerations more easily retrievable from memory (*accessibility*), or because they increase the perceived relevance of such considerations to the decision at hand (*applicability*) (Althaus & Kim, 2006)? A second omission in the

literature is the lack of attention to prior existence of the considerations. It has been well established that the mass media can increase the importance of issues and candidates, but little has been done on whether this effect is mediated by the presence of these considerations at the outset of the campaign. This paper[1] offers evidence regarding these two outstanding issues: first, I investigate whether factors that increase applicability or accessibility alter the priming effect. Second, I incorporate pre-existing issue and politician considerations and model their mediating role on the priming effect.

Priming of issues and candidates

In the run up to elections, the mass media's attention to politics increases: television broadcasters stage electoral debates, newspapers and magazines add sections on the campaign to their regular political coverage, and so forth. Thus, media coverage during 'campaign times' is distinctly different from the coverage during other periods (Van Aelst & De Swert, 2009; Walgrave & Van Aelst, 2006). During such periods, the mass media's political coverage not only intensifies, it is also subject to different rules: attention is more evenly distributed among the various political actors, and within the political coverage the attention to horse race news increases as the electoral battle heats up. Because the mass media are the prime source of political information available to voters (De Vreese, 2010), the effect of mass media campaign coverage on voters has received ample scholarly attention.

While priming, framing and agenda setting are all well-established models of media effects, priming theory differs from the other two models in that it directly links mass media attention to the voter's decision making processes (Sheafer, 2007). Following the initial definition of Iyengar and Kinder (1987, p. 63) most of the research on priming focuses on judgments or evaluations. Evaluations are distinct from decisions[2]. Nevertheless, priming research has broadened the focus towards decisions (Sheafer, 2007). There is little reason to expect that the priming effect would not apply to decisions. As we see later on, the causal mechanisms that presumably cause priming in judgments could easily apply to decisions. Furthermore, decisions are often preceded by judgments of the separate choices (i.e. party evaluations) (Stroh, 1990). Even if we concede that priming only occurs in judgments this would still indirectly affect the decision.

The types of considerations that have been studied in priming research vary, but a large part of the literature has focused on issue considerations. This is mainly due to the fact that the introduction of priming into political communication occurred as an extension of agenda setting theory (Miller, 2007). Several studies have taken a broader perspective and analyzed different considerations, most often candidates and issues (Krosnick & Kinder, 1990). Druckman (2004) compared issue considerations, considerations regarding candidates, and strategic considerations. By combining an exit poll with content analysis of the media content leading up to the election, he was able to show that respondents that followed the campaign (dubbed 'campaign voters') gave more weight to issues and candidates that had received the most media attention. Mendelsohn (1994; 1996) compared issue, party and candidate considerations and his findings also suggest that mass media attention primes such considerations among the public. This broadened perspective is not far-fetched. Van der Brug (2004, p. 211) states that *"priming is not*

[1] This research was supported by the IAP project PARTIREP (www.partirep.eu), a cross university collaboration funded by the Belgian Science Policy (www.belspo.be).

[2] An evaluation or judgment is made for one object, for example the president. A decision is made between various alternatives.

restricted to issues … but applies to all determinants of party choice" (for a similar argument, see Roskos-Ewoldsen, Roskos-Ewoldsen, & Carpentier, 2002).

I investigate the priming of issues and candidates[3]. Based on earlier findings, the baseline expectation is that mass media attention to issues and candidates will prime them amongst the electorate. The issue priming effect has been substantiated in a number of studies. Iyengar and Kinder (1987) found support for the priming effect of issue considerations on presidential evaluations, findings that were substantiated in a later study by Krosnick and Kinder (1990). Outside of the US, a variety of studies found similar effects: Van der Brug and colleagues provide evidence on issue priming during an EU summit (2007). Sheafer's (2007) findings provide further evidence substantiating the priming effect. In short, issue priming is well established in the literature, in both two- and multi- party systems and elections held at different levels. Due to the predominance of US-based studies, there has been less focus on the priming of candidates: most of the studies have investigated the priming effect *on the evaluation of politicians*, but not the priming effect on the importance of candidates in the decision. However, the evidence that is available supports the expectation that campaign coverage primes candidates. Mendelsohn (1994; 1996) presents Canadian evidence on the priming of leadership (politician) considerations at the cost of issue and party considerations. Even in the US setting, some studies have broadened the perspective towards candidates-as-considerations by looking at the importance of candidate image in voter decision making. Druckman (2004) shows that the candidate's image became primed among voters that were exposed to mass media coverage. Jacobs and Shapiro (1994) offer indirect evidence by showing that candidate's adapt their strategy and put more emphasis on their image or policy positions; Druckman, Jacobs and Ostermeier (2008) reach similar conclusions. Thus, our baseline hypotheses are that politicians and issues that receive more media attention during an electoral campaign are primed among voters.

> *H1: over the course of the campaign, issues that receive more attention in the mass media become more important among voters.*
>
> *H2: over the course of the campaign, politicians that receive more attention in the mass media become more important among voters.*

These hypotheses are hardly ground-breaking, and merely serve as the set-up for the contribution of this manuscript: developing working hypotheses on the impact of accessibility, applicability, and prior presence of issue and politician considerations.

Causes of priming

The priming effect is well-established, but its causes are unclear. Priming (and its ancestor agenda setting) was built upon accessibility. By increasing the accessibility of certain issues (agenda setting) or considerations (priming), their relative weight increased (Druckman,

[3] In the actual operationalization and hypotheses, I refer to 'politicians'. The reason for this is discussed in the method section, but in brief the Belgian polity has several very visible policy levels (federal and regional): in a regional campaign, federal politicians that do not actually 'run' in the election may nonetheless be very active and present in the campaign. As such, it would be nonsensical to exclude such non-candidates from the study. This explains the broadened conceptualization to 'politicians'

Kuklinski, & Sigelman, 2009, p. 495). The focus on accessibility was based on the psychological literature at that time (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987). While Iyengar and Kinder were correct in their assessment of psychological literature at that time, Druckman and colleagues (2009) point to the evolution in the debate within psychology that occurred after this assessment. Althaus and Kim's (2006) paper offers a similar argument. Priming as it was used in political science continued to build on the underlying assumption of increased accessibility. Meanwhile, psychology debated whether priming occurred through increased accessibility or increased applicability.

Why priming occurs may seem trivial because the key point is that it occurs in the first place. However, correctly identifying the underlying mechanism has two important implications. First, the concept of priming risks becoming something different in political science and psychology, which hampers interdisciplinary efforts. Second, the underlying mechanism has implications for hypothesis building. If priming operates through increasing accessibility, the effect occurs because exposure to information from the mass media increases the chance of activation from memory. Put differently, priming would occur because the primed information is 'fresh' in memory (Higgins, 1996). In this scenario, the time gap between exposure and decision is crucial. The more time passes before the decision is actually made, the greater the possibility that the primed material fades to long term memory, nullifying the priming effect. For example, when a voter is watching a television report on the state of the economy, the hypothesis is that if priming occurred the economy weighs more heavily in that voters' subsequent electoral evaluations. The importance of the underlying mechanism becomes clear if we look at *when* we expect the priming effect to occur. If accessibility is at work, the effect should be most potent only moments after exposure, and it would fade as time passes by. Experimental studies indeed found mostly short term effects (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987). However, survey-based studies found effects that were persistent – not just minutes or hours after exposure, but days. Druckman (2004) demonstrated effects that occurred as a real campaign progressed over days, weeks and months. These mixed results cannot be explained by accessibility alone[4]. More recent work in psychology nuanced the 'more attention equals more accessibility equals more importance in judgment' line of thought that dominated the political communication research on priming (Althaus & Kim, 2006; Miller & Krosnick, 2000). This has led scholars to distinguish applicability as a second causal mechanism.

If applicability governs the priming mechanism, priming would occur because exposure to media information increases the degree to which a stimulus and a stored knowledge construct are perceived as applicable to one another. In other words, exposure to the stimulus increases its perceived relevance to a judgmental task (Higgins, 1996). This means that a link is established between certain information (e.g. the state of the economy) and a judgment (e.g. the evaluation of the candidate). If applicability is at work, the time gap is less important: once information is deemed relevant, this link is likely to persist (Domke, Shah, & Wackman, 1998). Applicability can explain the empirical results obtained in survey research: the most important factor is not recency of exposure, but frequency. The more political news focuses on certain issues, the more likely it is that these issues are deemed as relevant or applicable to the voting decision. Scholars call this a 'big message' effect: the more, the better. This idea is echoed in the gradient hypothesis (Miller & Krosnick, 1996, p. 81). The more frequently a link is activated, the stronger it becomes, regardless of time considerations.

[4] Arguably, accessibility *could* explain these results: for example if the economy remains salient in the mass media for longer periods of time, the short term effect would continually prime the economy. However, the explanation offered by the applicability mechanism is just as likely.

Thus, priming is presumably caused by both *accessibility* and *applicability*. Various factors can in- or decrease the extent to which both causal mechanisms create the priming effect. As with any media effect, these mediators are present in the message, the sender, or the receiver. In this paper I focus on three factors, two of which are properties of the media coverage (message), and one that is inherent to the voter (receiver). More specifically, I hypothesize that messages with clear *tone* increase accessibility of a message, that messages with a *link to the upcoming elections* increase applicability of the message, and that *voters that are already using issue or candidate considerations* at the outset of the campaign are more likely to view the corresponding media messages as applicable.

The role of tone is important for accessibility, since the presence of tone leads to increased attention to the message. This is especially so for negative tone: *"bad is stronger than good"* (Miller, 2010, p. 889). Negative information is given more attention, which increases its accessibility. It is also more deeply processed, increasing the probability that ties between the information and the act of voting are established, thus indirectly increasing applicability. During electoral campaigns, mass media have a definite preference for bad news (Miller, 2010, p. 887). Among others, Willnat (1997) and Sheafer (2007) concluded that tone also affects priming effects (Sheafer referred to this as 'affective priming'). Balmas and Sheafer (2010) demonstrate that evaluative tone affects the priming of candidate attributes such as competence and leadership on the evaluation of the candidate in Israeli elections. If the evaluative tone on salient attributes was negative, the overall evaluation of the candidate was negative. I do not discern between individual characteristics, but see no a priori reason why negative coverage on a candidate – regardless of the salience of specific attributes – would have a different effect on overall candidate priming. Consequently, I expect that

> *H3: evaluative tone in the news mediates the priming of politicians. More negative or positive tone increases the probability that a politician is primed, whereas neutral coverage lowers the probability.*

Secondly, media coverage itself can convey the message that the information (on issues or candidates) is relevant to the decision, thus increasing applicability. Althaus and Kim (2006) argue that the context of the information can in- or decrease the perceived applicability and accessibility. Issues that are mentioned in media coverage dealing with the upcoming elections are more directly linked to the elections compared to issues that are dealt with in the foreign news section. Similarly, politicians that are very visible in the mass media, but are never mentioned in relation to the upcoming elections, are not linked to those elections. A good example of this would be the role of the American president in mid-term elections. The president himself is not up for election, but by attending rallies of candidates that are running he is linking himself to the elections nevertheless. These clues, embedded in the mass media coverage, can in- or decrease the perceived applicability of information. With regards to electoral decision making, the key factor that increases applicability is the establishment of a link to the upcoming elections.

> *H4: the more issue coverage is linked to the elections, the greater its priming effect will be.*

> *H5: the more candidate coverage is linked to the elections, the greater its priming effect will be.*

Finally, regardless of how media coverage increases the information's accessibility (tone) or applicability (linking with elections), various authors have noted that there is substantial variation in the way the information is processed depending on the individual. The bounded rationality framework is built upon the assumption that people are not able to decide based on all the relevant information (Simon, 1985). Information can be discarded passively and actively. Information is passively discarded before it enters working memory. Long term memory is organized as a network of interlinked nodes (Miller & Krosnick, 1996). As such, if you think about voting only information related to that construct is activated. Both applicability and accessibility affect these links: applicability causes long term connections to be established, whereas accessibility can establish a short-term connection. These connections will determine what is passively discarded, and what is not. However, Price and Tewksbury (1997) argue that people also *actively* discard information. Just because you remember something when you have to make a decision does not mean you will include it in the decision. Accessibility may cause you to remember that a candidate you saw on television made a funny remark, but this does not mean that this information is included in the decision you make. Price and Tewksbury go on to argue that relevant information will be retained, while irrelevant information will be left aside. I argue that pre-existing considerations determine active discarding of information.

Discarding information implies reduction: some information is retained, some is not. What links the model of priming to bounded rationality is that in both cases the underlying processes are reducing the information being considered. The link is especially important if we consider priming. In bounded rationality and priming the *relevance* of the information is crucial. Bounded rationality stresses that people have neither the time nor ability to process all information, and depending on their goals (a good enough decision versus an optimal one) they use different heuristics. Priming stresses that people *"...may suppress the use of inappropriate information and seek out information in order to fulfill their processing objectives"* (Price & Tewksbury, 1997, p. 193). Therefore, the considerations that were relevant at the start of the campaign are the benchmark against which new information is judged to be relevant or not. And subsequently whether it is used in the decision or not.

In another body of literature the connection between studies of media and the psychological processes underlying information processing has been made by Entman (1989, pp. 77-78) when he discusses the interaction between schemas and external information: *"Schemas direct attention to relevant information, guide its interpretation and evaluation, ... , and facilitate its retention"*. Popkin (1991) talks about issue publics and argues that part of the electorate considers some issues to be more relevant than others. Lau and Redlawsk (2007) show how we can make inferences about the decision making process based on the information that people assess. They do so based on the assumption that people seek information that they deem relevant. Pre-existing considerations moderate priming. After activation from long term memory into short term memory, they guide voters in their assessment of relevance.

> *H6: Issue priming is more likely amongst voters that already used issues in their decision making at the start of the campaign*.

> *H7: Politician priming is more likely amongst voters that already used politicians in their decision making at the start of the campaign*.

Method

To test these hypotheses, I draw on a panel survey among Belgian voters in the run up to the Belgian regional elections of 2009, the Partirep Voter Panel Survey (PVPS). Due to the specific nature of the Belgian polity, the regions have become an important level of policy making and these elections are thus widely covered. More importantly, the linguistic divide that splits Belgium essentially brings about separate campaigns in Flanders and Wallonia[5]: the party systems are completely separate from one another, as are the media systems (Billiet, Maddens, & Frognier, 2008; Deschouwer, 1996; Deschouwer, 2009; Swenden, Brans, & De Winter, 2008). In short, the Flemish and Walloon electoral campaigns ran a completely separate course: this enables me to test these hypotheses for two separate campaigns. Furthermore, the PVPS is a *panel* survey, allowing me to observe individual level change. The initial sample for wave 1 was a geographically clustered random sample of Flemish and Walloon voters, and interviewing used the CAPI method (see Lefevere, 2011 for a more extensive description). Because of the method, the field work period for the first wave was lengthy and lasted roughly 2,5 months. Wave 1 field work started in late February, 2009 and lasted until the end of May. Wave 2 data collection used the CATI measure and field work only lasted 2 weeks, namely the final two weeks of the campaign. Thus, some respondents were interviewed twice in a relatively short time span, whereas the time gap was substantially larger for other respondents: naturally, this is advantageous when studying campaign effects because there is a lot of variation at the individual level.

The main difference between my method and those of prior priming studies is that the dependent variables in my analysis are coded open-ended causal reports given to us by voters themselves. After asking respondents who they would vote for, we asked the question: *"you indicated that you would vote for [party] for the [Flemish][Walloon] parliament. People often have a variety of reasons to vote for a certain party. Can you explain in your own words why you would vote for this party?"*. Responses were then assigned codes that indicated which issues and politicians were mentioned as reasons[6]. Inter rater reliability was calculated by having a student coder double code all the wave 1 causal reports (N=2010). Krippendorff's _ was 0.8 for the politician considerations, and 0.7 for issue considerations (Hayes & Krippendorff, 2007).

Of course, the main methodological criticism will not arise from low reliability – which is more than acceptable – but rather from the fact that the indicator stems from a causal report, a method that has withered from mainstay political science in the last decades. The reference work for their dismissal is '*Telling more than we may know'* by Nisbett and Wilson (1977). However, as I explicate much more elaborately elsewhere we have good reasons to believe that the codes originating from these reports are at least as good as the more tradition indicators, if not better (Lefevere, 2011). Firstly, open ended questions do not present information to voters. A closed ended list of issues incites many respondents to list most of them as (very) important, and the odds that this is partially induced by social desirability are substantial: when a respondent is being read a list of issues as reasons to vote for a party, he might be inclined to think he *should* be considering them (Wilson & Nisbett, 1978). Second, the codes correlate highly with the closed-ended issue battery measures and a host of other, more traditional, measures (Lefevere, 2011, pp. 135-140). These findings are similar to those of Van Holsteyn (1994) using the Dutch

[5] The bilingual third region, Brussels, is left aside here because we do not dispose of survey data for this region.

[6] The actual coding scheme included 13 categories, but we only use the issue and politician ones. For a more extensive overview, see (Lefevere, 2011);

NES data. Thus, the findings based on causal report data are very likely to be similar to those using the more traditional measures. Third, contrary to what is suggested by critics of such measures, I find strong stability in the codes that are assigned: in contrast to the 'randomness' that is often attributed to them, the codes are highly stable and are thus a more strict test of the priming hypothesis – if there is little change in the dependent there is less variance to be explained. Four, the post-hoc rationalization criticism does not apply here because I only use pre-electoral waves, and immediately survey the reasons after party preference has been indicated. As such, respondents immediately delivered the report after the decision, which greatly reduces the possibility of bias. The PVPS data also contained measures on mass media exposure (6-point scales, ranging from not being exposed at all (1) to being exposed every day of the week (6)), and various control variables[7].

The second dataset at my disposal is a detailed content analysis of two Flemish and two Walloon newspapers during the period of the first wave 1 interview of the PVPS survey, and the final wave 2 interview[8]. Except for special weekend and sports sections and advertisements, everything in the newspapers was coded. For each article, the issues that were being covered were coded, as were the politicians that were mentioned (if any) as well as the tone in which this occurred (negative (-1), neutral (0), or positive (+1)). For reasons of inter rater reliability, coders were instructed to be restrictive in assigning tone: only if it was a clear-cut case of negative or positive tone, the coder assigned a code. Additionally, each article was coded as dealing with the elections or not: this allows me to look at both issue and politician visibility in electoral coverage and general coverage, which is necessary to test H4-H5.

Inter rater reliability for politician codes was high: mentions of politicians never had an _ below .8, and tone ranged between .8 for one coder, .7 for two coders, and .6 for one coder. The low reliability for the last coder was due to the coder being *too* restrictive. Thus, the reader should keep in mind that the effects of tone might be understated due to this restrictiveness in the coding procedure. Regarding issues, none of the 20 codes used in the analyses had a _ score lower than .7.

For each respondent in the PVPS dataset, I calculated media content scores based on their interview dates: only media content between the two dates was taken into account. Regarding politician visibility, I calculated the absolute visibility of each individual politician, for each respondent depending on the time gap between interviews[9]. The measure is the weighted [10] count of the amount of items in which a politician (*Absolute Visibility*) appeared. Tone (*Overall Tone*) was operationalized as the sum of all tone codings for the politician; negative values reflect negative tone, and vice versa. Finally, as a measure of applicability, I calculated the proportion of politician references that occurred in articles mentioning the regional elections (*Regional*

[7] The controls (age, sex, education and political interest) are included in all the models, but not reported in tables because they are not relevant for any of the hypotheses.

[8] The content analysis was a cooperation between the UA and ULB Partirep teams. Funding for the coding was provided by Belspo (www.belspo.be) and by the FER research grants of the ULB. Promotors of the project were Jean-Benoît Pilet (ULB) and Stefaan Walgrave (UA). The research itself was monitored by Régis Dandoy (ULB), Jonas Lefevere (UA) and Dave Sinardet (UA).

[9] In (Lefevere, 2011) I also estimated the models with a decay function on the visibility measures, where coverage closer to the wave 2 interview received greater weight compared to earlier coverage. Additionally, I added relative measures to account for the within-party competition. However, due to space limitations and because the overall conclusions remain identical, I omitted these from the current manuscript.

[10] The weight accounts for the size of the article, and its prominence (first page or not).

Election Linking), and the European elections[11] (*European Election Linking*) ranging from 0 (none of the appearances were in electoral articles) to 1 (all of the appearances were in electoral articles).
For issues, I calculated relative measures for the general coverage (*Specific Issue, General Salience*, and for electoral coverage (*Specific Issue, Regional election Salience / Specific Issue, EU election salience*). The measures range from 0 to 1, and indicate the percent of articles in the time period that referred to the issue.
The dependent variable in the analyses is whether a respondent mentioned a certain issue or politician (1) or not (0) at the wave 2 interview. Because each respondent could mention multiple issues or candidates, I used a stacked dataset, with multiple rows per respondent. Because adding every possible politician for each respondent would result in a very large dataset (and skew the dependent), the politician dataset only contains rows those politicians that were mentioned at least once in the two PVPS waves, and only for the party that the respondent would vote for. Table 1 presents the layout of the dataset used to estimate politician priming effects, with fictitious data.

<Table 1 here>

This layout allows me to estimate, at the individual politician level, the effect of media visibility (*Visibility*) on their use at the end of the campaign (*Specific Politician W2*), controlling for their presence at the start of the campaign (*Specific Politician W1*). More importantly, I can examine the mediating effect of presence of the politician consideration at the start of the campaign (a respondent-level variable, *Politician Consideration W1*) on the priming effect. I use a multilevel logistic regression with a random intercept for respondent to estimate the model: the addition of a random intercept ensures that the standard errors for variables situated at the respondent level (most notably *Politician Consideration W1*) are estimated correctly. I use a similar dataset to estimate issue priming effects, with the exception that the dataset contains 18 cases (one for each issue) for each respondent.

Results – Issue Priming

Table 2 and Table 3 present results for models estimating the direct and indirect priming effect of mass media salience of issues**.** To keep the amount of coefficients manageable, I only present the coefficients that are of substantive interest to this study. All models include socio-demographic control variables (age, gender, education), and all constitutive direct and interaction terms (Brambor, Clark, & Golder, 2006). The tables do not include the intercept-only model, but model fits increase significantly and because I estimate logit regressions the changes in the variances at the various levels is hard to interpret anyway (Goldstein, Browne, & Rasbash, 2002). Given that the two election campaigns (and the news coverage) focused on different issues, the similarities between the Flemish and Walloon data are striking.

<Table 2 and Table 3 here>

Firstly, the priming effect (H1) is substantiated, but only as far as election coverage is concerned: only issues that were salient in the coverage on the upcoming regional elections had a priming

[11] The EP elections were held concurrently with the regional elections, but had a clear second order character: they received less media attention, and party communications (especially in Wallonia) focused on the regional elections. Thus, I mostly leave them aside in this analysis.

effect on voters. Issues in the general coverage did not prime voters. This also supports the hypothesis on applicability: the stronger the link between an issue and the upcoming election, the greater the probability that the issue primes voters (H4). The crime issue is a key example: while this issue was one of the most salient issues in the newspapers in general, voters only seldom used it in their decision making. The reason is simple: most of the coverage was generic and the issue was never politicized. The state reform issue, on the other hand, was a small issue in the general coverage but was very visible in the election coverage. As a result, this issue became more important among voters. Interestingly, the EU election coverage also has a marginally significant priming effect, but only in Flanders. The EP election campaign was much more visible in Flanders, due to the fact that the frontrunners for the Liberals and Christian-Democrats were both former prime-ministers. As such, it might be the case that EP election coverage was perceived as relevant, though the effect is admittedly weak. Model 2 suggests only a moderate effect for exposure: the issue priming effect happened not just among the highly exposed. One possible explanation is the fact that most of the issues were stable throughout the campaign. In 2009, the financial crisis was the dominant issue, as was the state reform issue. They kept this position for months on end, making exposure somewhat irrelevant: if an issue is front page news for a prolonged period of time, voters would be hard-pressed not to notice it. Finally, regarding H6 (the mediating effect of pre-existing issue considerations), the results run counter to my expectation: if the issue consideration was present at the start of the campaign, the probability that new issues prime voters decreases. As such, it seems that the way voters processed campaign coverage runs counter to what applicability theory would predict, namely that types of information are only deemed relevant by certain voters[12].

Results – Politician Priming

Table 4 presents results for the Flemish campaign, Table 5 for the Walloon campaign. Model 1 estimates the direct effects. The findings clearly substantiate H1: the mass media have a direct priming effect. Regardless of exposure to newspapers or television, absolute visibility of a politician significantly increases the odds that (s)he becomes a consideration in the vote ($p < .001$ in both regions). Model 2 estimates the same model with two way interactions between exposure and visibility. It suggests that the priming effect is mediated by newspaper exposure. That said, the signs of the interactions are opposite in the two regions. In Flanders, the interaction is negative, whereas it is positive in Wallonia. While in both regions absolute visibility has a positive marginal effect, in Flanders the effect increases as exposure to newspapers is greater whereas it decreases in Wallonia. One explanation is that in Wallonia the diversity of politicians that were mentioned is lower: only prominent figures are primed, whereas in Flanders a greater diversity of politicians is primed. Some of these are less visible, and thus only likely to be primed among voters that are highly exposed to mass media coverage.

<Table 4 and Table 5 here>

H3 predicted that tone, by increasing accessibility (and to a degree, applicability), would increase the priming effect. The results suggest that tone matters, but also that its effect is different in the two regions. In Flanders, the direct effect of model 1 is insignificant, and the two-way interaction with visibility is only marginally significant. Conversely, the direct effect is very strong in

[12] I also tested for three-way interactions with media (newspaper / television) exposure, but none of these were significant.

Wallonia (0.03, S.E. .01, $p < .01$), and so is the interaction with visibility (0.00, S.E. .00, $p < .01$). The explanation is the different electoral context: in the 2009 Walloon regional campaign two parties vied for the market leadership (PS and MR), which resulted in a mudslinging campaign with a lot of negative tone. Such open hostility was mostly absent from the Flemish campaign which had much less outspoken tone. Also, tone mattered in Flanders, if only as a control variable: when I estimate model 1 *without* controlling for tone the direct effect of visibility weakens (not in table). These results partially confirm H3: whereas I expected that any kind of tone mattered, only positive tone seems to prime voters[13]. This suggests that politicians that are depicted in a negative fashion fade to the background: the Walloon liberal party MR had the most visible politician in the Walloon campaign – Didier Reynders. However, he was depicted in a very negative fashion, and as a consequence MR voters stopped using him in their decision making. Interestingly enough, these voters did *not* switch party – they stayed loyal, but seemed to shift attention away from Reynders. This effect is also partially induced by the measure: we polled people for their reasons to vote *for* a party, and a negatively evaluated politician may become a liability, rather than an asset for a party.

The stronger the link between a politician and the upcoming elections, the stronger the priming effect was expected to be (H5). Again, results in both regions clearly support H5: the effect of regional election linking is strongest in Flanders, but also significant in Wallonia. The strength of the link with the EP elections is insignificant, but this is to be expected: the dependent variable was related to voting in the *regional* elections. Additionally, in Flanders the two way interaction between visibility and electoral linking is significant. Figure 1 plots effect of electoral linking on the predicted probabilities of politician priming, for various degrees of visibility[14].

<Figure 1 here>

As the plot shows, electoral linking matters, and potentially matters a great deal for highly visible politicians: if a highly visible politician is linked to the election in 60 per cent of the times (s)he appears, the probability of becoming primed is less than ten per cent. However, if that same politician is almost exclusively mentioned in electoral news, the probabilities exponentially increase, especially over the 80 per cent mark. Of course, such findings are hardly relevant for non-multi level systems: in Belgium, the finding is relevant because parties can opt to keep unpopular federal politicians away from the regional elections to stop them from becoming a factor in the vote choice. However, if parties do not have to deal with multiple policy levels that are all very visible to voters, such considerations are not needed in the first place. That said, one should remember that this finding also suggests that *applicability* matters: I only tested one possible factor, but it is likely that other such factors exist. H5 is confirmed.

Finally, H7 expected that pre-existing considerations would affect candidate priming. Model 2 shows that they do, but as with issue priming, not as expected. When the politician consideration was present at the outset of the campaign, the priming effect is *decreased*; when it was not present, the probabilities of candidate priming are higher. In Flanders, model 3 shows that both three-way interactions are negative, indicating a similar trend: whereas there is no mediating effect of the politician consideration for low degrees of exposure, at high degrees of exposure the

[13] Not displayed in table, I also ran the same regression with the absolute value of tone (thus treating positive *and* negative tone alike). However, this measure did not yield significant result, suggesting that the direction of tone does matter.

[14] Low visibility = one standard deviation below the mean, Mean visibility = mean visibility of a politician in the Flemish dataset, High visibility = one standard deviation above the mean.

marginal effect of visibility is lower when the politician heuristic was absent, than when it was present. H7 must be rejected.
This concludes the empirical section. Whereas I find clear support for the priming hypotheses (H1 and H2) and both factors that I expected to in- or decrease the priming effect (H3-H5), my findings also suggest that priming effects effectively 'override' pre-existing considerations. In the conclusion the implications for future research are discussed.

Conclusion

This study adds to the considerable body of literature on priming effects. In line with previous studies, I find that in two separate regional election campaigns, issue and candidate coverage primed voters. In two election campaigns that differed in terms of the issues that were covered, and the way in which parties' and candidates struggled for votes, the results are highly similar. This only strengthens the results: priming effects occur largely independent of the electoral setting. That said, the particularities of the coverage had a great impact on its probability of priming voters. Following Althaus and Kim (2006) and Domke and Wackman (1998), these results suggest that applicability and accessibility are indeed two roads to the same destination: media coverage primes because it makes coverage more 'top of mind' (accessible) *or* because it creates persisting links between the upcoming elections and the primed constructs. My study is limited in this respect because I only study three factors: electoral linking, evaluative tone, and prior considerations. Though my findings suggest that these factors do capture some of the underlying mechanisms that are in play, future scholars should focus on finding additional mediators and moderators of the priming effect. Most likely, the effect is in- or decreased due to an interplay between factors inherent to the sender (the news source), message (news item) and receiver (the voter).
My study suggests that voter properties affect priming, but also that the theoretical underpinnings need re-adjustment. My results clearly suggest that pre-existing considerations either do not mediate the priming effect, or they have an inverse effect: their absence increases the probability that media coverage primes. One explanation on this weird finding, at least for issues, is to be found in Popkin's (1991) discussion of issue publics. Voters that were focused on the environment may be less likely to consider other issues relevant. That is, they seem to stick to their issues, and are very reluctant to include other issues in their decision making. However, I see no reason to expect a similar effect on candidate priming, and yet results were similar. Voters that were focused on the party leader at the outset of the campaign were not likely to take other politicians into account. Perhaps the explanation is that voters only want to take so much into account: once a decision is reached based (in part) on the party leader, other politicians are irrelevant. This might explain why voters that were not focused on politicians were more susceptible to priming: for them individual politicians were perhaps unknown at the outset of the campaign, making the likelihood of politician priming greater. The overall conclusion to draw then seems to be that on the one hand, applicability matters as far as news content is concerned, but that it does not matter at the voter's end. Whereas the priming effect has received wide empirical support, such conflicting findings show that our understanding of what creates it is limited. Future scholars are urged to disentangle the causal mechanisms, because it is the only way to fully understand the way electoral campaigns and their coverage in the mass media affects the vote.

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Table 1: Example of stacked politician dataset.

Case	Respondent	Party W2	Politician Consideration W1	Politician	Specific Politician W1	Specific Politician W2	Visibility
1	1	CD&V	1	Peeters Kris	0	0	6.2
2	1	CD&V	1	Vervotte Inge	1	1	4.9
3	1	CD&V	1	Leterme Yves	0	1	0.3
4	1	CD&V	1	Thyssen Marianne	0	0	3.0
5	2	LDD	0	Dedecker J-M	0	1	1.9
6	2	LDD	0	Verstrepen Jurgen	0	1	8.0
7	3	N-VA	1	Dewever Bart	1	0	19.1
8	3	N-VA	1	Brepoels Frieda	0	1	2.5
9	4	SLP	1	Lambert Geert	1	1	0.2
10	5	Sp.a	1	Gennez Caroline	1	0	10.0
11	5	Sp.a	1	Smet Pascal	1	1	0.3
12	5	Sp.a	1	Lieten Ingrid	1	1	3.0
13	5	Sp.a	1	Tobback Louis	0	0	1.9
14	5	Sp.a	1	Janssens Patrick	0	0	0.3
15	5	Sp.a	1	Anciaux Bert	0	1	3.0
…	…	…	…	…	…	…	…

Table 2: Campaign priming of Issues among Flemish respondents: multilevel statistical estimates. Table entries are coefficient estimates with standard errors in parentheses. *= p ≤ .05 ** = p ≤ .01 *** = p ≤ .001.

Parameter	**Model 1**			**Model 2**		
Fixed effects						
Issue consideration W1	0.34	(.20)		0.85	(.31)	**
Specific issue W1	3.75	(.26)	***	3.79	(.26)	***
Specific Issue, general salience	-5.44	(2.89)	+	-5.08	(2.87)	+
Specific Issue, regional election salience	4.34	(1.36)	**	3.68	(4.86)	
Specific Issue, EU election salience	2.45	(1.29)	+	-1.39	(4.65)	
Newspapers	0.01	(.05)		-0.10	(.08)	
Television	0.06	(.06)		0.02	(.09)	
Specific Issue, regional election salience * Newspapers				-0.31	(.67)	
Specific Issue, regional election salience * Television				0.79	(.87)	
Specific Issue, EU election salience * Newspapers				1.42	(.70)	*
Specific Issue, EU election salience * Television				-0.26	(.82)	
Specific Issue, regional election salience * Issue consideration W1				-5.36	(2.77)	+
Specific Issue, EU election salience * Issue consideration W1				-0.56	(2.58)	
Random effects						
Level 2 (respondent) variance	0.79	(.22)		0.78	(.23)	
Log likelihood	-782.453			-775.701		
N	15534/863			15534/863		

Table 3: Campaign priming of Issues among Walloon respondents: multilevel statistical estimates. Table entries are coefficient estimates with standard errors in parentheses. *= $p \leq .05$ ** = $p \leq .01$ *** = $p \leq .001$.

Parameter	**Model 1**	**Model 2**
Fixed effects		
Issue consideration W1	0.61 (.20) **	0.53 (.26) *
Specific issue W1	3.59 (.24) ***	3.57 (.25) ***
Specific Issue, general salience	-3.60 (3.21)	-3.60 (3.20)
Specific Issue, regional election salience	3.83 (1.31) **	-2.21 (4.11)
Specific Issue, EU election salience	-0.42 (1.25)	4.30 (3.98)
Newspapers	-0.07 (.05)	-0.02 (.07)
Television	0.05 (.06)	0.01 (.09)
Specific Issue, regional election salience * Newspapers		0.02 (.58)
Specific Issue, regional election salience * Television		1.18 (.76)
Specific Issue, EU election salience * Newspapers		-0.51 (.74)
Specific Issue, EU election salience * Television		-0.76 (.79)
Specific Issue, regional election salience * Issue consideration W1		0.51 (2.04)
Specific Issue, EU election salience * Issue consideration W1		0.39 (2.49)
Random effects		
Level 2 (respondent) variance	0.07 (.09)	0.07 (.10)
Log likelihood	-684.143	-682.217
N	12654/703	12654/703

Table 4: Campaign priming of Politician heuristic among Flemish respondents: multilevel statistical estimates. Table entries are coefficient estimates with standard errors in parentheses. *= p ≤ .05 ** = p ≤ .01 *** = p ≤ .001.

Parameter	**Model 1**		**Model 2**		**Model 3**	
Fixed effects						
Politician consideration W1	0.20 (.33)		1.07 (.44)	*	-1.06 (1.63)	
Specific Politician W1	2.59 (.49)	***	2.73 (.50)	***	2.74 (.42)	***
Absolute visibility	0.00 (.00)	***	-0.00 (.00)		-0.01 (.00)	+
Regional Election Linking	5.72 (.92)	***	2.90 (1.31)	*	2.65 (1.28)	*
European Election Linking	0.61 (1.23)		0.27 (2.05)		0.27 (2.00)	
Overall tone	-0.00 (.00)		0.01 (.01)		0.01 (.01)	
Newspapers	-0.03 (.06)		-0.21 (.10)	*	-0.32 (.12)	*
Television	0.03 (.08)		0.08 (.14)		0.10 (.16)	
Absolute Visibility * Newspapers			0.00 (.00)	*	0.00 (.00)	**
Absolute Visibility * Television			-0.00 (.00)		-0.00 (.00)	
Absolute Visibility * Politician Consideration W1			-0.00 (.00)	**	0.01 (.00)	*
Absolute Visibility * Regional Election Linking			0.01 (.01)	**	0.01 (.00)	**
Absolute Visibility * European Election Linking			0.00 (.01)		0.00 (.01)	
Absolute Visibility * Overall tone			-0.00 (.00)	+	-0.00 (.00)	*
Politician Consideration W1 * Newspapers * Absolute Visibility					-0.00 (.00)	+
Politician Consideration W1 * Television * Absolute Visibility					-0.00 (.00)	**
Politician Consideration W1 * Newspapers					0.38 (.20)	+
Politician Consideration W1 * Television					0.14 (.29)	
Random effects						
Level 2 (respondent) variance	0.92 (.44)		0.86 (.52)		0.13 (.32)	
Log likelihood	-411.333		-400.338		-389.787	
N	4374/853		4374/853		4374/853	

Table 5: Campaign priming of Politician heuristic among Walloon respondents: multilevel statistical estimates. Table entries are coefficient estimates with standard errors in parentheses. *= p ≤ .05 ** = p ≤ .01 *** = p ≤ .001.

Parameter	**Model 1**	**Model 2**	**Model 3**
Fixed effects			
Politician consideration W1	-0.38 (1.00)	1.99 (1.20) +	7.55 (4.06) +
Specific Politician W1	3.51 (1.29) **	3.91 (1.20) **	4.57 (1.60) **
Absolute visibility	0.01 (.00) ***	0.00 (.01)	0.01 (.01)
Regional Election Linking	3.16 (1.48) *	0.95 (2.54)	0.90 (2.94)
European Election Linking	0.95 (1.93)	3.99 (4.88)	4.70 (5.45)
Overall tone	0.03 (.01) **	-0.02 (.02)	-0.02 (.02)
Newspapers	-0.22 (.13) +	0.27 (.23)	0.13 (.28)
Television	0.08 (.15)	-0.54 (.26) *	-0.27 (.32)
Absolute Visibility * Newspapers		-0.00 (.00) *	-0.00 (.00)
Absolute Visibility * Television		0.00 (.00) *	0.00 (.00)
Absolute Visibility * Politician Consideration W1		-0.02 (.01) **	-0.03 (.03)
Absolute Visibility * Regional Election Linking		0.01 (.02)	0.01 (.02)
Absolute Visibility * European Election Linking		-0.02 (.03)	-0.02 (.03)
Absolute Visibility * Overall tone		0.00 (.00) **	0.00 (.00) **
Politician Consideration W1 * Newspapers * Absolute Visibility			0.01 (.01)
Politician Consideration W1 * Television * Absolute Visibility			-0.01 (.01)
Politician Consideration W1 * Newspapers			0.74 (.67)
Politician Consideration W1 * Television			-1.55 (.84) +
Random effects			
Level 2 (respondent) variance	0.93 (1.19)	0.09 (.38)	0.11 (.48)
Log likelihood	-121.414	-107.122	-103.3493
N	2251/758	2251/758	2251/758

Figure 1: Predicted probabilities of Politician priming, for range of electoral linking