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Hutter, S.; Vliegenthart, R.

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# Who responds to protest? Protest politics and party responsiveness in Western Europe

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**Swen Hutter**

European University Institute, Italy

**Rens Vliegthart**

University of Amsterdam, the Netherlands

## Abstract

This article addresses the questions of whether and why political parties respond to media-covered street protests. To do so, it adopts an agenda-setting approach and traces issue attention in protest politics and parliament over several years in four West European countries (France, Spain, the Netherlands and Switzerland). The article innovates in two ways. First, it does not treat the parties in parliament as a unitary actor but focuses on the responses of single parties. Second, partisan characteristics are introduced that might condition the effect of protest on parliamentary activity. More precisely, it assesses the explanatory power of ideological factors (left-right orientation and radicalism) and other factors related to issue competition between parties (opposition status, issue ownership and contagion). The results show that parties do respond to street protests in the news, and they are more likely to respond if they are in opposition and if their competitors have reacted to the issue.

## Keywords

agenda setting, party politics, protest politics, responsiveness, Western Europe

## Introduction: Studying protest-party interactions between elections

Political parties and social movements are key actors involved in interest intermediation between citizens and the state. Parties and movements might differ in form (organization vs. network), institutional access (high vs. low) and the main site of activity (parliament vs. ‘the street’), but both articulate societal interests and make publicly visible demands on behalf of a constituency. Therefore, it seems counterproductive that, since the 1980s, research on social movements and protest has become increasingly disconnected from mainstream political science in general and the study of parties and elections in particular. However, due to both scholarly attention cycles and recent political events, such as the rise of movement parties in Southern Europe, there have been new attempts to bridge this gap (e.g. della Porta et al., 2017; Hutter and Kriesi, 2013; McAdam and Tarrow, 2010, 2013). These are giving us a more nuanced understanding of how interest

intermediation works and the roles that social movements and protests play in the process.

The present article is another effort to bridge this gap. By adopting an agenda-setting approach, we examine the effects of media-covered street protests on the issue attention of parties. Our research questions are as follows. *Do political parties in their parliamentary questions respond to the issues addressed in protests? If so, which factors determine the strength of the relationship?* In contrast to other recent work linking these fields, we do not emphasize elections and electoral campaigns as heightened moments of party conflict. Instead, we focus on the interactions between protest and political parties in the periods between elections. Furthermore, we focus on *issue emphasis* as a

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### Corresponding author:

Swen Hutter, European University Institute, Via Roccettini 9, Fiesole 50014, Italy.

Email: [swen.hutter@eui.eu](mailto:swen.hutter@eui.eu)

particular element in the strategic toolkit of political parties (for classical accounts, see Budge and Farlie, 1983; Carmines and Stimson, 1993; Robertson, 1976). According to this theoretical approach, a crucial element of party competition is that parties emphasize issues that benefit them electorally while they ignore those that might be potentially harmful. More precisely, we focus on the attention parties pay to issues in parliamentary questions. These parliamentary questions are argued to be part of the 'symbolic' political agenda: they do not have direct policy consequences but are an important way for a party to highlight its priorities and respond to the issues of the day (Walgrave and Van Aelst, 2006). Parties might also respond to protests by adapting their issue positions or framing strategies, but issue emphasis or 'getting attention' seems to be a condition for these types of response.<sup>1</sup>

There is increasing, but still limited, research that adopts such an agenda-setting approach to studying movement outcomes (for an overview, see Walgrave and Vliegenthart, 2012). These studies investigate the relationship between the attention devoted to issues by protesters and by other political actors, for example, parliament or government. The empirical findings are not conclusive. Nevertheless, they indicate that (a) there is some agenda-setting effect of protest and (b) this effect is stronger in the early stages of the policy process. However, the studies share a major shortcoming, as they usually treat parliament or government as unitary actors. In this study, we innovate by focusing on the responses of individual political parties and especially on the way they vary in their responses to media-covered protest.

Furthermore, we innovate by introducing *party characteristics* that might condition the effect of protest on a single party's parliamentary activity. We draw on related studies that examine whether and why parties respond to other types of external signals, such as shifts in public opinion, general media attention or competitor behaviour (e.g. Adams et al., 2004, 2006; Green-Pedersen and Mortensen, 2010, 2015; Klüver and Spoon, 2014; Meguid, 2005; Spoon et al., 2014; Vliegenthart and Walgrave, 2011; Wagner and Meyer, 2014). These studies show that responsiveness depends on, for example, ideological affinity, opposition status or contagion. In the present study, we assess two ideological factors (left-right orientation and radicalism) and three additional factors related to party issue competition (issue ownership, contagion and opposition status). We scrutinize the explanatory power of these factors by showing whether they affect the extent to which parties respond to the particular signals sent by the participants involved in protest events.

Empirically, our analysis covers several years and four European countries: France (1995–2005), the Netherlands (1995–2011), Spain (1996–2011) and Switzerland (1995–2003). The data on parliamentary questions were collected by the *Comparative Agendas Project* (CAP) ([http://](http://www.comparativeagendas.net)

[www.comparativeagendas.net](http://www.comparativeagendas.net); including links to data sets). The protest data were collected by the *National Political Change in a Globalizing World* project (Kriesi et al., 2012). More precisely, the protest data were collected by means of a quantitative content analysis of protest coverage in national quality newspapers. Using media data to assess the activity in the protest arena reflects the predominant approach in studies on the agenda-setting power of protest. On the one hand, this choice follows a long-standing tradition in social movement research more generally, as media (and especially newspapers) offer almost the only source with which to systematically trace protest events over longer periods and across different countries (e.g. Earl et al., 2004; Hutter, 2014a).<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, we know that political elites mainly – or as Koopmans (2004) argues, even exclusively – get to know about protest through media reporting. Thus, there are good reasons for initiating a study of differentiated party responses to protests by focusing on national news coverage.

Combining the data sets allows us to draw on around 29,000 questions and 4,500 media-covered protest events for the analysis. The unit of analysis is the attention to a given issue during a particular period (here we use months). As observations are not independent of each other (they are nested in both parties and issues), we rely on a cross-classified model to test our hypotheses. Overall, our results indicate that parties do respond to street protests in their parliamentary questions and that they are more likely to respond if they are in opposition and if their competitors have reacted to the issue. Once we control for opposition status, left-right orientations no longer significantly affect parties' reactions to news coverage of protests. Moreover, we find instances of associative issue ownership as the populist radical right systematically responds to the salience of immigration in the protest arena.

## Who responds? Ideology and party competition

Previous studies on the agenda-setting effects of protest have been innovative, as they allow systematic examination of movement outcomes across issues and contexts. Walgrave and Vliegenthart (2012) present an overview of studies adopting an agenda-setting approach to assessing the impact of protest. They list 11 articles published in the period 1978–2010 (Baumgartner and Mahoney, 2005; Burstein and Freudenberg, 1978; Costain and Majstorovic, 1994; Johnson, 2008; Johnson et al., 2010; King et al., 2005, 2007; McAdam and Su, 2002; Olzak and Soule, 2009; Soule and King, 2006; Soule et al., 1999). Most of these indicate that protest – measured by media accounts – matters in terms of which issues get emphasized by other actors. When protests over an issue increase, political elites start to devote more attention to that issue. This finding raises the question of why other actors (in our case, political

parties) should care about the signals sent by protesters. As Vliegenthart et al. (2015) argue, protests can be seen as a particular type of information communicated to elites about urgent societal problems (Burstein, 1999; Lohmann, 1993). The protest signal seems particularly attractive because 'it is public and accessible, negative, most of the time unambiguous, with a clear evaluative slant, applicable to one's task, and (for some elites) compatible with existing predispositions' (Vliegenthart et al., 2015: 8). Moreover, involvement in protest allows the participants to raise issue-specific concerns, and it shows their commitment due to the fairly high 'costs' involved in this form of political participation (e.g. Verba et al., 1995: 48). Thus, protest – and especially protest that gets into the news – is a strong signal sent by a mobilized part of the population. Depending on the strength of the signal, political parties might ultimately interpret it even as an electoral threat (Burstein, 1999; Lohmann, 1993; Uba, 2009, 2016).

Based on the idea that protest is an informative signal and that its effects depend on the characteristics of the signal and the recipient, previous studies have formulated a set of hypotheses. For example, it has been shown that protest size matters more than protest frequency (e.g. McAdam and Su, 2002) and that protests related to certain issues matter more than others (e.g. Walgrave and Vliegenthart, 2012). Regarding the recipients, the existing literature usually compares different political agendas (like the parliamentary or governmental agenda). Studies in the US context indicate that protest is especially effective early on in the policy cycle (e.g. King et al., 2005; Soule and King, 2006). By contrast, the government seems to react more than parliament in the case of Belgium (Walgrave and Vliegenthart, 2012).

However, what studies have so far ignored is the question of why particular political parties respond to protest mobilization. By looking at the general parliamentary agenda, they focus on the effect of protest on the party system at large but not on the responses of individual parties. As stated initially, in this study, we attempt to open the 'black box' of parliament and this should allow us to get closer to understanding the complex relationship between protest politics and party politics. What type of party is most likely to respond to a protest signal reported in the media? In the following, we discuss five such partisan moderators of the agenda-setting influence of protest.

To begin with, the literature on party responsiveness brings in ideological affinity as an explanatory variable. According to this argument, political parties are more likely to react to issues emphasized by competitors within their political camp. For example, Adams and Somer-Topcu (2009) show that regarding positional shifts, parties are more responsive to parties from the same ideological camp. The same has been observed for strategies of issue emphasis. Left-wing parties are more likely to take up the issues emphasized by other left-wing parties in general

(Green-Pedersen and Mortensen, 2015) and by green parties in particular (Spoon et al., 2014). It is argued that this effect is due to the similar issue preferences of the actors in the same political camp. In fact, they might pose more of an 'electoral threat' (Spoon et al., 2014: 363) to each other, as they compete for similar constituencies. Closely related to ideological affinity, the literature discusses the distinction between mainstream and niche parties. According to Adams et al. (2006), niche parties are characterized by their non-centrism on economic left-right issues, and the results indicate that niche parties do not consistently respond to general shifts in public opinion. As Klüver and Spoon (2014: 6) argue, niche parties are 'classic policy seekers, who value their policy goals over any office considerations'. Therefore, they seem less likely to follow signals from the general population but are more sensitive to their constituency and the issues that they care about the most (see also Ezrow et al., 2011).

How can we apply these ideas to the particular signal sent by protesters? It is important to note that the protest signal is usually negative and it comes with a political 'bias'. That is, a large majority of the protests that are reported in the media demand economically left-wing and/or culturally libertarian solutions to a certain problem (Hutter, 2014b). Thus, we study responses to protests that correspond more to the preferences of left-wing parties. Many studies show that left-right ideological orientations are positively related to support by citizens or representatives for involvement in protest. Using multilevel models in their 87-country study, Dalton et al. (2010: 69), for example, show that the effect of left-wing ideology is magnified by the democratic and economic development of a state. Thus, the effects are most pronounced in established and affluent democracies – that is, the countries on which we focus in our study. Therefore, we expect that left-wing parties are more responsive to protests than right-wing parties. They might act as institutional allies of social movements because they are more likely to share the demands of the protesters. At the same time, they might also risk more if they ignore the electoral threat posed by sustained news coverage of protests on behalf of people who are very likely to belong to their support base.

Moreover, the protest signal should correspond more to the preferences of radical political parties. As March and Mudde (2005: 24) rightly state, both the left-right distinction and the term 'radical' are 'a potential terminological minefield'. However, following their suggestion, we use the term radical to label 'an ideological and practical orientation towards "root and branch" systemic change of the political system'. As Mudde (2007: 26) argues in his book on the populist radical right, radical involves 'opposition to fundamental values of liberal democracy'. While radical (left- or right-wing) parties are thus opposed to liberal democracy, they are not anti-democratic per se. However, they advocate profound political change and are more

critical of existing representative channels of interest intermediation. Therefore, we expect that radical political parties are more responsive to the challengers active in the protest arena, who often share their views, than moderate political parties.

Protests in the news – like any other type of external signal – might not just trigger responses from ideologically close or radical allies, however. The literature on party strategies finds additional factors that influence the extent to which parties are responsive to such signals. A key factor seems to be the different strategic incentives faced by opposition and government parties. First, opposition parties are less constrained by their past activities or external factors, such as economic conditions or international commitments. Second, opposition parties might have more incentives to be responsive to citizens' demands to (re)gain control of the government. Supporting this idea, Vliegenthart and Walgrave (2011) indicate that, in general, parties in opposition are more likely to take up media signals than parties in government. The opposition responds to media signals because they offer 'potential ammunition' (Vliegenthart and Walgrave, 2011: 324) with which to attack the government. Similarly, Klüver and Spoon (2014) show that, regarding issue emphasis in their election manifestos, government parties are less responsive to voters' issue priorities than opposition parties. This mirrors earlier arguments in the political process approach about why opposition parties should facilitate protest mobilization more than government parties (Kriesi et al., 1995; Maguire, 1995). Although the opposition cannot offer any substantial concessions to social movements, it is not bound by the constraints of established policies and the diverse societal forces that government parties need to take into account. Moreover, it might want to build broad social coalitions for electoral purposes. Overall, this suggests that parties are more likely to respond to the signals of protests in the news when in opposition.

At the same time, the literature on party competition stresses that not all parties might profit from emphasizing the same issues. Some parties are considered to be more capable of dealing with certain issues or they are more likely to be associated with them. This idea is at the heart of the issue ownership theory (e.g. Petrocik, 1996; Walgrave et al., 2012). One way in which a party seeks to establish 'associative' or 'issue ownership competence' is by talking as much as possible about the issues it owns. Therefore, the responsiveness literature and work on the media's agenda-setting effect expect that actors react more to signals from their environment if these concern their 'own' issues. Klüver and Spoon (2014) confirm that niche parties – a classic type of 'associative issue owners' – are more likely to respond to changing issue priorities in the electorate if they concern their preferred issue. Moreover, Vliegenthart and Walgrave (2011) show that parties react more to general media coverage of their issues than to

coverage of other issues. Again, this can be translated into varying effects of the protest signal. If protests in the news relate to a matter for which a certain party claims ownership, that party should be more likely to respond to the protest. This response can be either accommodative (taking up the position of the protesters) or adversarial (attacking the position of the protesters) – but there should be a reply.

Finally, the literature on party strategies shows that competitors' actions play a significant role in determining what parties do. To a certain extent, this perspective complements the issue ownership approach with its focus on why parties *selectively* emphasize certain issues and ignore others. As Green-Pedersen and Mortensen (2010) argue, issue ownership offers only a partial view of party issue competition as there is a kind of 'party system agenda' (see also Dolezal et al., 2014; Wagner and Meyer, 2014). This systemic agenda is in large part due to the reactions of parties to the behaviour of their competitors. As Green-Pedersen and Mortensen (2015) argue, it is 'difficult for parties to completely ignore issues that other parties talk about'. This process can be modelled like a contagion or 'riding the wave' process. If a certain issue gets emphasized by some parties, others react. Therefore, apart from just emphasizing their issues, parties react to each other and might want to ride the wave by focusing on those issues that are currently high on other agendas, such as those of the electorate or the media in general. Given our main independent variable, it seems important that the protest signal in the media leads to some initial reactions by other parties so that additional parties react. Again, studies on the reactions of mainstream parties to the issues emphasized by niche parties indicate that challengers can make a difference by initiating such a 'contagion process' – as shown by Spoon et al. (2014) for environmental issues and by van de Wardt (2014) for immigration and European integration.

To sum up, we formulate the following five hypotheses about partisan moderators of the influence of protests on the parliamentary agenda of parties:

- Left-wing parties are more likely to respond to news coverage of protest than right-wing parties (*left-wing hypothesis*)
- Radical parties are more likely to respond to news coverage of protest than moderate parties (*radical hypothesis*)
- Parties in opposition are more likely to respond to news coverage of protest than parties in government (*opposition hypothesis*)
- Parties are more likely to respond to news coverage of protest over their own issues than over other issues (*issue ownership hypothesis*)
- Parties are more likely to respond to news coverage of protest if their competitors have responded recently (*contagion hypothesis*)

## Data and methods

We rely on data from the following countries and periods to test our hypotheses: France (1995–2005), the Netherlands (1995–2011), Spain (1996–2011) and Switzerland (1995–2003). The countries are partly selected because of the availability of data. All are West European democracies with a tradition of protest, free media, elections and accountable government. At the same time, the countries differ in both the general institutional opportunities faced by social movements and the rules that regulate parliamentary questions. We adopt a most different systems design, as we are interested in common patterns in the protest–party interactions across the various settings in which these interactions might take place. We rely on existing data from the CAP to assess the agendas of political parties in the four countries. To be precise, we look at the issues that political parties address in their parliamentary questions. We rely on oral questions for France and Spain and on written questions for the Netherlands (500 questions per parliamentary year, a 30% stratified sample<sup>3</sup>) and Switzerland. While the role and function of parliamentary questions differ across countries (Wiberg 1995), we have selected for each country the type of question that is as equivalent as possible and that has enough variation. Earlier research has shown that such questions can be fruitfully combined in a single analysis (Vliegenthart et al., 2016). In all the countries included in our analysis, questions are asked both by opposition and government parties and parties face few constraints in putting them on the table. A total number of more than 29,000 parliamentary questions are included in the analysis. All this material is coded according to the major policy categories of the CAP (see below). We only include parties that received at least 2% of the vote in the last parliamentary elections, making a total of 29 parties included in parts of or the whole research period.

To assess the protest agenda and its issue content, we rely on protest event analysis (PEA), a particular type of quantitative content analysis. By doing so, we follow a long-standing tradition in research on social movements and contentious politics (for a recent overview, see Hutter, 2014a). Compared to survey data, the other primary source for tracing the development of protest, PEA is far better suited to measuring the issues of protest, that is, the key variable of interest in agenda-setting research. In this study, we rely on protest event data collected by Kriesi et al. (2012) in the project *National Political Change in a Globalizing World*. These data are an updated and extended version of the data used by Kriesi et al. (1995) to study new social movements in Western Europe. The data themselves comes from one national quality newspaper per country. This results in a data set covering 4925 protest events in the four countries, involving around 49 million participants. The newspapers covered are *Le Monde* (France), *NRC*

*Handelsblad* (Netherlands), *El Pais* (Spain) and *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* (Switzerland).<sup>4</sup>

PEA generally – and Kriesi et al.'s sampling strategy more precisely – has been an object of criticism in the literature and researchers still disagree on how problematic the selection bias of newspaper data is. No one would claim that the events covered in the Monday editions of a national newspaper are a representative sample of all protests taking place in a given country. However, the factors that predict whether the news media cover a protest event or not have been empirically assessed. These are event characteristics (especially size, violence and organizational sponsors), the type of media outlet (especially the ideological and regional orientation of the newspaper) and issue characteristics (especially media attention cycles) (Earl et al., 2004). In general, studies report the strongest effects for event characteristics. Since we cannot totally avoid biases and are particularly interested in trends and differences, the present data are based on the idea of making the bias 'as systematic as possible' (Koopmans, 1995: 271).<sup>5</sup>

Furthermore, there are good reasons for assuming that if we cannot establish an effect of media-covered protests on party agendas, it would be even less possible to uncover a direct unmediated agenda-setting effect of protest. As stated in the introduction, the decisive interactions between protests and political elites take place to a large extent – if not exclusively – through the mass media (Koopmans, 2004). Party officials usually get their information about protest events from the media. Moreover, although media-based accounts of protest come with the price of selection bias, precisely these event characteristics that increase the chances that protests get into the news might also increase the chances that political parties perceive the protest signal as a potential electoral threat and therefore respond to it.

As the two data sets were collected for different purposes, an important step was the matching of issue categories. We follow the strategy used by Vliegenthart et al. (2015). More precisely, the protest event data employed in this article initially identified 103 protest 'goals'. The goal variable combined information on the issue and the position of a given protest event (e.g. against nuclear energy, against racism). Following the general approach of the agenda-setting literature, Vliegenthart et al. (2015) merge the different positions and recode the specific issue categories in the protest event data to fit the CAP major issue categories (which total 19 categories for political agendas). The issues of the coded protest events fall into 17 different CAP categories (16 for Spain, where immigration is excluded as a major category). These 17 categories are used in the analysis and listed in Table A1 in the Online Appendix. In general, it should be noted that by bringing together two different data sets and by not cherry-picking types of issue (e.g. main protest issues or new issues), it would already seem noteworthy if we could establish some significant relationship between the general issue areas

emphasized in the protest arena and those emphasized in the parliamentary one.

Our dependent variable is the attention party  $x$  pays to issue  $y$  in month  $z$  – in terms of the share of the total number of parliamentary questions this party tables that month. Our main independent variable is the monthly share of protest activities for an issue from the total number of protest activities that month. Here, we use the average of the previous 3 months (lags 1, 2 and 3) since we assume that protest signals might take some time before they reach the institutional political arena (for a similar argument, see Walgrave et al., 2008). This is all the more true given the skewed distribution of this variable, which has a mean value of .011% with a standard deviation of .047% and 89% zero values. To test our hypotheses, we focus in particular on the interaction of this protest variable with the various party characteristics discussed in the previous section. To classify political parties into ‘left versus right’ and ‘radical versus moderate’, we rely on two different approaches. The main operationalization relies on the categorization of individual parties into party families as proposed by the Comparative Manifestos Project (CMP) (Klingemann et al., 2006; Volkens et al., 2013). This classifies parties into 10 party families: communists, ecologists, social democrats, liberals, Christian democrats, conservatives, populist radical right, agrarians, ethnic-regionalists and special issue parties. For our analyses, parties that belong to the communist, ecologist or social democratic family are coded as ‘left-wing’ and parties that belong to the communist and populist right family are coded as radical. The other operationalization relies on the actual coding of the manifestos and uses the left-right scale (rile) of the CMP data.<sup>6</sup> More precisely, we code all parties with a negative value as left-wing and all those with a rile measure that is one standard deviation either below or above average as radical. The opposition/government status is based on whether a party is part of the national government or not at the time when a question is asked in parliament. To measure issue ownership, we again rely on the party families. To date, there is no established method to determine issue ownership and no comparative data sets exist that contain such measures. Therefore, party family labels are often used as proxies because they tend to reflect fairly well the issues with which parties are typically associated (e.g. Wagner and Meyer, 2014). Table A1 in the Online Appendix lists the party families and the issue categories that they own. Finally, the ‘contagion’ variable (a count variable) indicates how often other parties talked about a given issue in the previous month if there was a protest event related to the issue.

Our observations are not independent. First of all, temporal dependency is present. We take this into consideration by adding a lagged dependent variable and a variable that captures the lagged attention of other parties to the same issue. Second, the observations are nested in both

parties and issues. These two entities are not necessarily hierarchically ordered. Therefore, we rely on a cross-classified (instead of a multilevel) model (with restricted maximum likelihood estimation) that accounts for this double nesting. In the first model (random intercept), we only allow the intercept to vary across issues and parties. In the following models (random slopes), the effect of protest is also considered to differ across issues and parties. We try to account for this variation by including interactions between protest and (mainly) party characteristics as well as issue characteristics (e.g. issue ownership). Finally, our observations are nested in countries. We include fixed effects (i.e. dummy variables for all countries minus one) to account for this.

## Empirical findings

In Table 1, we present the results of the regression analysis. The first model contains all the main effects. Apart from our variables of interest, we also include the following control variables: the lagged value of a party’s own agenda, the lagged value of the agenda of all parties and the size of the party measured by its vote share.<sup>7</sup> The second model tests the dependency of the effect of protest on party attention based on ideological characteristics (left and radical). The third model focuses on dependency on party competition and more dynamic factors (issue ownership, government/opposition distinction and contagion). The fourth model combines the two approaches, and Table 2 presents additional models that focus on opposition parties in particular.

Regarding the two ideological factors, our findings are mixed at best. The second model in Table 1 indicates that left-wing parties tend to be more likely to respond to news coverage of protest than right-wing parties. This finding confirms our first hypothesis and mirrors other studies, as political parties are more likely to react to signals coming from the same ideological camp (e.g. Adams and Somer-Topcu, 2009; Green-Pedersen and Mortensen, 2015; Spoon et al., 2014). By contrast, we do not find the expected effect when comparing radical parties with moderate parties. As shown in Table 1, the interaction effect for radical parties and protest is statistically insignificant and even negative (disconfirming hypothesis 2). Thus, once we control for left-wing ideology, radical parties are as likely to respond to protests in the media as moderate parties. If there is an effect of being radical on how responsive parties are to the protest signal, this seems to be due to the behaviour of radical parties from the left but not from the right. However, the results of model 4 indicate that the effect of sharing the left-libertarian preferences of most protesters is only marginally significant if we take into account other factors that are expected to influence parties’ strategies of issue emphasis. Most importantly, if we consider opposition status, the response of left-wing parties is no longer

**Table 1.** Impact of party characteristics on the agenda-setting influence of protest (all observations).

	Model 1 (main effects – random intercept)			Model 2 (ideology)			Model 3 (party competition)			Model 4 (all)		
	Coef.	SE	<i>p</i> > <i>z</i>	Coef.	SE	<i>p</i> > <i>z</i>	Coef.	SE	<i>p</i> > <i>z</i>	Coef.	SE	<i>p</i> > <i>z</i>
Party agenda (1 month lag)	0.065	0.004	***	0.036	0.004	***	0.035	0.004	***	0.035	0.004	***
All parties' agenda (1 month lag)	0.136	0.010	***	0.091	0.010	***	0.083	0.010	***	0.083	0.010	***
Protest agenda (3 months average lag)	0.060	0.009	***	−0.009	0.021	n.s.	−0.097	0.023	***	−0.113	0.027	***
Party size	0.000	0.000	*	0.000	0.000	***	0.000	0.000	**	0.000	0.000	**
Left-wing	0.051	0.030	+	0.005	0.002	*				0.005	0.002	**
Radical	0.001	0.003	n.s.	0.001	0.002	n.s.				0.002	0.002	n.s.
Issue owner	0.005	0.001	***				0.005	0.004	n.s.	0.005	0.004	n.s.
Contagion	0.002	0.000	***				0.001	0.000	*	0.001	0.000	*
Opposition	−0.002	0.001	n.s.				−0.003	0.001	*	−0.003	0.001	*
<b>Protest*left-wing</b>				<b>0.070</b>	<b>0.029</b>	<b>*</b>				<b>0.051</b>	<b>0.028</b>	<b>+</b>
<b>Protest*radical</b>				<b>−0.002</b>	<b>0.036</b>	<b>n.s.</b>				<b>−0.046</b>	<b>0.035</b>	<b>n.s.</b>
<b>Protest*issue owner</b>							<b>0.031</b>	<b>0.041</b>	<b>n.s.</b>	<b>0.025</b>	<b>0.041</b>	<b>n.s.</b>
<b>Protest*contagion</b>							<b>0.027</b>	<b>0.003</b>	<b>***</b>	<b>0.027</b>	<b>0.003</b>	<b>***</b>
<b>Protest*opposition</b>							<b>0.107</b>	<b>0.021</b>	<b>***</b>	<b>0.106</b>	<b>0.021</b>	<b>***</b>
Constant	0.025	0.005	***	0.031	0.004	***	0.036	0.004	***	0.033	0.004	***
Log restricted-likelihood	49999.602			50477.067			50529.293			50534.476		

Note: *N* = 58,089 (17 issues; 29 parties). Our main independent variable is the monthly share of protest activities for an issue out of the total number of protest activities that month. We use the average of the previous 3 months (lags 1, 2 and 3), since we assume that protest signals might take some time before they reach the institutional political arena. To test our hypotheses, we focus in particular on the interaction of this protest variable with the various party characteristics in bold type. n.s.: not significant.

+*p* < 0.10; \**p* < 0.05; \*\**p* < 0.01; \*\*\**p* < 0.001.

**Table 2.** Impact of party characteristics on the agenda-setting influence of protest (opposition only).

	Model 1 (main effects – random intercept)			Model 4 (all)		
	Coef.	SE	<i>p</i> > <i>z</i>	Coef.	SE	<i>p</i> > <i>z</i>
Party agenda (1 month lag)	0.075	0.005	***	0.042	0.005	***
All parties' agenda (1 month lag)	0.156	0.013	***	0.111	0.014	***
Protest agenda (3 months average lag)	0.090	0.012	***	−0.087	0.035	*
Party size	−0.000	0.000	n.s.	0.000	0.000	*
Left-wing	0.006	0.004	n.s.	0.006	0.003	*
Radical	−0.000	0.043	n.s.	0.003	0.003	n.s.
Issue owner	0.007	0.002	**	0.007	0.004	n.s.
Contagion	0.002	0.000	***	0.001	0.000	n.s.
<b>Protest*left-wing</b>				<b>0.063</b>	<b>0.041</b>	<b>n.s.</b>
<b>Protest*radical</b>				<b>−0.048</b>	<b>0.046</b>	<b>n.s.</b>
<b>Protest*issue owner</b>				<b>0.052</b>	<b>0.055</b>	<b>n.s.</b>
<b>Protest*contagion</b>				<b>0.042</b>	<b>0.005</b>	<b>***</b>
Constant	0.024	0.005	***	0.028	0.004	***
Log restricted-likelihood	28017.790			28351.418		

Note: *N* = 34,317 (17 issues; 26 parties). n.s.: not significant.

+*p* < 0.10; \**p* < 0.05; \*\**p* < 0.01; \*\*\**p* < 0.001.

that different to that of right-wing parties. We only find a marginally significant interaction of the protest agenda and being a member of a left-wing party family if we include an interaction with opposition status (again, see model 4 in Table 1), and it is not significant if we run the analysis only for opposition parties (see Table 2). Moreover, considering the alternative operationalizations of left and radical based

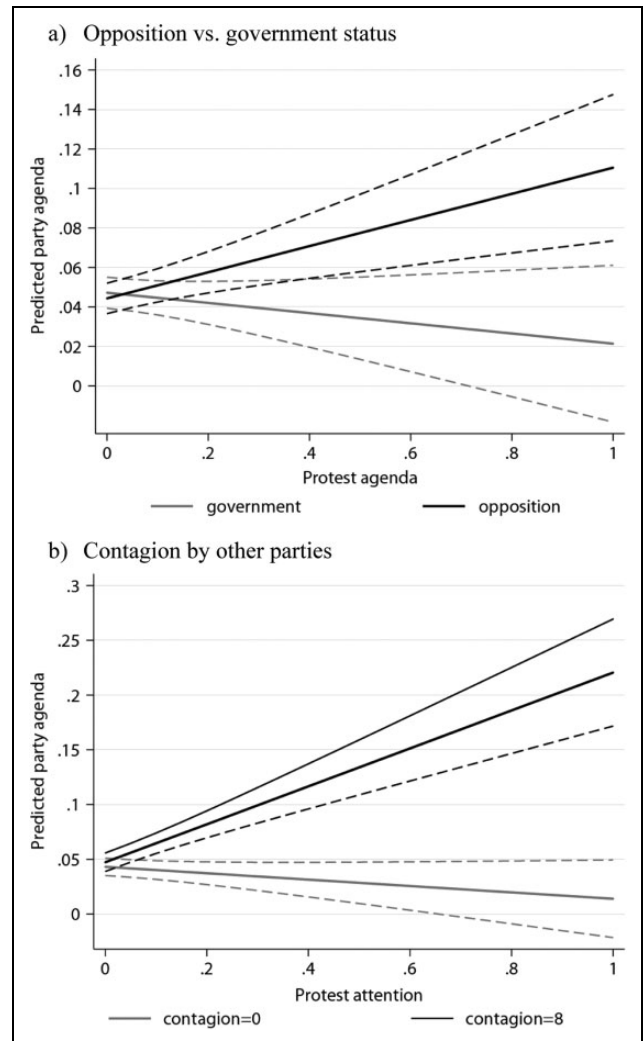
on the rile measure does not yield any substantially different results (see the 'Data and methods' section and Table A3 in the Online Appendix) and neither does the exclusion of one of the interaction terms from the final analysis (Table A4 in the Online Appendix). Overall, the results indicate a limited influence of ideological factors in determining the responsiveness of MPs to protest.



The results in Table 1 support our third ‘opposition hypothesis’. Political parties in opposition are more likely to respond to the signals of media-covered protests than parties in government. This effect also holds if we take the ideological orientation of parties into account. The opposition seems to use the signals received from protesters as a way to challenge the government in parliament and to show its responsiveness to societal demands more generally. This mirrors findings on party responses to changing voter preferences and general media attention (Klüver and Spoon, 2014; Vliegenthart and Walgrave, 2011), and it supports the claim from the political process approach in social movement research that opposition parties are key sponsors and facilitators of large-scale protest mobilization (e.g. Kriesi et al., 1995; Maguire, 1995).

Moreover, our results provide evidence for the contagion or riding the wave idea. As shown in Table 1 (models 3 and 4), parties are more likely to respond to news coverage of protest if their competitors in the party system have already started to talk about the protesters’ issue the previous month. This also holds for the subset of opposition parties (see Table 2). By contrast, we cannot establish a significant link between issue ownership and responses to protests. In general, parties do *not* tend to be more likely to respond to protests related to issues for which they claim ownership. This is somewhat surprising given the perceived importance of issue ownership for the responsiveness of political parties to incoming signals. To further explore the potential importance of ownership, we conduct an additional analysis in which we look at separate issues that have parties from one family as issue owners: agriculture, environment and immigration. The results of a multi-level model (months nested in parties) are presented in Table A5 in the Online Appendix. The results show that for one of the three issues, immigration, issue ownership results in a greater responsiveness by issue owners. For the other two issues this is not the case. Taken together, these findings support recent research that emphasises that issue ownership offers a relatively partial view of party competition, as parties react to each other and have incentives to take up the issues raised by their competitors (e.g. Dolezal et al., 2014; Green-Pedersen and Mortensen, 2010, 2015; Wagner and Meyer, 2014).

Finally, in Figure 1, we present the main interaction effects between our partisan moderators and protest to illustrate the substantive significance of our results. The figures report the interaction between (a) government/opposition and protest and (b) contagion and protest resulting from models that in both instances only include the single interaction. Figure 1(a) again shows that opposition parties tend to be more likely to respond to a strong protest signal than government parties, but that the predicted values for government and opposition parties only differ significantly if protest takes high values, which only occurs under somewhat exceptional circumstances: only in 2.1%



**Figure 1.** Effects of protest on party attention. Note: Lines with 95% confidence intervals.

of the cases is the relative protest attention for a single issue higher than 0.4. Additionally, government parties seem to respond to increased protest attention by asking fewer questions about the issue, but the coefficient for this effect is not significant. Figure 1(b) shows the corresponding contagion effect: the more other competitors in the party system have already picked up the protest issue, the more a party responds to it (Figure 1(b)). This effect already results in significantly different predictions at relatively low values of protest. At the same time, the relative protest attention to a single issue is only 3.8% higher than 0.1. Overall, the relatively small size of the effects shown in Figure 1 indicates that the agenda-setting power of protest and the reactions of parties should not be overstated: the changes in parliamentary attention due to protest are modest. For opposition parties, for example, a protest agenda that focuses on a single issue in the previous 3 months increases the overall share of that issue on the party's agenda by 4%.

## Conclusion

In this study, we have followed recent calls to bridge the gap between research on political parties and research on social movements and protest politics. Our study has offered another attempt to unravel this complex and dynamic interaction by looking at the effects of protest politics on the issues emphasized by parties. More precisely, we have adopted an agenda-setting approach and traced issue attention in protests covered in the media and questions raised in parliament over several years in four West European countries (i.e. France, Spain, the Netherlands and Switzerland). Compared to previous attempts to assess the agenda-setting power of protest, the present study has innovated by (a) focusing on the responses of the various parties in parliament and (b) taking into account party characteristics that might condition the effect of protest signals on parliamentary activity. By doing this, we have linked research on protest-party interactions with research about how parties respond to other types of external signals, such as those sent by voters, the media or competitors in the party system (e.g. Adams et al., 2004, 2006; Green-Pedersen and Mortensen, 2010, 2015; Klüver and Spoon, 2014; Meguid, 2005; Spoon et al., 2014; Vliegenthart and Walgrave, 2011; Wagner and Meyer, 2014).

Overall, we can draw two important conclusions from our findings. *First*, political parties respond to protest coverage in the media. Thus, parties seem to be responsive to the signals sent out by highly mobilized crowds on the streets. We find a significant, although small, effect of the protest agenda on the party agendas in parliament. We consider that even this small effect is noteworthy. Parties face a large variety of environmental signals and are also constrained in the amount of attention they can devote to each issue, due to (internal) regulations and limited time and resources. Moreover, the data used in this article were collected for different purposes and matching the issue categories was a challenge that we could only solve by focusing on fairly broad issue categories. The focus on such broad issue areas might actually hide stronger effects of protests related to very specific topics on parliamentary activity concerning the same topic. Furthermore, by using lagged values of the protest variable, while also controlling for the past of the parliamentary questions series, our models offer a solid basis for causal claims.

*Second*, it is not just ideologically close allies that take up matters that are emphasized in the protest arena; instead, party responses seem to be driven by the dynamics of party competition more generally. That is, although we find that parties from the left are more likely to respond to protests covered in the news than parties from the right, if we take into account opposition status this effect is no longer statistically significant. What we find is that (a) parties in opposition are more likely to respond to news coverage of protest than parties in government and (b) parties are

more likely to respond to news coverage of protests if other parties have already responded to the issue emphasized by the protesters. This last finding supports the idea of Green-Pedersen and Mortensen (2010, 2015) that issue ownership offers only a partial view of party issue competition because parties take up the issues emphasized by their competitors. In our analysis, we have also not been able to find a general effect of issue ownership on how parties react to news coverage of protest. However, we find instances of ‘associative issue ownership’ (Walgrave et al., 2012), as the populist radical right in parliament seems to respond to the salience of migration-related protests in the news. This confirms Klüver and Spoon’s (2014) finding that certain niche parties (in their case, the greens) are more responsive to external signals related to the issue that they own.

As stated before, our approach is only a first, although crucial, step in understanding the dynamic interaction of protest and party politics. It is crucial because catching the attention of political decision makers is often a first step triggering more profound changes. By responding to protests, parties can show that they are responsive to (certain) societal demands and the issues of the day. Agenda setting offers an extremely powerful tool to capture these protest effects: paying attention to issues is a first but necessary step for further political action and potential policy change. Further research in the agenda-setting tradition should focus more on whether and how different parties respond to protests by other means, for example, by emphasizing protest issues in their manifestos or by responding to them with legislative activities. In addition, future research should address how the impact of protests might differ depending on the electoral cycle or more long-term evolutions in the party system and also take a wider range of party responses beyond just parliamentary questions into consideration. For example, our finding that radical parties are *not* more likely to respond to news coverage of protests might only hold for their parliamentary activity. By contrast, it might well be that they attempt to align with challengers on the streets during electoral campaigns. Similarly, it is interesting to note that we have not been able to establish a link between protests over environmental issues and the agenda of green parties in parliament. On the one hand, the difference to the findings of Klüver and Spoon (2014) might be due to the fact that they study responses in electoral manifestos, whereas we have looked at parliamentary activity between elections. Additionally, they look at the general policy priorities of voters, while we have focused on protest activities. On the other hand, it might also be caused by their focus on the whole period from the early 1970s to 2011. This period includes the advent of green parties in Western Europe, whereas our study has concentrated on the period from the mid-1990s to the late 2000s. Overall, this article has offered a first, but important, step in this

quest to understand the contingencies of protest effects on party politics.

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### Supplemental material

Supplementary material for this article is available online.

### Notes

1. However, both accommodative and adversarial responses to claims by challengers might lead to increasing issue attention (Meguid, 2005). Thus, the present article is not about whether parties support the claims of protesters but whether they emphasize the issues addressed in protest politics.
2. The only alternative is police archives (e.g. Walgrave and Vliegthart, 2012). However, police archives are also biased and, most importantly for our research, they are far less comparable (even within a single country) and they often contain very limited information on the issues of the protesters as compared to media reports.
3. Practical considerations constrained the data coding in the Netherlands. The sample of 30%, however, is substantial and the total number of coded questions for the Netherlands is comparable with those of the other countries.
4. The data set is based on coding of the Monday editions of these newspapers. The choice of Monday editions was dictated by the need to reduce the work of collecting a large number of events over a long period of time and also because the Monday edition covers events during the weekend. Since protest activities tend to be concentrated on weekends, the data set includes a high proportion of all the protests occurring during the period under study. All the events covered in the Monday editions were coded, including those taking place a week before or after

the publication date. This is why around 25% of all the coded events occurred on weekdays.

5. The newspapers were chosen with respect to six criteria: continuous publication throughout the research period, daily publication, high quality, comparability with regard to political orientation (none is very conservative or extremely left-wing), coverage of the entire national territory and similar selectivity when reporting on protest events. While the cross-national and longitudinal stability in the patterns of selection bias is still a contested topic, recent studies show that the sampling strategy used here scores well in comparison with more widely encompassing strategies of data collection (see Hutter, 2014b: 147ff; McCarthy et al., 2008). Most importantly, the results show that the national ebbs and flows of protest mobilization in general and of individual issues more specifically are accurately traced with this sampling strategy.
6. The rile measure is based on all 57 policy categories in the CMP codebook. It is calculated by subtracting the percentage of 13 'left' categories from the percentage of 13 'right' categories. The other 'neutral' categories are also taken into account as these percentages are based on all categories.
7. One could consider party size as a variable of substantial interest that might determine the responsiveness of the party towards protest: the larger the size, the more resources (personnel) the party has to monitor incoming information such as protest activities. Additional analyses suggest that the interaction between party size and protest is positive, but only marginally significant ( $p < 0.10$ ). Furthermore, excluding party size as a control variable does not substantially change any of the other results (see Table A2 in the Online Appendix for detailed results).

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### Author biographies

**Swen Hutter** is a postdoctoral research fellow at the European University Institute in Florence.

**Rens Vliegenthart** is a professor in Communication Science at the Amsterdam School of Communication Research (ASCoR), University of Amsterdam.