

The media is becoming increasingly independent from politics in Switzerland

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*The agenda setting power of the mass media has significant influence over the political process in European countries. **Anke Tresch**, **Pascal Sciarini** and **Frédéric Varone** assess the relationship between the media and policy-makers' issue attention in the four phases of the law-making process in Switzerland. They find that although the media do not always give priority to the same issues as policy-makers, when looking at the referendum phase of the law-making process, media and policy makers' priorities are aligned. However, this strong alignment becomes weaker over time. This, they argue, is a sign of the media's growing independence from politics.*



Mass media organisations are important to democracy. By providing information and analysis about electoral competition and policy-making, they make politics accessible and transparent, while also helping citizens to make sound political choices and hold policy-makers accountable. However, the media are more than conveyors of information. In recent years, many scholars have come to consider the media as an increasingly important and autonomous force in politics. Buzz phrases such as “the mediatisation of politics” or “media democracy” refer to the idea of a transformation of the media's political role and with it a transformation of politics itself.



One important way for the media to influence politics is through the allocation of attention: by emphasising some issues and downplaying others, the media are likely to influence which issues policy-makers deem important and which they ignore. This influence is usually referred to as the “political agenda-setting power” of the media. However, influence can operate in both directions. Policy-makers have adapted to the media's selection logic and standards of newsworthiness. They have professionalised their news strategies and try to use the media for their own purposes, driving media coverage in a certain direction and playing up their own issue priorities. As a result, publicity has become a strategic weapon in the political process, making news an integral part of making laws.



In a recent [study](#) of Swiss politics, we show that the relationship between the media and policy-makers varies across the different phases of the law-making process. In the initiation phase, issues can be put on the political agenda by different national state actors, but also by Swiss cantons and citizens. Then, bills are formulated in a lengthy preparatory phase involving the main stakeholders in the field. The resulting draft bill is discussed and voted on in both the upper and lower house during the parliamentary phase, which is sometimes followed by a referendum phase.



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Each of these four successive phases is governed by different rules and actors, and they also vary in terms of importance. In Switzerland, the referendum phase is of crucial importance for the final outcome of the entire law-making process because it offers citizens the opportunity to veto a bill adopted by parliament. This has contributed to the development of extensive and elaborate pre-parliamentary procedures.

The purpose of this lengthy preparatory phase is to find compromise solutions that enjoy across-the-board support and are able to minimise the risk of policy failure in a referendum. Hence, the referendum and preparatory phases are interconnected and both are crucial. In comparison, the initiation and parliamentary phases are less important. It is this relative importance of the different phases that determines how similar the allocation of issue attention is between the media and policy-makers.

Our empirical study was based on a systematic analysis of policy-makers' issue attention in the four phases of the law-making process. These data were compared with the distribution of issue attention in the leading Swiss quality paper *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* (NZZ) for the period 1996-2003. In both cases, issue attention was coded by applying the "[Policy Agendas Project](#)" classification system developed in the United States.

We can point out three key results. First, the media allocate attention selectively. In terms of the law-making phases, they report much more often about some phases of the law-making process than others. Whereas the initiation phase is much ignored by the media – a total of only 156 news articles for over 3,000 parliamentary initiatives and motions in the 1996-2003 period – the referendum phase receives a lot of media attention, with a total of 329 articles for only 81 referendum votes. In terms of issues, the media concentrate on a smaller number of different issues than policy-makers.

Second, the media do not always give priority to the same issues as policy-makers. A few issues get a substantial amount of attention from both the media and policy-makers in several phases, such as government operations, transportation, and macroeconomics, while others get almost none at all – for example public lands, housing and urban development issues. There is also a third category of issues which gets substantial attention from either policy-makers or the media in a specific law-making phase, but not from both. For example, in the initiation phase labour issues receive significant attention from policy-makers, but not from the media.

Third, the more important a law-making phase, the stronger the correlation between the distribution of the media's and policy-makers' issue attention. In spite of the first two observations, the media and policy-makers have similar issue attention profiles overall. For all years, the correlation is strongest for the referendum phase, generally followed by the preparatory, initiation, and parliamentary phase.

In sum, our study underpins the idea that the media have become an autonomous force in political life. They do not just reflect what policy-makers do in the law-making process, but often follow their own standards of newsworthiness and issue priorities. In the most important phases of the law-making process (especially in the referendum phase), the media's priorities are more similar, and more strongly connected to policy-makers' issue focus than in the less important phases.

However, even in the most important phases, the strong correspondence decreases over time. The weakening correlation between the media's and policy-makers' issue attention profiles is yet another sign of the growing independence of the media from politics, and raises the question of whether the media still provide sufficient information to contribute to citizens' "enlightened understanding" and help them make sound choices in a referendum vote.

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