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## Media Motivation and Elite Rhetoric in Comparative Perspective

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*The exchange of diverse points of view in elite deliberation is considered a cornerstone of democracy. This study presents evidence that variations in political motivation for media use predict the tendency of politicians to present deliberative rhetoric that considers multiple points of view regarding issues and sees those views as related to one another. We surveyed 111 incumbent Members of Parliament in Belgium, Canada, and Israel and analyzed a large sample of their parliamentary speeches. The findings demonstrate that motivation to attain media coverage and act upon information from the news media leads politicians to strategically display simple and unidimensional rhetoric due to newsworthiness considerations, but only in countries where the media constitute important resources for reelection. The results contribute to extant literature by demonstrating a media effect on elite deliberation and by emphasizing the moderating role of political systems on the nature of elite rhetoric.*

**Keywords** deliberation, elite rhetoric, integrative complexity, media logic, political systems

Observers of democracy long ago recognized the importance of an exchange of well-reasoned and diverse opinions in elite deliberation. Thinkers such as Burke (1774/1975) and Mill (1861/1972) have argued that this type of communication between representatives extends the variety of parties and interests that are taken into consideration in the political process, thus acting to prevent tyranny of the majority.

Contemporary accounts of deliberative democracy expand on this logic, and demonstrate that discussing a multitude of perspectives in deliberation leads to better-informed judgments and to more legitimate policy decisions. Exposure to different points of view on the same topic, deliberative scholars maintain, emphasizes practical and moral trade-offs, stimulates critical thinking, and generates more refined opinions (Esterling, 2011; Fishkin, 2009; Gutmann & Thompson, 2009; Habermas, 1989).

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A growing interest in gauging the nature of deliberation has led scholars to develop several measures of deliberative quality (Cappella, Price, & Nir, 2002; Kim, Wyatt, & Katz, 1999; Steenbergen, Bächtiger, Spörndli, & Steiner, 2003). These measures all share the perspective that an opinion is of higher deliberative quality when it expresses considerations on both sides of an issue and supported by a variety of justifications. In line with this logic, it has recently been suggested that another variable—the *integrative complexity* of communications—may be correlated with deliberative quality (Brundidge, Reid, Choi, & Muddiman, 2014). Integrative complexity measures the extent to which communicators differentiate dimensions of a given topic, and, if more than one dimension is present, the degree to which they integrate those dimensions into a common framework (Suedfeld & Tetlock, 1977; Tetlock, 1983).

While the integrative complexity exhibited in oral communication by elected representatives has so far been studied in the fields of political, cognitive, and personality psychology, it has received relatively little attention from political communication scholars. We nevertheless suggest in this article that there are good reasons to expect integrative complexity to be related to media use. More specifically, we argue that representatives who are more reliant on the news media for communication with their electors will tend to tailor their speech in ways that make it more congenial for mass mediation. The end result should be that representatives who are more media reliant will tend to exhibit lower levels of integrative complexity.

We explore this possibility here by drawing on a unique body of data: survey interviews with 111 incumbent Members of Parliament (MPs) in Belgium, Canada, and Israel. The strength of the cross-national approach is that it is likely to generate a good deal of variation in political motivation for media use; and indeed, we first find that some elected representatives are more media-motivated than others. Statistical tests reveal no main effect of individual-level media motivation on integrative complexity in elite rhetoric, at least not when we pool individual-level data across countries. But a focus on across-country variation reveals a significant interaction effect, in which the political system moderates the effect of media motivation on integrative complexity in elite rhetoric. In short: we find that in political systems where the news media are absolutely central in MPs' reelection efforts, politicians who are individually motivated to use the news media as a political resource appear to strategically reduce the complexity of their public messages.

The study offers three contributions to the existing literature. First, it demonstrates that the mass media can have a significant effect on the quality of deliberation in politics. This finding provides empirical support for the often stated (but rarely tested) notion in the mediatization literature positing that politicians change their behavior and communication due to their dependency on the news media (Esser & Strömbäck, 2014). The second contribution lies in the incorporation of the integrative complexity of political communications as a valid measure of the deliberative quality of elite discourse. Third, our analysis supports the possibility that complexity (or, in fact, simplicity) is not necessarily the consequence of politicians' cognitive abilities or resources, as most previous studies suggest, but largely a rhetorical strategy they utilize in response to political constraints and motivations.

### **The Nature of Elite Rhetoric**

The empirical deliberative democracy literature is largely focused on the antecedents and outcomes of citizens' conversations on politics (e.g., Cappella et al., 2002;

McLeod et al., 1999; Nir, 2012). At the same time, the factors that influence the nature of *elite* deliberation are much less thoroughly studied. The few studies that do tackle this topic suggest several conditions that enhance informed and consequential elite deliberation (Bächtiger, 2014; Esterling, 2011; Steiner, Bächtiger, Spörndli, & Steenbergen, 2004). None takes into account a central factor that influences the way politicians behave and communicate: the news media.

Investigating the nature of elite rhetoric is important for several reasons. What politicians say has a strong influence on public opinion, and it serves as an important source of information for citizens on political matters (Druckman & Nelson, 2003). Prominent theories in political communication contend that the range and diversity of opinions that elites express in their communications are strong determinants of the opinions that the public forms (Zaller, 1992). A similar argument can be made from a deliberative democracy perspective. This normative model of politics maintains that decision making is a process in which political actors present reasonable justifications to their positions, weigh alternative arguments and suggestions, and show willingness to reevaluate their preferences in the face of strong and compelling arguments (Gutmann & Thompson, 2009; Habermas, 1989). This process requires a constant “supply” of diverse considerations that can be discussed by politicians. When elite rhetoric is unidimensional, simple, and avoids acknowledging competing points of view, the range of legitimate perspectives on political issues becomes narrower, opinion polarization becomes more likely, and the likelihood of compromise between conflicting points of view decreases.

Over the years, several empirical measures of the deliberative quality of individuals’ stated opinions have been developed and validated by scholars. The existing measures include, among others, argument repertoire (AR), which counts the number of relevant reasons for one’s stated opinion on a particular political issue as well as the number of relevant reasons one can give for opposite opinions (Cappella et al., 2002). Another variable, the “consideredness measure” of opinion quality, ranks opinions that express considerations on both sides of an issue as having higher quality than those that do not (Kim et al., 1999). These two measures build largely on Kuhn’s (1991) influential work on argument quality, in which she gauges the quality of opinions by counting the number of causes one cites for his or her view; whether arguments are supported by evidence and counterevidence; and one’s ability to refute counterarguments. Finally, Steenbergen and colleagues’ (2003) Discourse Quality Index (DQI) ranks political speeches that include more than one justification, refer explicitly to counterarguments, and make alternative proposals to the current agenda as highly deliberative.

In sum, each of these measures is premised on the notion that an opinion is more deliberative when it takes a multitude of different, often conflicting perspectives into consideration, and recognizes the legitimacy of alternative points of view. Based on this logic, we see the *integrative complexity* of political rhetoric as an appropriate indicator of the deliberative quality of elite rhetoric.

### **The Integrative Complexity of Political Rhetoric**

Integrative complexity measures the extent to which communicators take multiple points of view regarding a given topic into account, and the degree to which they recognize trade-offs and interrelations among those perspectives (Suedfeld & Tetlock, 1977). The first aspect of integrative complexity, *differentiation*, refers to the number of dimensions

or characteristics of information that are acknowledged in a communication: complexity is deduced when communicators take at least two characteristics of any given multi-dimensional stimulus into account. The second aspect of integrative complexity, *integration*, refers to the development of connections between the differentiated characteristics. When the different dimensions or characteristics are perceived as operating in isolation, lower complexity is deduced, but when the dimensions appear to operate in hierarchical interaction or according to multiple, complex, and perhaps flexible patterns, higher complexity is deduced (Kleinnijenhuis, Schultz, & Oegema, 2015).

In general terms, messages on the simple end of the complexity continuum reject dissonant information, minimize conflict into categorical black-and-white judgments, and lack recognition that several perspectives of one issue can be valid at the same time. Conversely, the complex end of the continuum represents messages in which different interpretations of the same issue are considered simultaneously and trade-offs among alternatives are discussed (Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, & Sulloway, 2003; Tetlock, 1983).

The concept of integrative complexity has so far been mainly studied from a cognitive perspective that measures political rhetoric as a means to draw conclusions on the psychology of speakers. Recently, it has been proposed (but not yet empirically tested) that integrative complexity can also capture two fundamental dimensions of deliberative quality: the extent to which a political argument is supported by reasons, and the extent to which alternative viewpoints are presented as legitimate (Brundidge et al., 2014). Communications high on integrative complexity include more substantive information on the discussed topic, bring more voices and perspectives into the discussion, examine joint probabilities and alternative outcomes, and stimulate the consideration of arguments both for and against a given proposition. Integrative complexity thus captures some of the elements regarded as important to deliberation; and, indeed, we show in a concluding section that there is a significant correlation between integrative complexity and deliberative quality.

## The News Media and Integrative Complexity

Previous studies have examined integrative complexity as a function of two types of variables. The first are individual and relatively constant features of politicians, such as their ideology and personality. Politicians in the moderate left-of-center are consistently found to display more complex communications than conservatives—results that were obtained, among other contexts, in the U.S. Senate and the British House of Commons (Suedfeld, 2010; Tetlock, 1984). Other studies positively correlate integrative complexity with stable personality traits such as openness and creativity (Suedfeld, 2010).

The second type of explanations refer to temporary external changes in political conditions, such as election campaigns and international crises. At times of elections, for instance, the integrative complexity of U.S. presidents tends to decrease (Thoemmes & Conway, 2007), and the winners of party nominations in the United States show a steeper drop in complexity as the election campaign progresses, when compared to non-winners (Conway et al., 2012). The complexity of political leaders' communication also decreases prior to military attacks conducted by their country, and under stressful conditions such as domestic and international political crises (Suedfeld, 2010).

Both of these approaches consider integrative complexity first and foremost a reflection of the contents of politicians' thoughts, and therefore a mirror into their

cognitive processes or even personalities. They focus on the mental capacities of politicians, either in general or in a given context, and tend to discount the highly planned and goal-oriented nature of political communication. The few studies that do propose that integrative complexity may be a deliberate rhetorical strategy do not test this possibility: they demonstrate changes in complexity at times considered highly strategic for politicians—such as election campaigns—and conclude that these changes may reflect a conscious choice (Conway et al., 2012; Tetlock, 1981; Thoemmes & Conway, 2007). None of these studies, however, examines the systemic origins of strategic shifts in complexity. Moreover, previous integrative complexity studies draw conclusions on the psychology of speakers based on textual analysis, without directly measuring the goals and motivations behind elite communication. We suggest a different approach here. To test whether politicians' integrative complexity is determined by strategic considerations, we measure the relationship between a politician's integrative complexity and her motivation to use the news media as means of communication.

A growing number of studies in political communication point to an increasing reliance of politicians on the news media as means to achieve their goals (Cook, 1998; Esser & Strömbäck, 2014; Mazzoleni & Schulz, 1999; Strömbäck, 2008). As a consequence of the growing importance of the news media and their increasing independence from politics, it is argued that political actors adapt their communicative behavior to the "media logic," namely, to the media's principles of newsworthiness (Sheafer, Shenhav, & Balmas, 2014; Strömbäck, 2008). However, while scholars agree that such processes take place in Western democracies, the exact ways in which the communication of politicians is affected by "media logic" remains unclear.

That said, one central principle of newsworthiness is simplicity. Prioritizing this news value will tend to lead journalists and news organizations to prefer clear and unambiguous messages over complex ones. Studies find that simple, clearly stated, and unambiguous information is much more likely to be featured in the news than ambiguous and vague information from which many conflicting interpretations can be derived (Galtung & Ruge, 1965; Harcup & O'Neill, 2001). The need to generate an audience, in combination with commercial constraints, leads news organizations to cover a broad range of issues, but to necessarily do so in a relatively unidimensional and simple manner that ignores intricate details (Wolfsfeld, 2014).

In light of the media's tendency toward simplicity, it seems reasonable to assume that when politicians wish to appear in the media, they will tend to present their opinions in simple rather than complex terms. Of course, since not all politicians seek out media coverage, not all politicians will exhibit declining levels of integrative complexity. But the more an MP thinks that her media coverage will affect her voters and the ability to legislate, the more she will be motivated to invest efforts in attaining media coverage (Cohen, Tsafati, & Sheafer, 2008; Vliegenthart & Walgrave, 2011). We thus hypothesize that media-motivated politicians are likely to modify their communication to the newsworthiness requirements of media logic. Specifically, we expect that parliamentary speech will rely more frequently on brief slogans and dramatic generalizations, at the expense of complex and multidimensional persuasion efforts. This expectation leads us to formulate the following hypothesis:

*H1:* Higher levels of media motivation will tend to decrease the integrative complexity of a politician's parliamentary speech.

## Methods

Survey interviews were conducted between June 2013 and May 2014 with 111 Members of the national Parliaments of Belgium, Canada, and Israel. The sample included mostly rank-and-file MPs, but also several party leaders and cabinet members. Table 1 provides summary statistics for the sample. Full details on the ideological makeup of the sample can be found in the Supplemental Material. The data there reveal that while MPs from liberal and oppositional parties are slightly overrepresented, all major parties in all three countries are included in our sample of MPs.

Politicians in all three countries were first contacted by an e-mail, followed by phone contact from each country's research team in which the goal of the project was explained and a request for an appointment was made. We contacted all Belgian MPs (Flemish), a representative sample (in terms of partisanship) of half of Canadian MPs, and all Israeli Members of the Knesset.<sup>1</sup> The response rates were 45% in Belgium (40/88 Flemish MPs), 23% in Canada (35/154), and 30% in Israel (36/120).

All MPs who agreed to participate were interviewed face-to-face by a group of researchers, in the Parliament or in other locations decided by the MPs. Survey interviews were conducted in the presence of the researchers. During these interviews, MPs answered a standardized questionnaire with closed-end questions in their native language on a tablet computer. The anonymity and confidentiality of the study were emphasized to the politicians before, during, and after the interviews. In addition to the survey, we conducted a large-scale content analysis of parliamentary speeches, aimed at measuring integrative complexity. To make sure that the data were comparable, identical procedures of data gathering and analyzing were conducted in the three countries.

### *Dependent Variable: Integrative Complexity*

*Selection of Materials.* Full transcripts of all speeches in the Belgian, Canadian, and Israeli Parliaments by each one of the 111 MPs who participated in the study were obtained from the official Parliaments' databases. In Belgium and Canada, all speeches were collected during a period of 13 months, from the first day of January 2013 to the last day of January 2014. In Israel, due to elections to the 19th Israeli Parliament held on January 22, 2013, sampling started a month later, on February 5. A total of 9,546

**Table 1**  
Biographical features of MPs participating in the study

		Number of MPs	Male	Female	Age (Mean)	Year First Elected (Mean)
Belgium	Sample	40	27 (68%)	13 (32%)	47	2005
	Parliament	150	91 (61%)	59 (39%)	47	2005
Canada	Sample	35	25 (71%)	10 (29%)	51	2007
	Parliament	308	231 (75%)	77 (25%)	53	2005
Israel	Sample	36	30 (83%)	6 (17%)	55	2006
	Parliament	120	93 (77%)	27 (23%)	54	2006

speeches, which are on average 86 speeches per MP, were collected. Out of the full speech materials, 30 speeches per MP were randomly selected to be coded for integrative complexity. Speeches from both committee and debate discussions were collected (15 from each), since together they form a rather complete picture of the public communication of MPs in Parliament.

As it is routinely carried out in integrative complexity research (Baker-Brown et al., 1992), the unit of analysis for integrative complexity was a paragraph. One paragraph of every speech was sampled in order to be coded for integrative complexity. In each paragraph, all identifying information (names, dates, and contexts) was removed. The paragraphs were assembled in random order, and the resulting set included 3,330 units (111 MPs \* 30 paragraphs). Paragraphs containing mere descriptions, definitions, quotations, or otherwise un-codable paragraphs were not sampled. In other words, since we are interested in the deliberative quality of elite rhetoric, texts in which an issue was simply mentioned but no relevant argumentation pertaining to it was included were not sampled to be coded for complexity.

*Coding Procedure.* Each sampled paragraph was coded in the original language in which the speech was held (i.e., Dutch in Belgium, English in Canada, and Hebrew in Israel). For every paragraph, the first factor of integrative complexity, differentiation, was coded when the speaker displayed recognition that more than one dimension or perspective of an issue can be valid and legitimate. The second factor, integration, was coded when the paragraph indicated interactions among the multiple aspects recognized (see Supplemental Material for details on coding). This procedure resulted in a three-level variable, in which paragraphs that lacked both differentiation and integration were coded as 1; paragraphs with mere differentiation but no integration were coded as 2; and paragraphs high on both differentiation and integration were coded as 3. This coding procedure was applied to each of the 3,330 paragraphs, and an average integrative complexity score was then computed for each politician in the sample. In the Supplemental Material, we discuss our decision to use a three-level integrative complexity scale instead of the seven-point variable used in many previous studies.

*Intercoder Reliability.* Based on the aforementioned coding criteria, a total of three human coders (two English+Hebrew speakers and one Dutch+English speaker) were extensively trained to code for integrative complexity. After disagreements were resolved by discussion among the coders and researchers, the coders, who were unaware of the research hypotheses, coded 180 paragraphs for reliability testing. The reliability paragraphs were drawn from the Canadian sample, since the only common language to all coders was English. The reliability score between the two English/Hebrew coders was alpha Krippendorff = 0.76 for differentiation and 0.74 for integration; between the Dutch coder and the English/Hebrew coders intercoder reliability was 0.74 for differentiation and 0.73 for integration. After sufficient reliability was reached, the three coders manually analyzed all materials.

### ***Independent Variables***

*Media Motivation.* A survey question measured the importance of the media in politicians' work. Under the introductory question "What features of information make you act



upon it?" appeared the statement "Information that has a lot of potential to gather media attention for me and my party." The statement was ranked on a scale of 1 (very low) to 10 (very high). This directly taps the extent to which the media are important in politicians' considerations to act.

*Conservatism.* Since it is the most consistent political correlate of integrative complexity, we control for the ideology of politicians. Ideology was tapped by party affiliation. A binary "conservatism" variable was computed, in which members of right-wing parties were coded as 1 and members of left and center parties were coded as 0. In Belgium, the coding was based on the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES) of the ideology of political parties in Europe (Bakker et al., 2015). Right-wing parties in Belgium are those with a general left-right value higher than 7 (on a 1–10 "conservatism" scale). Those were the New Flemish Alliance (N-VA) and Vlaams Belang ("Flemish Interest"). In Canada, we interviewed representatives of the three major parties in the 41st Parliament (Conservative Party, New Democratic Party, and Liberal Party). The government party at the time of the study, the Conservative Party, was coded as conservative (1), while members of the two other parties were coded as 0. In Israel, categorization was based on the associations between ideology and party preferences analyzed by Shenhav, Oshri, Ofek, and Sheaffer (2014). MPs from conservative parties (Jewish Home, Shas, and Yahadut HaTorah) were coded as 1, while MPs from all other parties were coded as 0.<sup>2</sup>

## Results

The mean integrative complexity score in the full sample ( $N = 111$ ) was 1.93 on a scale of 1 to 3 ( $SD = .03$ ), and the median score was 1.9. In Belgium the mean score was 1.70 ( $SD = .03$ ;  $N = 40$ ), in Canada 2.10 ( $SD = .04$ ;  $N = 35$ ), and in Israel 2.02 ( $SD = .03$ ;  $N = 36$ ). To ensure that our MP sample is not systematically different from the population from which it was drawn, these results were compared to the mean integrative complexity scores of a random sample of 30 incumbent MPs (10 MPs per country) who were not included in our sample. A t-test comparing the mean integrative complexity in the sample (1.93) with the mean score of the random subsample of incumbents (1.84) showed no significant difference ( $t(139) = 1.62$ ;  $p > .1$ ), indicating that there are no systematic differences in integrative complexity between those who agreed to participate and those who did not. A detailed discussion of this comparison can be found in the Supplemental Material.

In order to test H1 (higher media motivation of politicians leads to lower integrative complexity), we conducted a regression analysis predicting the integrative complexity of politicians' rhetoric as a function of several individual-level factors. Due to the relatively small sample size ( $N = 111$ ), we included in the test only the most relevant variables to our hypothesis, namely, media motivation as an independent variable, and ideology, which is the strongest and most consistent political correlate of integrative complexity, as a covariate. The regression analysis, presented in Model 1 in Table 2, did not yield statistically significant results for media motivation ( $b = .008$ ;  $t(110) = .9$ ;  $p > .1$ ). There is, in this model, no support for the notion that media motivation leads to low integrative complexity in parliamentary speech.

**Table 2**  
Effects on integrative complexity

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6	Model 7
Media Motivation	0.008 (0.009)	-0.007 (0.008)	0.058† (0.033)	0.062† (0.033)	0.062† (0.034)	-0.022* (0.009)	0.402 (0.379)
Conservatism	-0.243* (0.057)	-0.183* (0.047)	-0.167* (0.047)	-0.147* (0.049)	-0.149* (0.049)	-0.223* (0.051)	-0.965 (0.614)
Parliamentary Experience				0.004 (0.003)	0.005 (0.003)		
Age				0.001 (0.002)	0.001 (0.002)		
Female				0.053 (0.049)	0.058 (0.050)		
Party Leader					-0.048 (0.113)		
Minister					0.078 (0.115)		
Belgium		-0.404* (0.052)	0.189 (0.310)	0.207 (0.316)	0.204 (0.318)		3.738 (3.587)
Israel		-0.137* (0.059)	0.473 (0.302)	0.521† (0.311)	0.511 (0.314)		5.033 (3.521)
Canada						-0.335 (0.334)	
Belgium*Media Motivation			-0.067† (0.036)	-0.071† (0.037)	-0.071† (0.037)		-1.045* (0.464)
Canada*Media Motivation						0.074† (0.038)	
Israel*Media Motivation			-0.071* (0.034)	-0.074* (0.035)	-0.073* (0.036)		-0.682† (0.405)
Constant	1.938* (0.066)	2.217* (0.083)	1.634* (0.296)	-0.582 (4.304)	-0.674 (4.349)	2.036* (0.060)	-2.320 (3.390)
R <sup>2</sup> (Adjusted)	0.13	0.46	0.47	0.47	0.46	0.34	
N	111	111	111	111	111	111	111

*Note.* In Models 1 through 6, entries are OLS regression coefficients. Model 7 reports the log odds of scoring high (as opposed to low) on integrative complexity. Standard errors in parentheses.

\*  $p < 0.05$ . †  $p < 0.1$ .

Since our sample of 111 MPs consists of politicians from three countries—with three different political systems—we set out to test the possibility that the rejection of H1 does not stem from the absence of a correlation between media motivation and integrative complexity, but rather from *a different effect in each country*. We next elaborate on our theoretical premises for expecting a moderating role of political systems, and then present the results of a moderation analysis.

### *The Moderating Effect of Political Systems*

Current scholarship on the determinants of parliamentary deliberation acknowledges that electoral systems and representational constraints affect the nature of

parliamentary discourse profoundly (Bächtiger, 2014; Proksch & Slapin, 2012; Steiner et al., 2004). Yet previous integrative complexity studies are mostly single-country analyses, and the studies that analyze speeches of politicians from more than one country do not take a comparative approach: they focus on individual-level psychological mechanisms rather than on systemic elements.

Belgium, Canada, and Israel are all relatively small parliamentary democracies. They were chosen for this study because their political systems vary on a number of crucial aspects that are expected to lead to a different role of the mass media in politicians' work, and therefore to different effects on their rhetoric. In particular, these countries represent very different electoral systems, a factor that is expected to influence strategic use of the news media. The Canadian single-member plurality (SMP) electoral system, in which 308 constituencies elect a single representative, is a good example of a system that prioritizes dyadic district-centered representation. In such systems, a direct link between an elected politician and his or her geographic constituency is created and a majority of MPs pay limited attention to national-level issues (Blais, Gidengil, Dobrzynska, Nevitte, & Adeau, 2003; Heitshusen, Young, & Wood, 2005; Ingall & Crisp, 2001; Norris, 1997; Soroka, Penner, & Blidook, 2009; Strøm, 1997). Cultivating close relationships with a specific constituency usually cannot be assisted by the national media. MPs in such systems are mainly interested in information regarding problems, solutions, and preferences that affect a specific local constituency—information that is, naturally, less newsworthy for the national mass media.

Belgium and Israel represent a very different electoral system, as the nature of representation—and consequently the role of the news media in politics—differ sharply in districts of greater magnitude. In Belgium's moderately proportional multi-member district system, on average 14 representatives are elected from each one of the country's 11 electoral districts. Israel is an example of an extremely proportional system, in which the whole country constitutes a single district that elects all 120 Members of Parliament. In proportional systems, direct constituency efforts are generally ineffective (Kreuzer, 2000), and MPs rely more heavily on large-scale forms of mass communication, such as national television and newspapers.

There is another institutional variation that likely augments the cross-country differences outlined here. Our expectation to see differences in media use builds not only on variations in district magnitude, but also on the smaller number of MPs in Israel (120) and Belgium (150), when compared to Canada (308). Given the higher number of Canadian MPs, and given their higher average attention to local rather than national matters, a majority of them remain unnoticed by the national media and only recognizable in their districts. We present evidence to this effect in the next section. On the other hand, the struggle for media attention is expected to be stronger in systems where politicians need to be heard by the whole nation (or at least by significant parts of it) in order to be reelected—as is the case in Belgium and Israel.

Finally, previous studies find that parties in Canada tend to exert more control on their MPs than parties in other countries, including Belgium and Israel. In Westminster political systems in general, and in the Canadian parliament in particular, party discipline constrains MPs to deal with very specific fields of interest (e.g., by controlling their committee assignment), and the control party leaders have over MPs' career advancement

leaves little space for policy initiatives by individual MPs (Kam, 2009; Malloy, 2003). This, we expect, should lead Canadian MPs to be less responsive to the information the news media provide: the media cover a very wide range of policy topics in a relatively shallow manner, and its information fits “generalist” politicians, who deal with many issues, more than specialists who know a lot about one or two topics (Van Aelst & Walgrave, 2016).

These significant variations in political systems allow us to test the effect of country-level constraints on media motivation and integrative complexity. Specifically, it enables to test the prediction that in proportional systems such as Belgium and Israel, the news media are more influential actors than in majoritarian systems such as Canada, and that consequently, different effects on political rhetoric should be observed.

In sum, MPs in single-member district systems invest more in direct forms of communication with their voters than MPs in multi-member districts, they are less newsworthy for the national media, strive less for the media’s attention, and are therefore less influenced by them. Although it is clear that some politicians in Canada are more media-motivated than others, we argue that their incentives to change their discourse according to the media’s logic is much weaker. We therefore expect the following interaction effect:

*H2:* In Belgium and Israel, but not in Canada, higher media motivation of politicians leads to lower levels of integrative complexity in parliamentary speeches.

### ***Moderation Analysis***

Prior to testing the effect of political systems on the relationship between media motivation and integrative complexity, it was necessary to empirically establish that (a) media motivation is more prevalent among Belgian and Israeli MPs than among Canadian MPs and (b) the chances for MPs to be covered in the news vary in the same direction.

A one-way ANOVA comparing mean media motivation scores in the three countries shows that it is significantly lower among Canadian MPs ( $M = 6.06$ ) than among Belgian ( $M = 7.18$ ) and Israeli ( $M = 6.92$ ) MPs ( $F(2,108) = 3.09; p < .05$ ). Our survey data also indicate that it is more important for Canadian MPs to represent people in their local constituencies ( $M = 2.63$ ) than it is for Belgians ( $M = 2$ ) and Israelis ( $M = 1.8$ ) ( $F(2,77) = 9.94; p < .001$ ).

To test whether the level of media motivation in a country is related to the actual media coverage politicians receive, we searched for all articles that include the words “Member of Parliament” or “MP” during a period of six months (June 2014 to December 2014) in one major national news outlet in each country: *De Standaard* in Belgium, *The Globe and Mail* in Canada, and *Haaretz* in Israel. A total of 150 articles were then randomly sampled and coded for two questions: (a) Is an MP cited in the article? (2) Is the citation taken from a speech made in Parliament? The data, presented in Table 3, indicate that individual Canadian MPs are much less likely to be personally mentioned in the national media than MPs in the two other countries. Moreover, even when Canadian MPs are cited in an article, very rarely is it for something they said in Parliament. Low chances to be covered make the news media an unnecessary political resource for Canadian MPs, and therefore, we assume, they are less likely to adapt their rhetoric to the mass media’s demands.

**Table 3**  
Media coverage of Members of Parliament in Belgium, Canada, and Israel

	Number of MPs in Parliament	Frequency of Media Citations	Chance for an MP to Be Cited in the News	Frequency of Media Citations of Parliamentary Speeches	Chance for a Parliamentary Speech to Be Cited in the News
Belgium	150	33/50	22%	13/50	9%
Canada	308	15/50	5%	1/50	0.3%
Israel	120	37/50	31%	16/50	13%

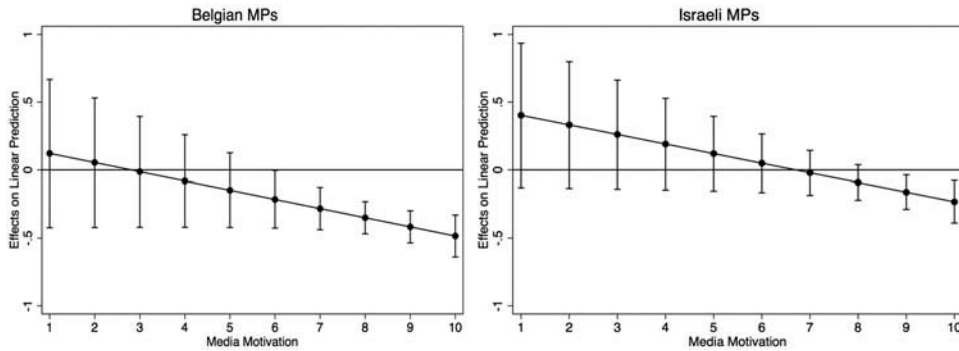
*Note.* The adjusted values in the fourth (Chance for an MP to be cited in the news) and sixth (Chance for a parliamentary speech to be cited in the news) columns take into consideration the total number of MPs in a country. For example, out of 50 articles sampled in Belgium, 33 included a direct citation of a Member of Parliament. This number is divided by the total number of MPs in the Belgian Parliament (150), hence the adjusted value presented is  $33/150 = .22$ .

To test H2 (in Belgium and Israel, but not in Canada, higher media motivation of politicians leads to lower levels of integrative complexity in their parliamentary speeches), we constructed a dummy variable for each political system and tested its main and interaction effects on integrative complexity. The results of the empirical test of H2 are presented in Models 2 and 3 in Table 2. As can be seen in Model 2, the main effect of media motivation on integrative complexity, while holding political systems and ideology constant, is insignificant here as well. Model 3 then tests H2 directly by introducing interaction terms between political systems and media motivation. The significant negative coefficient of the interaction between the dummy variable for Israel and media motivation shows that, in support for H2, higher media motivation of Israeli politicians leads to lower integrative complexity, when compared to the same association in Canada. The interaction between being a Belgian MP and media motivation is also negative and nearly achieves conventional levels of significance ( $p = .063$ ), indicating that in Belgium, as well, media motivation leads to lower integrative complexity, when compared to the same relationship in Canada.

The interactions are illustrated in Figure 1, which shows the marginal effects (Brambor, Clark, & Golder, 2006) of political systems on integrative complexity in Belgium and Israel, when compared to the base level (Canada), and while holding political ideology constant. The graphs make clear that in both Belgium and Israel there is a negative effect of media motivation on integrative complexity, which becomes significant at the higher levels of media motivation. These results lend further support for H2: since the interaction coefficients for both countries are negative, the results demonstrate that the same negative relationship does not apply to Canadian politicians, who serve in both cases as the reference group.

### **Robustness Checks**

In order to test the robustness of our findings, we employ a number of different strategies to test H2. Models 4, 5, 6, and 7 in Table 2 represent different model specifications in which the dependent variable, independent variables, and covariates are varied in order to ensure that our results are not driven by a specific model selection. Models 4 and 5 include the same variables as Model 3, but add on top of them biographical controls (the



**Figure 1.** The marginal effect of political systems on politicians' integrative complexity.

*Note:* The graphs display effects on the linear prediction of integrative complexity at each level of politicians' media motivation. Canada serves as a reference category to which the prediction in Belgium and Israel is compared, and political ideology is held constant. Post estimation is based on Model 3 in Table 2.

age, experience, and gender of MPs in Model 4, and two additional dummy variables—one for being a minister and one for being a party leader—in Model 5). These models produce similar results to those of Model 3, with both interaction coefficients being negative and significant at similar levels. Model 6 includes one dummy variable for country (instead of two), in which Canada is coded as 1 and Belgium and Israel as 0. This model directly compares Canadian politicians with Belgian and Israeli politicians combined. The interaction term here is positive and marginally significant ( $p = 0.053$ ), in line with H2. Finally, Model 7 presents the results of a logistic regression in which the dependent variable is a binary variable that compares low and high complexity levels (split by the median complexity score, which is 1.9). In this model, too, the Belgian interaction term is negative and significant ( $p = 0.02$ ) and that of Israel is negative and marginally significant ( $p = 0.09$ ). Taken together, these models show that our results remain stable in response to different specifications of dependent and independent variables and while holding various additional variables constant.

In an additional effort to ensure the robustness of our results, we test H2 using a hierarchical model whose results are reported in the Supplemental Material. This model is employed since it is possible that the rhetorical styles and political strategies of politicians from the same country and party are correlated, which may lead to an underestimation of standard errors. In the hierarchical linear model, we treat individual MPs as nested in party-families (e.g., Belgium-conservative parties). Country could not serve as the higher level, since we only have three cases at that level, and party could also not be a level of its own, since some parties are represented in our sample by too few MPs. As can be seen in the results, in a mixed-effects model that allows intercepts to vary between party-families, the interaction of political systems and media motivation for both Belgium and Israel remain negative, as hypothesized, and significant. In fact, the significance of the interaction terms is higher here than it was in the dummy-coded models reported in Table 2 (the  $p$ -values are now 0.02 for the Belgian interaction and 0.01 for the Israeli one). The hierarchical model, we believe, shows that our results hold even when we account for potential clustering at the party and country levels.

## Discussion

This study tested the hypothesis that the complexity of political rhetoric varies as a function of politicians' motivation to use the news media as a political resource. While we find no evidence of an across-the-board main effect, we do find empirical evidence for this relationship in some countries. We find that in Belgium and Israel, countries in which electoral rules lead to centrality of the news media in the actions of politicians, media-motivated Members of Parliament tend to communicate at lower levels of complexity. They often describe issues using only "one big idea," ignore alternative interpretations and viewpoints to the ones they present, and tend to speak in unidimensional generalizations. In Canada, on the other hand, where electoral rules lead politicians to be relatively independent from the news media and to focus instead on more direct means of communication with constituents, no such decrease in rhetorical complexity is found.

These differences stem, we argue, not from different cognitive structures or processes, but from different incentives to display simple communications. We claim that due to strategic electoral considerations, politicians who use the media as a political resource are encouraged to *express* simple rhetoric—which is easier to interpret, appeals to wider audiences, and can be more easily covered in the news—and not necessarily to *hold* simpler opinions. This interpretation complements earlier studies suggesting (but not testing) the possibility that shifts downward in rhetorical complexity may be deliberate and strategic. The current study offers a first test of what we theorize to be an important source of strategic change in the nature of elite deliberation—the news media. The increased centrality of the mass media during election campaigns can, by this account, explain the low complexity of election rhetoric documented in previous studies.

We believe that the findings of this study offer three theoretical contributions. The first is our finding that the extent to which politicians need and use the news media affects their rhetorical styles. We think that this constitutes an important finding, since it shows that political elite discussion is affected by politics-media relations. Normatively, one would expect politicians to present well-reasoned arguments in their public speeches as a means to persuade others of the superiority of their views. In contrast to that expectation, our findings demonstrate that when politicians strive for media coverage, they are likely to "give in" to the simplicity governing the news and present relatively shallow and unidimensional opinions. This effect may reduce the diversity of the information that citizens are exposed to and may also indicate low-quality elite deliberation prior to political decision making. This finding is also in line with theoretical claims in the mediatization literature in political communication, which posits that the behavior and communication of politicians are influenced by the norms and values that guide the news media.

The second contribution of the study is in incorporating integrative complexity as a measure of the quality of elite deliberation. Although it is not the first study to recognize a possible correlation between integrative complexity and deliberation (see Brundidge et al., 2014), it is, to the best of our knowledge, the first to study it as an indicator of the tendency of political elites to present deliberative and multidimensional rhetoric. We point to notable similarities between integrative complexity and existing empirical measures of opinion quality, and show that integrative complexity is theoretically relevant when attempting to study two key components of deliberativeness: the tendency of political speakers to introduce a diverse array of perspectives pertinent to issues they address in their speeches, and their inclination to see the differentiated dimensions as related to each other.

That said, the results herein reflect this correlation only indirectly. We can offer a more direct test of the relationship between integrative complexity and deliberative quality, however. We have compared integrative complexity scores in a random subsample of 300 speeches with the results of a validated measure of deliberative quality in political elite discourse—Steenbergen and colleagues' (2003) DQI. A moderate, positive, and significant correlation between DQI and integrative complexity is found in our sample ( $r = 0.39$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ).<sup>3</sup> We take this as solid evidence that the integrative complexity explored here is related to deliberative quality.

The third contribution of the study lies in the presentation of empirical evidence suggesting that integrative complexity does not represent a form of thinking but a rhetorical strategy. Integrative complexity has so far been mostly analyzed from a perspective that focuses on inner cognitive processes of speakers, such as the flexibility of their thinking or their ability to cope with stress; the few studies that discuss its strategic component do so indirectly and do not test explanatory hypotheses. Our study presents evidence that integrative complexity is to a large degree a rhetorical strategy that politicians utilize in face of systemic political constraints. Our findings suggest that it is not only short-term episodes (e.g., an election campaign, or a single policy debate) that affect complexity, but rather a stable context: it is the nature of the political system itself that causes politicians to respond strategically to the media.

Based on our findings, we believe that integrative complexity can be thought of as the outcome of *a combination* of cognitive capacities and personality traits, on the one hand, and context-driven constraints and motivations, on the other hand. For example, a politician who is very high on cognitive flexibility and tolerance to ambiguity—two well-known positive correlates of integrative complexity—may present complex rhetoric under most political circumstances he or she encounters; however, a politician low on these personality traits may be more predisposed to “succumb” to environmental pressures (such as media logic) and present simple rhetoric when circumstances seem to demand that. Unfortunately, we do not have data on the personality traits of MPs in our sample to corroborate this intuition.<sup>4</sup>

At this stage, it is important to discuss two potentially confounding factors that can affect our theory. The first is the local media. Politicians who are elected locally and therefore focus on representing their districts in Parliament (like in Canada) are likely to be more interested in the local media rather than the national media. In that case, we would expect a similar negative relationship between media motivation and integrative complexity, since local media, just as the national media, should prefer simple messages over complex ones. Yet we believe that this should not change our conclusion. Our media motivation measure presents MPs with a general question that inquires whether information that is interesting to *any* news media outlet is likely to make them act, meaning that this question taps local as well as national media motivation.

Second, we focus on parliamentary speeches to measure the public communications of political elites, while politicians make use of other forms of public communication as well (e.g., press releases, media interviews). We believe that the focus on parliamentary speeches works in favor of our findings, and in fact may produce underestimates of the impact of media motivation on rhetorical complexity. Parliamentary discussion is, as our tests indicate (see Table 3), very often not covered by the news media. If indeed media motivation leads to a decrease in integrative complexity, speeches held by politicians in more publicly visible and media-oriented contexts are likely to become even simpler.



Our study has two principal limitations. First, we rely on self-reported measurements of media motivation and representation. These measures may be biased in comparison to behavioral measures, and may likewise be correlated with an unobserved difference between our subjects. Second, we rely upon a relatively small sample of politicians. Results estimated on a small number of observations are often more susceptible to outliers and to modeling choices. That said, our sample of MPs appears representative on our main measure of integrative complexity, and our robustness checks suggest that model selection is not driving our results. We believe that despite these limitations, the results presented here constitute meaningful evidence that media motivation can affect the nature of political rhetoric, and that different political systems encourage different rhetorical responses from political actors.

## Notes

1. Belgium is a strongly decentralized country with quite autonomous regions. Regions have their own government and parliament, and they hold their own elections in which different parties compete. In Belgium, there are no national parties that compete in the different regions simultaneously. The media systems are also fully split along linguistic lines. Therefore, including only Flemish (Dutch-speaking) MPs makes sense; including Francophone MPs as well would actually add an additional case to the comparative design.

2. The analysis by Shenhav and colleagues (2014) offers another possible clustering of Israeli parties, one in which the parties Likud and Yisrael Beitenu are considered conservative. We note here that coding the conservatism variable this way does not change the results of any of our models in a meaningful way.

3. In the first stage, 30 MPs (10 per country) from our original 111 MPs sample were randomly selected. Second, 10 speeches per MP were analyzed for DQI, using the coding categories elaborated in Steenbergen and colleagues (2003, pp. 27–30). Since we analyze paragraphs, and not full speeches/debates, the relevant categories for analysis were (a) level of justification, (b) counterarguments, and (c) constructive politics.

4. We have attempted to test the strategy versus personality question by examining the effect of the interaction between ideology and media motivation on integrative complexity. The results of this test were insignificant ( $b$  of interaction term = 0.037,  $p > 0.1$ ). A  $t$ -test also revealed no significant difference in the mean media motivation of conservatives and liberals ( $t(109) = -1.02$ ;  $p > 0.1$ ). Since media strategy does not differ between liberals and conservatives, we cannot confidently conclude that conservatives are more “simple” than liberals due to strategic choices.

## Supplemental Material

Supplemental data for this article can be accessed on the publisher’s [website](#).

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