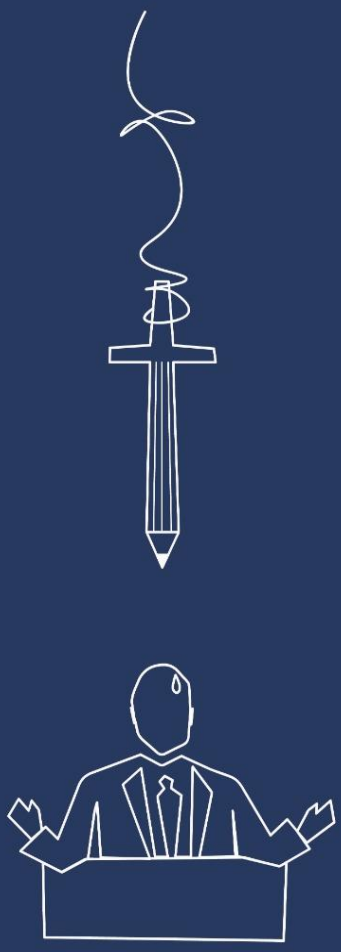
Chronicle of an election foretold

Politicians' beliefs about electoral accountability and its effects



Karolin Soontjens

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Karolin Soontjens

Universiteit Antwerpen

Faculteit Sociale Wetenschappen

Departement Politieke Wetenschappen

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Karolin Soontjens

Promotor: Prof. dr. Stefaan Walgrave

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Members of the doctoral committee:

Prof. dr. Peter Van Aelst

Prof. dr. Jean-Benoit Pilet

Prof. dr. Frédéric Varone

Prof. dr. Stefaan Walgrave

Members of the doctoral jury:

Prof. dr. Jane Mansbridge

Prof. dr. Petra Meier

Prof. dr. Yvette Peters

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Contact: karolin.soontjens@uantwerpen.be

www.m2p.be

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INTRODUCTION

Introduction

> *"One of the basic tendencies of democracy is that the anticipation of elections by policy-makers is a crucial mechanism by which citizens can control their leaders."*
> – John Kingdon (1968)

In March 2018, we interviewed Belgian politicians about the role of public opinion in their daily decision-making. A large majority of them, 251 out of the 321 we interviewed, describe themselves as "trustees"; they declare that, as representatives, they prefer to retain some independence from voter preferences and to follow their own convictions of what is best for society. Most politicians we asked about it, and Belgium is definitely no exception in this regard, claim that they do not feel strictly bound by the desires of (their) voters (see Dudzińska et al., 2014 for comparative evidence on politicians' role conception). The general tenor seems to be that policy-making should not be dictated by voters' wishes, but instead should come "from above" (Esaiasson & Holmberg, 1996). In essence, politicians' conception of representation generally holds that voters give them a loosely defined mandate and that after the elections they do whatever they deem necessary.

How most representatives describe their own role contrasts sharply with empirical evidence showing that politicians invest heavily in getting to know the opinions of voters (Geer, 1996) and rarely ignore these opinions in their decision-making (Soroka & Wlezien, 2010). Indeed, whilst most politicians claim that they prefer to be independent from the preferences of voters, there is surprisingly strong evidence that they respond to (changes in) these voters' preferences (Stimson et al., 1995). Interviewing Belgian politicians between March and July 2018, in the context of this dissertation, about the role of public opinion in their decision making, we get some insight into the counterintuitive finding that politicians value and stress their independence from voter preferences and adhere to a rather top-down view of representation while at the same time caring a great deal about public opinion. The following conversation with a Dutch-speaking member of the Belgian Federal parliament is exemplary for as good as all reactions we got from politicians –members of parliament, cabinet members, party leaders and caucus leaders alike– when they were asked about the importance of public opinion.

Interviewer: *Is estimating public opinion something you often do as a politician?*

MP: *Yes, it is a constant reflex. This does not imply that we always take public opinion into account or that we always follow it, but considering public opinion is definitely a constant reflex.*

Interviewer: *And do you think it is important for a politician to assess public opinion?*

MP: *Yes I do. Absolutely. Our aim is to improve society and to pursue the ideas we have, we simply need seats in parliament and, thus, votes. Hence, we always have to make a good assessment of what citizens want... We cannot just ignore public opinion.*

Politicians who identify as trustees but seemingly counterintuitively care a great deal about public opinion do so because of electoral incentives, this short conversation with a Belgian politician suggests. Her reflections are exemplary for how most politicians conceive of representation; because they are wholly beholden to voter support for their pursuit of office and policy goals, they want to know what citizens desire (Bernstein, 1989). Politicians cannot just ignore citizens' preferences, because they need these citizens to get out and vote for them in the elections.

However, that politicians feel the need to know what voters want because of re-election concerns is rather startling knowing how citizens in reality vote. After all, most scholarly work, observational (e.g. Achen & Bartels, 2017) as well as experimental (e.g. Huber et al., 2012), casts doubt about citizens' competence to effectively control representatives, documenting several biases in their retrospective assessment of political performance. An extensive literature has shown that voters rarely hold politicians, parties or governments to account for their actions in elections (Arnold, 1993; Carpini & Keeter, 1996; or see Plescia et al., 2021 who find that citizens have a hard time attributing responsibility for governmental decisions). This should not come as a surprise, given that most citizens know little about politicians' behavior –politics, after all, is quite complex to understand and requires an investment of (scarce) time (Alvarez & Gronke, 1996; Campbell et al., 1960). With the exception of some particularly obtrusive or polarized policy issues, politicians' actions rarely attract widespread public attention, let alone that these actions would influence citizens' voting decision (Arnold, 1993). The dearth of actual voter scrutiny,

established in ample scholarly work, causes some to question the efficacy of electoral accountability in spawning democratic representation.

In addition, even if citizens would hold politicians accountable and elect the political actors whose policy preferences most closely align with theirs, these citizens cannot control what representatives do *in between* elections (Przeworski et al., 1999). Imagine that a politician decides to pursue a course of action that is completely at odds with the promises she has made before the election and, therefore, with her voters' wishes. The only way for a voter to hold the politician accountable is to wait three, four or even five years, try to remember it at the ballot box and not give her a vote again. The same goes for parties, of course. Simply put; there is nothing voters can do *immediately* to correct inconsistent, or undesirable, political action. Therefore, one could argue that political actors should not be too concerned about the positions they take or the initiatives they pursue affecting their electoral prospects (Bianco et al., 1996; Bernstein, 1989). Overall, citizens are not permanently looking over the shoulders of politicians, and it is doubtful that the votes they cast in the elections as such contribute much to establishing a connection between political action and public preferences.

Still, the absence of citizen control need not be all too problematic. After all, citizens may be able to control their representatives even in the absence of actual electoral accountability. As long as representatives *believe* that some voters might hold them to account in the next elections, they are presumably "kept in check" (Mayhew, 1974).

Indeed, ample theoretical and empirical work on democratic representation rests on the assumption that elections, and more specifically the *anticipation* of future elections, induces politicians to advance the desires of voters, to please voters so they will vote for them in the next elections (Miller & Stokes, 1963). Representatives, in "rational anticipation" of future electoral consequences of their actions, presumably adapt their political actions to meet public demands (Stimson et al., 1995; Pitkin, 1967). The premise that rational anticipation of elections prompts politicians to respond to voters' wishes is ubiquitous in the representation literature, and is commonly referred to as "anticipatory representation" (see Mansbridge, 2003 or see Stokes, 1999 on parties).

The key assumption this mechanism of anticipatory representation hinges on is that politicians *anticipate* voter control. That is: that they truly believe (some) voters may

hold them accountable for their actions (Mansbridge, 2003). Were politicians to believe that what they do or say does not have any electoral implications, they should not feel obliged (at least from a *strategic* perspective) to pursue policies or to take stances that are popular among the public. Nor should they refrain from enacting policies or taking positions that they deem necessary but that are not supported by voters; they will not get punished for it on Election Day anyway. Similarly, politicians who do feel that their actions matter to their election result should be more motivated to learn and to respond to voters' preferences.

In contrast to the central role of politicians' anticipation of electoral accountability in theories of democratic representation, we know remarkably little about how politicians conceive of voter control, about the extent to which they believe voters will hold them accountable for their actions. With the exception of a few seminal works on U.S. legislators –notably by Miller and Stokes (1963) and Kingdon (1968)–, we know close to nothing about politicians' perceptions of electoral accountability. It is unclear whether and to what extent politicians feel the weight of voter control on their shoulders. While the assumption of rational anticipation carries so much normative importance that it should be examined empirically, it has not been done so far –in stark contrast to the large amount of work on citizens' *actual* accountability behavior. And, not only is there hardly any research on how politicians perceive voter control, work that examines variation in these perceptions across politicians and that investigates the accuracy of these perceptions, is lacking entirely.

Similarly, that the anticipation of electoral accountability instigates responsive elite behavior has rarely been studied directly. This is not to say that scholars have ignored the mechanism of anticipatory representation –quite the opposite in fact. Exploring variation in elite responsiveness over time (close to elections versus in the beginning of the legislature) and place (in competitive versus in non-competitive districts), scholars have tried to get a grip on the role of elections in bringing about responsive political action. But results are mixed: some have found that elections induce responsiveness, others have not (see Bernardi, 2018). In sum, it is *assumed* rather than *known* that politicians, in anticipation of future elections, want to please voters. A classic example is the following assertion by Stimson and colleagues (1995, p. 195): *'Hardly indifferent, politicians are keen to pick up the faintest signals in their political environment. Like antelope in an open field, they cock their ears and focus their full attention on the slightest sign of danger.'*

In short, representation scholars regularly, albeit implicitly, refer to politicians' perceptions of electoral accountability as the key incentive that makes them responsive to public opinion, but have refrained from systematically empirically investigating these perceptions (Stimson et al., 1995). Given that politicians' perceptions, motivations and resulting behavioral choices are at the heart of democratic representation, there is a compelling need for empirical evidence on perceptions of voter control and the consequences thereof for elite behavior (Herrick et al., 1994). In this dissertation, I therefore empirically tackle the following two overarching research questions:

RQ1. *How do politicians perceive the mechanism of electoral accountability?*

RQ2. *How do politicians' perceptions about electoral accountability influence their behavior?*

Answering these two research questions requires insight in the minds of politicians, which is exactly where previous research fell short. Since one cannot deduce from their behavior how politicians see voters and how these perceptions impact their (strategic) behavior, this dissertation relies entirely on survey and interview data, collected among members of parliament, party leaders and ministers in Belgium, members of parliament in Germany, Switzerland and Canada, and local U.S. legislators.

By studying how politicians conceive of electoral accountability, of citizens' monitoring abilities and of the considerations underlying their vote choice, and by examining whether these conceptions impact political behavior, this dissertation aims to fill one particular gap in the field of scholarly research on democratic representation. My aim is to enhance our understanding of elite behavior, by conceptualizing, measuring, and explaining an oft-mentioned variable in the mechanism of anticipatory representation.

In the remainder of this introduction, I first set out the theoretical foundations of this dissertation in more detail; I reflect on how representation comes about and subsequently zoom in on elite responsiveness. Next, I address the mechanism of anticipatory responsiveness and the role of politicians' perceptions of voter control. I conceptualize these what I will call "accountability beliefs", discuss how they are studied in previous work and what we (do not) know about the effects of these beliefs on political

action. Finally, I discuss the methodological approach that is applied to formulate an answer to the research questions and I conclude the introduction with an overview of the different empirical chapters of this thesis.

Two tracks to substantive representation[1]

In a representative democracy, public decision-making should somehow accord with the policy preferences of its citizens (Pitkin, 1967). Policy congruence, the degree to which public preferences and public policies coincide, is a cornerstone of democratic quality (Dahl, 1956). Policies that reflect public preferences are considered legitimate and as such contribute to citizens' trust in democracy (Linde & Peters, 2020). Whilst political theorists agree that policy-making cannot be disconnected from citizens' preferences, this does not imply that representatives are necessarily strictly bound by the desires of the represented (see Pitkin, 1967, who defines representation as '*acting in the interest of the represented, in a manner responsive to them*'). There are, after all, many valid reasons why policy-making can diverge from the public's desires –international commitments and obligations, economic interdependences, the protection of future generations and minority societal groups, or the public's unstable, egocentric or unfeasible preferences may require it (Burke, 1777; Manin, 1997; Mansbridge, 2003; Mair, 2009).

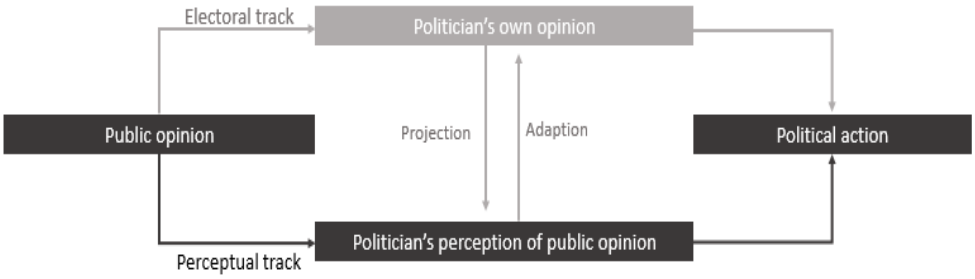
The degree of correspondence democracy requires may be up for debate, but fact is that policy-making should not be totally at odds with voters' preferences. At the very least, the degree to which policies respond to voter preferences constitutes a key aspect *and* qualifier of democratic representation. Regardless of whether one accepts or rejects the desirability of such preference congruence, discerning its degree and variation offers important insights into the functioning of democratic societies (Rehfeld, 2009).

It is not surprising, then, that scholars have over the years shown great interest in the extent to which policies reflect the will of the people. Or, more precisely, in whether policies are *congruent* with public opinion (i.e. overlap at a certain point in time) and whether policies are *responsive* (i.e. dynamically respond to (changes) in public opinion) (see Beyer & Hänni, 2018 for more information on this distinction). Overall, this vast body of work establishes that some political actions, on some policy issues, instigated by some

actors, in some countries, are congruent with public opinion (e.g. Kuklinski, 1978; Lax & Phillips, 2012), and are dynamically responsive to public opinion (e.g. Page & Shapiro, 1983; Stimson et al., 1995; Wlezien, 2004; Toshkov et al., 2020). While there is a sizable overlap between public preferences and policies, there are ample examples of governments, parties and individual politicians failing to respond to citizens' desires. Therefore, it is important to understand how this connection between public preferences and policies comes about, and why it sometimes fails to come about, and to do so we need to study the mechanisms that can establish such a link.

The key mechanism here is *competitive elections* (Manin, 1997; Pitkin, 1967). Without popular control in elections, Kingdon (1968) argues, you get representation by chance instead of democracy (see also Erikson, 1978; Pitkin, 1967). The premise holds that citizens, in competitive elections, control representatives and that these representatives in turn respond to citizens' preferences in between elections (Bernstein, 1989; Przeworski et al., 1999). In essence, then, there are two main ways in which elections can contribute to the convergence between public opinion and public policies; either via (1) citizens electing politicians and parties that share their policy preferences (the **electoral track**), or via (2) these actors being responsive to voter preferences (the **perceptual track**) (Miller & Stokes, 1963). These two avenues for constituency control are visualized in **Figure I**.

Figure I – Two tracks to substantive representation



Note. Figure adapted from Miller and Stokes (1963)

In their seminal work on democratic representation, Miller and Stokes (1963) argue that the first way in which voters can steer policy-making is by electing political actors with whom they share their preferences, and by holding them accountable in subsequent elections if they fail to act in accordance with their wishes. Through selection at the ballot, and the resulting electoral turnover, eligible voters give a mandate to political actors for the next years, which constitutes an exceptional opportunity for these citizens to pass on their preferences to those who can actually translate them into public policy (Przeworski et al., 1999). So, to the extent that voters engage in policy voting for like-minded political actors, in the aftermath of the elections, all these elected actors have to do is let their own opinions guide their behavior for congruent policies to be put in place[2] (Erikson, 1978). In this so-called **electoral track**, therefore, the responsibility lies with voters in casting a congruent vote, or put differently; in selecting the candidate or party whose policy package most closely resembles theirs (a so-called "correct" vote, see Lau & Redlawsk, 1997). In the context of (strong) party systems, this (s)election track has been referenced as the "responsible party model"; citizens are expected to compare the positions of the parties running in the elections and to vote for the ideologically closest party, and after the elections this party carries out the mandate that was given by its voters (Pierce, 1999). Or in other words, parties formulate programs, try to sell them to voters in elections and once sold successfully, carry them out (Holmberg, 1997). In sum, this mandate conception of representation implies that political actors propose policies in elections and citizens in turn use their vote to choose the best policies. As such, the choices of voters in elections should result in a legislature with politicians and parties representing voters in their proportionate strength (Przeworski et al., 1999)[3].

However, ample scholarly work casts doubt about the basic assumptions of the selection model promoting congruence. For one, voters often seem unable or unwilling to elect the politicians and parties that share their preferences –or rather the actors that represent them best, considering that there might not always be a "perfect match" (see Lau et al., 2014). Whether it is because voters are not informed about the policy preferences of the candidates and parties running in the elections (e.g. Dejaeghere & van Erkel, 2017), or whether it is because other considerations than policy preferences determine their vote choice (see Achen & Bartels, 2017), fact is that electoral selection cannot, on its own, bring about congruent policy-making. That politicians and parties share the policy preferences of the citizens who voted for them, is regularly contested by empirical evidence (Belchior, 2010; Dalton, 1985, 2013).

This is not to say that only "incorrectly voting" citizens are to blame; even in the scenario where citizens effectively cast a vote for the candidate(s) or party that *is* ideologically closest, there is only so much one vote can tell. After the elections, all kinds of different policy issues need to be tackled, some of which political actors got an unequivocal mandate on, while for many other policies they have not publicly advocated their position, or they do not even have an opinion yet –e.g. when "new" policy issues, such as dealing with a global pandemic, emerge during the legislature. Also, in elections, political actors present a package of policy proposals to voters, while these voters might favour the position of party/candidate X on certain policy issues and party/candidate Y on another issues (Costello et al., 2012). In addition, the assumption that once elected, political actors faithfully carry out their (perhaps strategically made) promises, is uncertain. There are no institutional rules that force representatives to adhere to their pre-election promises (Przeworski et al., 1999). And, importantly, there may be other constraints that lead political actors to behave differently from what they promised before the elections –think for instance of coalition agreements that require governmental parties to compromise (see Green-Pedersen & Mortensen, 2010). Therefore, it is unlikely that electoral selection will in itself result in congruent policy-making.

Congruence between voter demands and political actions can be established in yet another way. In what Miller & Stokes (1963) call the **perceptual track** (see Figure I), elected politicians do not necessarily have to agree with their voters' policy preferences in order to be responsive to these preferences. Instead, all they need is an *accurate* understanding of

what citizens' preferences are (Esaiasson & Holmberg, 1996), and sufficient *incentives* to respond to these perceived preferences in their actions (Miller & Stokes, 1963; Stimson et al., 1995). Thus, even if voters elect representatives who do not share their preferences at all, these representatives may still be responsive to public preferences and, as such, establish congruent public policy (Mayhew, 1974; Pitkin, 1967).

In sum, there are two main ways via which public preferences are translated into public policy. Either through politicians' own opinions and electoral turnover, or through politicians' perceptions of public opinion and their responsiveness to these preferences (Soroka & Wlezien, 2009; Stimson et al., 1995). Interestingly, recent evidence suggests that these two tracks towards substantive representation are connected via the internalization of citizens' opinions by politicians (Clausen, 1977) –so-called **adaption** (see Figure I). Indeed, a recent study of Sevenans (2021) shows that politicians update their *own* opinion when learning about their voters' preferences.

This dissertation will focus on the second, perceptual, track where politicians respond to voter preferences in between elections (Miller & Stokes, 1963). In the next part of the introduction I set out the two assumptions of this perceptual track of representation, and clarify how this dissertation connects the second with the first avenue of constituency control in yet another important way.

The perceptual track of representation and the role of rational anticipation

Mansbridge (2003) famously described the importance of politicians' perceptions of public opinion for anticipatory representation by stating that; '*the beliefs of politicians at time 2 about the future preferences of voters at time 3, are the cause of politicians' actions at time 2'* (see Friedrich, 1941 for an early reflection on this). Political actors can be responsive to voters' (future) preferences if two key conditions are met. Politicians need *accurate knowledge* of what these preferences are (1), and they need to be *motivated* to follow-up on these perceptions of voters' preferences in their actions (2).

First of all, knowledge is key. The intention to respond to voter desires is to no avail if these desires are misunderstood (Broockman & Skovron, 2018). Miller and Stokes (1963) were the first to study the accuracy of public opinion perceptions among U.S. legislators. In their footsteps, a small but substantial literature emerged that measures the accuracy of politicians' perceptions of general public and party electorate opinion (see Converse & Pierce, 1986 in France, Hedlund & Friesema, 1972; Erikson et al., 1975; Clausen, 1977; Uslaner & Weber, 1979 in the United States and Dekker & Ester, 1989 in The Netherlands). While somewhat ignored in the 90s and early years 2000, a handful of scholars have recently rediscovered interest in politicians' perceptions of voter opinion (Belchior, 2014; Broockman & Skovron, 2018; Eichenberger et al., 2021; Granberg, 1987; Granberg & Holmberg, 2002; Norris & Lovenduski, 2004; Varone & Helfer, 2021). A brief, simplified, summary of this literature would read that politician perceptions of public preferences correspond with what citizens actually desire, but that they are not entirely accurate either. Politicians' biased information environment (most politicians come from and reside in higher social circles) (Broockman & Skovron, 2018; Butler, 2014) and their tendency to "project" (see gray arrow connecting track 1 and 2 in Figure I) – that is: think that voter positions are closer to their own views than they actually are (Hedlund & Friesema, 1972; Sevenans et al., 2021)–, seem to contribute to this inaccuracy.

Having a perfectly accurate image of public opinion does not guarantee responsive action either. Even if politicians would know perfectly well what citizens want them to do – not all too utopian considering the increasing use of modern polling techniques and the growing potential for big data analytics to predict public preferences (Geer & Goorha, 2003; Hersh, 2015; Kreiss, 2016) –they should still be *willing* to respond to these desires. This motivation is all the more important because voter preferences, as argued earlier, do not

always accord with politicians' own policy views (Arnold, 1992; Mayhew, 1974). The literature identifies roughly two types of motives that may prompt politicians to take into account what citizens want in their actions; intrinsic (public interest) and extrinsic (self-interest) motivations (Geys & Mause, 2016).

First, public interest motives refer to the fact that politicians are responsive to (their perceptions of) voter preferences out of a sense of *duty* (Jones, 1973). Elected as representatives of the people, politicians may reason that voter opinions simply should be followed (Bartels, 1991). This stance fits the conception of politicians as "(instructed) delegates" (a terminology that dates back to Eulau et al., 1959). Delegates want to dutifully translate public opinion into policy because they think of it as their job, they may value the public's preferences and acknowledge their capabilities of good judgement –i.e. "There is wisdom in the crowds" –, or they may believe that policy can only be sustained effectively if it is supported by many. In short, if politicians believe that learning about and responding to public opinion in their actions is what they are in office for, responsive policy-making should follow once they are informed about public opinion. Yet, empirical work tackling whether politicians respond to public opinion out of duty is inconclusive. Most politicians, as explained in the introduction, approach representation from a trustee perspective. Once elected, a large majority of politicians feel that they should follow their own opinions and act in the best interest of citizens rather than doing exactly what voters want (Dudzińska et al., 2014; Andeweg & Thomassen, 2005). Moreover, the (few) self-declared delegate politicians do not seem to respond more to public preferences than their trustee colleagues. Though the early study of Kuklinski and Elling (1977) did find that delegates take into account constituent opinion more in their roll-call votes than trustees, Jones (1973) shows this is only true for controversial issues, and more recent work has not been able to confirm that delegates are more responsive (Blomgren & Rozenberg, 2015).

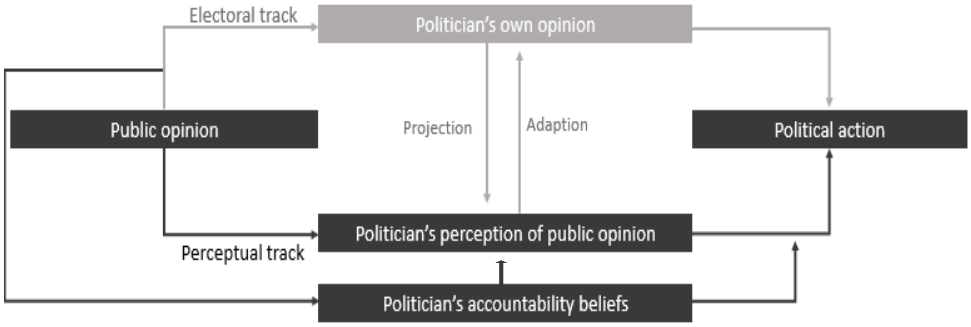
Second, politicians may be motivated to respond to public opinion to ensure (re-)election –a *self-interest* motive. Indeed, the incentives that elections generate are commonly thought to induce political actors, at least to some extent, to be responsive to public opinion (Downs, 1957). Rather than the election in itself (as has been discussed earlier), the anticipation of future electoral sanctions and rewards is often said to be citizens' primary means of power over representatives in between elections (Pitkin, 1967; Esaiasson & Narud, 2013). That politicians calculate the future implications of their behavior

and act accordingly, in fact, would produce accountability without there being a need for actual electoral sanctioning (Prewitt, 1970; Fiorina, 1974; Arnold, 1992; Maloy, 2014). Indeed, the assumption holds that in anticipation of elections, re-election minded politicians select policies that broadly reflect the will of the governed, because the governed decide who is rewarded and who does not (Bernstein, 1989). That public approval in the form of votes is indispensable for political actors to pursue their goals renders it unlikely that they will ignore voter preferences at the risk of electoral sanctions (Przeworski et al., 1999). That rational politicians anticipate future elections, is crucial in establishing a representational relationship, and is in the literature referred to as "anticipatory representation" (also "rational anticipation") (Mansbridge, 2003; Stimson et al., 1995). Whereas so-called "promissory representatives" aim to do as they promised and to explain it if they deviate from these promises, "anticipatory representatives" aim to please future voters, by gauging what these voters want and adapting their actions accordingly (Mansbridge, 2003). As Kingdon (1968) posits; '*one of the basic tendencies of democracy is that the anticipation of elections by policy-makers is a crucial mechanism by which citizens can control their leaders'.*

As such, and concluding the previous section, the impact of elections might not be limited to electoral turnover. The sheer anticipation of elections may induce politicians to reflect voter preferences diligently or at least try to do so. Therefore, how politicians behave presumably hinges on their subjective perception of how voters will react to their actions in the next election (Miller & Stokes, 1963; Kingdon, 1968; Arnold, 1992). I label these perceptions "accountability beliefs".

As is shown in **Figure II,** politicians' **accountability beliefs** integrate Miller and Stokes' electoral and perceptual track. The anticipation of elections (the first track) by politicians presumably serves as an important motivation for politicians to be responsive to their perceptions of voter preferences in their **political actions** (the second track) (Bernstein, 1989). And, knowing that responsiveness to public preferences requires an accurate understanding of what these preferences are, accountability beliefs may also affect politicians' motivation to gauge these preferences in the first place (Maestas, 2003), and as such impact politicians' **perceptions of public opinion**. It is this anticipatory mechanism, the dark boxes and lines in Figure II, that will be the focus of this dissertation.

Figure II – Overview tracks of representation and the anticipation of voter control



Note. Figure adapted from Miller and Stokes (1963)

Whilst I so far talked almost exclusively about policy *responsiveness* (which is considered desirable by many –Dahl, 1956), the relevance of the anticipation of electoral accountability for elite action may stretch well beyond the potential impact on policy-making and its responsiveness as such. Or to put it differently: accountability beliefs matter for other theories of representation too. There are, after all, other ways in which politicians can please voters and try to secure their re-election, and therefore, there are other political actions that are potentially affected by the anticipation of voter control (Cain et al., 1979; Fenno, 1978).

First, and quite evidently, how politicians (strategically) *communicate* about what they do and envision may just as well be subject to politicians' perceptions of electoral retribution and reward (Mayhew, 1974). The literature identifies different communicative strategies. First, *position taking* matters*;* besides taking position by voting in parliament, politicians can also speak rather than do, making statements about their policy views in the media for instance. Another strategy that is brought up in the literature is referred to as *advertising;* politicians put effort in making their name heard among constituents and try to create a favorable image of themselves. *Credit claiming,* then, is a similar strategy whereby politicians try to make voters believe that they are responsible for creating a desirable outcome. Finally, politicians may *explain*, justify, their actions to voters (especially if these actions are initially not that popular among voters) (Fenno, 1978; Powlick, 1991). All these communicative strategies to ensure voter support can be affected by the extent to which politicians believe they will be held accountable on election day. For instance, the sheer size

of the investment in communication can be affected by the belief that devising congruent or incongruent policies will pay off/be punished afterwards. More concretely, why would one invest in explaining an unpopular policy if one believes that the policy will not be noted? In sum, the anticipation of voter control probably does not only impact how reactive politicians are to public preferences in their policy-making behavior, but may also prompt politicians to account for their actions, to take position, to claim credit, and so on (Pitkin, 1967; Fenno, 1978; Mansbridge, 2003; Urbinati, 2008; Disch, 2011). In a similar vein, accountability beliefs may instigate so-called "case work", whereby politicians serve particularized interests or favor certain local constituencies, by for instance bringing home funding, or "delivering pork" (Gamm & Kousser, 2010; Harden, 2013). Such actions allow politicians to send a signal to constituents showing that they are looking after their needs without being necessarily in line with the actual policy preferences of voters.

Moreover, even in the context of pure trustee-style representation (see Burke, 1777), where politicians do not want to pander to voters' desires, politician perceptions of electoral accountability may impact their actions. Rather than following public opinion, trustee politicians seek *a posteriori* approval for their actions and/or try to influence public opinion. After all, as Mansbridge (2003) argues, accountability implies that representatives need to explain their actions and positions to the represented in order to achieve their electoral goals (see Esaiasson et al., 2013). Hence, rational anticipation may induce politicians to focus on *shaping* voter preferences instead of following them; it may encourage politicians to think of voters as "educable", or even "manipulable" (Pitkin, 1967; Mansbridge, 2003). So, not just for delegate politicians, but also for those with a Burkean view on politics, it matters whether they feel the weight of voter control or not. Overall, the anticipation of electoral accountability and the degree to which politicians feel being watched and scrutinized by voters takes a central role in many theories of representation.

In sum, ample empirical and theoretical work on representation hinges on the assumption that re-election minded politicians anticipate voter reactions to their actions and act accordingly. Yet, remarkably scant is the literature that (1) conceptualizes politician perceptions of electoral accountability, (2) studies politicians' accountability beliefs empirically and (3) studies the effects of accountability beliefs on politician behavior. In what follows, I describe how this dissertation contributes to filling these three gaps in the representation literature. I start by discussing what accountability beliefs are.

Accountability beliefs: some conceptual clarification

A first contribution of this dissertation is the endeavor to create conceptual clarity regarding the anticipation of electoral accountability. Accountability literally means to account for one's actions or being called to account for one's actions (Mulgan, 2008). The feeling of being held to account, then, encapsulates the expectation that certain behavior will be made public, that one must justify it and that it will be judged by others (Lerner & Tetlock, 1999). In the context of political representation, the term (electoral) accountability, also referenced as "popular control" or "constituency control" describes the ability of constituents to punish representatives for failing to act in accordance with their wishes by voting them out, or keeping them in for responding to their preferences (Arnold, 1993). As Joseph Schumpeter (1947) states in his classic work on democracy; *'the few who govern are responsive to the preferences of the many because, as elected officials, the few can be and are held accountable* for *their actions'.*

While electoral accountability is a retrospective mechanism –citizens sanction and reward politicians *a posteriori* for their actions, I argue that it should also be studied from the prospective viewpoint of politicians. Hence, to conceptualize (and in a next step operationalize) politicians' accountability beliefs –also referred to as "perceptions of voter control" later in this thesis–, *it* is useful to look at what accountability as a retrospective mechanism would ask from citizens. In particular, electoral accountability presupposes that citizens can observe what politicians and parties are doing and what their policy positions are, are able to understand policy outcomes and assign responsibility for these outcomes, and draw the conclusion that a certain politician or party does or does not deserve her support (Arnold, 1993; Fox & Shotts, 2009; Przeworski et al., 1999). Whether these preconditions are met, determines the likelihood of political actors being held accountable.

First, to exercise control over representatives, citizens should have a some (general) ideas about what politicians have said and done in the past legislature. Note that accountability is often said to focus on the evaluation of policy outcomes, while I interpret it more broadly and argue that citizens evaluate (incumbent) politicians based on their past actions *and* on their policy positions (Arnold, 1993). Therefore, I argue that it is crucial for representatives to *believe* that citizens know who they are, and know their political actions and policy positions (Bernstein, 1989). After all, politicians should only feel constrained by

voters if they assume that these voters are aware of what they do, or could potentially become aware of it due to the intervention of more involved actors –so-called "indirect oversight" (Arnold, 1993; Fenno, 1978; Kingdon, 1989). Politicians need not fear that voters see every (mis)step, as long as they assume that some are watching them and might "alert" others (i.e. "fire alarm oversight", see Clinton & Tessin, 2008). In sum, if politicians believe that what they say and do is visible, and known to voters, they likely have an incentive to anticipate their reactions (Miller & Stokes, 1963; Besley & Burgess, 2002 or see Snyder & Strömberg, 2010). Politicians', what I will call **awareness beliefs**, constitute the first element of their accountability beliefs (see Figure III below).

Second, retrospective voting implies that voters evaluate the outcomes of the policies[4] political actors have pursued, or plan to pursue in the future (Arnold, 1992; Jones, 2011). Assuming that citizens are able to monitor politician behavior (first element: awareness beliefs), in a next step they should decide whether these actions or proposals (will) have a positive effect for them, or for society as a whole (i.e. weigh the costs and benefits). Of course, this outcome awareness is connected to the attribution of *responsibility*, whether citizens are able to trace the outcomes back to individual politicians and parties responsible for them (see for instance Fisher & Hobolt, 2010; Achen & Bartels, 2017). So, politicians' beliefs about whether citizens approve of certain outcomes (i.e. evaluate and attribute responsibility) are the second aspect of politicians' perceptions of voter control. I will refer to this with the term **outcome beliefs.**

Third and finally, the sheer awareness and evaluation of politicians' actions, is not enough for citizens to hold politicians accountable. The represented are not only expected to monitor and evaluate, but also to *reward* the good representative and to *punish* the bad (Mansbridge, 2009). Whether citizens actually hold politicians to account in elections, after all, still depends on whether they *recall* this knowledge about politicians' actions at the ballot box and are *willing* to actually incorporate it in their voting decision. Converse and Pierce (1986) and Miller and Stokes (1963) examined these, what I will refer to as **voting beliefs**, by asking legislators whether they thought their personal records had been important in gaining them votes. If they assume that citizens vote for reasons that have nothing to do with their policy views or actions, politicians should not feel the strategic need be responsive to these voters' preferences (Bernstein, 1989). Politicians' perceptions about the extent to which voters will hold them accountable for their actions, their voting beliefs,

are the third and final element of their accountability beliefs (Esaiasson & Holmberg, 1996).

In sum, as is shown in **Figure III**, I argue that politicians' accountability beliefs consist of (1) their *awareness beliefs*; do they think their actions and positions are known to voters?, (2) their *outcome beliefs*; do they think voters are able to evaluate the (possible) outcomes of their political actions? Finally, (3) their *voting beliefs*; do they think voters will hold them accountable for what they do and say on election day? Note that there is a clear hierarchy in the items; being perceived at all is a precondition for being perceived favorably, and for being sanctioned or rewarded on election day (Mansbridge, 2009).

Figure III – Constituting elements of politicians' perceptions of voter control

Accountability beliefs: an empirical black box

This dissertation's second goal is to *measure* politicians' accountability beliefs and their perceptions of citizens' voting behavior more generally. With the exception of some older, predominantly American, studies we know close to nothing about politicians' perceptions of voter control. We do not know how politicians in general conceive of electoral accountability, nor what explains differences in these beliefs. In total, I am aware of only *four* older studies for which researchers got the required access to cooperative politicians to actually study their perceptions.

First, there is the seminal work of Miller and Stokes (1963) on the accuracy of politicians' public opinion perceptions, in which they also dedicate some attention to the accountability linkage and how it works in the minds of legislators. Surveying U.S. legislators, they show that a majority of them believe that their re-election chances hinge on constituents' reactions to their records. In particular, of the Congressmen they surveyed, four-fifths said that the outcome in their district had been strongly influenced by voters' reactions to their records and personal standing. Therefore, they conclude that: '*Congressmen feel like their individual legislative actions may have a considerable impact on the electorate, yet some simple facts about the representative's salience to his constituents imply that this could hardly be true*' (p. 54). The second study on politicians' accountability beliefs is conducted by Converse and Pierce (1986), who asked a very similar question to U.S. and French politicians; do they feel that their personal reputations has been important in gaining votes? Seventy percent of the re-elected incumbents that were interviewed, believed that this was indeed the case.

Third, there is Kingdon's (1968) classic '*Candidates for office, beliefs and strategies',* for which he asked U.S. election candidates in a post-election survey whether they believed their voting records, the issues of the election or the party label determined citizens' vote choice. He shows that most of the winning candidates (65 percent to be exact) put the importance of their own records high (only 35 percent of the losing candidate did, they instead blame the party label for the result, in their case the defeat). The fourth study addressing accountability beliefs, then, is another classic work of Kingdon (1989). Drawing on open interviews with U.S. legislators about a specific roll-call vote they had recently taken, he shows that they seemed to believe that voters were aware of it, or could

potentially become aware due to the intervention of interest groups, important public figures, journalists or parties.

In short, the evidence suggests that (some) politicians, at least in the U.S.A. and in France in the 1960s-1980s, believe that their voting behavior determines their election outcome. Note that most of these works study politicians' *voting beliefs*, not their overall accountability beliefs (see previous section where I identify its three building blocks). The existing empirical evidence is scant, to say the least. Hence, one major shortcoming in the representation literature is the lack of examination of politicians' subjective beliefs about electoral sanctions and rewards (Maloy, 2014). Filling this gap by studying politicians' accountability beliefs on a larger scale, and more systematically, is the second contribution of this dissertation.

Accountability beliefs influencing political action: mixed, indirect evidence

A third and final contribution of this dissertation lies in the empirical study of the effects of accountability beliefs on elite action. Ample work on democratic representation hinges on the assumption that the observed correspondence between voter preferences and public policies is, at least in part, due to politicians anticipating future elections. Elections, it is stated, induce political actors to respond to voter preferences, in so far, of course, that they believe that what they do and say may affect their election result (Stimson et al., 1995). While electoral competition is widely considered the engine of democracy because it compels politicians to *identify* and *respond* to the wishes of voters, research backing this assumption with empirical evidence is mixed and inconclusive. The main reason for these ambiguous results lies in the fact that politicians' subjective perceptions of the electoral consequences of their behavior are rarely studied in relation to their actions, but instead indirect proxies are used.

Notably, scholars have long endeavored to study the connection between (district) *electoral competition* and responsiveness (Jones, 1973; Stimson et al., 1995). Representatives who face a lot of competition, the assumption holds, should be more solicitous of voter preferences in an effort to diminish electoral uncertainty (Campbell, 1981; Jones, 1973). Empirical evidence testing this assumption is diverse. Some scholars look at the correlation between voter opinions and policymaking and find that it increases as elections approach (Erikson, 1978). Other work compares levels of policy congruence across electoral systems and finds that the more governments have to compete for votes, the more likely they are to incorporate public opinion in their decisions (Hobolt & Klemmensen, 2008; Heitshusen et al., 2005; Wlezien & Soroka, 2012). Also, and this approach is quite popular, scholars have studied whether district competitiveness is a predictor of responsiveness (see Fiorina, 1974 for an overview of work on this so-called "marginality hypothesis"). While some find that district competitiveness is related to stronger responsiveness to voter preferences (e.g. Griffin, 2006; MacRae, 1952; Miller & Stokes, 1963; Stimson et al., 1995), suggesting that the anticipation of voter control instigates responsiveness, others do not find this effect (Erikson & Wright, 1968), or even detect an inverse relationship (Bartels, 1991; Fiorina, 1974; Jones, 1973; Kuklinski, 1977).

Another strand of research that suggests that politicians anticipate and respond to voter control by furthering citizens' desires looks at politicians' *career ambitions*. Maestas (2003) shows that politicians who aspire higher office are more motivated to become informed about public opinion. And representatives in their final term in office, who have no electoral incentives to act in line with the public's preferences simply because they will not stand for re-election again, seem to work less in parliament and do less efforts to satisfy voters (Besley & Larcinese, 2011; Geys & Mause, 2016; Herrick et al., 1994).

Finally, another indirect approach that is used to assess whether the anticipation of future elections drives responsiveness, is to look at *issue salience*. The idea is that politicians are most fearful of electoral retribution when they tackle issues that are important to voters, and/or that would impose large, direct costs on them, while they are less fearful when it concerns small costs or technical issues, of which citizens do not understand what the stakes are (Arnold, 1993; Jones, 1973). Empirical evidence on the importance of issue salience in relation to elite responsiveness is again mixed. Several studies on policy responsiveness have identified that political actors are more likely to

respond to voter preferences on issues that are of greater importance to voters (Lax & Phillips, 2012; Page & Shapiro, 1983; Wlezien, 2004). However, others posit that the degree of overlap between public opinion and public policy is no greater for high than for low salience issues (e.g. Brooks, 1990).

In sum, evidence on electoral competition inducing voter responsiveness is inconclusive. Bernardi (2018), in a recent overview of work addressing the connection between policy responsiveness and electoral incentives, concludes that voter preferences are represented in certain policy domains, but that that this responsiveness is mostly unrelated, or at least *not clearly* related, to electoral incentives. In part, these inconsistencies may stem from the rather circumstantial, indirect measurement of electoral incentives. Here is why.

First, earlier observational work on responsiveness does not do a good job at isolating politicians' electoral motivations from other factors that may affect levels of responsiveness, notably their *ability* to be responsive. For instance, there might be a relationship between district competitiveness and the difficulty of reading public opinion. Districts where politicians win by small margins tend to be more divided on policy issues, and, therefore, politicians in unsafe electoral positions have a hard(er) time being responsive to majority opinion (Fiorina, 1974; Jones, 1973). Also, legislators in non-competitive districts generally enjoy longer tenure, which allows them to get to know their district better (Jones, 1973; or see Brunell & Buchler, 2009). Similarly, research has shown that politicians' perceptions of public opinion are more accurate for politicized, salient issues (e.g. Converse & Pierce, 1986; Miller & Stokes, 1963 or see Varone & Helfter, 2021 who show that politicians have a more accurate understanding of voter preferences on policy issues that are owned by, and are therefore important to, their party). This, in turn, may explain findings of stronger responsiveness on salient issues (e.g. Page & Shapiro, 1983). The same issue of lacking a clear distinction between knowledge and incentives pops up with regard to the finding that responsiveness increases as elections approach (Kuklinski, 1977). Is the sheer anticipation of the forthcoming election driving the effect or do the opinions of citizens become more outspoken, more easy to grasp when elections are nearing –for instance because there is more poll data available (see Beckers, 2020)?

Second, and relatedly, scholars generally lack direct measures of politicians' electoral motivations. District competitiveness is a reasonable proxy for electoral

motivations but it does not fully grasp how politicians *feel* about their re-election. Politicians who are objectively in a "safe seat" may still doubt whether they will get re-elected and therefore be more responsive than expected (Enos & Hersh, 2017; Mayhew, 1974). For all sorts of reasons –for instance because they are in general quite insecure, or risk averse (Mann, 1978)– politicians in electorally safe positions may be in doubt about their re-election (see Cohen, 1984 who shows that politicians feel insecure about their re-election even though they have won previously by large margins), and therefore have strategic incentives to pander towards voter preferences (Bartels, 1991). Moreover, politicians who do not anticipate that voters will reward them for being responsive or hold them accountable for being incongruent, should not bother about being responsive to begin with.

Finally, and strongly related to the previous argument, focusing on "seat safety" neglects the complex and uncertain nature of *anticipated voter control.* A good example is the work of Egan (2008) on party issue ownership that shows that parties are *less* responsive to voter opinion on issues their party owns (i.e. salient issues). The author claims this is the case because parties try to exploit their "trust advantage" on these issues. Also, and related, Jones (1973) argues that if a politician from a competitive district violates district majority opinion, he is less likely to alienate the support of all groups than is the legislator from a non-competitive district because majorities are less preponderant in heterogeneous, competitive districts. This may explain why some find congressmen in safe districts to be more receptive of voter preferences than their colleagues in unsafe, competitive districts (Fiorina, 1974). Overall, the point is that we do not know what politicians *think* will be rewarded or punished on Election Day and therefore we cannot deduce politicians' motives from their behavior.

Four classic works deserve to be mentioned here as an exception to the predominantly indirect evidence on accountability beliefs influencing political action. These studies, by providing anecdotal evidence, suggest that the positions politicians express through roll-call votes and their interactions with constituents are affected by the anticipation of voter control. First, by interviewing U.S. legislators about their roll-call voting decisions, Kingdon (1989) shows that they seem to believe that voters are aware of their roll-call behavior, or could potentially become aware due to the intervention of third actors, and that this impacts their behavior (not just how they vote, but also in how they strategically communicate and instruct voters –see Grimmer, 2013). When a lot is at stake

for citizens, legislators are more careful in showing discrepant behavior. Kingdon therefore concludes that politicians act according to their conception of citizens' reactions to alternative courses of action they may pursue.

Another contribution is the innovative observational study of (Fenno, 1978). In *home style,* Fenno reports on how a representative's view of her constituency affects her behavior in the district. By observing legislators in their local constituencies, Fenno shows that they try to live up to their re-election goal by thoughtfully presenting themselves to constituents, for instance by justifying what they do in Congress. The idea is that the presentation of themselves enhances trust, that trust enhances the acceptability of explanations and that the acceptability of explanations enhances voting leeway (see also Grose et al., 2015). Fenno establishes that Members of Congress have three goals; getting re-elected, exercising power in Congress and pursuing good public policy. In balancing these goals, politicians' view of the constituency is important; they are more likely to follow their voters when they feel their opinions are strong and robust (i.e. hard to change).

In a similar vein, there is the work of Arnold (1992) –*The logic of congressional action*– and Mayhew (1974) –*The electoral connection.* Both authors rely on their inside knowledge of Congress to develop a theoretical argument, and substantiate it with some anecdotal evidence. They reflect on the policy choices of Congressmen and argue that they should have a strong aversion of choices that impose costs on their constituents because these citizens might blame them for it. They conclude that legislators tend to choose among policy proposals by estimating citizens' policy preferences and the likelihood that these citizens incorporate these policy preferences into their choices in subsequent elections.

Concluding this section is simple: the aggregate relationships scholars have studied, although interesting and suggestive, do not offer definitive proof for anticipatory responsiveness (Kingdon, 1989). What is lacking in particular is knowledge on politicians' *beliefs* about the rewards and penalties voters can impose on them and knowledge on how these beliefs relate to elite behavior. This is the final gap in the literature on responsiveness that this dissertation seeks to address.

In sum: the puzzle and its implications

Elections are key for establishing a substantial connection between voter preferences and policies (Pitkin, 1967). After all, elections allow voters to elect politicians and parties with whom they share their preferences and to hold incumbents to account for their actions.

Yet, to ensure a representational relationship in *between elections*, we are necessarily reliant on politicians who are *motivated* to follow up on what they *think* that voters want. We know from older (e.g. Hedlund & Friesema, 1972) and more recent work (Broockman & Skovron, 2018) that politicians' perceptions of public preferences reflect citizens' real opinions but are not entirely accurate either. What we do not know, however, is whether the anticipation of future elections induces politicians to learn and respond to (what they think) voters want. This is the classic idea of anticipatory representation (Stimson et al., 1995; Mayhew, 1974; Mansbridge, 2003). Its foremost precondition, namely that politicians *believe* voters may hold them to account on Election Day, is never conceptualized nor measured in a systematic fashion. Doing so, are the first two contributions of this dissertation. In addition, while ample work tackles elite responsiveness to public opinion, the mechanisms driving such responsiveness remain understudied. Examining whether the anticipation of voter control impacts political action is the third main contribution of this dissertation.

That the anticipation of voter control may allow citizens to exercise some control over their representatives –e.g. induce them to work hard and to further their desires– renders it essential to understand how politicians look at this mechanism of electoral accountability. By studying politicians' accountability beliefs and its effects, this dissertation tries to fill one particular empirical lacuna in the representation literature. As such, my aim is to better understand how representation comes about and why it is sometimes flawed.

Important to note is that I do not, as a starting point, take a normative stance on how representation *should* come about, e.g. on whether I deem it desirable that politicians are responsive to voters' wishes. I will address the implications for democracy at length in the conclusion. My point is that, regardless of which normative stance one adheres to, elite responsiveness to public opinion *matters* for democratic representation and therefore deserves to be studied. And to get a better grip on elite responsiveness, we need to understand how politicians conceive of electoral accountability.

Data and methodological approach

To formulate an answer to the central questions guiding this dissertation, namely (1) how politicians conceive of electoral accountability and (2) how these perceptions affect their behavior, I draw on evidence directly acquired among politicians. The methodological approach of this study is innovative in three particular ways; (1) it relies on evidence acquired, by means of surveys, a survey experiment and face-to-face interviews, among politicians, (2) it examines a large sample of representatives, and (3) it studies politicians' perceptions of voter control in a relevant setting: Belgium. I will elaborate briefly on each of these features, for more detailed information on the specific methods and data used can be found in the respective chapters.

1) Surveys and interviews with politicians

Examining how politicians conceive of voter control and how these beliefs affect their behavior, inevitably requires insight in the minds of politicians. We cannot, after all, deduce from their behavior how politicians conceive of voter control, nor can we ascertain from a distance how their accountability beliefs affects (strategic) behavior. Therefore, this dissertation relies on three survey methods; closed survey questions, a survey-embedded experiment and open interview questions.

First, politicians are questioned about their perceptions of voter control in *closed survey questions*. This survey approach allows to get a systematic insight in politicians' minds, and the closed nature of the questions at the same time makes it possible to *compare* perceptions across politicians, parties, and countries. In the same questionnaire, politicians are also asked about their (intentional) behavior, and these questions are introduced as outcome variables in some of the empirical chapters –note that research has shown that intentional behavior does correlate with politicians' real behavior (Donsbach & Traugott, 2007). While survey research obviously has its disadvantages (see further), it is simply indispensable to get a coherent view of politicians' beliefs.

Second, I rely on a *survey experiment* to draw causal inferences on the impact of accountability beliefs on politicians' responsiveness to voter opinion. In particular, politicians in the survey experiment were confronted with poll data about their party voters' preferences (*real* public opinion data –see Naurin and Öhberg (2021) for a discussion on

ethics in experiments with political elites), and we consequently measure how they respond to this information and check whether accountability beliefs affect their reactions. The main advantage of this experimental approach, in contrast to observational work, is that it allows isolating the moderating effect of perceived voter control. After all, politicians' *ability* to read public opinion, another key element in generating responsiveness, is kept constant as all politicians in the experimental condition are given the public opinion information. And although survey experiments come with additional limitations –notably their external validity–, they are ideal for making causal claims about the influence of politicians' perceptions of voter control for their behavior.

Finally, in addition to the closed survey questions and survey experiments, we interviewed politicians (members of parliament, ministers and party leaders) about their awareness and accountability beliefs, and about how the anticipation of voter retaliation and reward influences their behavior. Such *open interviews* allow to get a rich, comprehensive, insight into the beliefs of political actors, and into the considerations that guide their behavior. Letting politicians talk (more or less) freely, I learn how they perceive their voters, where these perceptions come from, why these beliefs may be distorted and how they influence their decisions. In the open interviews, we confronted all politicians with the exact same questions, but leave room for follow-up questions to pop up during the interview itself. Having a fixed set of questions was important to ensure consistency, especially since different researchers were responsible for interviewing the politicians.

To understand politicians' dealing with and perceptions of the accountability mechanism I inevitably have to rely on self-reported evidence. Therefore, the conclusions drawn in this dissertation necessarily hinge on the truthfulness of politicians' answers. Whenever scholars rely on self-reported evidence, a first issue that pops up is *social desirability* and it is important to address this –the more so because politicians are public actors that have a strategic interest in conveying a positive image of themselves. One can never be sure that politicians give answers that align with their true convictions, of course, but we did take some precautionary measures to reduce the likelihood of politicians giving desirable answers. First, before interviewing and surveying politicians, we guaranteed full anonymity. We promised participants that their answers would never be shared nor reach the public realm in an identifiable format. We would never report on the results of individual politicians, nor on the results of specific parties –this is important because politicians may

not only want to convey a positive image of themselves but also of their party. Having conducted a substantial amount of interviews and surveys myself, I am strongly convinced that politicians trusted our confidentiality agreement. No one, for instance, objected that I would record the open interview. And politicians were often surprisingly honest in what they told us. They regularly said things that did not paint a positive picture of themselves, of others and of politics in general. If politicians at all tried to convey a desirable image of themselves, it was to impress the interviewer because they knew their answers would not matter for their public image. In addition, for the closed survey and the survey experiment, politicians answered the questions alone on a laptop, and the researcher present in the room to make sure politicians and not their employees filled in the questionnaire did not observe their answers. Hence, the incentive to impress the researcher should have been non-existent for the closed survey.

A second potential problem with self-reported evidence lies in *post-hoc rationalizations*. While social desirability points to a conscious process whereby politicians want to convey a positive image of themselves, rationalization happens unconsciously. The idea is that politicians, just as any other human being, have difficulties with remembering things correctly. We all tend to make decisions based on intuition, and when we are asked about the decision afterwards, we rationalize why we did it. Not necessarily to convey a more positive image of ourselves, but because we are unaware of many of the causes of our behavior and we tend to come up with reasons that sound more rational and systematic than our initial behavior actually was. At the same time, we downplay more emotional reasons for action. Politicians as well, and perhaps even more so, may justify or explain things they actually did unconsciously, which potentially introduces a fallacy (see Rahn et al., 1994 who show that rationalization in the context of voters' evaluation of political candidates was especially strong among politically involved voters. In particular, post-hoc rationalizations may pose a problem to the findings of the open interviews, in which we asked party elites to reflect on past decisions, and the considerations and motivations driving these decisions. It is not easy for politicians to reflect on something they consider routine behavior, but we try to limit the impact of distorted rationalization by asking about *specific* initiatives, to make their reflections very tangible, and, thus, presumably more accurate too (see Kingdon, 1989 for a similar argumentation and approach). Even in consideration of the possible "risk" of rationalization in the mind of elites, I deem the

interview approach valuable: it provides new insights on how key political actors perceive the representational process, and why they act in one way or another. I interviewed elites knowing there is a risk of rationalized responses, for the sake of generating new insights that complement observational work. It is a leap of faith I gladly take.

2) Studying politicians in the context of the POLPOP project

The survey and interview evidence this dissertation relies on is for most part collected within the framework of the POLPOP project[5]. The project is a collaborative effort of research teams in five different countries that is designed to study (the accuracy of) politicians' perceptions of public opinion. I was lucky that studying politician perceptions of *voter control* fitted with the research agenda of the POLPOP consortium. The consortium consisted of Belgium (Wallonia and Flanders, the team I am part of[6]), The Netherlands, Germany, Canada and Switzerland. In all five countries, a common core of survey questions was presented to politicians and, of course, all country teams fielded additional questions to their respective representatives. For most part, this dissertation draws on data collection efforts in Belgium and in particular in Flanders, although there are two comparative chapters; one that reports on survey evidence collected in Germany, Belgium, Canada and Switzerland (Chapter 2), and one that studies Belgian MPs alongside local U.S. legislators (Chapter 4).

For the single-country studies, I rely on survey and interview evidence collected among Belgian, and in particular Dutch-speaking, regional and federal representatives. Note that Belgium is a federal state; its main regions Flanders and Wallonia have a different language (Dutch and French), have their own parties, and their own media system (Deschouwer, 2009). In total, 179 Dutch-speaking Belgian politicians—national and regional members of parliament, national and regional ministers, and party leaders—were extensively survey-interviewed in the spring of 2018. To achieve this quite exceptional response rate (77 percent of all national politicians participated), the principle investigator of the project, Stefaan Walgrave, repeatedly called politicians and asked for their cooperation (the method is explained in more detail in Walgrave & Joly, 2018). We interviewed and surveyed politicians, face-to-face, for about one hour on average; politicians first answered a series of closed survey questions (± 30 minutes) and then took an open interview (± 30 minutes). The survey not only contained questions on politicians'

perceptions of public opinion and electoral accountability, but also other questions on their feeling of electoral safety, their role conceptions, the frequency with which they talk about public opinion etc. These variables will be introduced in different chapters of this dissertation. For party leaders and (junior) ministers, we adopted a different approach; they were interviewed for one hour and only filled in a short survey about their perceptions of public opinion (+- 10 minutes) that did not include questions on their perceptions of voter control –but instead left more room for open questions. The main reason for focusing, especially in the open interview part, on Flanders (or rather: on Dutch-speaking politicians) is a practical one; together with my team, we were able to ensure that high-level elites (party leaders and ministers) participated and, especially, we made sure that politicians could be interviewed at length in a face-to-face setting, and in our mother tongue. Arranging this in another country or in Wallonia would have been virtually impossible.

3) Examining individual politicians' perceptions in party-centered systems

In contrast to existing research on the anticipation of voter control that is conducted predominantly in the USA (e.g. Kingdon, 1968) and occasionally in France (Converse & Pierce, 1986), this dissertation's focus is mostly on Belgium. Belgium is quite similar to other West-European countries; it is a proportional system with coalition governments, and homogenous and powerful parties (Depauw, 2003). Politicians in proportional systems such as Belgium have a different relationship with the public than those in majoritarian systems –to secure re-election, for instance, they should rather please the party leadership than their geographic constituents–, and the potential for representatives to act independently is fairly restricted (André et al., 2015). Why, then, study *individual* politicians' perceptions?

First of all because of *the nature of the research questions* I ask. Examining how political actors conceive of electoral accountability and how these perceptions affects political action, inevitably demands an individual-level approach. Parties, governments or states are a collectivity of politicians, and while individuals can hold beliefs, collectivities as such cannot. Moreover, it are individuals that, together, decide on the party's ideological positioning, initiative-taking, strategic communication and so on (Öhberg & Naurin, 2016), and it are these individuals' beliefs that guide their actions.

Second, I study the beliefs and actions of individual politicians because even in proportional multiparty systems such as Belgium, politicians have (some) control over their election outcome (André et al., 2014). Belgium has a flexible ballot list system, which implies that voters can cast one or more preferential vote(s) in addition to a party vote. The number of preferential votes that individual politicians receive is important –for obtaining a favorable position on the ballot list in the next election, for getting awarded a high-level position by the party selectors etc.–, which consequently incentivizes politicians to cultivate a personal vote (André et al., 2015; Bräuninger et al., 2012). Politicians can seek personal endorsements with the questions they ask in parliament (if not to impress voters directly, to impress the party leadership), with the positions they take in the media, with the direct interactions they have with voters, and so on (Soroka et al., 2009). Also, even in the scenario where individual politicians cannot affect their own electoral fate whatsoever, the study of these individuals could still be interesting. What matters, after all, is whether they *think* they can influence their own electoral fate (Mayhew, 1974). Whether politicians think their activities have electoral impact, and whether they actually do, are two different things, and the former can be just as important in explaining elite action as the latter. Overall, it is not the case that Belgian politicians are inexorably pushed back and forth by forces beyond their power. Their individual perceptions and resulting behavioral choices matter.

Third and finally, studying individual politicians in Belgium renders this dissertation into a conservative case. After all, politicians in multiparty proportional systems have fewer incentives, and means, to please voters compared to politicians elected in majoritarian systems, where they have to build "power base" independent from their party (André et al., 2015; Campbell & Zittel, 2020). Strongly dependent on their party for their electoral fate, Belgian politicians can be expected to mostly try to satisfy their party and not to care too much about what citizens want. In legislative voting, party discipline is high and legislators are expected to toe the party line; individually representing a specific group of voters is difficult (Depauw, 2003). Comparatively speaking, Belgian politicians should anticipate *less* voter control, and the anticipation of accountability should matter *less* for their behavior. If I were to find that Belgian MPs believe that voters monitor them and will hold them accountable on election day, and if I were to find that these beliefs incentivize them to be responsive, this should be even more the case in political systems that are more candidate-centered.

While there are good reasons to study individual politicians' perceptions in Belgium, I am not oblivious to the context in which these politicians operate. In this dissertation, I take the party level into account in various ways –as described in more detail in the respective empirical chapters. For instance, while U.S. studies focus on how politicians represent their geographical constituency, I recognize that the more relevant reference point for Belgian representatives are (potential) *party voters* (Esaiasson, 1999; Brack et al., 2012). To gauge politicians' accountability beliefs, then, I ask politicians to think of '*all people who consider voting for your party*' (i.e. their potential party electorate). Another way to account for the party level in this dissertation is by studying *party behavior*. I ask politicians to reflect on voter awareness of party initiatives and on citizens' party choice considerations, and I interview party leaders and ministers about (strategic) party decision-making. Finally, in all chapters, I acknowledge the role of parties by controlling for party characteristics in the explanatory models.

Overall, precisely because representatives in proportional systems have a different relationship with the public than those in majoritarian systems, this dissertation's focus is *innovative.*

Summary overview of the dissertation

In this thesis, I examine politicians' perceptions of voter control and its effects in six empirical chapters, each with a different focus. Three chapters tackle politician perceptions of voter control, three other chapters zoom in on the effect of these perceptions on political behavior. A visual overview of the chapters and their empirical focus can be found in **Figure IV**. Note that each chapter can be read as a standalone research paper that has its own introduction, theoretical framework, methodology and conclusion –which inevitably results in some overlap between the chapters.

Chapter 1 is titled '*The awareness paradox: (Why) politicians overestimate citizens' awareness of parliamentary questions and party initiatives'.* It studies the extent to which politicians believe that voters are aware of their behavior in parliament and of their party's decision-making. In particular, Flemish members of parliament (N=164) were asked to estimate voter awareness of a parliamentary question they had asked and an initiative their party had recently introduced. To benchmark politicians' answers, citizens were surveyed about their actual knowledge of these party initiatives and parliamentary questions. Results show that most MPs overestimate, and sometimes even largely, voter awareness. Paradoxically, politicians across the board do consider citizens in general as rather uninformed about politics but still they believe that some of them are aware of specific party initiatives and oral questions they had asked in the rather invisible parliamentary arena. Interview evidence is analyzed to provide some insights on why politicians believe they are quite visible. I learn that MPs seem to generalize feedback they receive from engaged citizens, leaving them with a biased image of how aware voters actually are of what they do. Also, the exceptionality of gaining visibility with their work causes politicians to overestimate the scope of awareness when they are covered in the media, receive reactions on their social media accounts or work on policy issues they think voters care about.

Whereas Chapter 1 relies predominantly on qualitative survey evidence and studies Flemish politicians' awareness beliefs **Chapter 2** instead examines politicians' general accountability beliefs –the chapter is titled '*Do politicians anticipate voter control? A comparative study of representatives' accountability beliefs'.* Besides politicians' perceptions of voter awareness of their actions and policy views, I ask politicians whether they think that voters are capable of evaluating the outcomes of their actions and whether they anticipate that voters will hold them accountable for these actions and positions on

election day. This chapter presents comparative survey evidence, collected among Belgian, Swiss, German and Canadian Members of Parliament (N=782), and shows that most politicians believe that voters monitor them and take what they do and say into account on Election Day. Strikingly, this is also true for backbencher, junior or opposition MPs, for whom the likelihood of being held to account for their individual actions is in reality limited. The political system does matter (a bit); MPs in party-centered systems (Germany and Belgium) feel less controlled by party voters than those in more candidate-centered systems (Switzerland and Canada). Interestingly, populist politicians, in contrast to their colleagues in traditional parties, are more convinced that voters know about their political actions and take this knowledge into account at the ballot. It seems that politicians who take pride in being close to voters (and their preferences), also feel more monitored by these voters.

In **Chapter 3**, entitled *'Voters hardly care about a party's policy profile: politicians' pessimistic view of voting motives',* I shift focus from politicians' perceptions of their individual electoral accountability to the party level. In particular, I ask Belgian politicians in a survey to indicate which factors govern citizens' party choice on Election Day. Results show that politicians are, in Achen and Bartels' (2017) terms, "democratic realists". Most politicians believe that citizens are seduced to vote for a party because of individual personalities on the party list and campaign communications. More (policy) informed voting motives rank at the bottom of politicians' list; citizens, according to MPs, hardly take into account the parties' promises for the future or their past behavior in their party choice.

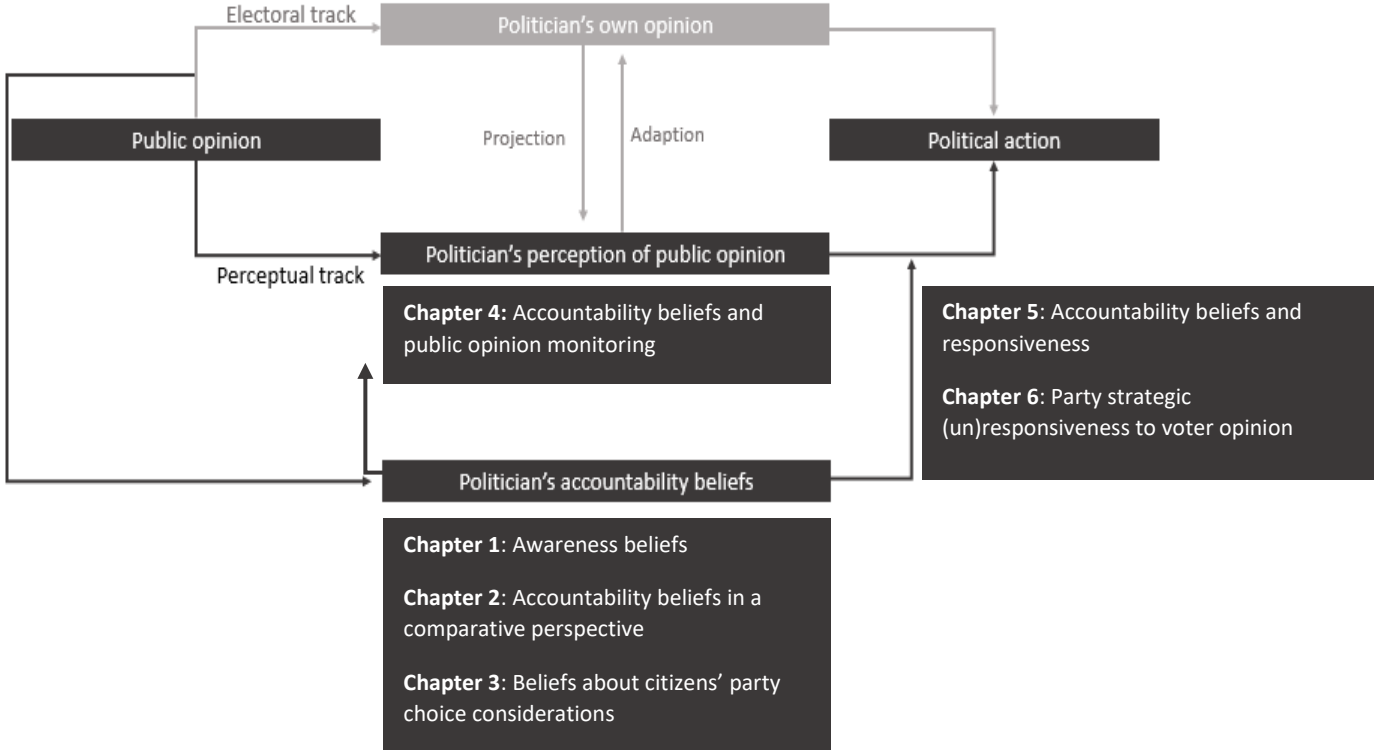
In the next three chapters, I zoom in on the *impact* of the anticipation of voter control. In particular, I explore whether the anticipation of voter control induces politicians to get to know public opinion and to respond to voter preferences. First, **Chapter 4** that has the title '*Listening to the people. Politicians' investment in monitoring public opinion and their beliefs about accountability*' is written together with Stefaan Walgrave. It examines how intensely politicians monitor public opinion and why there is variation between politicians. Relying on survey evidence collected among Belgian national and regional MPs and U.S. local legislators, we show that politicians who feel the weight of voter scrutiny – who believe voters are aware of what they do and will hold them accountable for it at the ballot box– interact more frequently with ordinary citizens, discuss public opinion more often with their fellow colleagues, and spend more time collecting public opinion information.

Next, **Chapter 5** is titled '*Electoral incentives make politicians respond to voter preferences. Evidence from a survey experiment with members of parliament in Belgium',* and is written together with Julie Sevenans. In this chapter, we present evidence from a survey experiment in which Flemish MPs are confronted with real survey information about their party voters' opinion on a particular policy issue. We show that politicians who are unsure about their re-election are more inclined than safe MPs to bring their behavior in line with their voters' preferences after learning what these preferences are (in their communications and on internal party meetings). In a similar vein, we find that politicians who believe that voters may hold them to account on Election Day respond more strongly to information about their party voters' preferences than their colleagues who do not anticipate voter control. We thereby confirm, in an isolated context, that accountability beliefs instigate responsiveness.

In the final empirical **Chapter 6**, entitled '*Inside the party's mind: Why and how parties are strategically unresponsive to their voters' preferences'* I shift focus from the individual level to the party level. Based on lengthy open-ended interviews with nineteen Flemish party leaders and ministers, I show that voter opinion plays a crucial role in party's decision-making. Yet, parties do not blindly pander towards their electorate's desires. When they deem the opinions of their voters unfounded, ideologically flawed or a threat to the general public interest, they do decide to oppose their voters' will. When, exceptionally, they decide to go against their voters' desires *and* anticipate electoral repercussions for it, they try to dodge these potential losses by invoking different coping strategies. Concretely, they try to cover-up (parts) of the unpopular initiative, thoroughly explain it to decrease resistance by stressing its fairness, benefits and ideological consistency, or strategically time the announcement of the proposal so that citizens would have forgotten about it by the next elections or to have more time to explain their decision to citizens.

In the concluding chapter of this dissertation, the findings of the different empirical chapters are brought together, the overarching contributions of the dissertation are highlighted and the limitations are acknowledged. In addition, suggestions are made for future work to continue this line of research.

Figure IV – Overview of empirical chapters



Notes

1. Pitkin's (1967) classic work on representation distinguishes four dimensions of representation: *formal* (is the selection of representatives legit, can they be held to account?"), *symbolic* ("do the represented feel represented?"), *descriptive* ("does the representative resemble the represented?"), and *substantial* representation ("do policies reflect the will of the people?"). This dissertation's focus is predominantly on the latter form of substantial representation.

2. Other than making a policy-induced vote choice, it could also be that politicians and voters hold the same views because they *are* similar as they are from the same district (see Erikson 1978 on so-called "involuntary" representation).

3. Note that congruence can also follow if voters take cues from elites and adapt their preferences accordingly (see, for instance, Kuklinski et al., 1982) and/or if voters change their opinions in response to policy (Broockman & Butler, 2017).

4. Note that voters do not only evaluate policy outcomes as such, but also evaluate (and take into account in their vote) the process through which the outcomes are established –e.g. was the process transparent, legitimate, fair? Therefore, one would expect that politicians face less electoral retribution if they pursue policies of which the outcome is unpopular but the process is considered legitimate by voters (see, for instance, Arnesen, 2017; Arnesen & Peters, 2018). However, in this dissertation's operationalization and conceptualization of "accountability beliefs", I do not include this idea of "procedural fairness" nor its ramifications for elites' beliefs and behavior.

5. The surveys and interviews were conducted in the framework of the POLPOP project, a joint research project with teams in Belgium (Flanders and Wallonia), Switzerland, The Netherlands, Canada and Germany. Stefaan Walgrave (University of Antwerp) is the principal investigator of the POLPOP project in Flanders, Jean-Benoit Pilet and Nathalie Brack in Wallonia, Christian Breunig and Stefanie Bailer in Germany, Rens Vliegenthart in The Netherlands, Frédéric Varone in Switzerland and Peter Loewen in

Canada. Funding for this project was obtained by each country individually. Ethical approval for this research was provided by the respective universities.

6. I am very grateful for the help of the colleagues in Flanders (Julie Sevenans, Arno Jansen, Kirsten van Camp, Pauline Ketelaars and Stefaan Walgrave), but also in the other POLPOP countries. There is no way I would have been able collect the data used in this dissertation without their help.

CHAPTER 1

The awareness paradox

(Why) Politicians overestimate citizens' awareness of parliamentary questions and party initiatives

If politicians believe that they will be rewarded for responsive behavior at the ballot and punished for doing the opposite, they are disciplined to follow-up on the public's desires. That the anticipation of electoral accountability prompts re-election minded politicians to act in line with the public's wishes, vitally hinges on the assumption that politicians *feel* monitored in the first place. To understand how this precondition for anticipatory representation works in reality, this article examines politicians' perceptions of *voters' awareness* of party initiatives and parliamentary questions. Quantitative and qualitative survey evidence collected among Belgian MPs (N=164) shows that politicians consider citizens as rather uninformed about politics but, paradoxically, believe that some of them are aware of specific party initiatives and oral questions they had asked. Evidence on citizens' actual knowledge shows that politicians strongly overestimate voter awareness. From their reflections, I learn that MPs overgeneralize feedback they receive from informed citizens, leaving them with a biased image of how aware most voters actually are. Also, the exceptionally of gaining visibility with their work causes MPs to overestimate the scope of awareness when they are covered in the media, receive reactions on their social media accounts or simply work on topics which they think are important to voters.

Keywords: anticipatory representation, elite perceptions, mixed methods, parliamentary initiatives, perceived awareness

Reference: Soontjens, K. (2021). The awareness paradox: (Why) politicians overestimate citizens' awareness of parliamentary questions and party initiatives. *Representation*, 57(1), 75-94.

Introduction

The representative democracy is built on the idea that representatives, at least to a certain extent, must be responsive to voters' demands in their decision-making (Pitkin, 1967). To establish this connection between citizen preferences and public policy, the rational anticipation of elections by politicians is often said to constitute an important guarantor (Mansbridge, 2003; Stimson et al., 1995). Re-election minded politicians, the theory of anticipatory representation holds, are extrinsically motivated to get informed about and act upon their perceptions of what the public wants (Campbell & Zittel, 2020; Mayhew, 1974). Given that a political actor's electoral survival vitally hinges on the approval of voters, they calculate, or rather try to anticipate, the electoral implications of their behavior in elections and act accordingly. If politicians expect to be held accountable for unresponsive behavior and to be rewarded for the opposite, they should be sensitized to the citizens' desires, as Miller and Stokes (1963) classically argued. Regardless of whether citizens actually hold politicians to account on Election Day, if politicians *believe* that they will, they are disciplined to follow-up on voters' preferences (Arnold, 1992; Mayhew, 1974; Schlesinger, 1966; Stimson et al., 1995). That the anticipation of popular control constrains elected representatives in their behavior is all the more important knowing that actual citizen control is in reality rather limited. Indeed, the well-established literature on retrospective voting concludes that voters' performance at the ballot leaves a lot to be desired; representatives do not always face consequences for "bad policy" (see Healy and Malhotra, 2013 for a literature overview, or Achen and Bartels, 2017 for a recent study on this).

That the threat of electoral accountability prompts re-election minded politicians to act in line with the public's wishes, hinges on the assumption that politicians *feel monitored* in the first place (Mayhew, 1974). Indeed, that politicians believe citizens are aware or can become aware of what they do is an absolute necessity for anticipatory representation to come about. Were politicians to believe that citizens are completely unaware of what they say and do, they should not fear electoral retribution for unpopular actions, nor should they feel extrinsically motivated to satisfy voters' desires, it will not be rewarded anyways. Therefore, when politicians do not feel monitored at all, they may drift away from the public. If politicians on the other hand believe that at least some citizens keep a close eye on them or that citizens may become informed about what they do due to the intervention of influential others, such as journalists or interest group leaders,

regardless of whether this is the case in reality, they will attempt to anticipate their reactions to the decisions they make and the positions they take (Kingdon, 1989). Snyder and Strömberg (2010) indeed show that when the likelihood increases that politicians feel monitored –operationalized by the amount of coverage they get in local newspapers–, they are induced to work hard, and to produce better policies for their constituents (Besley & Burgess, 2002). Thus, to understand better how anticipatory representation works in reality, one should first and foremost get an idea of *the degree to which politicians believe voters are aware of what they do*.

Despite the fact that politicians' perceptions of voter awareness are central to the mechanism of anticipatory representation, they hardly received any attention over the years. Not that scholars have ignored the topic: many have emphasized the importance of studying perceived voter monitoring (see Converse & Pierce, 1986; Maloy, 2014; Mayhew, 1974), yet empirical evidence extremely rare. The scarce and rather old evidence on Members of the U.S. Congress suggests that politicians fear citizen control, and believe citizens are quite informed about what they do in Congress (Kingdon, 1968; Miller & Stokes, 1963).

What we do not know, however, is whether these findings hold outside the USA. Nor do we have insights in politicians' perceptions of voter awareness today, in a society where politicians' actual visibility is changing rapidly as a result of a continued mediatization of politics and the widespread use of social media that allow politicians to be in touch with an unprecedented number of citizens (Larsson & Kalsnes, 2014). Also, and importantly, what we do not know from previous research is whether politicians' perceptions of voter awareness actually match reality. If citizens are completely unaware of let's say politicians' roll-call voting, the fact that politicians do feel their voting behavior is being monitored is all the more important in keeping them aligned with voter preferences –in contrast to when citizens are perfectly informed and are able to use this information to make an informed vote choice. A final shortcoming in the literature is that we are largely left in the dark about why politicians (mis)perceive citizen awareness in a certain way, with Kingdon (1968) being the only one who asked elected representatives to reflect on their perceptions of voter awareness. Addressing these limitations, this study centers around the following research questions:

RQ1: *To what extent do politicians believe that voters are aware of what they and their party do?*

RQ2: *How accurate are politicians' perceptions of their voters' awareness of what they and their party do?*

RQ3: *Why do politicians hold these perceptions?*

Drawing on a combination of qualitative and quantitative survey evidence collected among Members of Parliament in Belgium, this study shows that even though politicians generally have a rather pessimistic idea about the public's political knowledge they, paradoxically, believe a substantial amount of citizens is aware of the initiatives their parties propose, and of the oral questions they individually ask in parliament. Matching these estimations with citizens' actual awareness of party initiatives and parliamentary questions, I show that politicians widely overestimate voter awareness. From their reflections on why they believe that voters are aware of the parliamentary questions they recently asked (while they are in fact not), I derive two reasons for this paradox that pops up in our quantitative data. First, MPs tend to generalize feedback they receive from informed citizens to the electorate as a whole, leaving them with a biased image of how aware voters actually are. Second, the exceptionality of gaining any visibility at all with their individual work causes politicians to overestimate the scope of voter awareness when they are covered in the traditional media, receive likes/shares/comments on their social media profiles, are covered in their party's internal communications or address a salient topic or an issue they are specialized in.

Representation and elite perceptions of voter awareness

To exercise any form of constituency control, the theory of electoral accountability holds, citizens should have some broad ideas about what representatives and/or parties have done in the past legislature (Bernstein, 1989). However, if politicians were confronted with the scholarly literature on retrospective voting, they might conclude that they should not worry all too much about the decisions they make influencing their results at the polls (Anderson, 2007; Arnold, 1992; Healy & Malhotra, 2013; Maloy, 2014). After all, the average voter hardly ever recalls legislative behavior on Election Day, nor do most of them even

know who their representatives are (Arnold, 1993; Hutchings, 2003). Whether or not citizens actually need this knowledge to cast a meaningful vote is up for debate, of course (Adams et al., 2014). Still, it is interesting to translate this principle of minimal voter awareness to the side of representatives.

After all, one could argue that it is vital for political elites to believe that voters are aware, or can potentially become aware, of what they and their party do. In the face of widespread voter ignorance, they might otherwise get away with incongruent decision-making or their benefits towards the public might simply go unnoticed (Severs et al., 2014). As Kingdon (1989) and Powlick (1991) posit, politicians feel more constrained by the public –and thus are more strongly incentivized to be responsive to their preferences– when they believe citizens pay close attention. Indeed, when politicians believe voters are sufficiently informed about policy issues, they will be more attentive to their desires (Petry, 2007). If the opposite is true and representatives do not feel observed by (some segments of) the public, they lack one important incentive to reflect public preferences in their decision-making (Cain et al., 1987; Mayhew, 1974; Butler & Nickerson, 2011).

Miller and Stokes (1963) first acknowledged the importance of perceived voter awareness in their groundbreaking work on constituency influence in the American Congress. Specifically, they claim that '*the idea of reward and punishment at the polls for legislative stands is familiar to members of Congress, who feel they and their records are visible to their constituents*' (Miller & Stokes, 1963, p. 54). Rather than asking politicians about the extent to which voters are *aware* of their policy records or more general policy profile, Miller and Stokes (and later also Converse & Pierce, 1986) ask incumbent politicians about the extent to which they thought the election outcome was a result of their personal records (Converse & Pierce, 1986). Yet, between politicians' behavior and citizens' actual vote, there are more factors that play a role than mere awareness –citizens still have to evaluate what they see, and decide whether or not to let this information determine their vote choice. Still, while the question asked does not strictly tap into politicians' perceptions of voter awareness, these early findings are relevant in that Congressmen seem to believe their individual legislative actions considerably influences their electorate's vote choice. Miller and Stokes (1963, p. 54) argue that this finding contains a striking contradiction in that '*some simple facts about the representative's salience to his constituents imply that this could hardly be true*'.

Building on the same idea of perceived voter monitoring, some other scholars followed in Miller and Stokes' footsteps. First, a strand of literature focused on politicians' perceptions of citizens' general political knowledge or interest, which could be considered a precondition for actual awareness of legislative activities. Indeed, as Besley and Burgess (2002) argue, an electorate that is considered politically informed strengthens incentives for politicians to be responsive. Kingdon (1989) finds that most representatives do believe that an informed public does exist. While they are in general rather pessimistic about how knowledgeable citizens are about politics, they do believe that an uninformed majority can become informed through the intervention of other actors such as journalists or interest group leaders, who reduce the need for citizens to follow-up on everything that happens in the complex political world (Hutchings, 2003). Kingdon (1989) additionally derives from his interviews that politicians tend to believe that the people that are affected by certain policy measures can be(come) highly interested and, as a result, monitor elite behavior closely. In his observational study, Fenno (1978) confirms that representatives believe that third actors or "intermediaries" have the ability to activate inattentive citizens, alerting them about unresponsive or unwanted behavior. Powlick (1991), on the other hand, finds that policy officials tend to have negative perceptions of the public's capabilities; they emphasize that citizens lack both the interest and the knowledge to hold politicians accountable at the ballot. Finally, and more recently, Petry (2007) asked both politicians and policy officials about their perceptions of policy knowledge among Canadian citizens. While he finds that 25 percent of the officials in his sample agree or even strongly agree with the idea that policy issues are too complex for citizens to understand, 75 percent is more positive about citizens' capabilities.

Examining politicians' perceptions of voter awareness of specific elite behavior instead of citizens' overall political knowledge, then, Kingdon's (1968) older work is unique. In his examination of *candidates' beliefs and strategies*, he asks politicians to what extent they thought that citizens were informed about the issues that were relevant in the election campaign. While he was mainly interested in the difference in beliefs between winners and losers of the election, the absolute level of their estimations provides an indication of their overall perceptions of voter awareness. Results show that 23 percent of the winning candidates believed citizens were informed, while only seven percent of the losing did. However, we do not know whose beliefs are in fact more accurate.

Although none of these studies explicitly matched citizens' actual awareness of elite behavior with politicians' perceptions of this awareness, abundant literature on voter knowledge suggests that politicians overestimate citizens' actual awareness of political action (see among many others Hutchings, 2003). Miller and Stokes (1963) also posited that politicians' perceptions may be biased, and that their potentially distorted perception of reality are rooted in the fact that the interactions most politicians have within their district inevitably put them in touch with citizens that exceptionally well informed and/or interested in politics. Kingdon (1968) as well argues that politicians regularly deal with people involved in some aspects of government and may therefore think of themselves as the center of attention. In addition, Kingdon (1968) posits that politicians may overestimate voter awareness of their actions because it is simply socially acceptable and because of a so-called ''congratulation-rationalization-effect": the idea is that politicians have a natural tendency to praise voters for their qualities (their levels of political awareness, in this case) because it is them who decide about their electoral fate.

Methods

This paper focuses exclusively on the Belgian (Flemish, to be more precise)[1] case to examine politicians' perceptions of voter awareness. Belgium is known to be a proportional system with strong parties that differs quite strongly from the more individualized U.S. case. Not the least because the American political system entails more individual responsibility because of smaller district sizes and a more direct connection between the representative and the represented (André et al., 2014, 2015). Belgium, an open PR system where voters can cast individual preference votes next to their party vote, finds itself in the middle of the continuum between individualistic and party-centered system. This basically means that even though parties are very important, individual MPs do have incentives to pursue a personal vote (Bräuninger et al., 2012). Importantly, survey evidence shows that while Belgian politicians are elected on provincial lists, their primary focus is on the party electorate as a whole (Brack et al., 2012). Focusing on a strong party system in which MPs do develop their own electoral strategies allows us to examine politicians' perceptions of voter awareness with regard to two different yet central representational activities, namely *party initiatives* and *oral parliamentary questions*.

To explore politicians' perceptions of voter awareness, this study first and foremost draws on novel survey and interview evidence collected among Dutch-speaking Belgian MPs that are elected in either the federal or the regional parliament in Belgium. The survey was part of the POLPOP project[2] in which elite interviews were conducted between March and June 2018 –one year before the national elections. MPs were surveyed and interviewed by a team of four researchers who visited them for about one hour in their offices in Brussels. Specifically, politicians were asked to fill in a closed survey on a laptop brought by the interviewers and afterwards an open-ended, semi-structured interview was conducted for another 30 minutes. After targeting the total population of 211 Dutch-speaking MPs, no less than 164 were willing to collaborate –a response rate of 78 percent, which is exceptionally high for elite research (Bailer, 2014; Deschouwer & Depauw, 2014). In addition, our sample of participating politicians is representative for the full population of Dutch-speaking MPs: there are no self-selection biases according to party, age, gender, political experience or government/opposition status.

In the closed part of the questionnaire, politicians are first asked to estimate how informed they think that citizens are about politics in general. While this question does not directly tap into politicians' perceptions of voter awareness of their behavior, it does provide an indication of how closely citizens follow-up on political events in general. This is important because, as Snyder and Strömberg (2010) argue, well-informed voters are more likely to monitor politicians closely. Specifically, I asked politicians; '*When you think of all Flemish citizens, to what extent do you think they are, in general, informed about politics*?' (0 = not at all informed; 10 = fully informed). Disregarding nine missing answers, 155 MPs filled out this question.

To examine politicians' perceptions of *specific* voter awareness, I first zoom in on –given the Belgian multi-partisan context– whether politicians believe that party voters are aware of party initiatives. In particular, MPs were asked to estimate the amount of party voters that was aware of their party taking one specific initiative –again I should stress that the party electorate is the number one reference group for political elites in Belgium, hence this methodological decision (Brack et al., 2012). To ensure some level of comparability, I applied three specific criteria to the selection of party initiatives that politicians were asked about: the initiatives had to be taken more or less one month before the interview period, they had to be covered in the written press (verified by a GoPress search) and they had to

address an issue that is important to the party (e.g. immigration/integration for the extreme right party or social affairs for the socialist party). In addition, politicians working on the federal level were shown an initiative about a federal issue competence while those active on the regional level were presented party initiatives on regional competences. One example is the proposition of a right-wing party to enable people under the age of 21 to inherit from their parents without paying taxes –a full list can be found in **Appendix I**. Specifically, with this party initiative in mind, MPs were asked: '*What percentage of your party electorate knows this initiative was taken by your party?*'. In total, 149 politicians responded to this question in the closed survey questionnaire.

To formulate an answer to our second research question –*How accurate are politicians' perceptions of their voters' awareness of party initiatives?*–, I check politicians' estimations against citizens' actual knowledge. To do so, an online survey was distributed by Survey Sampling International (SSI) to a representative sample (quota on age, gender and education were applied) of 2389 Dutch-speaking citizens[3] in February 2018, right before the elite interviews were fielded. In this survey, citizens were first asked '*What party would you vote for if it were elections right now?*'. Based on their party preference, then, respondents were assigned five initiatives: three randomly drawn from the total amount of twelve party initiatives (for distraction) and two that were actually initiated by the party they would vote for –the purpose of this being the identification of the electorate the MP is questioned about. Logically, only citizens' awareness of their preferred party's initiatives is used to calculate whether politicians' estimations of citizen awareness match reality. Specifically, citizens had to indicate for each initiative what party they thought was the instigator –'*Which party do you think took this initiative?*'–, from a list of all parties (including 'don't know'). Doing so, a benchmark is created to compare politicians' perceptions of citizens' awareness with.

Third, I examine to what extent politicians believe that voters are aware of the oral questions they ask in parliament –which is one of the most important tools for individual members of parliament to address public concerns and set the political agenda. Specifically, MPs were in the open interview part (for feasibility reasons, we did not ask it the closed survey) invited to estimate voter awareness of an oral question they had recently asked during the plenary session in the Federal or the Flemish Parliament: '*What percentage of your party electorate knows that you asked this question in parliament*?'. For all politicians

the last oral question they had asked before the interview was selected to ensure that the selection of questions is not systematically biased towards the more visible ones[4] (a full list of oral questions can be found in **Appendix II**). Important to stress is that while the careful selection of oral questions ensures some level of comparability across MPs, it does not rule out differences completely: some questions simply addressed topics that are broader in scope than other topics. Of course, when it comes to the accuracy of elite perceptions of public awareness, these differences matter less, because they are somehow controlled for by including actual public awareness in the calculation. Because the question tapping into politicians perceptions of voters' awareness of oral questions was included in the open interview, a lot of politicians did not answer it or left us with vague answers (such as: "a lot" or "not much") that were impossible to use in a quantitative fashion, leaving us with 59 responses to work with[5]. Even though we insisted quite strongly on providing us with an numerical estimation of the scope of attention for the oral question they had recently asked, some politicians simply refused to do it –and obviously it is impossible to force them to answer.

To check the accuracy of these perceptions of voter awareness of oral questions, I draw on citizens' responses from a (panel)survey, fielded by SSI in June 2018 on the same sample of respondents as the previous wave, after the interviews with elites had taken place[6]. Specifically, 1190 citizens were presented four oral questions that were asked by different politicians belonging to their preferred party and they had to select the correct MP from a list of ten names (nine randomly drawn and the actual name), including a "don't know"-option. Again, the actual amount of citizens that is able to link a specific oral question with the politicians that asked it, will serve as a benchmark to compare politicians' estimations of voter awareness with.

Finally, to get an idea of why politicians hold certain awareness beliefs, they were in the open part of the survey, directly after having estimated what percentage of their party electorate was aware of them asking this particular oral question, asked to elaborate on their answer. We asked: '*Why do you think [X%] of your party electorate knows you asked this question?*'. Depending on elites' initial answer, the wording was slightly adapted. In total, 113 MPs[7] provided us with an answer to this open-ended question –which means that a substantial amount of MPs who were not willing to estimate citizens' awareness about their oral question in numerical terms, did reflect on why they thought voters knew, or did

not knew, about this oral question. This makes sense in that politicians rarely refused to answer the question on voter awareness of their oral interpellation, but it was the estimation in percentages that seemed to deter some of them. Thus, even for those politicians of whom we lack a numerical estimation of their individual visibility, their reasoning provides some interesting insight as to how they might (mis)perceive voter awareness. Politicians' reflections were recorded and afterwards fully transcribed.

To answer the third research question, and to take full advantage of the insights politicians provided, I rely on an the established method of qualitative content analysis (see Cho & Lee, 2014; Kuckartz, 2014). In a first round of coding, I analyzed the transcripts carefully and inductively classified politicians' answers into different categories –without having decided beforehand how many, or what, categories I would allow. Doing so, five main categories were withheld. In a second step, then, I took another look at the transcripts and coded all categories as either present or absent in politicians' argumentations. Important to note is that all answers politicians provided were spontaneous mentions of what was on their mind; I did not know beforehand what to expect nor what to look for in the data. The count presented in the result section, in combination with exemplary quotes, thus gives an indication of what arguments are top of mind for MPs. While it provides us with important insights in the underlying patterns as to why politicians think voters are (un)aware of what they do, we cannot rule out the existence of other considerations that were not spontaneously brought up. Yet, given that we ask MPs about a *specific* oral question, we make the cognitive task elites have to perform a lot less abstract, which helps to grasp their full considerations (see Kingdon, 1989 for a similar approach).

To round off the method section, I should briefly discuss the possibility of social desirability affecting this study's results. While it is hard to avoid that politicians give socially desirable answers, we tried to deal with it by keeping the interview setting as informal as possible and by ensuring complete anonymity. Importantly, politicians were not concerned about this, we felt, which might have to do with the fact that we conducted two other waves of elite interviews where the same anonymity rule applied and where identifiable information has never reached the public realm. Thus, a relationship of mutual trust has been established with most politicians, which also shows in the exceptional response rate. Also, other questions asked in the survey that addressed even more sensitive topics on representation and the role of public opinion showed that many politicians did give answers

that were in fact not socially desirable. Therefore, I do believe that politicians gave us answers that match their actual beliefs –beliefs that might obviously in itself be affected by social desirability, yet this is part of what we aim to investigate.

Results

Let us, before addressing politicians' perceptions of voter awareness, take a look at how informed they think that citizens are about politics in general. On a scale ranging from completely uninformed (0) to completely informed (10), politicians on average place citizens at 4.3. While it remains an arbitrary number to interpret, politicians seem to believe Flemish citizens are in general rather uninformed about politics. No less than 75 percent of all MPs think the public is uninformed about politics in general (0–4 on a 10-point scale). In addition, no politician perceives the general public as very informed about politics (8, 9 or 10 on a 10-point scale). In general, it shows that political elites assume the average citizen is rather uninformed about politics, which would imply that they should not really care about their monitoring behavior in the first place.

Examining politicians' actual perceptions of voter awareness, I first look at perceived awareness of *party initiatives*. Politicians had to estimate the percentage of party voters that would know that their party initiated a certain initiative. On average, I find, MPs estimated that 35 percent of their party voters would be able to make this connection. Around half of all 149 MPs answering this question believe more than a quarter of their party electorate is aware of the fact that their party has initiated this particular initiative. Only in rare cases do politicians argue that a majority would be able to link the initiative with their party.

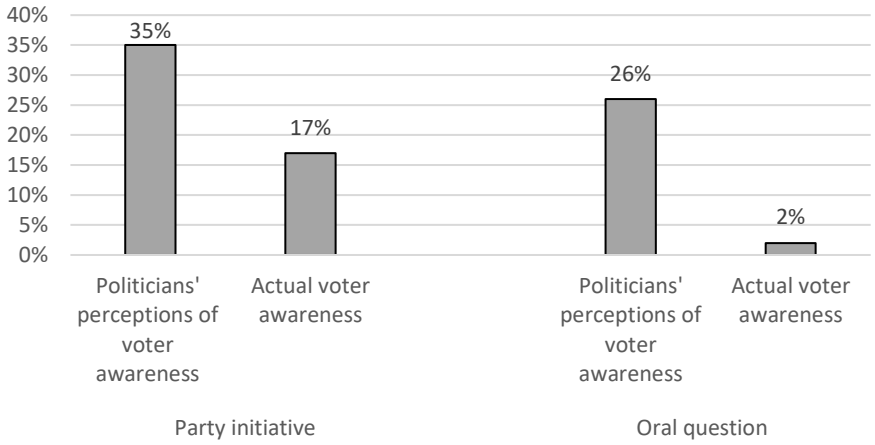
When questioned about citizens' awareness of *an oral question* they had recently asked, estimations are slightly lower: on average, politicians believe that 26 percent of their party electorate knows they asked a particular question in the plenary session in parliament. The difference between perceived voter awareness about party and individual behavior makes sense in that parties are the most relevant political actors in Belgium, and party initiatives are generally more visible than oral questions. In addition, there are simply a lot

more MPs for citizens to keep an eye on than there are parties. Politicians seem to take this reality, at least to a certain extent, into account in their estimations. Still, results are quite striking in that it implies that politicians generally think they are individually known –that is: recognized by *name*– by 26 percent of their party voters. Only three MPs argue that their oral question was invisible for citizens, all 56 others believe that a substantial amount of party voters is aware of them asking a specific oral question during the plenary session in parliament. Importantly, the aggregate pattern is robust, controlling for some individual or institutional characteristics (**Appendix III**).

On the one hand, it shows, politicians have a rather pessimistic view about the level of political knowledge of the public at large. Yet on the other hand, they do seem to believe that at least some party voters are informed about party initiatives and even about the oral questions they ask in parliament. This finding is in line with what Kingdon (1968) has postulated, namely that politicians do not necessarily have a positive image of the public's capabilities, yet they do believe that somehow, an informed public does exist.

A very short answer to our second research question '*Do politicians' perceptions of voter awareness of party initiatives and oral questions match reality*?' is no, they do not – as **Figure I** shows. While politicians on average expect that 35 percent of their party voters would able to link the correct initiative with their party, citizens only successfully do so in 17 percent of the cases –which is in line with findings from earlier studies grasping political knowledge (e.g. Hutchings, 2003; Dejaeghere & van Erkel, 2017). What matters for the theory of anticipatory representation, however, is that politicians clearly overestimate the visibility of party initiatives: their estimation is more than twice as large as the actual percentage of citizens knowing about the initiative or even guessing the answer correctly – after all, one in six answers is correct. While there are rare exceptions of MPs underestimating voter awareness, 73 percent overestimates, and often even largely, citizens' awareness of initiatives taken by their party.

Figure I – (in)accuracy of politicians' perceptions of voter awareness



Moving on to the individual level, the inaccuracy of politicians' perceptions is even more pronounced. While only two percent of all citizens in our sample is able to correctly link an oral question to the MP who asked it during the plenary session of parliament, politicians, on average, believe that 26 percent of their party electorate can. A first explanation for this inaccuracy that pops up is the complete lack of awareness on the side of citizens: the amount of correct answers is lower than the expected result would be when citizens would guess the answer randomly (since one in ten is correct). It therefore seems as if citizens guess the answer by picking top politicians whose name they do recognize, causing their answers to be systematically biased. Although I focus on a subset of 59 MPs who estimated their individual visibility, I can confidently conclude that politicians overestimate voter awareness of the oral questions they ask in parliament.

The numbers clearly indicate that politicians believe that what they do in the parliamentary arena is somewhat monitored by voters, while it is in fact not. This would lead to the obvious conclusion that politicians are completely unrealistic when it comes to the visibility and public knowledge of their parliamentary work. Reflecting on their assessment of voter awareness in the open interview part, though, the image becomes somewhat more nuanced. Of all 113 MPs who told us *why* they thought that voters were aware of the oral question they had recently asked, no less than 49 start their argumentation by stressing that politics is often too complex for citizens to understand and that most citizens are ignorant about what happens in parliament. This is perfectly in line

with the quantitative evidence showing that politicians consider the public to be rather poorly informed about politics. Some indicative examples of argumentations;

> *'Citizens are simply not concerned about what we do here in the Federal parliament.'* [federal MP, government]
>
> *'We only get to ask one or two questions a year in the plenary session and they don't always get covered in the media. And even when it does get covered, who is even interested in politics?'* [regional MP, opposition]

When reflecting on an oral question they have recently asked during the plenary session, the majority of politicians follow a similar line of argumentation: while they recognize that citizens are generally not that interested nor informed about politics, they focus their argumentation on why this one particular oral question was *exceptionally* visible. Thus, most politicians argue that a substantial amount of citizens knows about them asking this particular oral question, although, paradoxically, most of them are well aware of the fact that politics in general is not that attractive for citizens to follow intensely, as the following quote exemplifies;

> *'Most of what I do here is technical and people don't care. I am very realistic about that. But this question was exceptional, it really concerns a debate that dates back a long time and the press was really on it.'* [regional MP, government]

Politicians rely on various argumentation to explain why they think the oral question we had asked them about was able to reach an exceptionally wide audience. I classify their responses into five categories to provide a structured interpretation of what politicians spontaneously mention in their reflections about voter awareness. Additionally, I count how often each of these arguments were mentioned and add some exemplary quotes. Since the literature does not provide empirical evidence to substantiate expectations in this regard, I opted to adhere to this exploratory, inductive, approach and let the answers of politicians speak for themselves.

It was Covered in the Traditional News Media – Of all arguments put forward by politicians for why they believe this particular oral question is known to citizens, visibility in the traditional media is referred to most commonly– by no less than 70 out of 113 MPs. Within the broader range of traditional outlets, newspaper coverage on the oral question is mentioned most often, while television news comes second. In rare cases, radio news is also referred to. From their answers, it becomes clear most MPs struggle to appear in the traditional media; they emphasize the fact that competition is fierce. They additionally stress that most of what they do in parliament (such as their work in parliamentary committees) is by definition completely invisible because it happens behind closed doors, but that the plenary session where the oral questions are asked provides an exceptional opportunity to gain some visibility. This is not to say that politicians are completely unrealistic about the actual scope of traditional news outlets. Some politicians for example acknowledge that *'quality newspapers are only read by highly interested citizens'*. Still, they often refer to these media outlets as being crucial for reaching citizens with their parliamentary work.

> *'My question addressed an important topic that was covered extensively in the news media: it was on television and maybe also in some newspapers. I even received reactions from people saying: 'I saw you on television!'*. [federal MP, opposition]
>
> *'It almost never happens, but this question even made it onto the front page of De Morgen* [Flemish newspaper], *it was for sure very visible*. [regional MP, opposition]

I Posted it online – In addition to the importance of traditional news media, 44 politicians argue that social media outlets– either Facebook, Twitter and sometimes Instagram –were crucial in raising voter awareness of their oral question. Most MPs who bring up social media outlets say that they use those outlets to share fragments of them asking oral questions. Additionally, politicians emphasize that the fragment of the particular oral question they were asked about received a lot of public attention, which they stress by referring to the number of comments, likes, shares and/or views the video received. Others argue more vaguely *that 'it practically exploded on Twitter'* or that *'it did very well on Facebook'*.

'I publish fragments of the plenary session and post them on Facebook. I get many reactions on these videos, also from interest groups. It takes some effort, but I definitely make sure I respond to all of the replies!' [regional MP, government]

'We made a movie of my interpellation and posted it on our Facebook page. It was shared a lot. If I remember correctly, around five or even nine thousand times.' [federal MP, government]

It was a Salient Topic – Next to media coverage, politicians often (38 out of 113) refer to the salience or obtrusiveness of their oral question– which, of course, is related to media attention. MPs tend to believe that issues *'people care about'* or that '*affect everyone'*, are monitored more closely. This is in line with Kingdon's (1989) finding that politicians assume that citizens are more concerned about lawmaking when it comes to salient or intense issues –with intensity implying that citizens have strong opinions on the matter. This finding can additionally be linked to the idea that interested third parties or affected citizens might not only care themselves, but also alert others and therefore additionally increase awareness (see Fenno, 1978). Interestingly, the range of topics politicians claim that are salient among the public is surprisingly wide, including issues that are traditionally not considered obtrusive, such as foreign affairs or agricultural policy.

'People care about this issue. Everyone knows somebody who has or has had breast cancer.' [federal MP, government]

'This hormone issue in toys is about the health of our children, which is really a subject that is tangible: it matters for everyone.' [regional MP, opposition]

It is My Specialization – Additionally, 22 politicians stress that voters are aware of the question they asked because it addressed a topic in which they are specialized. The underlying idea is that citizens associate MPs with a certain topic because they have been working on it for a while and they might have received some media coverage linking them with this topic over the years. As one MP puts it: *'repetition is key'*

'Oh, it did very well in the media because it was a very specific proposal. It also 'sticks' to me: I have been working for years on the topic of well-being. People know that.' [regional MP, opposition]

'The question was about heart diseases and as a former doctor, people just know that it is my business.' [federal MP, government]

My Party Communicated About It – Finally, 18 MPs bring up that party communications had a positive impact on voters' familiarity with the oral question they asked. Such internal communications, they argue, are generally directed towards members of the party or to close party supporters.

'My intervention was included it our newsletter to members of the party. It will be around 1500 people I know who for sure have read about it.' [federal MP, opposition]

'I remember that the party communicated about it as well, they covered it in our magazine that is send to all members of our party.' [regional MP, government]

The five arguments discussed above and the combination of them grasps the variety of argumentations spontaneously brought up by politicians when they are asked to reflect on why they think a substantial amount of party voters would know that they asked a particular oral question in parliament. While politicians provide various reasons for why this question has generated quite a bit of visibility, the question still remains; why is it that politicians overestimate public awareness of their actions? Why, for example, do they overestimate the scope of a small newspaper article? Or why do they think oral questions on salient or obtrusive topics necessarily create public awareness? From their reasoning, I deduce two explanations that certify this systematic overestimation of public awareness.

First, politicians repeatedly refer to feedback they receive from citizens when reflecting on their voters' awareness of oral questions, feedback they then generalize to their party electorate as a whole. Basically, politicians extrapolate this limited and often biased attention they receive (think of the example where an MP receives an e-mail from one voter about her media appearance) to their party electorate, logically leading to an

overestimation of actual awareness. Miller and Stokes already speculated about this mechanism in 1963, arguing that citizens who reach out to politicians are presumably above average politically interested and, therefore, not representative for the whole population. As to why politicians make this kind of reasoning error, the so-called availability heuristic, a concept from cognitive psychology, provides useful insights. Tversky and Kahneman (1973) argue that: '*A person is said to employ the availability heuristic whenever he estimates frequency or probability by the ease with which instances or associations could be brought to mind.'*. Politicians use available information from feedback they receive as a judgement of perceived frequency or (subjective) probability of voter awareness. Some exemplary quotes:

> *'Until today, I have received ten reactions from very different people. Therefore, I estimate that around 20 percent or so of our voters will know about this oral question. I think so, yes.'*[8] [federal MP, government]
>
> *'People generally don't really care about politics, but it is striking that, after a while, some people were informed about this question. Some even called me about it. It should be that interest groups have covered it in their communications, or that some citizens have seen it and passed it on to others*.' [federal MP, opposition]
>
> *'I recently [as a mayor] had to marry a couple, and they told me they knew I was working on this topic. It is surprising how well informed some people are*.' [regional MP, government]

Importantly, politicians nowadays do not only receive feedback in person, but often also via social media, which additionally gives them the feeling of being watched closely by citizens. Everything about social media is somehow feedback: the amount of views, shares, likes, or comments they receive, and this feedback often comes in numbers that are difficult to interpret. This finding is important because even though politicians differ in how (often) they use social media, fact is that usage is generally on the rise (Larsson & Kalsnes, 2014).

> *'After the plenary session, I uploaded a fragment of my intervention on my personal Facebook page and bought a sponsored advertisement. Surprisingly, my old neighbor had seen it, she e-mailed me!'* [regional MP, government]

Second, the exceptionality of gaining any visibility with their parliamentary work matters a great deal. Politicians strongly emphasize that gaining visibility is something most politicians struggle with on a daily basis. That they care a lot about their individual visibility also shows in their efforts in dispersing their intervention in the plenary session via a lot of different channels. Except for their own social media accounts, though, they are completely dependent on others –journalists, party officials, …– to access those arenas that allow them widespread visibility. What is also relevant is that MPs generally work on rather technical or complex issues, while the discussions in the plenary session tend to be more topical, more accessible. In sum, it is simply common for most politicians, and for most aspects of their work as an MP, to be rather invisible. This causes their perceptions of public awareness to be exaggerated when they do gain some visibility with their parliamentary work.

> *'I don't think we should have an optimistic idea about citizens' interest in politics. Yet this particular question was different. The topic was really accessible and it got covered in the news of the commercial broadcaster and in Villa Politica*.' [regional MP, opposition]

Conclusion

For a democracy to function effectively, many facets are important. One of them is the existence of extrinsic incentives –read: the threat of electoral accountability– for elected representatives to respond to citizens' wishes (Miller & Stokes, 1963). In this study, I show that one crucial precondition for politicians to "feel controlled" by their voters is fulfilled: politicians think that at least some voters are aware of the initiatives their parties propose and of the oral questions they ask in the parliamentary arena. This is an important finding given that politicians who believe voters are aware of what they do, should be disciplined to follow-up on their desires –after all, they face electoral retribution if they do not (Mayhew, 1974; Stimson et al., 1995). As Kingdon (1968, p. 150) argued, perceived voter monitoring presumably '*keeps politicians on their toes and working hard at the business of staying in office'.* Without taking a normative stance on the desirability of anticipatory representation, and by extent of policy congruence, the findings on politicians' perceptions of voter control clearly matter.

Interestingly, when asking politicians to estimate voter awareness, a paradox arises. While politicians perceive the mass public as rather uninformed, they substantially overestimate voter awareness of specific party initiatives and oral questions. Inviting politicians to reflect on their estimations, I find two mechanisms that cause them to overestimate voter awareness. First of all, MPs seem to generalize the feedback they receive from some interested citizens to the population as a whole. The interactions politicians have with the more politically engaged and informed citizens –both in real life and via their social media accounts– create an inaccurate understanding of the average voter's monitoring behavior. Today, politicians do not only receive feedback in person, but often, and usually in large numbers (likes, shares,..), via their social media profiles. This immediate and seemingly abundant feedback, I learn from politicians' reflections, adds to a their biased views of voter awareness. Second, it clearly shows that MPs struggle to gain visibility with their parliamentary work, and asking oral questions does allow for some exceptional visibility. The exceptionality of them, mostly being back-bencher MPs, getting covered in the traditional media, for example, causes them to overestimate the actual scope of awareness. In addition, politicians' answers clearly show that they believe intermediaries (mostly news media, but also interest groups or other interested citizens) inform other citizens about what they do.

Finding in Belgium, an open PR system, that politicians generally overestimate voter awareness of their actions, one would expect that politicians in another political context that fosters more individual responsibility (e.g. the USA) will feel even more closely monitored. More important, however, is the (psychological) mechanism driving this overestimation. The conclusions drawn from the interview evidence –the fact that the availability heuristic and the high level of engagement of some non-representative voters, and the frustration with their individual visibility (and especially the traditional media) distort politicians' perceptions of voter awareness– should be generalizable to other political contexts, as well as to other types of elite behavior. After all, one would not expect cognitive biases to be context-specific, and that this study's findings match the assumptions made by Miller and Stokes (1963) in a completely different setting substantiates this claim. At the very least, this study has provided some modest insights into how politicians conceive of the public's awareness of political actions, insights that are applicable to other contexts.

Some limitations of this study should be addressed. First, I only ask politicians about their perceptions of voter awareness of *one* party initiative and *one* oral question. Even though politicians did generalize beyond those particular activities in their reflections, addressing a more extensive set of behaviors both parties and individual politicians can undertake, would allow for an interesting comparison. Especially if one would compare perceived voter awareness of behavior that elites want to be seen (as is the focus of this study) with estimations of voter awareness of behavior elites would rather want to hide (unpopular policies, for example). While oral questions and party initiatives are both very important tools to represent citizens in proportional political systems, examining a more diverse set of political activities would allow to see in which aspects of their job representatives feel most constrained by voter monitoring. In addition to the explorative findings on *why* politicians overestimate voter awareness, the literature would benefit from a more systematic approach, for example by asking politicians systematically about each of the elements I find to matter, or by experimentally testing what (causally) drives elites' overestimation. In that sense, this study derived some hypotheses that could be tested with other data in the future. Finally, to get a better understanding of the impact of perceived voter awareness, future research could directly link politicians' estimations of voter awareness with their actual behavior, and answer question such as: does the feeling of being monitored indeed affect how (responsive) politicians and parties behave?

Notes

1. Belgium is a federal state, with competences on the national and the subnational level. Both the Federal and the Flemish parliament are elected based on a system of open list proportional representation.

2. These data were gathered in the framework of the POLPOP-project in Flanders, led by Stefaan Walgrave from the University of Antwerp (Flanders, Belgium), with funding from the national science foundation [FWO, grant number G012517N].

3. SSI (now called Dynata – see https://www.dynata.com/) has its own online panel from which they sampled 2389 citizens, enforcing quota on gender, age and educational level.

4. During the plenary sessions of both the Flemish and the Federal parliament, MPs get the opportunity to ask questions about topical debates. It is the most visible meeting in parliament because part of it is broadcasted live on television. While there are differences in how often MPs ask questions (Dandoy, 2011), most politicians, if not all, use the plenary session to gain some visibility and, importantly, to put issues on the agenda (see Campbell & Zittel, 2020). Important to note is that MPs in Belgium mostly ask questions about issues that relate to their field of expertise.

5. Importantly, missing answers are randomly distributed: a (logistic) regression analysis shows there are no significant differences according to governmental level, years of parliamentary experience or gender, nor are there systematic differences in non-response according to who conducted the interview. In addition, there is no self-selection bias: politicians who did estimate voter awareness of oral questions hold similar beliefs about party initiative awareness compared to their colleagues who did not answer this question.

6. SSI (now Dynata) was asked to contact respondents from the previous survey wave, applying quota on age, gender and educational level. Fifty percent of the respondents were willing to collaborate again.

7. Missing values for this question stem from the fact that some politicians did not have enough time to finish the open interview.

8. From their answers, it becomes clear that some politicians have difficulties estimating percentages, which manifests itself when they first provide an absolute number and later turn this into an inaccurate (too high) percentage.

Appendix

Appendix I – List of party initiatives

Federal	Non-Belgians have to stay in Belgium for at least seven years and have worked here for at least three years before they are allowed access to social security.
Regional	90 percent of the social housing projects in our country should be reserved for Belgians. Only 10 percent may be assigned to foreigners.
Federal	Part-time work should be made more attractive by reducing the OCMW benefits for people receiving a living wage more slowly as they begin to earn more money in their part-time jobs.
Regional	Children under the age of 21 must be able to inherit from their parents without paying taxes.
Federal	There should be more controls on and higher fines for middle lane drivers.
Regional	The tax companies have to pay to install electric charging stations at car parks of the national railway station should be abolished.
Federal	Someone who retires before the age of 65, but worked for a full career of 45 years, should receive the same tax benefit on his/her supplementary pension as someone who retires at the age of 65.
Regional	Part of the estimated tens of thousands of old violations against building laws in Flanders should be regularized.
Federal	If the budget for new military investments approved by the parliament is exceeded by more than 15%, parliament must be informed and vote again on this budget.
Regional	A tough policy is necessary to tackle the phenomenon of teenage pimps, and at the same time the optimal care for victims should be prioritized.
Federal	A single person should be entitled to free assistance from a lawyer as soon as his/her income is lower than 1,500 euros/month; for families this should be the case with a total income that is lower than 2,000 euros per month.
Regional	There should be more investments in more punctual public transportation and in better real-time information for passengers.

Appendix II – List of oral questions

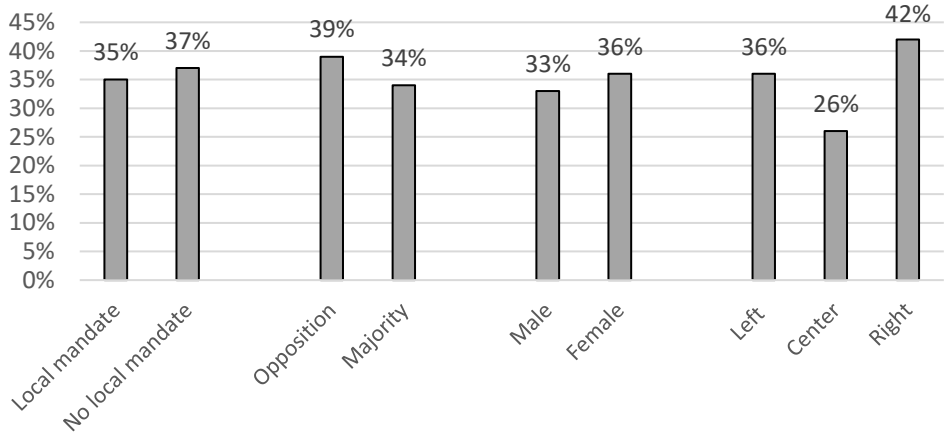
Question about the impact of the closing of nuclear power plants by 2025 on the climate.
Question about the port of Antwerp.
Question about the alleged use of chemical weapons by the Bashar al-Assad regime.
Question about the expropriation of white farmers in South Africa.
Question about the transition period after the Brexit-referendum.
Question about support for people with a rare diseases.
Question about the reform of the inheritance and donation tax.
Question about new food quality standards and behavioral rules for slaughterhouses.
Question about the replacement of prison guards by police officers during a prison strike.
Question about the route of the Maastricht-Hasselt express tram.
Question about the death sentence of professor Ahmadreza Djalali by the Iranian court.
Question about the use of a Luxembourg mailbox company by the ACW.
Question about the lack of progress municipalities make in public transport policy.
Question about the growing debt at the national railway company.
Question about the implementation of community service for long-term unemployed.
Question about digital electricity meters.
Question about the current prison strike and the idea off minimal service.
Question about a new Islam school in Genk.
Question about extending the limitation period for asbestos-related issues.
Question about the World Cup-song and the sponsorship of championships by government companies.
Question on how to divide European support for bio-agriculture.
Question about the employment of IS-fighters as actors by NTGent.
Question about an overall weather insurance for farmers.
Question about the use of a Luxembourg mailbox company by the ACW.
Question about the replacement of the F-16 aircrafts.

Question about the government's coordination with regard to food safety, in response to the Veviba (food) scandal.
Question about the realization of projects with solar panels along railways.
Question about the consent of both parents that is needed for their children to get access to mental health care.
Question about the packaging industry's waste plan.
Question about the reporting code for genital mutilation.
Question about the first results of the newly launched City-Pass.
Question about zero-emission buses.
Question about the control of fire safety and the risk of explosion of buildings.
Question about the location of Zalando's new distribution center.
Question about the renewed management contracts with the National Railway Company.
Question about three Flemish companies that exported chemical products to Syria and Lebanon without a license.
Question about artificial intelligence.
Question about outsourcing OCMW checks to private companies.
Question about the hospital helicopter in West-Flanders.
Question about the Unia study on inequality in the Flemish educational system.
Question about convicted terrorists should stay at the disposition of the justice Departement after being released.
Question about the health care of persons with a handicap who are in urgent need for a personal assistance budget (PAB).
Question about the non-signing of the residential elderly care protocol by the commercial residential care centers.
Question about the subsidies for the Integration and Integration Agency.
Question about the introduction of a tax on drinks packaging.
Question about temporary work in Flemish public services and local authorities.
Question on how to handle asbestos problems in schools.
Question about the extended use of the current F-16 aircrafts.
Question about the replacement of the F-16 aircrafts.
Question about the ever-increasing traffic jams in Flanders.

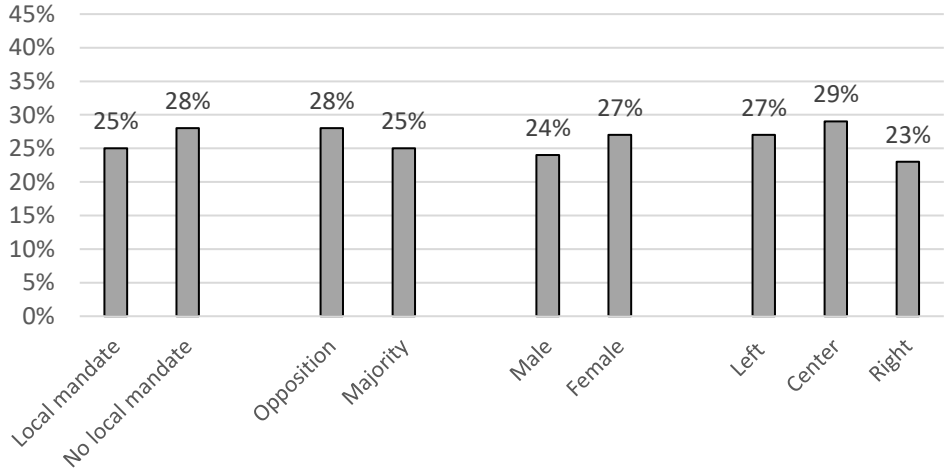
Question about the retirement age and the so-called list of heavy professions.
Question about the problem with asbestos in schools.
Question about the CETA and the possible consequences for foreign policy.
Question about increasing the number of traffic controls.
Question about the introduction of deposit money on cans and PET bottles.
Question about the federal plans for a closed center for families with children awaiting deportation to their country of origin.
Question about the frauds detected at slaughterhouses and Veviba processing units.

Appendix III – Robustness check aggregate data

Perceived party initiative awareness by different groups of elites (N=147)



Perceived oral question awareness by different groups of elites (N=59)



Note. A t-test and one-way ANOVA with Tukey post-hoc test are used to compare means and check whether there are significant between-group differences. The only significant difference is found between party ideologies (with politicians from right-wing parties more strongly believing that voters are aware of their party's initiatives), which makes sense because different initiatives are selected for each party. All other comparisons do not show any systematic differences.

CHAPTER 2

Do politicians anticipate voter control?

A comparative study of representatives' accountability beliefs

Scholars argue that the anticipation of electoral accountability by politicians constitutes a crucial guarantor of (policy) responsiveness; as long as politicians believe that voters are aware of their actions and will take this knowledge into account on Election Day, they are expected to work hard at keeping these voters satisfied. In this study, I examine whether politicians anticipate electoral accountability at all. In particular, 782 MPs in Belgium, Germany, Canada and Switzerland are asked, in a face-to-face survey, whether they believe that voters are aware of their behavior in parliament and their personal policy positions, are able to evaluate the outcomes of their political work, and, finally, whether this knowledge affects their vote choice. I find that a sizable number of MPs believe that voters are aware of what they do and say and take that into account at the ballot box. This general image of rather strong anticipation of voter control does hide considerable variation; politicians in Belgium and in Germany anticipate less voter control compared to politicians in Canada and Switzerland, more candidate-centered systems. In addition, it appears that populist politicians, compared to their colleagues, are more convinced that voters know about their political actions and take this knowledge into account in elections. Finally, it seems that politicians' views of voter control do not reflect the likelihood that they might be held to account; politicians whose behavior *is* more visible and whose policy profile should therefore be better known to voters do not feel the weight of voter control more strongly.

Keywords: representation, anticipatory responsiveness, accountability beliefs

Reference: Soontjens, K. (2021). Do politicians anticipate voter control? A comparative study of representatives' accountability beliefs**.** *European Journal of Political Research*

Introduction

Over the last few decades, scholars have observed an erosion of citizens' trust in politicians. This distrust is, at least in part, founded on the prevailing perception among citizens that representatives do not care about their preferences (Norris, 1999). A recent worldwide survey shows that 61 percent of citizens believe that elected officials do not care about what ordinary people think (Pew Research Center, 2019). The success of populist politicians, who criticize the traditional political elite for drifting away from the public's desires, is one clear manifestation of this growing distrust (Van Kessel, 2015).

The degree of congruence between what citizens want and what politicians do indeed constitutes a crucial indicator of a democracy's health. While this does not necessarily imply that elected representatives are strictly bound by the public's desires, scholars agree that policy-making should reflect the wishes of the public (Pitkin, 1967). One potential guarantor for such a substantial connection between citizens' preferences and representatives' behavior is the disciplining *mechanism of popular control* (Stimson et al., 1995). Once every few years, parties and candidates present themselves to the public, ask for approval and once elected turn their programs into policies. In theory, citizens' ability to sanction or reward political actors at the ballot box enables them to steer policies in their preferred direction. However, while the accountability mechanism is supposed to give voters some leverage over future public decision-making (Miller & Stokes, 1963), the bulk of empirical work casts doubt about the capacity of citizens to properly exercise this control (see Achen & Bartels, 2017, or Plescia et al., 2021) and to vote in office politicians and parties with whom they share their preferences (Ashworth, 2012; Clinton & Tessin, 2008; Huber et al., 2012; Lau et al., 2014). Voters, it shows, pay little attention to politics to begin with (Lupia, 2016) and tend to elect parties and candidates based on social identities and partisan loyalties, rather than correctly rewarding or punishing their past behavior or voting based on their policy preferences (Achen & Bartels, 2017). Even though the effectiveness of the mechanism of popular control may be hard to benchmark (Nyhan et al., 2012), fact is that actual voter control cannot account for the lion's share of policy congruence.

That the failure to deliver congruent policies or to take congruent positions rarely results in voter retribution, or, similarly, that congruent decisions are not rewarded on election day, may not be all that important if politicians do anticipate such voter scrutiny. The assumption holds that, even if actual voter control leaves a lot to be desired, the

mechanism of popular control still exerts a disciplining effect on politicians who expect citizens to hold them to account (Arnold, 1992; Mayhew, 1974). Their future being contingent on the approval of voters, re-election minded politicians are constrained by voters through the anticipation of future electoral sanctions and rewards (Miller & Stokes, 1963). As long as politicians want to continue in office and believe that their behavior may affect their election result, they are unlikely to ignore the preferences of voters (Bernstein, 1989; Fiorina, 1974; Pitkin, 1967). As such, the sheer anticipation of popular control, regardless of whether such accountability effectively takes place, sensitizes politicians in between elections to the preferences of voters, encouraging them to stay abreast of their opinions and behave (communicate, shift positions and decisions,…) accordingly (Kingdon, 1968; Maestas, 2003; Pitkin, 1967; Stimson et al., 1995). That the anticipation of voter retribution and reward constitutes a crucial guarantor of responsiveness, is commonly referred to as "the rule of anticipatory behavior", "rational anticipation" (Stimson et al., 1995), or more generally as "anticipatory representation" (Mansbridge, 2003).

Importantly, the assumption that the anticipation of future elections instigates elite responsiveness only holds if politicians genuinely believe that what they do and say will have repercussions on Election Day (and, of course, if politicians have accurate knowledge of what these voters desire; see for instance Belchior, 2014). Indeed, that elections make it in the best interest of politicians to endeavor and to respond to the public's desires vitally hinges on politicians actually *believing* that voters might hold them to account for unresponsive behavior and reward them for popular actions (Stimson et al., 1995). If, on the other hand, politicians were to believe that what they do and say in their capacity as a representative is completely inconsequential for citizens' voting behavior, they may see leeway to ignore their preferences, or to simply "misbehave". After all, enacting unpopular policies or taking unpopular positions would not cause much fuss anyways and their efforts towards the public would just go unnoticed (Mayhew, 1974). Therefore, the crucial question that is tackled in this study is whether politicians feel monitored –whether they believe voters are aware of their actions, and whether they believe this knowledge influences their vote choice.

While there is a modest revival of scholarly interest in politicians' perceptions of public opinion (Belchior, 2014; Eichenberger et al., 2021; Varone & Helfer, 2021), how they perceive these opinions to impact their electoral fate has received far less empirical

attention. With the exception of three older studies, conducted by Converse and Pierce (1986) in France and the USA, and Kingdon (1968) and Miller and Stokes (1963) in the USA, no studies have tackled politicians' perceptions of voter control in a systematic fashion. While these scholars seem to find that most politicians believe that their re-election chances hinge on constituents' reactions to their voting records, we have no idea how politicians today, in other political systems, judge the prospects for voter control. The striking uncertainty regarding politician perceptions of popular control recently led Broockman and Butler (2017) to conclude that the question why politicians think that the constraints public opinion places on them are strong, is a fruitful avenue for further research. This study seeks to fill this important gap in the representation literature in four particular ways; (1) by updating the evidence on politician perceptions of voter control collected several decades ago, (2) by examining politicians' views of voter control in four different countries, (3) by constructing a reliable scale that captures the different hierarchical steps voter control requires and, finally, (4) by examining variation in how politicians conceive of voter control.

In this study, I ask 782 Members of Parliament in Belgium, Germany, Canada and Switzerland in a face-to-face survey about their perceptions of voter control. In particular, MPs had to indicate whether they believe that voters are aware of their behavior in parliament and their personal policy positions, are able to evaluate the outcomes of their political work, and, finally, whether this knowledge affects their vote choice. I find that a sizable number of MPs believe that voters are aware of what they do and say and take that into account at the ballot box. Surprisingly, this holds true for MPs in all four countries, even in party-centered systems such as Belgium and Germany where individual accountability is in reality fairly limited. Still, this general image of rather strong feelings of voter control hides considerable variation; some parliamentarians do not feel the weight of voter control at all, while others feel closely scrutinized by voters and consider the likelihood of electoral sanctions and rewards to be very high. Although the differences between countries are small, I do find modest proof for the fact that politicians in party-centered systems (in Belgium and some politicians in Germany that are elected on closed party lists), anticipate less individual voter control compared to politicians in more candidate-centered systems (Canada and Switzerland). Within these systems, I find that populist politicians, in contrast to their colleagues in traditional parties, are more convinced that voters know about their political actions and take this knowledge into account in elections. It seems that politicians who take pride in being close to voters (and their preferences), also feel more monitored

by these voters. Finally, I show that politicians' views of voter control do not reflect the actual likelihood that they might be held to account; it is not the case that politicians whose behavior is more visible and whose policy profile should be better known to voters feel the weight of voter control more strongly.

Politician perceptions of voter scrutiny: what we (do not) know

Responsiveness to voter preferences, it is commonly argued, should follow from the fact that (most) representatives want to be re-elected and depend on citizens' approval for achieving this goal, approval that can be secured by supporting policies endorsed by voters (Bernstein, 1989; Mansbridge, 2003). Crucial here is the anticipation of voter control; as long as politicians believe that their behavior will be evaluated by voters, they have an incentive to respond to their demands, or, similarly, to refrain from taking unpopular decisions or positions (Miller & Stokes, 1963; Mayhew, 1974). Ample theoretical and observational work on elite responsiveness rests on the assumption that politicians believe that what they do and say matters for their election result and because of this perceived voter scrutiny respond to voter demands (Arnold, 1992; Stimson et al., 1995). That scholars unequivocally recognize the importance of the anticipation of voter control for elite behavior contrasts sharply with the scant work examining the key condition of this mechanism, namely whether politicians anticipate voter control at all.

The few studies that did attempt to grasp politicians' perceptions of voter control find that most politicians, at least in France and in the United States, believe that their policy record is key to their electoral result. In their seminal work on political representation in France and the USA, Converse and Pierce (1986) interviewed politicians about the extent to which they thought that their personal policy reputations had been important in gaining them votes. No less than 70 percent of the re-elected French incumbents thought their reputations had been either decisive or very important for their re-election, which is even more compared to U.S. legislators, of which around 60 percent thought their records mattered. Miller and Stokes (1963) show, as well, that U.S. legislators think their re-election chances depend upon constituency reactions to their voting records, and argue this is "striking", given that citizens' knowledge about roll-call votes is inadequate. Kingdon (1968), surveying candidates in the USA, finds that 65 percent of the politicians who had recently

won the elections believed that the positions they express in their roll-call votes impacted their election result, while only 35 percent of the losing candidates indicated that their records mattered for, in their case, losing the election. A somewhat contrasting finding emerges in the study of Prewitt (1970), who interviewed city council members and their staff about their decision-making and showed that they were rather pessimistic about citizens' ability to hold politicians accountable in elections, with some even stating things as: "*I don't feel the weight of voter responsibility*". Yet, it is hard to draw conclusions on perceived voter monitoring when some of the interviewees (i.e. staffers), unlike representatives, do not depend on voter approval to stay in office. In short, the evidence suggests that (some) politicians, at least in the USA and in France in the 1960s-1980s, believe that their voting behavior determines their election outcomes. Note that each of these earlier works asks politicians to what extent they think their record has been important in the elections (contrasted with, for example, the importance of the party label and topical policy issues). Yet, besides their voting track record, politicians have other opportunities to express their policy views and that may in turn affect their electoral fortunes.

Why is it, then, that most politicians seem to believe that voters scrutinize their political actions when in reality that control is fairly limited (see Achen & Bartels, 2017)? A first explanation, Kingdon (1968) argues, may be that elected, and therefore successful, politicians tend to "congratulate" voters for making an informed vote choice. After all, he shows that elected politicians tend to believe that their individual legislative actions were rewarded by voters, whereas candidates who lost the election did not attribute this loss to their behavior in Congress and therefore argue that voters do not hold them accountable for their individual actions (or at least consider it less likely that they will be held accountable than winners of the election do) (see Kim & Racheter, 1973). Thus, in light of this finding, one would expect *elected* politicians to believe that voters hold them accountable for their actions, even when they do not. Second, the biased information environment of politicians may to some extent explain why they feel the weight of voter control; politicians interact mainly with people that *do* monitor them closely –citizens who are above average interested in politics and keep track of what they do– and these frequent interactions potentially fuel their anticipation of voter control (Miller & Stokes, 1963; Soontjens, 2020). Third, Fiorina argues that politicians should have a considerable sense of voter control simply because electoral accountability potentially has far-reaching

consequences; *"The costs of defeat are so enormous that the probability of defeat pales"* (Fiorina, 1974, p. 124). Although the probability of defeat at the hands of an individual politician's voting behavior is limited, it is still common enough for politicians to have a healthy fear of electoral retribution, especially because they might recall the few examples in which a certain roll-call vote *did* lead to some electoral backlash (Arnold, 1993; Kahneman & Tversky, 1979). Finally, another reason why politicians would anticipate voter control while most citizens are hardly informed about what they do, may lie in the fact that they expect "influential" actors such as interest groups and especially news media to play a vital role in notifying voters about incongruent behavior –even though this so-called "indirect oversight" is in reality rather limited (Clinton & Tessin, 2008). Fenno (1978), for instance, finds that politicians believe that interest groups and activists have the power to activate inattentive citizens, and as such increase the likelihood that they will be held accountable for their behavior (see also Kingdon, 1989; Miller & Stokes, 1963).

Based on the potential drivers of politician perceptions of voter scrutiny discussed earlier, one would expect politicians, in general, to believe that voters hold them accountable for their actions. And perhaps even more so today than a few decades ago. After all, the current political landscape is more mediatized and political activities such as voting in parliament or congress are now more accessible to the larger public (Dai & Norton, 2007; Strömbäck, 2008 or see for instance *votewatch.eu*). Also, the rise of the internet and in particular social media enables representatives to communicate directly with voters about their actions and policy positions. Moreover, via these social media platforms citizens can more easily inform (a lot of) others about (mis)behavior of politicians and thereby increase "indirect oversight". That the opportunities for citizens to monitor politicians have expanded, could make politicians feel (even more) controlled by citizens. At the same time, research shows that even in the current, more mediatized, political landscape, politicians (and parties too) rarely get voted in or out of office "correctly" (see Achen & Bartels, 2017; Lau & Redlawsk, 1997 or see Plescia et al., 2021 on responsibility attribution for government decisions). From a rational point of view, then, it seems unlikely that individual politicians, especially in the proportional political systems I focus on in this study, strongly feel the weight of voter control.

Why some politicians may hold different views of voter control than others

Whilst Kingdon and Miller and Stokes conclude that U.S. legislators generally believe that voters consider their personal voting records when casting their vote (and speculate on why this may be the case, see earlier), this does not imply that *all* politicians do. Converse and Pierce (1986), for instance, show that while 70 percent of the French incumbents thought their personal record had been (very) important for their re-election, the other 30 percent felt their personal profile had not had a substantial impact on their election result. So far, scholars have not examined these differences in politician views of voter control and therefore we know close to nothing about why some think voters control them while others do not. Therefore, I do not formulate and test specific hypotheses on why politicians may conceive of electoral accountability differently, but adopt an exploratory approach instead. In what follows, some potential explanations are discussed.

First of all, one would expect that politicians who *are* monitored more closely by voters, or whose behavior can be more easily checked by voters, also *feel* the weight of voter control more strongly. For instance, one would expect that politicians in candidate-centered political systems where individual MPs have clear incentives to pursue a personal vote by promoting their individual record and policy views to also believe that voters monitor them. In contrast, MPs in party-centered proportional systems, because their personal records and positions are often of less relevance to voters, may be less likely to believe that voters pay attention to their individual political actions and will hold them to account for it (André et al., 2014). Moving from the country to the party level, then, one could argue that politicians in government parties, who get more airtime and take more legislative initiatives than their colleagues in the opposition (Vos, 2014), feel more controlled by voters. Moreover, that politicians in smaller parties may have less difficulty gaining familiarity among voters than politicians in larger parties may also affect their perceptions of voter control. In a similar vein, one would expect that within countries and parties, especially politicians in high-level positions, because they more frequently get covered in the mainstream media and are better able to reach a wide audience with their policy ideas and initiatives (Vos, 2014), believe more than their backbencher colleagues that voters know what they do and say and take it into account on election day.

Second, what we learn from Kingdon's previous work is that unsuccessful candidates downplay the importance of their personal records for their election result while

winners of the election believe that their voting records had an important impact on the election outcome (Kingdon, 1968). Interestingly, he argues, such rationalization may even occur before the election takes place; politicians who *expect* to win, then, will believe that voters monitor their behavior, while those who anticipate defeat will preemptively shrug off the responsibility for that defeat, or in other words: will put the blame for it outside themselves, and believe that voters do not evaluate their political actions. A similar logic may apply to more senior politicians; having survived multiple elections, they might start to believe that voters indeed control them –or, in their case, reward them repeatedly. Finally, it may be that a similar rationalization applies to politicians who feel they do a good job at representing voter preferences. Think, for instance, of populist politicians who take pride in claiming they 'represent the people', and may therefore believe voters indeed monitor them closely (Mudde, 2004).

Methods

To examine politicians' perceptions of popular control, I conduct surveys with politicians in Belgium, Canada, Germany and Switzerland. These country cases are interesting for two particular reasons. First, their political systems differ substantially from the USA and France, the only two countries where empirical evidence has so far been collected on politician views of voter control. Second, their political systems also differ from one another in various relevant respects. There is variation in the size of districts, the mode of election and ballot list system, the strength of parties…, all of which can affect the extent to which MPs are able and willing to run a personalized campaign, the extent to which voters can then control their actions and, therefore, potentially also the extent to which politicians *anticipate* voter control (Farrell, 2011). For instance in Canada, where candidates are elected in single-seat districts using a first-past-the-post system, politicians should be more incentivized to run a personalized campaign and to distinguish themselves from their party colleagues than in (more) proportional systems such as Belgium, Germany and Switzerland (André et al., 2014). But reality is more complex; Germany is a mixed system where some politicians are elected in single-seat districts under majoritarian rule while others run in multimember districts on closed party lists (André et al., 2016). Also, while Germany and especially

Belgium are party-centered systems, even Belgian politicians have incentives to run a personalized campaign since the flexible list system allows voters to cast one or more preferential vote(s) in addition to their party vote (see André et al., 2016 who show that politicians in flexible list systems are more prone to run personalized campaigns than politicians in closed list systems). Switzerland, then, is an open-list proportional system; voters can support a party and cast preference votes, even for candidates of different parties (Lanfranchi & Lüthi, 1999; Kriesi, 2001). Politicians in such open list PR systems have, more than those in closed and flexible systems, a strong electoral incentive to run a personal campaign (André et al., 2016). Overall, and knowing this is an oversimplification, one would expect Canadian, Swiss and German MPs elected in single-member ridings to feel more controlled by voters than Belgian and German MPs elected on closed lists. In short, the country variation in this study allows 1) to examine for the first time whether MPs' perceptions differ according to the political system in which they operate and 2) to thoroughly check the generalizability of the findings, especially regarding explanations for variation in politicians' views of voter control.

In total, we conducted surveys with 851 members of parliament in these four countries between March 2018 and September 2019[1]. Because they are federal countries with decentralized polities and important regional competences, we target both members of the national parliaments and of (some) regional parliaments. We contacted all MPs from the selected parliaments to participate in Belgium, Switzerland and Canada while in Germany, because of the large size of the *Bundestag*, a stratified sampling procedure was applied[2]. The average response rate is 46 percent, which is rather high for elite research (see for instance Bailer, 2014). Response rates vary substantially from one country to another, though, with very high response rates in Belgium (77%) and Switzerland (74%), and lower rates in Germany and Canada –see **Table I**. Important to note is that with regard to age, gender and seniority, the interviewed politicians are representative of the population and there is only limited bias in terms of party affiliation (see **Appendix I**).

Table I – Overview targeted and participating MPs in all countries

	Population	Sample	Response rate	Timing survey
Belgium				March-July 2018
National MPs	150	112		
Regional MPs	271	212		
Total	421	324	77%	
Switzerland				August-October 2018
National MPs	236	151		
Regional MPs Berne and Geneva	259	217		
Total	495	368	74%	
Germany				September 2018-February 2019
Total	511	79	16%	
Canada				March-September 2018
National MPs	334	50		
Regional MPs Ontario	124	30		
Total	458	80	17%	
Total	1,885	851	45%	

To guarantee that MPs themselves and not their employees filled out the survey, all politicians answered the questions in the presence of an interviewer. The researcher was at that point a passive observer of the politician filling in the questionnaire on a computer, merely responding to practical questions about the survey. The interviews took place in the politician's office, and completing the full survey took about thirty minutes on average. Most questions in the survey were directed at politicians' estimation of public opinion, and the questions concerning their perceptions of voter control were asked in the beginning of the survey.

In total, 799 MPs[3] were asked to answer four questions regarding their perceptions of voter control. In essence, I carefully designed four items tapping into the different aspects of electoral accountability –what does it take for citizens to exercise control over politicians (Ansolabehere & Jones, 2010)?– and study these elements as how they are perceived by political elites. For one, accountability as a retrospective mechanism requires citizens to be aware of politicians' policy positions and what they do in parliament. If voters are to hold MPs accountable, knowledge about them and their activities is required (Przeworski et al., 1999), which scholars refer to as 'the principal of minimal voter awareness' (Bernstein, 1989). Therefore, I first measure politicians' perceptions of voter awareness of their parliamentary work; *'Think about all people who consider voting for your party. To what extent are they generally aware of the parliamentary work you personally do?'* and their policy positions; *'To what extent are they generally aware of your personal position on different policy issues?* Their answers could range from 0 (not at all) to 10 (totally). Besides knowing what politicians did in the past legislature, voters are expected to consider the *outcomes* of politicians' actions, whether they expect these decisions to generate positive or negative outcomes in the (near) future (Jones, 2011). Hence, our third question taps into politician perceptions of citizens' ability to grasp the consequences of their behavior; '*To what extent are they generally aware of the outcomes of your political work?'* – 0 (not at all) to 10 (totally). Finally, what matters in the end is to what extent this knowledge is decisive for citizens' vote choice on election day; do they actually hold politicians to account or not? I grasp politicians' perceptions of this electoral evaluation by asking; '*To what extent does this knowledge influence these potential voters' decisions at the ballot?'*. Interestingly, these four constituting elements of perceived voter control align with psychological literature showing that in general and outside of the electoral context, the feeling of being held to account encapsulates the expectation of certain behavior being made public, of having to justify it and of it being evaluated (see Kunda, 1990; Lerner & Tetlock, 1999). Note that there is a clear hierarchy in the four items; if a politician believes that voters rely on their knowledge about her personal views and actions when casting their vote (cf. item 4), she should logically score voter awareness (cf. item 1-3) high as well.

By examining how politicians perceive these four aspects of electoral accountability, I go beyond existing work asking politicians solely about the importance of their voting record for their election result (e.g. Miller & Stokes, 1963).

It is important to emphasize that I deliberately ask politicians about their perceptions of the monitoring behavior of *all people who might vote for their party.* I believe this is a relevant reference point for MPs; all party voters likely belong to the potential electorate of the individual politician, at least when they fall within their constituency. Also, the conceptualization of politicians' perceptions of voter control is deliberately kept very *general* because I want to tap into politicians' overall stance vis-à-vis voter control. I am aware that certain circumstances might in- or decrease politicians' anticipation of electoral accountability (think, for instance, of issue salience –see Kingdon, 1989), yet it is not the focus of the current study, in which I try to establish a general yardstick of voter control that meaningfully allows comparison between politicians, parties, and countries.

From the 799 politicians that I asked about their perceptions of voter control, only seventeen (nine in Belgium, four in Switzerland, two in Germany and two in Canada) did not (fully) answer the perceived accountability-battery. They are not included in the analysis. Thus, in total I examine the accountability beliefs of 782 politicians. The number of observations in the explanatory analysis is slightly lower due to some missing values on the independent variables.

To explore variation in politicians' perceptions of voter control, six independent variables are introduced in the analysis (and two control variables; gender and level of office). I examine whether politicians who are confident about getting re-elected (a question that was asked elsewhere in the same survey), or who hold/have held high office, have been in parliament for a long time, are part of a government, a populist or a small party, feel more scrutinized by voters. To capture these latter five characteristics, I rely on publicly available data on MPs and their parties. More information on the IVs can be found in **Appendix II**.

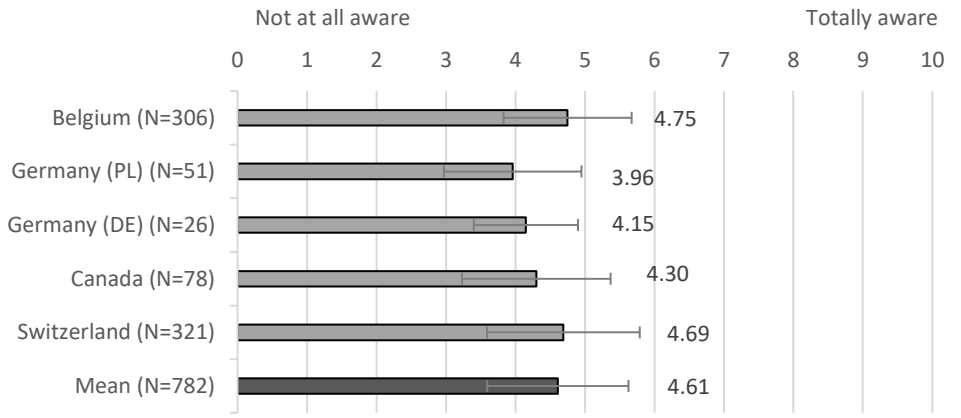
Finally, whenever scholars rely on survey evidence to draw conclusions on the intentions or perceptions of their study objects, the danger of socially desirable and strategic responses looms around the corner. However, there is no reason to expect that politicians would have answered the questions about perceived voter control strategically. For one, it is not entirely clear what the desirable/strategic answer would be. If anything, I would think that the desirable or "modest" thing to do, is for politicians *not* to overstate the extent to which voters know and care about what they individually do and say. More important, though, is that the interview context discouraged such responses; politicians were repeatedly assured that their answers would always be treated anonymously and

would never be shared or made public in any identifiable way. Also, politicians were generally very comfortable with the interviewer being present in the room, and while they could easily skip survey questions they did not like or thought of as "threatening" –which hardly ever happened for the questions on voter control (remember that only 17 out of 799 respondents skipped (part of) the question).

Results

Let us first consider each of the building blocks of perceived voter control separately. Overall, one can see in **Figure I**, with an average of 4.6 out of 10, politicians seem to believe that party voters are *aware of what they do in parliament*. In reality, however, voters are often badly informed about politics (Carpini & Keeter, 1996), and especially about what happens in the fairly invisible parliamentary arena (for studies on roll-call voting knowledge in the USA see Clinton & Tessin, 2008; Lupia, 2016). A recent study in France shows that only about half of the citizens know the name of *their* representative (François & Navarro, 2020), which should not come as a surprise given the scant media attention most MPs, and especially backbenchers, receive (Bennett, 1996; Vos, 2014). It is not hard to imagine, then, that voters' knowledge of individual MPs in party-centered systems is even poorer, let alone that they would know what these MPs do in parliament (see Soontjens, 2020 for recent evidence on the absence of voter knowledge of parliamentary initiatives).

Figure I – Politician perceptions of voter awareness of their parliamentary behavior



Of course, based on this average score of voter awareness, I cannot claim that politicians believe that a significant proportion of voters is closely following their activities in parliament. Politicians might as well reason that some exceptionally attentive citizens, or the news media, could inform others about what they do in parliament –something that, again, in reality does not happen all too often (Arnold, 2004; Clinton & Tessin, 2008). In sum, I find that MPs believe voter awareness of parliamentary behavior is substantial, in all four countries and, surprisingly, even most in Belgium where party discipline in parliament is very high and individual parliamentary authority is fairly limited (De Winter & Dumont, 2006). Yet, the differences between countries in MPs' perceptions of voter awareness of parliamentary behavior are not significant, nor do German politicians elected directly (DE) hold significantly different perceptions of voter awareness than German MPs elected on party lists (PL)[4].

Second, I look at how politicians conceive of *voter awareness of their policy positions* in **Figure II**. It shows that, with an overall average score of 5.4, politicians consider their positions to be better-known, or easier to grasp, for citizens than what they do in parliament. This makes sense in that citizens can to some extent deduce MPs' individual policy positions from the party ideology (Dahlberg & Harteveld, 2016). Still, and as has been argued before, it is striking that politicians think a substantial proportion of voters knows their stance on various policy issues, when many of these voters do not even know who they are to begin with. Comparatively speaking, politician perceptions of voter awareness of their personal policy positions sort of follow a logical pattern. In Canada, a first-past-the-post system where MPs are elected in single-member ridings, politicians are significantly more likely to believe that voters are aware of their *personal* policy positions than in Germany and Belgium where an individual politician's policy profile indeed matters less for his/her re-election. And, as anticipated, Swiss politicians are significantly more likely to believe that voters are aware of their individual policy preferences than Belgian and German politicians (both those elected on party lists and those elected directly).

Figure II – Politician perceptions of voter awareness of their personal policy positions

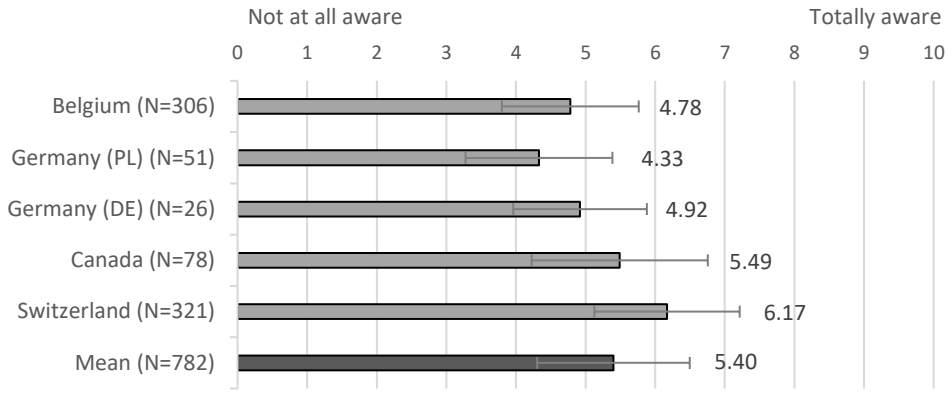
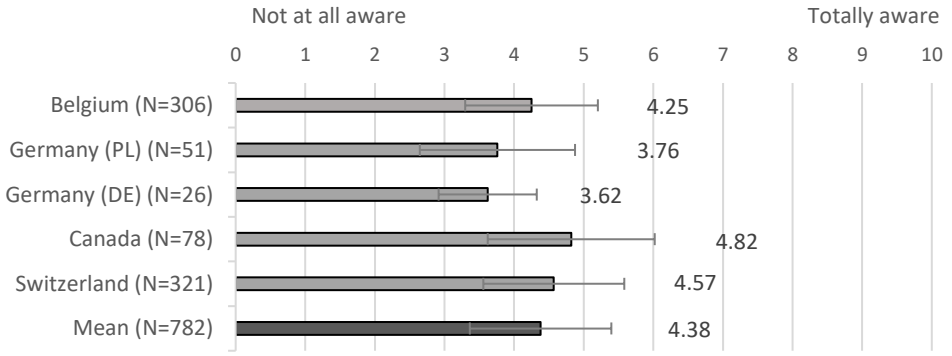


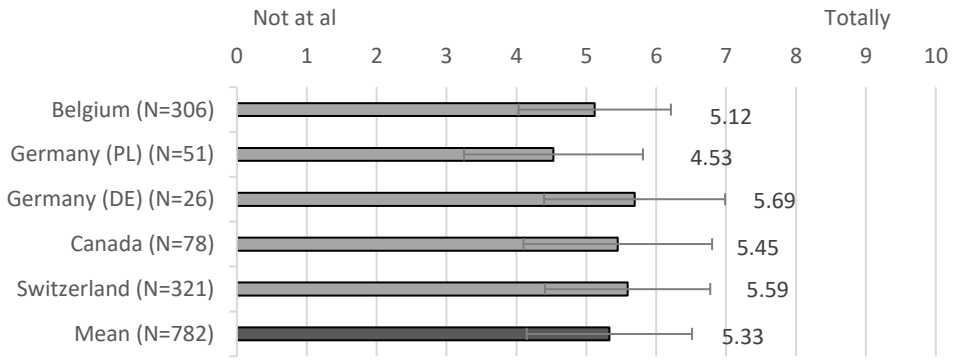
Figure III presents politicians' perceptions of citizens' awareness of *the outcomes of their political work*. With an average score of 4.4, outcome awareness is rated slightly lower by politicians than the mere voter awareness of parliamentary behavior (an average of 4.6 – see Figure I). Politicians seem to realize that evaluating their behavior, or rather estimating the future consequences of their actions, requires additional cognitive efforts from voters. Interestingly, it is again the politicians in the two more individualized political systems, Canada and Switzerland, who show the greatest confidence in citizens' ability to correctly gauge the consequences of their personal decisions –but note that only the difference between Canadian and Swiss versus German politicians (both those elected on party lists and those elected directly) is statistically significant.

Figure III – Politician perceptions of voter awareness of the outcomes of their parliamentary work



Finally, **Figure IV** visualizes to what extent politicians believe that the knowledge voters have of their parliamentary behavior, their personal policy views and the outcomes of their behavior affects their eventual vote choice. With this fourth and final question, I gauge politicians' perceptions of the actual accountability behavior of citizens, for which they need some knowledge of politicians' actions and policy views (Przeworski et al., 1999). With an average of 5.3, one could say that politicians estimate the likelihood that voters will hold them personally accountable on Election Day to be quite high. Overall, they believe that a significant proportion of voters are able and willing to perform their democratic duties of delegation and accountability. The finding that no less than 65 percent of the politicians believe that voters take their policy views and past decisions into account when casting a vote (i.e. score 6 or higher out of 10) contrasts with ample scholarly work showing that citizens' knowledge of politicians' records and positions is often not among the criteria that determine their vote (Achen & Bartels, 2017; Bernstein, 1989; Huber et al., 2012). It is, again, Canadian and Swiss politicians and, interestingly, directly elected German MPs who anticipate electoral accountability the most –but only the difference between German party list MPs and Swiss politicians is statistically significant. In addition, it shows that in Germany, directly elected MPs (5.69) anticipate electoral accountability significantly more strongly than their colleagues elected on party lists (4.53). This finding suggests that the ballot list system impacts elite conceptions of voter control.

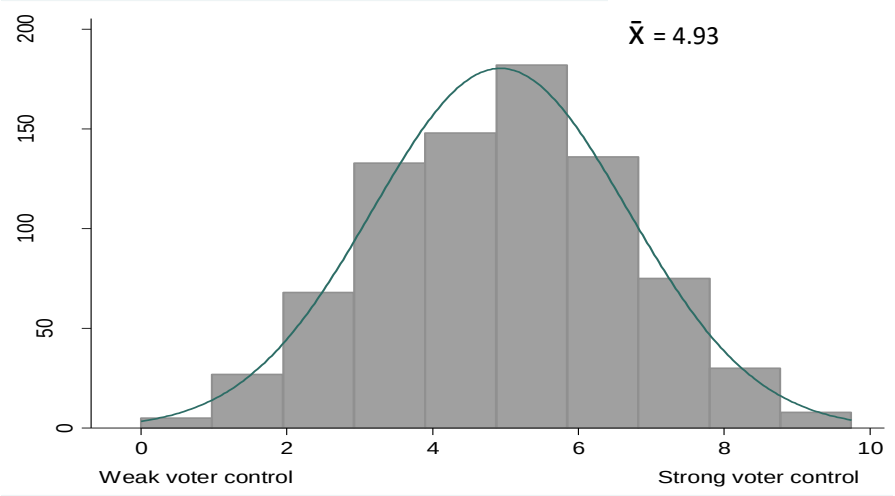
Figure IV – Politician perceptions of electoral accountability



Do these four items gauge the same underlying theoretical construct of *perceived voter control,* then*?* A principal factor analysis confirms they do; with an Eigenvalue of 2.1, the four aspects of perceived voter control together –voter knowledge of personal policy positions and (the consequences of) politicians' behavior in parliament, and the extent to which this all matters on election day– explain more variance than the variables do separately. All four items correlate strongly with the construct of perceived voter control; perceived visibility of parliamentary behavior has a factor loading score of .75, perceived awareness of policy positions of .71, outcome awareness of .78 and, finally, perceived retribution at the ballot has a slightly lower factor loading of .69. As for the scale, one may want to consider the hierarchy in the four items; after all, voter awareness of policy positions and (outcomes of) political actions is a prerequisite for actual accountability at the ballot. Or put differently; a high score on the perceived electoral accountability item should imply a high score on the first three knowledge items as well. Therefore, as a robustness test, a Mokken-scale analysis[5] is performed that takes into account this hierarchy. The findings confirm that the four items form a valid scale; the Loevinger H of all items are above 0.50 (.54, .56, .58, .61 respectively), implying very good scalability –the threshold for retaining items in a scale is usually set at .30. Therefore, I construct a single scale of perceived voter control by taking the average across the four items.

The distribution of this scale variable, depicting politicians' *perceptions of voter control*, is shown in **Figure V**. First, we see that, with an average score of 4.93 out of 10 (S.D. 1.76), politicians' perceptions are right in the middle of the scale. This means that, across the board, politicians do anticipate a substantial amount of voter control. Importantly, there is a lot of variation: some politicians expect no voter control at all (0), while others strongly believe citizens monitor them closely (a maximum score of 9.75).

Figure V – Politician perceptions of voter control (scale) (N= 782)



Looking at the country differences in politicians' overall perceptions of voter control, we see that Swiss politicians feel the weight of voter control significantly more strongly than politicians in Germany and Belgium (see **Appendix III** for the ANOVA results). And, Canadian politicians do so significantly more than German politicians. The difference between German MPs elected under different electoral rules follows the expected pattern; with an average score of 4.60, directly elected German MPs feel the weight of voter control more strongly than their German colleagues elected on party lists (4.15). The difference is not statistically significant, but mind that the N is low.

There is ample variation in how politicians conceive of voter control, also within the four countries under study, which prompts the question; who are the politicians that expect to be held accountable by voters for what they do and say? To explore variation in politician perceptions of voter control, I run a multilevel linear regression model –individual MPs are nested in parties (random effects), in countries (fixed effects). The results are in **Table II**. To ensure that the findings are not driven by one country only (keeping in mind the differences in sample size), I run the model in Table II again, excluding one country at the time. The results of this robustness test are in **Appendix IV**.

Let us first examine whether the variation in politicians' perceptions of voter control can be explained by the fact that the probability of being held accountable is greater for some politicians than for others. First, I do not find that elite politicians –those who have held the position of party leader, cabinet member, caucus leader or speaker and/or currently hold the position of caucus leader or speaker– feel the weight of voter control more strongly than backbencher MPs. While voters know elite politicians (and their policy positions and decisions) better than other backbenchers, it is not the case that they anticipate electoral accountability more. Although it is easier for voters to hold elite politicians to account, they do not perceive it that way. Nor do I find that government MPs, often more visible and more decisive in terms of policy-making than their colleagues in the opposition, feel the weight of voter control significantly more strongly. Finally, it seems that individual politicians in smaller parties do feel more controlled by voters than politicians in larger parties who presumably have more difficulty presenting themselves individually to voters and are less visible, yet the effect of party size is not robust across countries (see Appendix IV).

Next, I explore whether politicians tend to rationalize (expected) electoral success and come to believe that voters reward them in elections for their policy views and/or actions (this so-called "congratulation-rationalization effect" was first brought up by Kingdon in 1968). First of all, I do not find that politicians who are in parliament for a longer time conceive differently of voter control than more junior politicians. Surviving multiple elections does not seem to affect how politicians look at the accountability mechanism and citizens' monitoring behavior in particular. Interestingly, that more senior politicians believe just as much as their junior colleagues that at least some voters monitor them and take into account what they do and say when casting their vote, challenges the assumption that politicians feel freer to do whatever they want when they have more experience. Second, while we see that politicians who are confident about their re-election are somewhat more likely to feel the weight of voter control than their more insecure colleagues, the effect is not significant ($p > 0.05$) nor robust (see Appendix IV). Kingdon (1968) argued that successful politicians tend to believe they are voted in office because of their policy actions while those who are unsuccessful rationalize their defeat by blaming factors beyond their own control. However, I do not find confirmation for Kingdon's assumption that such rationalization even occurs before the election takes place (which is in line with Kim & Racheter, 1973).

Finally, I find that populist politicians –whose main objective is to represent "the people" (Mudde, 2004)– are more convinced than their colleagues in mainstream parties that voters monitor them closely and will hold them accountable for what they do and say. In all three countries where we surveyed politicians from populist parties (Belgium, Germany and Switzerland), populists estimate the likelihood of voter control significantly higher than their fellow colleagues –predictive value of voter control of 5.5 out of 10 compared to 4.8 for politicians of non-populist parties. It seems that especially politicians who think they do a good job at representing citizens' wishes also expect more voter control.

With respect to the control variables, it shows that female and male politicians have similar perceptions of voter control, and that federal politicians are more convinced that voters know what they do and envision and hold them accountable than politicians in regional parliaments –but the effect is not robust.

Table II – Multilevel linear regression explaining politicians' perceptions of voter control

	Coef. (S.E.)
Elite politician	-.19 (.16)
Party size	-.01 (.00)*
Government politician	.28 (.20)
Seniority (log)[6]	-.04 (.08)
Electoral safety	.13 (.08)†
Populist politician	.79 (.28)**
Country (ref. = Belgium)	
Germany (PL)	-.45 (.46)
Germany (DE)	.52 (.62)
Switzerland	.36 (.23)
Canada	.84 (.42)*
Control	
Gender	.20 (.13)
Federal politician	.36 (.15)*
Constant	4.1 (.36)***
N (parties)	745 (41)
Variance party level	.34 (.11)
Variance residual	1.68 (.04)
AIC (null model: 3,086)	2,939

Note. *** p<0.001, ** p<0.01, * p<0.05, † p<.1

Conclusion

One way in which successful representation can come about is through politicians responding to voter preferences between elections, prompted by their desire to get re-elected (Mansbridge, 2003). Such so-called "anticipatory representation" vitally hinges on the extent to which politicians believe that voters might hold them accountable for their actions on Election Day (Arnold, 1992; Mayhew, 1974; Stimson et al., 1995). Simply put; if politicians do not expect electoral accountability, they might see leeway to ignore voter preferences, whereas if they do, they should be incentivized to follow-up on voter desires. Numerous representation studies are built on the assumption that the anticipation of electoral accountability sensitizes politicians to voter demands, but the key prerequisite, namely that politicians *expect* such accountability in the first place, has hardly ever been empirically examined. Therefore, the current study sets out to systematically study politicians' perceptions of voter control –do they think their policy behavior and policy views are known to voters and that these voters will hold them accountable for it?– by surveying Belgian, German, Canadian and Swiss MPs.

Three findings stand out. First, I show that most politicians anticipate a considerable degree of voter control. Overall, MPs believe that a substantial amount of party voters know what positions they take on policy issues, what initiatives they pursue in parliament and what consequences these initiatives may generate, and take this information into account on Election Day. This is true for high-level elites as well as backbencher MPs, government as well as opposition MPs, senior as well as junior politicians, and electorally confident and unconfident politicians alike. The idea that politicians anticipate voter control is not new, but I am the first to show empirically that most politicians do feel constrained by the mechanism of electoral accountability. Second, the electoral context matters (a bit); while politicians in all four countries under study anticipate a substantial degree of voter control, Canadian and Swiss MPs are more convinced citizens monitor them closely and will hold them accountable for their actions than Belgian and, in particular, German MPs elected on party lists. Third, I find that populist politicians feel the weight of voter control more strongly than politicians belonging to mainstream parties. Politicians who claim being close to voters and to pursue their preferences, turn out to also feel more monitored by these voters.

That most politicians believe that their behavior is to some extent monitored by voters and is taken into account in their vote choice, has important normative implications. A positive reading of the findings would be that politicians are generally motivated to respond to their voters' preferences and, similarly, avoid taking positions that will put them at odds with most of them. And, that politicians experience such pressure is all the more important because the *actual* electoral impact of parliamentary behavior and individual position taking is limited (Achen & Bartels, 2017). Thus, the fact that politicians believe they are monitored by voters, while research has failed to show this is the case in reality, is crucial to bring about policies that reflect the will of voters. Of course, the disciplining effect of anticipated voter control should not necessarily result in responsive policy-making; politicians may as well be induced to manipulate voters into *believing* they are responsive (Jacobs & Shapiro, 2000). Either way, both *actual* accountability and the anticipation thereof by politicians, benefit from a rich information environment that ensures citizens make an informed vote choice and that politicians consider their behavior with care for public opinion (Arnold, 2004).

The purpose of the current study was to systematically examine to what extent, and which, politicians expect voters to hold them accountable for their personal political actions, and I did so by constructing a battery of four questions gauging politician perceptions of voter awareness of their parliamentary behavior, of their policy positions and of the outcomes of their behavior, and the extent to which this knowledge influences citizens' vote choice. Follow-up research could complement our exploratory findings, in particular by examining *variation within politicians*. While this study focused on politicians' general perceptions of voter control, it would be interesting to see what circumstances or events reduce or intensify the sense of being constrained by voters. With regard to highly salient policy issues, for instance, politicians may feel more monitored. In sum, politicians' incentives to respond to voter preferences are most likely influenced by both their general perceptions of voter control –which I study here–, and the specific context –which I encourage future studies to focus on. In addition, it would be interesting for future work to go beyond their own (party) voters and ask politicians how they conceive of the general public's accountability behavior. Comparing the anticipation of electoral accountability by their own voters, potential voters or the public as a whole would be another interesting contribution to the representation literature.

Finally, and most importantly, our fine-grained measure of perceived voter control can serve as an independent variable in studies on elite responsiveness, which have hitherto relied almost exclusively on indirect measures (e.g. district competitiveness) to argue that the anticipation of electoral accountability induces politicians to become informed about and respond to the public's preferences (Bernardi, 2018).

Notes

1. The surveys were conducted in the framework of the POLPOP project, a joint research project with teams in Belgium (Flanders and Wallonia), Switzerland, The Netherlands, Canada and Germany. Stefaan Walgrave (University of Antwerp) is the principal investigator of the POLPOP project in Flanders, Jean-Benoit Pilet in Wallonia, Christian Breunig and Stefanie Bailer in Germany, Rens Vliegenthart in The Netherlands, Frédéric Varone in Switzerland and Peter Loewen in Canada. Funding for this project was obtained by each country individually.

2. A random sample of German politicians stratified by party affiliation, incumbent status and gender was created to guide the contacting procedure. MPs were contacted in four rounds until 79 interviews were finished. At that point, a total of 511 politicians had been contacted.

3. In Switzerland, some politicians were, because of time constraints, given the option to complete a short version of the survey in which they were not questioned about perceived voter control, which 52 MPs did. This means that, in total, 799 politicians got to see the question tapping into their perceptions of voter control.

4. Findings based on a one-way ANOVA with Tukey post-hoc test, applying 95% confidence intervals.

5. See Mokken (2011) for technical details.

6. Including seniority as a linear variable or taking the quadratic function yields similar non-significant results.

Appendix

Appendix I – Representativity of the politician sample

	Belgium		Canada		Germany		Switzerland	
	Cooperated	Population	Cooperated	Population	Cooperated	Population	Cooperated	Population
	(N = 324)	(N = 421)	(N = 80)	(N = 458)	(N = 79)	(N = 709)	(N = 368)	(N=495)
Female (%)	37%	39%	39%	31%	25%	31%	32%	32%
Age in years (SD)	49.6 (9.8)	50.2 (9.9)	52.3 (12.3)	52.2 (11.9)	50.2 (10.8)	49.4 (10.1)	51.3 (11.3)	52.1 (11.0)
Seniority in years (SD)	10.5 (7.6)	11.0 (8.2)	6.3 (8.7)	6.0 (6.7)	4.9 (5.8)	6.0 (6.7)	9.9 (7.9)	11.0 (8.6)

Appendix II – Descriptives independent variables

Variable	Question/calculation	N	Mean	S.D.	Min	Max
Elite politician	Did the politician occupy to position of party leader, minister, caucus leader or speaker of the parliament in the past? Or does (s)he hold the mandate of caucus leader or speaker at the time of the interviews? 0. No 1. Yes	782	.22	.42	0	1
Party size	The amount of seats that the party of the politician occupies in the parliament (s)he is seated	780	42	46	1	200
Government	Is het politician part of the government on the level (s)he is active? 0. No 1. Yes	782	.67	.47	0	1
Experience	The amount of years the politician is active on the national/regional level	782	9.7	7.6	0	64
Electoral safety	How likely is it that you will be re-elected? 1. Very unlikely 2. Unlikely 3. It could go either way 4. Likely 5. Very likely	745	3.9	.87	1	5
Populist party	Is the party the politician belongs to classified as populist? 0. No 1. Yes For Belgium; the extreme-right Vlaams Belang, leftwing populist PvdA, neo-liberal Popular Party (PP) For Germany; the right-wing populist AfD and left-wing populist Die Linke For Switzerland; the Swiss People's party (SVP) and the Geneva Citizens Movement (MCG)	782	.14	.35	0	1

	We do not have Canadian politicians belonging to populist parties in our sample					
Gender	What is your gender? 0. Male 1. Female	782	.34	.48	0	1
Level	Is het politician active in the federal or regional parliament? 0. Regional parliament 1. Federal parliament	782	.43	.50	0	1

Appendix III – ANOVA comparing country differences (with Tukey post-hoc test)

	Mean (S.D.)
Belgium (N=306)	4.73 (1.68)
Germany (PL) (N=51)	4.15 (1.73)
Germany (DE) (N=26)	4.60 (1.45)
Canada (78)	5.01 (2.03)
Switzerland (321)	5.25 (1.73)

Pairwise comparison	Coef. (S.E.)
Switzerland vs Belgium	.53 (.14)**
Germany (PL) vs Belgium	-.58 (.26)
Canada vs Belgium	.29 (.22)
Germany (DE) vs Belgium	-.13 (.35)
Germany (PL) vs Switzerland	-1.11 (.26)***
Canada vs Switzerland	-.24 (.22)
Germany (DE) vs Switzerland	-.66 (.35)
Canada vs Germany (PL)	.87 (.31)*
Germany (DE) vs Germany (PL)	.45 (.42)
Germany (DE) vs Canada	-.42 (.39)

Note. *** p<0.001, ** p<0.01, * p<0.05, † p<.1

Appendix IV – Robustness check: analyses dropping one country at a time

	Excluding Belgium	Excluding Germany	Excluding Canada	Excluding Switzerland
	Coef. (S.E.)	Coef. (S.E.)	Coef. (S.E.)	Coef. (S.E.)
Elite	-.05 (.21)	-.20 (.17)	-.26 (.17)	-.20 (.22)
Party size	-.01 (.00)	-.01 (.00)*	-.00 (.00)	-.01(.00)*
Government	.27 (.31)	.30 (.19)	.23 (.20)	.31 (.24)
Seniority	-.07 (.10)	-.03 (.09)	-.00 (.08)	-.05 (.12)
Electoral safety	.13 (.10)	.14 (.08)	.12 (.08)	.12 (.10)
Populist	.87 (.34)*	.59 (.29)*	.79 (.28)**	1.04 (.42)*
Gender	.15 (.18)	.22 (.14)	.22 (.14)	.18 (.17)
Federal	.32 (.24)	.36 (.16)*	.41 (.15)**	.29 (.20)
Country dummies				
Constant	4.43(.50)	4.06(.38)	3.9(.37)	44.13(.47)
N (parties)	451 (28)	672 (34)	669 (35)	443 (26)
Variance party level	.38 (.16)	.25 (.10)	.35 (.11)	.37 (.13)
Variance residual	1.7 (.06)	1.7 (.05)	1.6 (.05)	1.7 (.06)

Note. *** p<0.001, ** p<0.01, * p<0.05, † p<.1

CHAPTER 3

Voters hardly care about parties' policy profile

Politicians' pessimistic view of citizens' party choice considerations

In *Democracy for Realists*, Achen and Bartels (2017) argue that most citizens are unable to cast an "accurate" retrospective or prospective vote. In this research note, I shift focus from citizens to *politicians*, and examine how they evaluate citizens' capacities to make a policy-oriented party choice. Politicians' perceptions of citizens' party choice considerations influence how they behave in between elections; what policies they decide on and what positions they take. Yet, with the exception of three outdated studies, a systematic assessment of how political actors conceive of citizens' voting considerations is simply nonexistent. Asking a large sample of Belgian Members of Parliament what they believe determines citizens' party choice, I show that only few politicians believe that citizens do their democratic duty and vote for a party because of its policy profile. In politicians' conception, voters hardly take into account the party's policy promises for the future nor their past behavior when casting a vote. Instead, most MPs believe that citizens are seduced to vote for a party because of individual candidates on the party list and campaign communications.

Keywords: voting motives, politician perceptions, elite surveys, substantive representation

Introduction

Democracy, ideally, presumes that voters with informed policy preferences make an informed vote choice on Election Day (Przeworski et al., 1999). By voting for the party whose (future) policy positions are most similar to their own (i.e. "prospective voting"), or by holding parties to account for their past performance (i.e. "retrospective voting"), citizens can ensure that their policy preferences are reflected in the political arena, and that congruent policies will follow. In reality, however, many voters seem to be poorly informed, about parties' policy positions as well as about what these parties have done in the past (see Achen & Bartels, 2017 for a comprehensive overview of work making this point). Instead of examining (again) whether citizens make policy-oriented evaluations of parties, I ask *politicians* to evaluate citizens' capacities to make policy-oriented party choices. This research note explores *whether or not politicians are* "*democratic realists"* (see Achen & Bartels, 2017).

In their quest for voter support, parties, or more precisely their politicians, naturally rely on their conception of how voters decide which party to vote for (Esaiasson & Holmberg, 1996; Mayhew, 1974). Therefore, politicians' understanding of citizens' voting considerations and abilities matters. It influences how they present themselves to voters during the legislature, how they campaign in the run-up to elections, and, of particular importance here, how they deal with voter preferences (Kingdon, 1968). Indeed, how constrained parties are by (future) voter preferences, at least in part, hinges on their *theory of voting behavior*, or more precisely; on the extent to which citizens are expected to vote for a party because of its policy profile. As such, it is commonly argued, the role of elections is not just the actual possibility of citizens delegating power, it might as well be the inducement of responsive political action (Miller & Stokes, 1963). As Stokes (1999) has argued; '*Electoral competition induces parties, and hence governments, to give voters what they want, just as economic competition induces firms to produce what consumers want'*.

Imagine that politicians are "democratic *idealists*" and assume that citizens vote for their party because of its (future) policy positions and past decisions. In their attempt to please voters, then, these politicians are likely incentivized to learn and respond to their preferences and, similarly, feel more reluctant to divert from these preferences (Miller and Stokes, 1963). Simply put; if one expects voters to be swayed by a party's policy positions and past decisions on Election Day, one automatically becomes more sensitive to these

voters' preferences (Mayhew, 1974; Stokes, 1999). If, on the other hand, politicians assume that the policy profile of their party hardly affects citizens' party choice, they have less electoral incentives to pander towards citizens' desires in their decision-making. After all, they may reason, citizens will not reward responsive action, nor hold them accountable for ignoring their preferences (Strøm, 1990). In sum, politicians' conception of citizens' voting considerations matters for political decision-making.

It is not surprising, then, that over the years scholars have sought to understand politicians' beliefs about voters; of the policies these voters desire (e.g. Belchior, 2014) of the issues they want to see tackled (e.g. Converse & Pierce, 1986), of the parties they will vote for or of the likelihood that they will turn out at the ballot (Skovron, 2018). Yet, with the exception of some older work of Kingdon (1968) and Miller and Stokes (1963) who asked US legislators about their perceptions of voting considerations, and Esaiasson and Holmberg (1996) who studied MPs' conception of party voting motives after the Swedish election of 1985, there are, as far as I know, no recent studies that examine what politicians believe determines citizens' party choice.

Addressing this lacuna in our understanding of how politicians view voters, I ask 292 Members of Parliament in Belgium which factors shape citizens' party choice. In particular, MPs were asked to rank five voting considerations in order of importance; two voting motives that are clearly based on policy content (prospective and retrospective policy voting) along with three voting heuristics that are not directly related to the party's policy profile (campaign communications, individual personalities on the party list, and habit votes). The image that Belgian politicians have of citizens' party choice considerations is one of contempt, I find. Most MPs seem to believe that the party's campaign communications and the popularity of individual candidates on the party list crucially shape citizens' party choice. At the same time, politicians consider it rather unlikely that voters choose a party based on its past behavior or its policy promises. Additionally, I present modest evidence showing that political success may lead politicians to become more optimistic about citizens' willingness and ability to make a policy-induced party choice. The implications of the findings are discussed in the conclusion.

The black box of politicians' conception of citizens' party choice considerations

A small –I am aware of only three studies– and by now older literature has examined politician perceptions of citizens' voting considerations empirically. In *Representation from above,* Esaiasson and Holmberg (1996) prompt Swedish Members of Parliament to indicate why they think citizens voted for a particular party in the 1985 elections. In particular, they ask politicians to what extent they believe the election campaign, the party leader's image, party loyalty, ideology, class membership, the economy, foreign policy and religious questions impacted citizens' party choice. They conclude that Swedish politicians demonstrate disdain for citizens' voting motivations as they believe that voters are easily swayed by media campaigns and popular party leaders (van Schendelen, 1981). Their findings suggest that politicians are overall quite pessimistic about citizens' abilities to perform their democratic duties –i.e. making a policy-induced, either retro- or prospective vote choice. Two older studies also tackle elite perceptions of voting considerations by asking U.S. legislators about the determinants of their *personal* election result. First, Miller and Stokes (1963) show that most Members of Congress think their personal records had been important in gaining them votes. Kingdon (1968) as well questioned U.S. election candidates right after the elections about the extent to which they thought the party label, the issues of the election and their individual voting records had influenced their election result, and confirms that many politicians believe their records impact their results.

But what should we expect that politicians today believe about the determinants of citizens' *party* choice? After all, ever since these three valuable scholarly contributions have been made, citizens' actual voting behavior has changed in a few respects. On the one hand, one could argue that citizens today have all the more means to actually get informed about party behavior and policy positions –for instance, voting advice applications are omnipresent (Garzia, 2010) and parliamentary behavior has become somewhat more transparent due to the mediatization of politics (Esser & Strömbäck, 2014) and initiatives tracking and publishing data on roll-call votes (see, for instance *votewatch.eu*). Therefore, one would expect that today, politicians are more optimistic about citizens' abilities to make a policy-induced party choice. Yet, at the same time, research has shown that citizens' capabilities of monitoring political action have not increased. Their knowledge of party positions (Dejaeghere & van Erkel, 2017) and their retrospective voting capabilities (Achen & Bartels, 2017) is still quite poor. In fact, even though educational levels have increased

and politics has become more transparent, the average level of political knowledge has hardly changed over the years (Carpini & Keeter, 1996). Another reason *not* to expect that politicians are democratic idealists lies in the growing importance of electoral campaigns (i.e. "the permanent campaign"). Parties putting all the more effort in persuading voters (Johann et al., 2018; Dalton, 2002), they likely believe in the importance of campaigns for citizens' party choice. Also, politics has become increasingly mediatized –political actors are all the more dependent on, and shaped by mass (and social) media– which has let to, for instance, an increase in the importance of party leaders for citizens' party choice (Enli & Skogerbø, 2013; Wauters et al., 2018). Therefore, one would expect politicians to reason that campaigns and individual personalities are pivotal for the electoral success of their party. In sum, the first (general) hypothesis holds that:

H1: Politicians do not expect citizens to choose a party for policy-related reasons.

Not all politicians share the same view of citizens' voting considerations. Yet, the only study that explores variation in politicians' beliefs, and tries to explain why politicians conceive differently of citizens' voting motives, is Kingdon's work (1968). He compares the beliefs of the winners and losers of the election, and shows that those who are (re-)*elected* are more convinced that candidate and issues characteristics had been decisive, a finding that has been labelled the "congratulation-rationalization effect". In essence, he argues, winners overestimate the degree to which citizens voted on the "right" bases (i.e. their policy efforts), while candidates that had lost in the elections tend to downgrade the importance of their own efforts, and argue instead that voters engage in "blind voting for party labels" (but see Kim and Racheter, 1973). Even though Kingdon (1968) does not look specifically at policy-related voting motives, as I do in this research note, and studies the explanations for an individual candidate's election success instead of party choice considerations, his findings suggest that winning elections may lead to a favorable change in politicians' beliefs about the competence of voters to cast a policy-induced vote choice. In addition, it may be that this kind of reasoning takes place before elections and that those who *anticipate* success are more optimistic about citizens' retro- and prospective voting considerations. Therefore, the explanatory hypothesis holds that;

H2: Politicians that are more successful more strongly believe that citizens choose a party for policy-related reasons than unsuccessful politicians.

Methods

This study was conducted in Belgium, a small West-European country with strong parties and a proportional electoral system. The Belgian political system is very different from the plurality system in the USA, where two of the earlier studies on politicians' perceptions of voting motives have been conducted, and is similar to the Swedish political system where Esaiasson and Holmberg (1996) studied MPs' beliefs about the determinants of citizens' party choice. In particular, Belgium has a flexible ballot list system in which voters have two options on Election Day; they either vote for a party, a "list vote", or they additionally cast a vote for (a) particular candidate(s) of that party –a "preferential vote". In essence, citizens vote for a party and in addition they can express their appreciation for some (or even all) candidates on the party list (Deschouwer, 2012). Party list votes determine the amount of seats a party wins, while preferential votes may help individual candidates to move to higher office and/or to get a better position on the ballot list for the next elections. In sum, Belgium is a strong *partitocracy* where individual politicians are constrained by their parties, yet do have some incentives to pursue a personal vote (see André et al., 2014).

To examine how citizens' voting considerations are perceived, I draw on survey evidence from Belgian MPs –members of the federal, Walloon, Flemish and Brussels parliament– collected within the POLPOP project, surveying and interviewing politicians between March and June 2018. Note that parties were not in campaign mode during this interview period – local elections were held in October 2018, national elections only took place one year later in May 2019. It was a conscious decision not to ask politicians about one particular election but about citizens' voting considerations *in general*. Specifically, we contacted 423 MPs and 324 were willing to participate, which makes for a response rate of 77 percent. The group of participants is representative for the full population of Belgian politicians in terms of gender, age, seniority (see **Appendix I**). All participants filled in a 30-minute survey on a laptop in the presence of a researcher to make sure they, and not their employees, were responding to our questions. The questionnaire dealt with many different topics, such as politicians' perceptions of public opinion, their relationship with the traditional media, and so on. The question grasping politicians' perceptions of voting considerations was asked in the beginning of the survey. In total, 292 politicians (out of the 324 who participated in the study) fully completed the question on citizens' voting considerations.

To design the survey instrument measuring politicians' perceptions of voting motives, I relied on abundant literature tapping into what drives (and what *should* drive) citizens' party choice. Representative democracy hinges on delegation of policy preferences and accountability for policy-making in elections (Strøm, 2000) and, therefore, our main interest lies in politician perceptions of whether citizens, either prospectively or retrospectively, cast a *policy-induced* vote choice. The "*retrospective* party performance rule" implies that citizens evaluate conditions in society, decide whether they are acceptable and reward or punish parties for policy actions that they think contributed to this state of affairs. The "*prospective* party position rule" lies at the other side of the temporal dimension with voters knowing where parties stand on different policy issues, what the consequences of these policy issues would be and then identifying and voting for the party that offers the most pleasing package of policy positions (Arnold, 1992). Both retro- and prospective evaluations essentially serve the same goal: to give parties a mandate for the future and thereby (try to) ensure that congruent policies are put in place (Fiorina, 1981). In reality, however, citizens often do not know what parties stand for, what they promise for the future or what they did in the past (e.g. Lau et al., 2014; Achen & Bartels, 2017), and scholars have pinpointed various heuristics voters rely on to cast a vote (see Lefevere, 2011). Three important heuristics are included in this study. First, citizens sometimes consistently and loyally, presumably without much consideration, vote for the same party –so-called *habit votes* (note that Converse & Pierce, 1986 find that partisan loyalties and issue preferences are often badly misaligned). Second, voters may pick a party because they endorse (one or more) *individual candidates* on the party list. Third and finally, voters may be swayed because of the party's *campaign communications*. Of course, I should be careful claiming that votes induced by party communications or individual candidates are, in contrast to the evaluation of party positions and behavior, not motivated by policy preferences. Still, that I ask politicians to rank these motives along with two explicit policy-related voting considerations makes it quite unlikely.

In particular, I study each of these five voting considerations as how they are perceived by politicians by asking; '*People often have very different reasons for why they vote for a particular party. Below is a list of such possible reasons. Please imagine how the average Flemish citizen makes his/her vote choice and* rank *the reasons below from one (the main reason) to five (the least important reason) by dragging each of the items into your*

preferred order.' The answer choices were: '*For one or more individual candidates of the party', 'Because of the party program, the promises the party makes for the future', 'Because of the performances of the party in the past legislature', 'Out of habit: they always vote for the same party',' Because of the party's communication during the campaign'.*

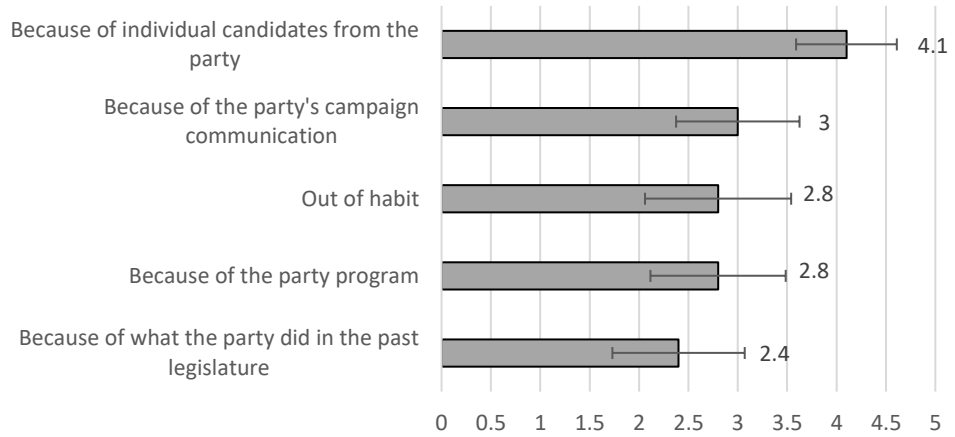
To test the second hypothesis, namely that *electoral success* makes politicians idealists, I include five different variables. First, politicians' *seniority* (the number of years they are active in parliament) gives some indication of politicians' (and their party's) electoral success over the years. Second, compared to other members of parliament, those in *high-level positions* could be considered more successful. Therefore, I include a measure that gauges whether politicians have held or currently hold the position of minister, party leader, speaker or caucus leader. Third, politicians that combine their national mandate with being a local *mayor* tend to be popular (see Wauters et al., 2018 who show that mayors generally attract more preferences votes) and are important for the success of their party. Fourth, a very straightforward measure of success is whether a politician is in *government* or in the opposition. Fifth and finally, I include a measure of politicians' personal electoral *confidence*, which I measured in the same survey by asking politicians '*How likely is it that you will be re-elected'* (*0; very unlikely; 5; very likely).*

Results

What considerations govern citizens' party choice, according to politicians? **Figure I** presents each of the five voting motives with the average importance ascribed to it by politicians –the variable was recoded so that the most important reason gets the highest score (5), the least important reason receives the lowest score (1). Overall, politicians seem convinced that citizens' party choice is determined by individual personalities. No less than 43 percent of the respondents indicate that the number one reason citizens vote for a party is because they like one or more candidates of that party. Ranked second is the party's communications during the campaign. Interestingly, that individual personalities and campaigns matter a great deal for a party's electoral success, at least in the minds of politicians, confirms early findings from Esaiasson and Holmberg (1995, p.199) who posit

that politicians '*believe citizens are rather of easy prey to media campaigns and charming party leaders'*. Politicians are somewhat less convinced that citizens vote for a party out of habit. Nor do many believe that the policy promises a party makes for the future impact citizens' party choice. Also, and importantly, surprisingly few politicians expect voters to retrospectively punish or reward a party on Election Day for its decision-making. This finding is important; political actors who feel little or no control by voters, or put differently; who do not expect to be held accountable by voters, have fewer electoral incentives to learn and respond to citizens' wishes (Mayhew, 1974)[1]. Overall, looking at both retrospective and prospective voting motives together, a mere 20 percent of the Belgian politicians we surveyed says citizens primarily vote for a party because of *policy reasons*. The other 80 percent are more skeptical about the ability of citizens to vote in office parties that represent their policy preferences. Overall, the first hypothesis can be accepted; politicians are democratic realists rather than idealists.

Figure I – Politicians' perceptions of citizens' voting considerations (rank 1-5) (N=292)

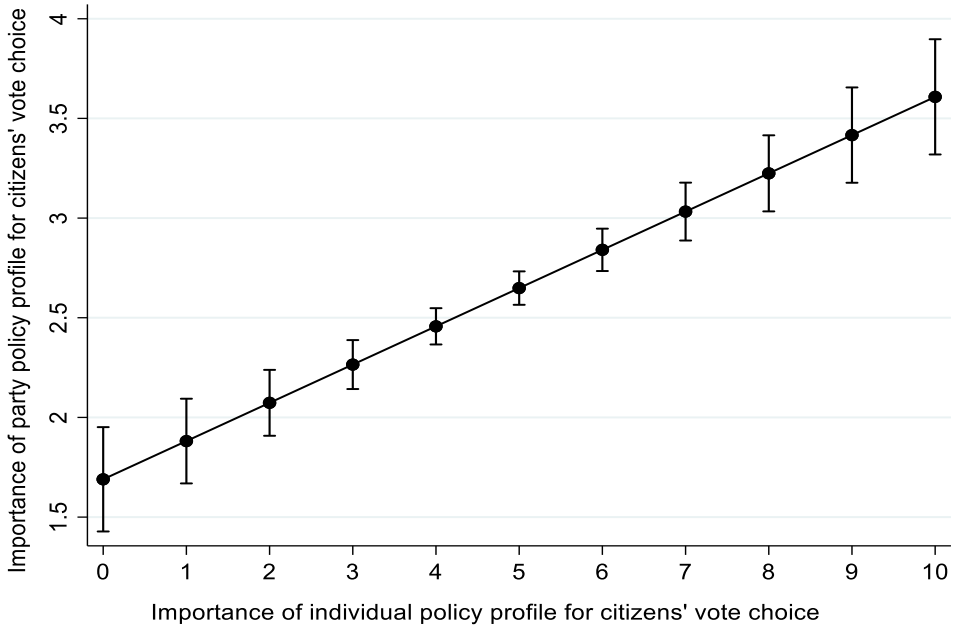


Zooming in on policy-oriented voting considerations separately, then, it shows that politicians believe that voters are more likely to take the parties' future promises into account than evaluating their past behavior. Prospective voting is given more weight in politicians' conception than retrospective voting. This implies that parties should have fewer incentives to pursue policies that would generate pleasing effects –e.g. contribute to voters' welfare– but will rather focus on promising policies that citizens want (see Achen & Bartels, 2017).

Next, I examine whether some politicians believe more than others that citizens vote for a party because of its (past and future) policy profile. In particular, a politician's average rating of the retrospective and prospective policy-induced voting consideration is used. The higher this score, the more politicians believe citizens vote for a party because of its policy positions. The average importance politicians attribute to policy-induced voting motives ranges from 1.5 to 4.5, so there is quite some variation to explore (Mean = 2.6; S.D. = .92).

First, as a kind of validation of the measure of politician perceptions of the likelihood of citizens voting for a party because of its policy profile, I look at the relationship between politicians' perceptions of citizens' party choice and the extent to which they feel that voters take into account their *individual* policy profile (their past decisions and positions) at the ballot box –which was questioned elsewhere in the same survey. In particular, politicians were asked; *Think about all people who consider voting for your party. To what extent are they generally aware of the parliamentary work you personally do, your personal position on different issues, of the outcomes of your political work and to what extent does this knowledge influence potential voters' decisions at the ballot?*, all on a ten-point scale, and we take the average score across the four items to grasp politicians' individual accountability beliefs. As is shown in **Figure II**, there is a strong positive relationship between how politicians conceive of their *own* prospects of electoral accountability and the determinants of *party* success. The more politicians think that voters take into account *their* policy behavior and policy positions in elections, the more they believe citizens make a policy-induced *party* choice, and vice versa.

Figure II – Predicted values of perceived importance of policy-related party choice motives for each value of perceived importance of the politician's individual policy profile (linear regression analysis including party fixed effects)



The second hypothesis states that political success leads politicians to (re)arrange their conception of voter preferences towards the idea that voters engage in, either retrospective or prospective, policy voting –as Kingdon (1968) famously postulated. To explore the relationship between political/electoral success and elite perceptions of voting considerations, I look at politicians' *seniority*, whether they hold/have held a *high-level political position,* whether they are *confident* about their future *re-election*, whether they are elected as *mayor* on the local level, and finally whether they are in *government*. The full regression results are shown in **Table I**.

Table I – Linear regression predicting perceived importance of policy-induced voting considerations

	Coef. (S.E.)
Independent variables	
Seniority (in years)	.01 (.01)
Subjective electoral safety	.14 (.11)
Holding/having held a high-level position	.00 (.15)
Mayor	.28 (.14)*
Government politician	.35 (.19)†
Controls Gender	.01 (.12)
Party dummies (not reported)	
Constant	2.4 (.29)***
N	291
R^2	11%

Note. *** p<0.001, ** p<0.01, * p<0.05, † p<.1

First, it shows that seniority does not affect politicians' conception of citizens' party choice considerations; it is not the case that being in parliament for a while, politicians update their views of voters. Nor do we see that high-level elites more strongly believe that citizens vote for a party because of its policy profile. Note, however, that we surveyed mostly *ex*-toppers who may not feel very successful being a regular MP after having held the position of minister or party leader in the past. Therefore, we cannot fully rule out the possibility that those who occupy leading positions conceive differently of voting motives. In addition, I find that politicians do not update their beliefs about voters in the anticipation of personal electoral success (confirming findings from Kim and Racheter, 1973 but going against Kingdon's 1968 hypothesis). It is not the case that politicians who anticipate being re-elected in the next election are more convinced that citizens make a policy-induced party choice than their colleagues who anticipate defeat.

Interestingly, when government and opposition MPs are compared, I do find some evidence for Kingdon's congratulation-rationalization hypothesis. Winners of the election (they are in government, after all) more strongly believe that a party's policy profile matters for citizens' party choice than opposition MPs (Kingdon, 1968). It is not the case that government MPs attribute a lot of importance to policy-induced voting considerations either (predicted value of 2.75), but they do so significantly ($p < .1$) more than MPs in the opposition (predicted value of 2.4). Interestingly, this difference between government and opposition MPs may also reflect the fact that the behavior of government parties is generally more *visible*, and thus potentially of greater importance, to voters. Finally, results show that politicians who also hold the mandate of local mayor –which twenty-two percent of the politicians we surveyed do– more strongly believe that voters choose a party for its policy agenda than their colleagues who did not experience such a "local success story". On the one hand, and in line with hypothesis 2, it makes sense that mayors, who generally receive a lot of preference votes and are therefore quite popular within the party too, are more positive about citizens' abilities to cast a policy-oriented vote. On the other hand, it is rather surprising, given that local politics is much more personalized than national politics is. In local elections, "knowing" candidates is often as important as the party label (Marien et al., 2015).

Note that I only tested explanations on the *individual* level, while *party* differences would be interesting to analyze in the context of citizens' party choice considerations too. Yet, it is not possible to explore party variation without obtaining unbiased estimates, given that the amount of parties (twelve to be exact) is too low. Looking at party differences descriptively[2], I do not find that the party choice beliefs of politicians from left, right and center parties[3] are statistically different (note that politicians from right-wing parties are slightly more optimistic about citizens' abilities to cast a policy-induced vote, but the difference is small). I do find that politicians from more ideologically extreme parties more strongly believe that voters cast a prospective or retrospective, policy-induced, vote than politicians from centrist parties. I encourage future work to explore these party differences further.

Conclusion

On what grounds do citizens vote for a party, according to politicians? Putting this question to a large sample of Belgian representatives, I show that most politicians are "democratic realists". Politicians ascribe a lot of importance to more superficial voting motives –i.e. the role of individual candidates and campaign communications–, while most of them do not believe citizens vote for a party because of its policy profile. A large majority of politicians is convinced that citizens do not judge a party's past performance on Election Day and that citizens do not vote for the party with whom they share their policy preferences. This finding matters for democratic representation. After all, that politicians assume that voters care about the party's policy profile is a key mechanism driving voter responsiveness (Mansbridge, 2003: Mayhew, 1974). The fact that politicians believe that a party's policy behavior and future policy promises do not determine citizens' party choice, implies that one incentive for these parties to learn about and respond to voters' preferences, to keep their election promises and to announce policies that are politically feasible, is lacking (Przeworski et al., 1999).

One may argue that it does not matter all that much what politicians believe about voters, as long as these voters effectively hold parties to account on Election Day and make an ideologically congruent party choice. Yet, there are two main reasons why it is unlikely that party choice *as such* can ensure policy congruence. For one, voters do not always vote "correctly"; they quite often are uninformed or unmotivated to select the party (or candidate) representing them best (see Lau et al., 2014) and they have a hard time casting an accurate retrospective vote (Achen & Bartels, 2017). Second, even if they would vote correctly, this does not guarantee voter responsiveness in between elections. After all, voters give one party a broad mandate in the election, instead of dictating a specific course of action for every single issue that may pop up during the legislature. Also, voter as well as party preferences may simply change in between elections and, importantly, there are no institutional devices to force parties to adhere to their pre-election promises. Therefore, the perceptions politicians have of their voters, and the resulting behavioral considerations, are an important field of study.

Next, this research note examined the relationship between (electoral) success and politicians' conception of voting considerations, and finds that government members and mayors are somewhat more optimistic about citizens making a policy-induced vote choice.

Politicians' seniority and re-election prospects did not appear to affect their conception of citizens' party choice considerations. Although the empirical evidence is mixed, I can carefully say that there appears to be a tendency for "successful" MPs to bring their conception of citizens' voting behavior somewhat more in line with normative theories about democratic accountability and delegation –or put differently: to reason that voters rewarded their party for its policy profile (Kingdon, 1968). I encourage future work to further explore this variation in politicians' perceptions of voting considerations.

The scope of this research note is limited. By asking one simple question to politicians, my aim was to get a better grasp of politicians' beliefs about voters, which constitutes an important link in the mechanism of (anticipatory) representation (Mansbridge, 2003). Future work would benefit from scope expansion in three particular ways. For one, a more fine-grained study of politician perceptions would be helpful. Letting politicians reflect freely, in an open interview, on the motivations behind citizens' party choice (see Lefevere, 2011 for a similar approach with citizens), would provide rich insights into, for instance, the reasons why politicians consider some voting considerations important or unimportant (e.g. "Why do politicians say candidates matter? Is it trust, personality or their handling of policies that convinces voters?). Second, another interesting research avenue would be to explore whether politicians conceive of their *own* voters differently than of the broader public (see van Schendelen, 1981). Finally, future work could tap into the relationship between voting behavior beliefs and elite behavior (for instance, campaign efforts, voter responsiveness,…).

Notes

1. A Friedman test shows that there is a statistically significant difference between the mean ranks of the five voting motives (Friedman = 185.411; P-value = .000). Wilcoxon signed-rank tests for each of the pairwise combinations confirm statistical difference for all combinations except for the difference between the perceived importance of habit votes and the party program, and between habit votes and the importance of campaign communications.

2. Findings from a one-way ANOVA with Tukey post-hoc test.

3. Parties are classified based on the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (see https://www.chesdata.eu/)

Appendix

Appendix I – Composition of the politician sample

	Population	Sample	Response
Flemish regional parliament	124	95	79.3%
Female	52 (42%)	35 (37%)	
Age in years (SD)	48 (9.6)	47 (8.7)	
Political experience (SD)	10 (7.3)	10 (6.3)	
National parliament (Dutch-speaking)	87	69	76.6%
Female	39 (45%)	28 (41%)	
Age in years (SD)	49 (8.5)	48 (8.8)	
Political experience (SD)	11 (7.8)	10 (7.6)	
Walloon regional parliament	77	61	79.2%
Female	28 (36%)	21 (34%)	
Age in years (SD)	50 (9.6)	50 (9.3)	
Political experience (SD)	8 (5.9)	8 (5.3)	
National parliament (French-speaking)	63	43	68.3%
Female	16 (25%)	11 (26%)	
Age in years (SD)	53 (9.7)	54 (10.2)	
Political experience (SD)	13 (8.3)	12 (7.0)	
Parliament of the Brussel Capital Region (French-speaking only)	72	56	78%
Female	28 (39%)	22 (39%)	
Age in years (SD)	52 (11.4)	50 (11.2)	
Political experience (SD)	14 (10.0)	13 (10.0)	
Total	423	324	76.6%

CHAPTER 4

Listening to the people

Politicians' investment in monitoring public opinion and their beliefs about accountability

Politicians' understanding of public opinion constitutes a crucial factor in the representational relationship between them and the public. Therefore, politicians staying abreast of what citizens want and why they want it matters for democratic representation. In this study, we examine how intensely politicians monitor public opinion and why there is variation between politicians. Relying on survey evidence collected among Belgian MPs and U.S. local legislators, we show that politicians who more strongly feel the weight of voter scrutiny –who believe voters are aware of what they do and will hold them accountable for it at the ballot box– interact more frequently with ordinary citizens, discuss public opinion more often with their fellow colleagues, and spend more time collecting public opinion information. The effect is potent, even if we control for politicians' electoral vulnerability, their ambition and their role conception.

Keywords: representation, public opinion, anticipation of electoral accountability

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Introduction

Politicians' understanding of public opinion constitutes a crucial factor in the representational relationship between them and the public (Dahl, 1971; Pitkin, 1969). Representatives being responsive towards citizens' desires in between elections is one important way via which citizen preferences may find their way into actual policymaking (Miller & Stokes, 1963; and see Burstein, 2010; Wlezien & Soroka, 2016 for an overview of scholarly work on policy responsiveness). But for politicians to be able to act in line with the popular will, they first and foremost need to know what these preferences are. They need to know which policies citizens desire and what issues they want to see tackled (Soroka & Wlezien, 2010; Miller & Stokes, 1963; Stimson et al., 1995). No matter how motivated politicians are to be responsive and act in line with what the public wants, they cannot adequately represent public opinion if they are unaware of what this opinion is in the first place (Arnold, 1992; Broockman & Skovron, 2018). Politicians need to understand citizens' desires to pursue responsive policies, but just as well to provide credible explanations for their actions (see Disch, 2011; Mansbridge, 2003; Urbinati, 2006). This is all the more important knowing that citizens prefer representatives who follow and acknowledge their preferences. Indeed, research has shown that citizens want politicians to 'listen' to them, to show that they care about their preferences (see among others; Carman, 2006; Bowler, 2017; Esaiasson & Wlezien, 2010; Esaiasson et al., 2017). Overall, it is widely accepted that politicians staying abreast of what citizens want and why they want it, is crucial for democratic representation (Mansbridge, 2003).

The bulk of the representation literature builds, often implicitly, on the assumption that politicians monitor public opinion closely, that they try to stay in touch with the people and invest a lot in finding out what it is that the people want (e.g. Fenno, 1978; Kingdon, 1989; Stimson et al., 1995; Uslaner & Weber, 1979). In short; it is widely assumed that politicians (try to) listen. Yet, actual evidence that politicians engage strongly in staying abreast of the people's preferences is scant. With the exception of Maestas' (2003) work on politicians' investment in collecting public opinion information and the outdated and circumstantial evidence collected by Fenno (1978) and Kingdon (1989), there are simply no empirical studies on the importance of public opinion assessment for politicians. Even though (field) experiments suggest that politicians tend to react to public opinion once they are informed about it (see Sevenans, 2021; Butler & Nickerson, 2011; Richardson & John,

2012; Öhberg & Naurin, 2015), it remains unclear how closely politicians monitor public opinion in reality.

And, second, work exploring why some politicians invest more in assessing public opinion than others is even more scarce (but see: Wood & Young, 1997; Maestas, 2003). So far, studies that examine politicians' motives for public opinion interactions focused predominantly on constituency service, effort or focus (e.g. on case work, communications with constituents, time spend working in the district, the allocation of staff time towards constituency matters, and so on) rather than on public opinion monitoring specifically (see Fenno, 1978; André et al., 2015; Heitshusen et al., 2005). Also, this work predominantly relies on indirect and aggregate measures of politicians' motivations, for instance by comparing the behavior of politicians in different electoral systems (e.g. André et al., 2015; Heitshusen et al., 2005). While this observational work suggests that politicians in different electoral systems deal with voter preferences differently, it does not allow to draw definitive conclusions on why it is that individual politicians invest in getting acquainted with public opinion, and why some do more than others (see Jones, 1973 for an elaborate discussion on the shortcomings of observational research in the context of elite responsiveness). Therefore, this study examines whether and why politicians listen to voters by asking them directly about their public opinion assessment and about their motivations. Scrutinizing politicians' public opinion assessment and its drivers helps to better understand how the representational link is established.

The current study leverages variation in monitoring efforts, looking at politicians' role conceptions (intrinsic motivation) and their electoral vulnerability, ambition and perception of voter control (extrinsic motivation). We do so relying on survey evidence collected among Belgian MPs (Study 1) and U.S. local legislators (Study 2). Conducting our research in two very different study contexts allows for a thorough robustness test of our findings. By, for the first time, directly measuring politicians' perceptions of the degree of voter control –that is: the extent to which they believe that voters are aware of what they do and will hold them accountable for it in elections—, we show that these 'accountability beliefs' are the main predictor of the intensity with which politicians monitor public opinion. Politicians who feel the weight of voter scrutiny interact more frequently with citizens, discuss public opinion more often with fellow colleagues, and spend more time collecting public opinion information. The effect is potent and robust, even if we control for

politicians' electoral vulnerability, ambition and role conception. In sum, the anticipation of electoral accountability incentivizes legislators to pay attention to voters' preferences, regardless of the political system they are running in and regardless of the level of office they occupy.

Why politicians monitor public opinion

That politicians closely monitor public opinion is the underlying assumption in many (theoretical) accounts of representation. In their seminal study on democratic representation, Miller and Stokes (1963) posit that one vital way in which congruent decision-making comes about, is via politicians responding to their perceptions of citizens' preferences in between elections (and see for instance Converse and Pierce, 1986 or more recently Broockman and Skovron, 2018 or Belchior, 2014 who followed in their footsteps). Empirical studies that examine the extent to which policies match public opinion, and especially those that tackle politicians' responsiveness towards public opinion over time, assume that politicians care about public opinion, try to get a grip on it and then act upon their resulting perceptions of public opinion (see for instance Manza & Cook, 2002; Druckman & Jacobs, 2010; Hobolt & Klemmemsen, 2005; Soroka & Wlezien, 2010; Stimson et al., 1995). In sum, scholarly work on policy responsiveness hinges on the assumption that politicians monitor public opinion and then act on these perceptions.

Moreover, research on communicative responsiveness similarly assumes that politicians closely monitor voter preferences. Knowing what citizens want, it is commonly argued, helps politicians to get these citizens to approve of their actions –which is especially important when pursuing initiatives that voters initially did not support (Esaiasson et al., 2017; Urbinati, 2006). Representation also involves carefully communicating about political actions, and to craft their arguments, politicians need to have a good understanding of the preferences and concerns of citizens (Fenno, 1978; Mansbridge, 2003; Esaiasson & Wlezien, 2010).

Some, predominantly older, studies empirically tackled politicians' daily concern with public opinion. Fenno's (1978) impressive observational work, for instance, shows that politicians are almost all the time preoccupied with assessing public preferences (see also Kingdon, 1989; 1984). Recently, more research that is systematic assessed the effort politicians put in reading public opinion. Wood and Young (1997), for instance, asked Irish and British politicians about the time they spend on their constituency (versus the national level), showing that they devote around half their time to (working for) their constituency. Similarly, Heitshusen, Young and Wood (2005) also ask MPs in six different political systems to indicate their level of constituency focus ('high', 'medium' or 'low'). Still other work asks politicians about the time they spend working in the district (André et al., 2015). Finally, Maestas (2003) asked U.S. state legislators about the time they are busy collecting information about their constituents' preferences, and finds that most politicians spend, on a weekly basis, around six to fifteen percent of their time informing themselves about the wishes of their constituents.

Theorizing about politicians' monitoring of public opinion, scholars came up with two broad reasons as to why politicians may be sensitized towards citizen opinion. For one, representatives may want to learn and respond to voter preferences out of an *intrinsic* moral compulsion, out of a sense of duty. If politicians conceive of themselves as delegates elected in office to dutifully translate public opinion into policy, they presumably care to know what voters want (Jones, 1973). Second, politicians may track public opinion for strategic, *extrinsic* reasons. Their future being in large part contingent on voter approval, strategic politicians should care a great deal about understanding (and then responding to) citizen preferences (Arnold, 1992; Mayhew, 1974; Miller & Stokes, 1963).

Monitoring public opinion out of duty—Representatives may intrinsically care about understanding citizens' desires (Searing, 1994). A classic distinction made in the literature to grasp politicians' intrinsic role conception is the trustee-delegate terminology (Eulau et al., 1959; Kuklinski & Elling, 1977). Delegate politicians hold on to the normative belief that they should faithfully learn and respond to public opinion. Trustee politicians, on the other hand, do not feel strictly bound by instructions of the public, but instead rely on their own preferences while acting in citizens' best interests (Eulau et al., 1959). Of course, trustee

politicians may benefit from understanding public opinion too: not necessarily to pander towards citizens' desires in their behavior, but rather to create approval for their decisions afterwards by effective communication (e.g. Fenno, 1978; Pitkin, 1967; Mansbridge, 2003; Esaiasson et al., 2017; Bowler, 2017). Although there is no empirical evidence supporting this claim, it stands to reason that politicians adhering to a delegate role, because they feel it is their duty to do as citizens want, should be more incentivized to monitor public opinion compared to those who consider themselves to be trustees. Therefore, our first hypothesis is that:

> *H1: The more politicians adhere to a delegate role of representation, the more effort they put in monitoring public opinion.*

Monitoring public opinion for electoral motives — Elections sensitize politicians towards citizens' preferences, it is commonly argued (Arnold, 1992; Mayhew, 1974). Politicians depend on voter approval to stay in office, approval that can be won by furthering their desires or strategically tailoring their explanations if they do not (Jacobs & Shapiro, 2000; Stimson et al., 1995). Politicians being strategic actors, they need to know what kind of actions would antagonize voters and what would result in voter support (Arnold, 1992). Therefore, electoral accountability is widely considered the engine of democracy: their electoral fortunes vitally hinging on voter approval, politicians have strategic reasons to get a good grip on public opinion.

One way to study this electoral connection, is by comparing the monitoring efforts of politicians who aspire re-election with those who do not. Politicians who harbor the ambition to stay in office need voter approval to do so, while those who plan to leave office do not need votes, obviously. Research on term limits shows that U.S. politicians active in term-limit states—states with a limit on the number of terms politicians can serve—spend less time getting in touch with their constituents (Carey et al., 1998). So, having to end one's career seems to diminish the strategic incentives to please and therefore to monitor public opinion. However, directly examining the assumption that electoral ambition fosters public opinion monitoring, Maestas (2003) cannot confirm that politicians running for re-election spend more time gathering public opinion information compared to their colleagues who do not seek office in the future. Legislators aspiring the same office over time do not differ

in their information seeking behavior from politicians who lack long-term career ambitions. However, those who are progressively ambitious—those who want to move up in office—do invest substantially more time in monitoring public opinion. Maestas (2003) explains that politicians who aspire the same mandate in the future generally face little competition in the elections and therefore lack strong incentives to monitor public opinion closely. Although the empirical evidence is scant and inconclusive, we believe that there are reasons to expect that politicians who aspire re-election, regardless of whether they want to move up in office or not, should be sensitized towards citizens' desires. We hypothesize that:

> *H2: Politicians who are up for re-election put more effort in monitoring public opinion than their colleagues who do not aspire re-election.*

Assuming that politicians generally strive for re-election, the ease with which they can achieve that goal varies. Not all politicians face the same electoral competition on Election Day, as Maestas (2003) pointed out (see also Canes-Wrone et al., 2002). That the re-election goal is harder to accomplish for some politicians—i.e. that some are more electorally vulnerable—may cause them to behave differently (Bartels, 1991; Kingdon, 1968). The natural reaction to electoral uncertainty for re-election minded politicians would be to seek information about constituents' preferences (Miler, 2007). Vulnerable politicians –those who have been elected by a narrow margin and see this past electoral competition as indicative for their future election– risk most by being inattentive to their constituency. They cannot afford to upset (some) constituents. Therefore, politicians who face competitive elections should have more incentives to get a good grasp of public opinion. Legislators elected by comfortable margins, by contrast, do not have to maximize their re-election efforts, and can spend their resources pursuing other objectives than being attentive to voters (Heitshusen et al., 2005). Research scrutinizing politicians' knowledge of public opinion indeed suggests that politicians running in competitive elections have more accurate public opinion perceptions (e.g. Broockman and Skovron, 2018), which may hint at greater monitoring efforts. In a similar vein, work on policy responsiveness shows that politicians in non-competitive districts are somewhat less likely to respond to (changes in) public opinion, but the evidence is mixed (see Bernardi, 2018 for a comprehensive literature review). Further, examining politicians' constituency focus (Heitshusen et al., 2005) and the

time they spend working in their district (André et al., 2015) in different electoral systems, scholars find some evidence for the idea that electoral competition encourages public opinion monitoring. Politicians in preferential—presumably more competitive—electoral systems work harder in/on their district than politicians in—presumably less competitive—closed list systems. Maestas (2003) as well shows that legislators in marginal districts spend more time monitoring public opinion than those in non-marginal districts, although the magnitude of effect is small. In short, our second operationalization of electoral incentives that may drive public opinion monitoring is electoral vulnerability. We expect that:

> *H3: The more uncertain politicians are about their re-election, the more effort they put in monitoring public opinion.*

Apart from politicians' ambition and electoral vulnerability, the two possible drivers of public opinion monitoring discussed above, the crucial matter is whether politicians believe that the public is actually attentive to what they do. Ambitious politicians or politicians in unsafe seats may think that the public does not care about their actions, and does not scrutinize what they do. In that case, closely monitoring public opinion in order to please it comes to no avail. Hence, what may actually spur politicians' assessment of public opinion is the expectation that they will be held accountable for their actions by attentive voters (Mayhew, 1974). Anticipating electoral accountability is what is actually at stake when thinking about the electoral connection (Arnold, 1992). Do politicians believe that what they say and do matters for their electoral fate? Even politicians who are objectively in a 'safe seat' may care a great deal about public opinion because they feel the chance of being held to account is so high that even one misstep could result in a loss of votes (Miller & Stokes, 1963; Fiorina, 1977). Irrespective of their ambition and the safety of their seat, politicians who believe that voters keep a close eye on them must have a stronger incentive to monitor public opinion (Arnold, 1992; Kingdon, 1989).

Although politicians' perceptions of voter control have hardly been studied empirically before, we can learn something about the relationship between perceptions of (electoral) accountability and opinion monitoring from experiments with citizens. Work in psychology shows that the anticipation of being held accountable—operationalized as citizens having to justify their decision—leads to more careful processing of the opinions of

the audience to whom one has to justify oneself (Kunda, 1990; Lerner & Tetlock, 1999). The expectation of having to justify one's actions to others, knowing that the inability to do so might have negative consequences, motivates people to be accurate (Lerner & Tetlock, 1999). Politicians, unlike citizens, are by definition accountable to voters, but that does not imply that all politicians hold the exact same beliefs about the extent to which citizens will hold them to account (see authors, 2021). Wood and Young (1997), in an attempt to explain variation in the number of days British and Irish politicians spend in their district, find that the expectation of punishment, at least for junior Irish MPs, is positively related to the days they spend working in/on the constituency. Combining these insights, we have reasons to expect that:

> *H4: The more politicians believe they will be held accountable, the more effort they put in getting informed about the public's preferences.*

Study 1: Public opinion monitoring by Flemish Members of Parliament

Methods

We examine politicians' efforts to monitor public opinion in Belgium, and more specifically among Flemish national and regional members of parliament[1]. Flanders is the largest region of Belgium[2], and Belgium is a strong party system where the electoral fortunes of individual politicians depend in large part on how their party performs. Still, the country has a flexible ballot list system, allowing voters to cast preference votes for individual candidates. Though the impact of such preference votes on seat allocation is limited (see De Winter, 2008), the system of preferential voting provides Belgian politicians with some incentives to cultivate a personal vote—more, at least, than representatives in systems with closed ballot lists. A good personal election result increases the chance that politicians will be assigned by their party to a high-level position (e.g. become a government minister), and, in particular, that they obtain a good position on the ballot list for the next elections (André et al., 2015).

Yet, compared to the U.S., where politicians are elected in single-seat districts with direct, individual accountability, the Belgian proportional electoral system provides politicians with less incentives to spend time tracking public opinion (André et al., 2014, 2015). In that sense, Belgium constitutes a conservative test for our hypotheses with regard to how electoral incentives drive politicians' public opinion monitoring behavior (H2, H3 and H4). After all, it is quite unlikely that Belgian politicians will be personally rewarded for promoting voters' interests and/or that they are sanctioned for shirking their desires. Hence, the electoral utility of closely monitoring public opinion is relatively low (André et al., 2015; Pilet et al., 2012). Were we to find that Belgian politicians invest in reading public opinion out of strategic reasons, such electoral motivations will likely have an even stronger impact in political systems that provide stronger incentives to cultivate a personal reputation.

To ascertain the intensity with which Belgian politicians monitor public opinion, we rely on survey evidence collected between March and June 2018[3], in the framework of the POLPOP project[4]. After emailing and repeatedly calling representatives to ask them to participate in our research, we were able to convince 164 Belgian, Dutch-speaking MPs to

participate, which makes for a response rate of 78 percent (see **Appendix I** for more information on the sample). We surveyed politicians in a face-to-face setting, and it on average took them thirty minutes to fill in the survey.

Two survey measures grasp politicians' investment in getting to know public opinion (see **Appendix II** for the exact question wording and descriptive statistics). We ask respondents about their *general* public opinion monitoring because Belgian politicians primarily care about citizens in general and their party voters, rather than representing their geographic constituency (André et al., 2017). First, we asked politicians to indicate the weekly amount of time (in hours) they spend on *interactions with ordinary citizens*. That politicians spend their scarce time talking to citizens shows how much they care about public opinion (e.g. Fenno, 1978; Wood & Young, 1997; Kingdon 1989). It is not easy to estimate the amount of time one weekly spends on a certain activity, of course, but we are convinced that our crude measure provides some indication of politicians' public opinion involvement. We find that the average Belgian politician spends around fourteen hours a week on direct interactions with citizens, but there is a lot of variation. Politicians' answers are all over the place; some say to spend no time at all on it, others claim to spend, on average, more than thirty hours a week talking to citizens. We recoded politicians' answers to ensure that extreme outliers would not distort the results[5].

Second, politicians are asked how regularly they talk *about public opinion with their colleagues*. The conversations politicians have about citizens' desires with their fellow colleagues form another indication of how much they care about the public's preferences. Discussing public opinion with colleagues, compared to direct interactions with voters, may be a less time-consuming manner for politicians to learn about public preferences. In politicians' interactions with their colleagues, assessing public opinion has a central place; most politicians (62 percent to be exact) indicate that they fairly often talk about public opinion with their colleagues, and there is not a single politician that claims to never talk about the public's preferences with colleagues.

To test the hypotheses about motivations driving public opinion monitoring, we include four predictors in our analyses—see **Appendix III** for more information on the variables. First, to grasp politicians' intrinsic motivation (duty) (H1), we rely on the classic question on politicians' *role conception* asking to indicate what they consider the right balance for a politician: following citizens' opinion exactly (0-total delegate), or relying on

their own convictions while pursuing citizens' interests (10-total trustee). Reversing the scale to test the assumption that delegate politicians monitor public opinion more closely, we see that with an average score of 3.7 most politicians in our sample define themselves as trustees (which is in line with comparative findings, see Dudzińska et al., 2014).

To examine whether electoral considerations motivate politicians to monitor public opinion, we ask about their *ambition*: whether they aspire to hold a political mandate in the next legislature (H2). Most politicians do: a large majority of 87 percent says they intend to run for re-election. Second, we ask politicians about their *feeling of electoral safety*; how sure are they about their re-election (H3). A majority of 58 percent think it is (highly) likely that they will be re-elected. Third, to grasp politicians' *perception of voter control*, we rely on a grid-question tapping into how knowledgeable politicians believe citizens are about what they do and say, and the extent to which they anticipate this behavior being important for citizens' vote choice on election day (H4). While the average politician believes that citizens are somewhat informed about their behavior and that some will take it into account at the ballot (a mean of 4.5 out of 10), there is a lot of variation. Some strongly believe that they will be held to account on Election Day for their behavior, while others do not anticipate much voter control (see Soontjens, 2021 for more information on this measure of politicians' accountability beliefs). Note that we control for politicians' gender, their seniority (the number of years they are active in parliament) and the parliament they take seat in (federal or regional) in our models.

Also worth mentioning is that the four predictors –delegate role conception, ambition, electoral vulnerability, and perception of voter control– are not significantly correlated.

Results

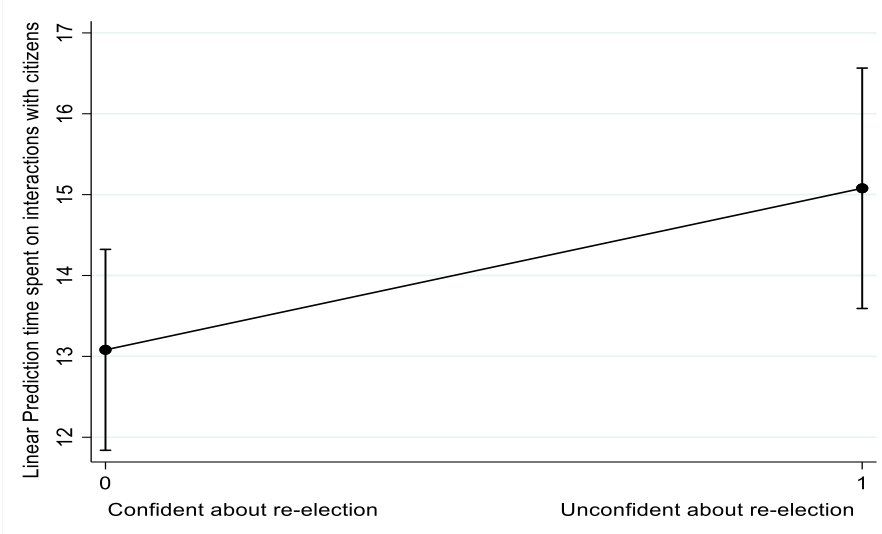
We run two linear regression models, one predicting the time politicians spend on direct interactions with citizens, and a second predicting the frequency with which they discuss public opinion with their fellow colleagues. The full results, also including models in which each independent variable is tested separately, are shown in **Appendix IV** and **Appendix V**.

H1 held that, compared to their trustee colleagues, politicians who identify as delegates – intrinsically believing it is their duty to get to know and act upon the public's desires–, monitor public opinion more intensely. We do not find confirmation for a relationship between public opinion monitoring and delegate role conception in our data. Politicians identifying as delegates, although they claim to care more about being responsive to public opinion, do not talk significantly more with ordinary citizens than their trustee colleagues, and they do not engage more in public opinion discussions with their fellow colleagues.

Examining whether electoral incentives motivate politicians to learn about public opinion, we first look at politicians' ambition –i.e. their willingness to run for re-election. Contrary to H2, we do *not* find that politicians who are hoping to stay in office in the next legislature spend more time monitoring public opinion compared to their colleagues who plan to leave politics. The effect of ambition is not significant for either of the two outcome variables. The finding is striking and contradicts earlier findings about term limits and their effect on responsiveness. Belgian politicians running for re-election devote just as much time to getting to know voter preferences than their colleagues who do not plan to remain in office.

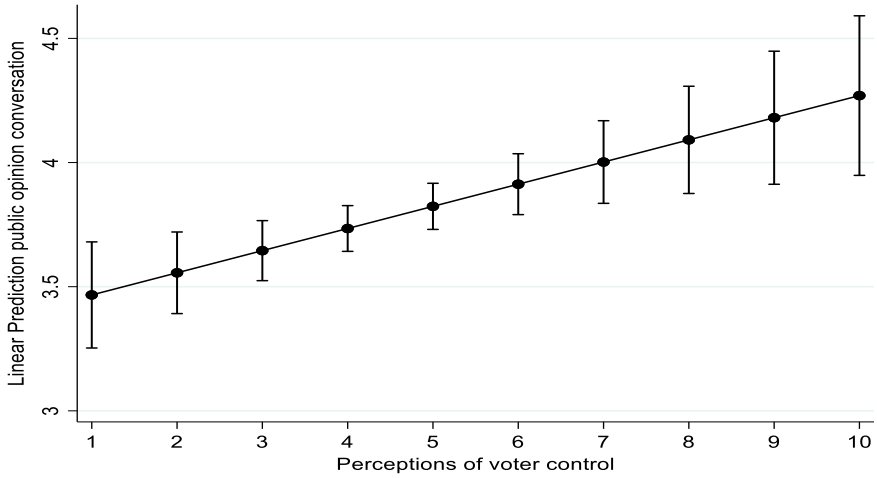
Politicians' feeling of electoral vulnerability does have the anticipated positive effect on public opinion monitoring, at least for politicians' engagement with ordinary citizens. Politicians who feel uncertain about their re-election, are more likely to interact with ordinary citizens (b = 2.1; S.E. = 1.2; p = .079), confirming the assumption that politicians are sensitized towards citizens' preferences out of electoral insecurity (H3)[5]. Politicians who fear that their re-election may be tricky feel the need to please voters more than their colleagues who are confident about their re-election. **Figure I** visualizes the size of the effect of electoral vulnerability on politicians' interactions with citizens. The predicted probabilities show that, keeping all other variables at their mean, MPs who are insecure about getting re-elected spend about two hours per week more on constituent interactions compared to their electorally safe colleagues. Therefore, overall, the effect of electoral insecurity on public opinion monitoring is rather small.

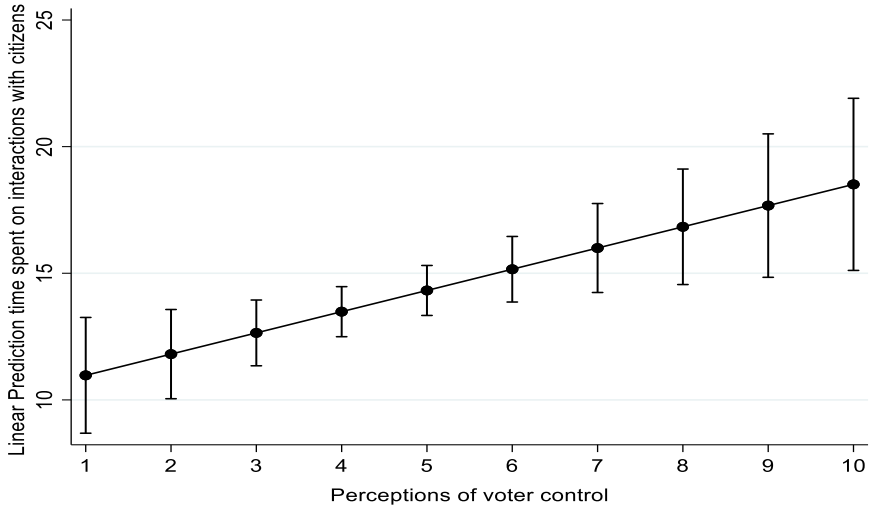
Figure I – Predicted probabilities of the effect of electoral vulnerability on interactions with citizens (90% CIs, from Appendix IV)



Finally, the strongest and most consistent predictor of their monitoring behavior is politicians' beliefs about electoral accountability (H4). The more politicians feel they are monitored by citizens—the more they believe citizens know what they do and say and take it into account at the ballot—the more time they spend interacting with voters (b=.78; S.E. =.36; p =.032). Similarly, the more elites expect that citizens will hold them accountable on election day, the more frequently they discuss public opinion with their colleagues (b=.09; S.E. =.03; p =.010). Our fourth hypothesis, prescribing that the prospect of electoral accountability sensitizes politicians towards the preferences of voters, clearly finds confirmation in the data. Figure II visualizes the effect of perceptions of voter control on both outcome variables (keeping all other variables at their mean). Politicians who do not believe they will be held to account on election day (1) spend around eleven hours a week on direct interactions with citizens, while politicians who strongly believe voters are keeping an eye on them (10) spend around 18 hours talking to citizens (first graph). A similar pattern emerges for the frequency with which politicians discuss public opinion with their colleagues; those who do not feel the weight of voter control do it sometimes (3.5 on 1-5 scale), while those who anticipate such control do it (very) often (4.3 on 1-5 scale) (see second graph).

Figure II – Predicted probabilities perceptions of effect of perceptions of voter control on public opinion monitoring (90% CIs, from Appendix IV & Appendix V)





Study 2: Public opinion monitoring by local U.S. legislators

Methods

The second study examines politicians' voter monitoring efforts in a context that is very different from the previous one in two respects. First, we focus on the U.S., a strongly individualized political system (in contrast to the Belgian proportional system). Second, we study local government officials (in contrast to national politicians). Moreover, the measures we employ in the U.S. study and the interview mode is different from the Belgian study as well. In the U.S., plurality voting is the rule, also for local and state elections. Under this plurality system, each state, county, city, or ward is divided into a number of geographically defined voting districts, each represented by one single official (single-member districts), or exceptionally by multiple candidates for the same local legislature (multi-member districts). Voters cast a single vote for their district's representative, with the highest total vote getter winning the election. Consequently, the accountability linkage between these representatives and their constituents is strong; they are much more individually visible and the likelihood that they will be rewarded for furthering constituent desires is higher, and potential blame is equally indivisible. This strong link should incentivize strategic legislators to build a personal reputation, to care and to get informed about their constituents' opinions (André et al., 2015).

Because the context of Study 2 is very different, we consider the case selection and comparison with Study 1 a robustness check of the patterns we find on why politicians monitor public opinion. Were we to find the same patterns in the U.S. than in Belgium, we can be confident that it was not the peculiarity of the political system that drove results.

In an online survey fielded in October-November 2020 by CivicPulse[7], we asked 326 local U.S. legislators—officials from townships and municipalities as well as county officials—to complete a longer survey in which questions on legislators' public opinion monitoring were included, as well as some variables grasping their extrinsic motivations. CivicPulse recruits participants via email, sent to a random sample of politicians drawn from a sampling frame including essentially all local elected officials serving a township, municipality, or county government. After the initial email invitation, participants with no

or incomplete responses are getting up to two reminder emails. The average locality represented in our sample is somewhat less urban, less educated, and more conservative than the population of the American citizens (see **Appendix VI**). The 326 respondents are divided across 47 states; 62 percent serves in municipalities, 20 percent in townships, and 17 percent in counties.

To tap into their public opinion investment, we ask politicians to provide an indication of the amount of *time they weekly spend on collecting information about their constituents' opinions*, on average of course —see **Appendix VII** for question wording and descriptives (and see Maestas, 2003 for a similar operationalization). With an average of 23 percent of their workweek spent on understanding the desires of their constituents, it seems that U.S. legislators are overall quite vested in getting to know the desires of their constituents. Importantly, there is a lot of variation; some legislators claim to spend no time at all on monitoring constituent opinion, others devote almost all their time to it. We recoded outliers to a maximum outlier value of 60 percent.

The independent variables are measured somewhat differently in this study—see **Appendix VIII** for an overview. We do not have a measure of politicians' intrinsic desire to get acquainted with public opinion (delegate-trustee role), so we cannot test H1. We do have variables grasping politicians' electoral incentives. For one, we measure *ambition* by asking politicians whether they plan to stand for re-election in the future; a substantial majority (71 percent) of legislators aspires holding a public mandate in the future. Second, we measure politicians' *electoral vulnerability* by asking whether their previous election was "competitive"—a common approach to studying seat safety in the U.S that hinges on the idea that rational politicians look to the closeness of the past election to infer how much challenge they will face in the next (see Maestas, 2003). About 65 percent of the respondents says their previous election was competitive. Finally, we ask more or less the same question grasping *politicians' perceptions of voter control* as we put to Belgian politicians. In four different questions (turned into a valid scale afterwards), we grasp whether politicians believe they are visible for their constituents, whether what they do and say is known to their constituents and finally whether this knowledge impacts citizens' vote choice. Again, we find that ambition, electoral safety, and perceptions of voter control are not significantly correlated. In addition, we control for gender, seniority and level of office in our models.

Results

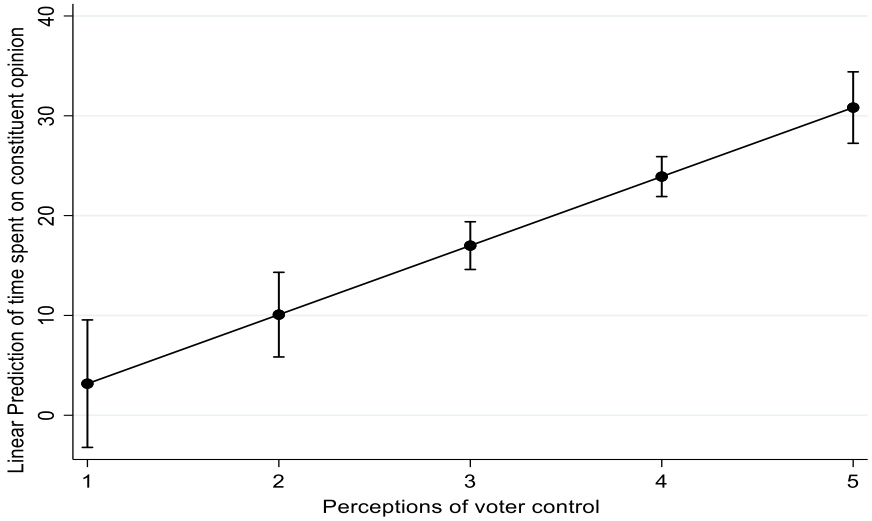
The analysis predicting U.S. legislators' efforts in monitoring constituent opinion are shown in full in **Appendix IX**. First, and rejecting H2 again, politicians who aspire running in the next elections do not allocate significantly more time to monitoring constituent opinions compared to their colleagues who have no interest in holding future office. It is striking that politicians who do not have the ambition to run for office still collect information about their constituents' opinions, while they lack strategic incentives to spend time on such activities. Still, that 'static' ambitions do not motivate politicians to learn about public preferences does confirm findings of Maestas (2003). She finds that it are only progressively ambitious politicians who spent more time on collecting information about constituent opinion. Unfortunately, we cannot test this with our data.

In contrast to the findings of Study 1, we do *not* find that uncertainty about future elections motivates local U.S. politicians to collect public opinion information (H3). Politicians who previously faced competitive elections do not monitor constituent opinion more closely than their colleagues who were elected more easily. Even though this finding seems to contradict that uncertainty about the elections motivates elites to get in touch with constituents, one should keep in mind that past competition is only a crude measure of future electoral (in)security, that might not fully grasp politicians' confidence in getting re-elected (Sheffer and Loewen, 2019).

Finally, we do find strong confirmation for H4, just as we did in Study 1 among a very different type of politicians in Belgium. Politicians who feel the weight of voter control —who believe that constituents may hold them to account for what they do and say— spend significantly more time learning about constituent opinions compared to their colleagues who do not think that their electoral fortune hinges on constituents evaluating them (b=7.8; S.E.=1.6; p=.009). The size of this effect is shown in **Figure III**. Keeping the other variables in the model at their mean, the predicted share of working time spent on learning about constituent opinion is three percent for politicians who do not believe that constituents will hold them accountable for their actions in elections (1 on 1-5 scale). Those who, on the other hand, believe that they are monitored closely by their voters, that they may be held to account for a misstep they make and/or that their responsive behavior will be rewarded on election day (5 on 1-5 scale), spend on average around 30 percent of their

weekly working time on gathering public opinion information. Clearly, the effect of perceived voter control on politicians' information gathering behavior is potent.

Figure III – Predicted probabilities perceptions of effect of perceptions of voter control on constituent opinion monitoring (90% CIs, from Appendix IX)



Conclusion

The anticipation of being held accountable on Election Day is the most important incentive for politicians to learn about public opinion. More than by the intrinsic duty to know public opinion, more than by their ambition to stay in office or by their electoral vulnerability—all things previous work focused on—politicians are sensitized towards citizens' desires, foremost because they anticipate to be held accountable for their actions in elections. Accountability beliefs, directly measured and not derived from politicians' structural situation or behavior, strongly affect their focus on public opinion. The finding that perceptions of voter control matter a great deal for politicians' public opinion monitoring behavior is corroborated for two very different types of politicians in two very different contexts—in U.S. local politics, and Belgian national politics—and employing partially different measures and survey modes.

The study contributes in three particular ways. For one, it shows that politicians generally spend quite a lot of time and effort listening to voters, which is important for democratic representation (for the preferences of citizens to be *represented* in politics, and for citizens to *feel* represented –see Mansbridge, 2003 or Esaiasson et al., 2017). Second, we find that public opinion monitoring is, at least in part, a matter of *strategy*. Evidence on politicians' role conception is absent in the U.S. study, but we were able to test its effect on public opinion assessment in Belgium, and we do not find an effect of intrinsic motivations here. The likelihood that politicians are properly informed about citizens' desires—a precondition for them to actually *represent*—increases with politicians' accountability beliefs. The more politicians believe citizens (can) keep a close check on them, the more they try to understand these citizens' opinions. Or put differently: the more politics is made *transparent*, the more politicians will be sensitized towards people's desires (even if voters may not pay attention in reality). In a way, this finding contests the often-held assumption that politicians do not care about the preferences of citizens. They do, as long as they believe that what they say and do may be consequential for their personal electoral fate.

Third, our results suggest we must re-think common measures of politicians' electoral motivations. Electoral incentives seem to matter but they should ideally be measured more directly than most previous research has done. In Belgium, it is the *feeling* of electoral vulnerability that sensitizes politicians (a bit) to voter preferences, while the more crude measure of vulnerability based on whether a politician's previous election had

been competitive does not generate the same findings in the U.S. This makes sense in that even politicians elected in safe districts and/or without much competition, may well be unconfident about their re-election for all sorts of reasons. That, in both systems alike, politicians' *perceptions of voter control* matter most for their monitoring behavior reinforces the point. Politicians' objective electoral safety nor their ambitions for future office add much to that. Classic observational studies cannot infer politicians' perceptions of voter control nor their feeling of electoral vulnerability from their actual behavior or from their position. That previous work generally relied on such indirect and crude measures, may explain the inconsistent findings on the relationship between electoral incentives and elite responsiveness (Bernardi, 2018). If one aims to lay bare the mechanisms of representation, one should also employ direct data about politicians' perceptions and beliefs about voters.

Of course, this study comes with some limitations too. In particular, with our cross-sectional survey design, we cannot say for sure that the anticipation of voter control drives public opinion monitoring. The opposite may be the case as well. It could be that some politicians feel more monitored, exactly because they are interacting a lot with ordinary citizens, talk a lot about them and spend of a lot of time grasping their preferences (thereby getting the impression that most citizens really care). Experimentally manipulating politicians' prospects of electoral accountability and then observing their intention to invest in gathering public opinion information may be a way to further our knowledge of how politicians represent. Moreover, it may be that some characteristic of politicians that we do not account for in this study influences both their accountability beliefs and their public opinion investment –for instance, some politicians might have an anxious personality. Future work could explore this further.

In addition, in this study, we only zoomed in on one particular aspect in the chain of representation, namely whether politicians *want* to learn about citizens' opinions. To elaborate on this work, we encourage future research to look at the consequences of intense public opinion monitoring. Does it lead to more accurate estimations of public opinion? And, ultimately, does that translate in legislative behavior that is more in line with what the people want?

Notes

1. We surveyed both the Flemish members of the national Parliament (the Chamber) and of the regional Flemish Parliament. Electoral circumscriptions (six) and rules for both elections are the same and both parliaments have important, albeit different, political competences.

2. Belgium is a federal country with Flanders and Wallonia as the two main regions. Both regions have their own language (Dutch is spoken in Flanders, French in Wallonia), have their own parties, their own public opinion and their own media system (see Deschouwer, 2009). Hence, Flanders could be considered a political system in its own right.

3. Important to note is that politicians were not in campaign mode at the time of the surveys and interviews, national elections only took place one year later in May 2019.

4. The surveys were conducted in the framework of the POLPOP project.

5. We recoded outliers (> 1.5*interquartile range) to the max outlier value of 27 hours a week. Also, we ran the analyses again classifying outliers more strictly, not recoding outliers and classifying politicians' answers into seven categories, and results did not change.

6. Note that we also tested whether objective electoral (un)safety (based on the amount of seats politicians' party won in their district in the previous elections, in combination with their position on the ballot list) affects public opinion monitoring, but it does not.

7. CivicPulse is a non-profit organization that administers surveys to US local government officials on a regular basis. For more information see: https://www.civicpulse.org/.

Appendix

Appendix I – Representativity of the sample Study 1

	Population	Sample	Response rate
Flemish parliament	124	95	79%
Female	52 (42%)	35 (37%)	
Age in years (SD)	48.2 (9.6)	47.4 (8.7)	
Political experience (SD)	10.1 (7.3)	9.5 (6.3)	
National parliament (Dutch-speaking)	87	69	77%
Female	39 (45%)	28 (41%)	
Age in years (SD)	48.6 (8.5)	48.0 (8.8)	
Political experience (SD)	10.6 (7.8)	10.3 (7.6)	
Total	211	164	78%

Appendix II – Descriptives of dependent variables of Study 1

Variable	Question wording	N	Mean (SD)	Min	Max
Time spent in constituency	How many hours do you, in a typical week, spend on interacting with citizens in your constituency?	164	14.5 (7.4)	2	27
Public opinion conversation	When you talk to your colleagues, how often do you discuss what citizens want. 1. Never 2. Rarely 3. Sometimes 4. Fairly often 5. Very often	150	3.8 (.66)	2	5

Appendix III – Descriptives of independent variables of Study

Variable	Question wording	N	Mean (SD)	Min	Max
Delegate role conception	Some people believe that elected officials should exactly follow the preferences of citizens. Others argue that MPs should follow their own convictions while pursuing the interests of citizens. What do you think is the right balance a politician should have? (0: Follow citizens' preferences exactly; 10: Follow their own convictions while pursuing the interests of citizens) (scale reversed to grasp 'delegateness')	155	3.7 (1.7)	1	10
Ambition	Do you intend to run in the next general elections? (0: No; 1: Yes)	156	.87 (.34)	0	1
Electoral vulnerability	How likely do you think it is that you will be re-elected? (0: Very unlikely/Unlikely/It could go either way; 1:Likely/Very likely) (reversed to grasp 'vulnerability')	152	.41 (.49)	0	1

Perceptions of voter control	Think about all people who consider voting for your party. To what extent are they generally aware of 1) the parliamentary work you personally do, 2) your personal position on different issues, 3) of the outcomes of your political work and 4) to what extent does this knowledge influence these potential voters' decisions at the ballot? All four questions are answered on a scale from 0 (not at all) to 10 (totally). We take the average across all items to construct a reliable scale (factor loadings +70).	153	4.9 (1.62)	1	10

Appendix IV – Predicting the time Belgian politicians spent on direct interactions with citizens

	Model 1 Coef. (S.E.)	Model 2 Coef. (S.E.)	Model 3 Coef. (S.E.)	Model 4 Coef. (S.E.)	Model 5 Coef. (S.E.)
Intrinsic motivation					
Delegate role conception	.02 (.34)				.14 (.34)
Extrinsic motivation					
Ambition		-.45 (1.8)			-.56 (1.8)
Electoral vulnerability			1.9 (1.2)		2.1 (1.2)†
Perceptions of voter control				.65 (.35)*	.78 (.36)*
Controls					
Female	-1.3 (1.2)	-.85 (1.2)	-1.4 (1.2)	-1.3 (1.2)	-1.6 (1.2)
Seniority	.04 (.08)	.01 (.09)	.05 (.09)	.03 (.08)	.03 (.09)
Level (federal)	1.9 (1.1)	1.9 (1.2)	2.0 (1.2)†	1.5 (1.1)	1.6 (1.2)
Constant	13.7 (1.7)***	14.6 (2.2)***	13.1 (1.3)***	10.9 (1.9)***	9.4 (3.1)**
N	155	156	152	153	150
R^2	3%	2%	4%	5%	7%

Note. *** p<0.001, ** p<0.01, * p<0.05, † p<.1

Appendix V – Predicting the frequency with which Belgian politicians talk public opinion with colleagues

	Model 1 Coef. (S.E.)	Model 2 Coef. (S.E.)	Model 3 Coef. (S.E.)	Model 4 Coef. (S.E.)	Full model Coef. (S.E.)
Intrinsic motivation					
Delegate role conception	.05 (.03)				.05 (.03)
Extrinsic motivation					
Ambition		.07 (.18)			-.02 (.17)
Electoral vulnerability			-.04 (.11)		.02 (.11)
Perceptions of voter control				.08 (.03)*	.09 (.03)*
Controls Female	.12 (.11)	.14 (.11)	.14 (.11)	.15 (.11)	.14 (.11)
Seniority	.01 (.01)	.01 (.01)	.01 (.01)	.00 (.01)	.01 (.01)
Level (federal)	.04 (.11)	.05 (.11)	.05 (.11)	.01 (.11)	.00 (.11)
Constant	3.5 (.16)***	3.6 (.20)***	3.7 (.12)***	3.3 (.18)***	3.1 (.29)***
N	150	150	150	148	148
R^2	3%	1%	1%	5%	7%

Note. *** p<0.001, ** p<0.01, * p<0.05, † p<.1

Note. Because the DV has five categories, we checked the robustness of the findings using ordered logit models; they are robust

Appendix VI – Representativity of the sample Study 2

	Sub-country officials		Country officials	
	Sample	Population	Sample	Population
Proportion urban	0.98	0.91	0.53	0.43
Proportion college-educated	0.27	0.21	0.24	0.21
Population size	5,735	3,898	45,909	33,739
GOP vote share	0.51	0.57	0.58	0.64

Note. Sub-country officials include officials from townships and municipalities.

Appendix VII – Descriptives of dependent variable of Study 2

Variable	Question wording	N	Mean (SD)	Min	Max
Time spent gathering constituent opinion information	In a typical work week, roughly what percentage of your time do you and your employee(s) spend on gathering information about constituent opinions? (0-100%)	277	23.4 (20.7)	0	60

Appendix VIII – Descriptives of independent variables of Study 2

Variable	Question wording	N	Mean (SD)	Min	Max
Ambition	How would you characterize your interest in holding an elected office in the future? (0=I am not considering future elected office;1= I am considering future office)	232	.71 (.46)	0	1
Electoral vulnerability	When you last ran for office, did you face an opponent in the general election? (0=No; 1=Yes)	227	.65 (.48)	0	1
Perceptions of voter control	Think about all people who might potentially vote for you. To what extent are they generally 1) aware of the fact that you are their representative? 2) aware of your work as a local politician? 3) aware of your personal position on different issues? 4) inclined to use this knowledge about your behavior and positions at the ballot box? (1:Not at all ⇔ 5: Very much) We take the average across all four items (factor loadings +70)	304	3.66 (.83)	1	5

Appendix IX – Predicting constituent opinion monitoring by U.S. local legislators

	Model 1 Coef. (S.E.)	Model 2 Coef. (S.E.)	Model 3 Coef. (S.E.)	Full model Coef. (S.E.)
Extrinsic incentives				
Ambition	3.6 (3.1)			2.2 (2.5)
Electoral vulnerability		3.3 (2.9)		1.8 (2.4)
Perceptions of voter control			8.4 (1.5)***	6.9 (1.4)***
Controls				
Female	.20 (3.2)	.06 (3.1)	2.1 (2.8)	1.1 (2.5)
Seniority	.10 (.13)	.06 (.13)	.05 (.11)	-.01 (.11)
Level of office (county)				
Municipality	-9.4 (3.6)*	-8.2 (3.6)*	-8.3 (3.3)*	-7.8 (3.5)*
Township	-14.2 (4.4)**	-13.6 (4.4)**	-11.8 (4.0)**	-9.3 (3.6)*
Constant	14.5 (4.6)**	19.4 (3.2)***	-10.4 (6.0)†	-1.3(6.4)
N	223	219	237	216
R^2	6%	5%	12%	15%

Note. *** p<0.001, ** p<0.01, * p<0.05, † p<.1

CHAPTER 5

Electoral incentives make politicians respond to voter preferences

Evidence from a survey experiment with MPs in Belgium

Research shows that there is ample variation in how responsive individual politicians are to voter preferences. One explanation, it is commonly argued, lies in politicians' varying electoral motivations. We test this assumption in a survey-embedded experiment in which Belgian MPs were asked what position they would take on a policy proposal, after a random half of them had been shown real survey data indicating that their party voters were in favor of this policy. We find that politicians who feel unsure about their re-election adapt their behavior more to be in line with the preferences of voters than electorally confident politicians. Moreover, the anticipation of electoral accountability fosters responsiveness; the more politicians anticipate to be held accountable on Election Day for what they do and say, the more they respond to voter preferences. These ideas are not new, yet we are the first to isolate them empirically and demonstrate their individual-level foundations.

Keywords: Elite responsiveness, survey experiment, public opinion, electoral motivations

Chapter written together with Julie Sevenans.

Introduction

A decisive feature of a representative democracy is the fact that public decision-making, at least to some extent, reflects the will of the people (Dahl, 1973; Pitkin, 1967). That is why a key task of political scientists is to examine whether political behavior is indeed congruent with voter preferences and how this congruence comes about (Beyer & Hänni, 2018). One particular question of interest is whether politicians are responsive to public opinion – that is; whether they adapt their decisions in response to information about what citizens (citizens at large, or, as in this paper: citizens from their own party electorate) want. Finding such responsiveness, via time-series analyses (Ibenskas & Polk, 2020; Klüver & Spoon, 2016; Soroka & Wlezien, 2010) or by means of field experiments with politicians (e.g. Butler & Nickerson, 2011), scholars agree that political actors contribute to mass-elite congruence.

However, because a vast majority of studies focuses on aggregate-level responsiveness, these findings hide variation as to how responsive individual politicians are (Beyer & Hänni, 2018). The scarce evidence on individual-level responsiveness suggests that politicians are not equally responsive (Jones, 1973; Soroka & Wlezien, 2010). Theorizing about why politicians respond differently to voter preferences, scholars have put forward two possible explanations: (a lack of) ability and motivation. Regarding the former, evidence shows that politicians are simply not equally informed about public opinion – because public opinion is easier to grasp for some issues, because more opinion signals are available in some contexts, and so on –, which affects the ability to respond to these opinions (Miller & Stokes, 1963). A small but growing body of research focuses on the variation in individual politicians' ability to form themselves an accurate view of voter preferences (e.g. Belchior, 2014; Eichenberger et al., 2021; Holmberg, 1999). Regarding the latter, scholars have argued that politicians' motivation to respond to public opinion must differ as well (Esaiasson & Wlezien, 2017). After all, even when politicians are equally informed about public preferences, in the context of experimental research, there appears to be variation in how they react to this information (Butler & Nickerson, 2011). Yet, in contrast to politicians' ability to assess what citizens want, we know little about what motivates politicians to be responsive, about what instigates politicians to take into account voter opinion in their actions.

It is not that scholars have completely disregarded the role of motivation in elite responsiveness. Quite the opposite, actually. The numerous theoretical accounts on (policy) responsiveness rest, often implicitly, on the assumption that politicians are responsive to citizen opinions because of vote-seeking incentives (Stimson et al., 1995). That voter approval is indispensable for politicians to stay in office or to move up presumably sensitizes them towards the preferences of voters because they assume responsive behavior will be rewarded in elections, while going against voter preferences may result in a loss of votes (Mayhew, 1974; Miller & Stokes, 1963).

Empirical evidence about whether electoral incentives foster responsiveness, however, is inconclusive. For instance, many have argued that electoral incentives boost responsiveness based on the finding that politicians running in competitive districts, or politicians who have won previous elections by a small margin, are more likely to support popular policies (e.g. Soroka & Wlezien, 2010; or Manza & Cook, 2002 for an overview). Yet, for each of these studies, there is another one that finds no effect of electoral vulnerability, or even the opposite effect (see Bernardi, 2018 for an overview).

The absence of consistent findings may be due to two main reasons. First, the dominant observational approach to studying responsiveness does not allow very well to isolate politicians' motivations from other factors that possibly affect levels of responsiveness, notably their ability to be responsive. Imagine, for instance, that there is a relationship between district competitiveness and the difficulty of reading public opinion—because districts where politicians win with small margins are also more divided on policy issues—and that electorally unsafe politicians therefore face difficulties being responsive to majority opinion. This could mask that unsafe politicians would actually be more responsive than electorally safe politicians, should they have the information to be responsive in the first place (Jones, 1973). Second, and relatedly, scholars generally lack direct measures of politicians' electoral motivations. District competitiveness is a sensible proxy for electoral motivations but it can differ from how electorally secure politicians *feel*. Politicians who are objectively quite certain about their re-election, may still feel unsafe and therefore be more responsive than expected. Additionally, politicians who do not expect that voters will actually reward (or punish) them for (not) being responsive, should not bother about being responsive – and if they do feel uncertain about their re-election, they probably try to boost

their electoral safety in other ways. Overall, these obstacles make it difficult for observational work to discern the effect of motivation on elite responsiveness.

The main goal of this paper is to resolve these issues by means of an experimental, individual-level approach. Concretely, we rely on a survey-embedded experiment in which members of parliament in Belgium were asked what position they would take on a particular policy issue, after a random half of them had been shown real survey data indicating that their party voters were in favor of this policy. In general, we find that there is responsiveness to voter opinion information: MPs who received this information bring their position –In their communications, in their vote and in discussions on internal party meetings– more in line with their electorate's opinion (compared to the control group that did not receive any information). Most importantly, we directly measure politicians' electoral motivations, and we explore whether perceived *electoral vulnerability* and the *anticipation of voter control* motivate politicians to respond to voter preferences. We find that politicians who are unsure about their re-election are more responsive to party electorate opinion than colleagues who are confident about their re-election. Additionally, politicians who anticipate that their party voters will hold them accountable for their behavior on Election Day respond more strongly to the party electorate opinion stimulus than their colleagues who do not expect voter control at the ballot. The implications for representational theory are discussed in the conclusion.

Responsiveness, a miscellaneous concept

This paper focuses on the dynamic relationship between party voters' policy preferences and politicians' reactions, that is: the extent to which changes in party electorate opinion *precede* changes in politicians' behavior (Bevan & Jennings, 2014; Eulau & Karps, 1977)**.** Indeed, the decisive feature of responsiveness, compared to congruence, is the fact that public opinion information, whether it is general public opinion or party electorate opinion information, is situated at the input side and precedes (policy) actions at the output side (Beyer & Hänni, 2018)[1]. To establish this temporal causality, scholars draw on time-series analysis (Page & Shapiro, 1992; Stimson et al., 1995) or experimental research (Butler, 2014;

Butler & Nickerson, 2011). Generally, these studies find that governments, parliaments, parties and individual politicians are responsive to public opinion, also elsewhere of the often-studied U.S. system (Beyer & Hänni, 2018; Wlezien & Soroka, 2012).

The current literature on the topic of responsiveness mainly addresses *policy responsiveness* and examines the formal policy positions taken by governments or parliaments (e.g. through the introduction of laws), parties (e.g. in party manifestos) or by individual politicians (e.g. in roll-call votes) (see for instance Page and Shapiro, 1983; Kuklinski and Elling, 1977). Studying whether policy decisions react to (changes in) the public mood, or whether party decisions react to changes in party voter opinions, scholars generally find such causal relationship to exist (Ibenskas & Polk, 2020; Soroka & Wlezien, 2010). The concept of responsiveness is, however, broader than policy adaption alone. Apart from policy responsiveness in the strict meaning of the word (i.e. formal position taking), politicians engage in many other (informal) activities (Esaiasson & Wlezien, 2017). There are different venues in which politicians express their positions, and where they can adapt these positions to be more in line with voter preferences. In particular, three additional position-taking arenas are studied here.

First, and in line with Butler, Naurin and Öhberg (2017), we argue that a relevant venue in which politicians can act to fulfil citizens' desires is the internal party arena. In their attempt to translate findings about the United States to the European context, where party discipline is higher and it is more difficult for MPs to respond individually to voter cues, these authors argue that MPs can be responsive to citizens' preferences by lobbying within their party for policies to change in the direction of voter preferences. While politicians generally toe the party line in the actual vote, they show that politicians do try to influence their party's position "behind the scene". We refer to this lobbying with the term *internal party responsiveness*.

Next to the internal party arena and the rather invisible parliamentary arena, politicians are expected to promote themselves externally: i.e. to seek opportunities to communicate their positions to the public, to show they are responsive (Mayhew, 1974; Öhberg & Naurin, 2016a). Kingdon (1989), for instance, describes how such strategic position taking in politicians' communications can be as important as 'real' policy adaption, even if it is less consequential policy-wise. In addition, as Cohen (1997) argues, politicians

need to demonstrate some level of responsiveness to garner the support necessary to get their policies implemented. And to do so, politicians can either communicate their positions to the wider public via the media, which we label *media communicative responsiveness,* or communicate their positions directly to individual voters, which we label *constituent communicative responsiveness* (Öhberg & Naurin, 2016). Note that the term communicative responsiveness –also referred to as rhetorical, symbolic or signal responsiveness– is sometimes used to describe the phenomenon where politicians neglect popular opinion in their actual policymaking, yet make an effort to explain to citizens why they do so (Binzer Hobolt & Klemmensen, 2008; Esaiasson et al., 2013). We do not use the term that way; rather we approach politicians' communications as just another venue where they take positions that can be in line with the preferences of the public (or not).

The electoral connection

The representation literature is rife with assumptions about politicians being responsive to public opinion because of electoral incentives (Jones, 1973; Miller & Stokes, 1963; Stimson et al., 1995). The idea is straightforward: (most) politicians strive for re-election –because it is a necessary precondition to pursue any other objective they may have– and their re-election is contingent upon the approval of voters. Assuming that voters will reward responsive behavior in elections while repercussions may follow for disregarding their desires, a politician should be incentivized to further voters' desires (Arnold, 1992; Mayhew, 1974).

Yet, in their bid for re-election, politicians may not be equally motivated to advance voter preferences. Politicians who are very confident about their re-election have fewer incentives to respond to voter preferences, especially if these preferences clash with their own desires (Kingdon, 1989). In contrast, politicians who fear losing their seat have all the more reason to respond to voter demands; they cannot risk alienating voters, and they need to please voters more to ensure re-election. Therefore, it is commonly argued, politicians' willingness to be responsive to voter demands likely hinges on their *electoral vulnerability* (Bartels, 1991). Still, the vast majority of evidence on the relationship between electoral

vulnerability and responsiveness is indirect. Some scholars leverage variation in responsiveness over time, showing that correlations between constituency opinion and policymaking increase when elections are nearing (Erikson et al., 1980). Others compare levels of (policy) responsiveness across electoral systems and, depending on how competitive these systems are, deduce that electoral motivation affects voter responsiveness. Hobolt and Klemmensen (2008), for example, find that the more governments have to compete for votes, the more likely they are to incorporate the public will in their decision-making (see also Breunig et al., 2020 on electoral systems and communicative responsiveness; or Wlezien and Soroka, 2012). Yet most studies exploring the electoral connection look at district competitiveness as a predictor of responsiveness (Fiorina, 1974). Some find that competitiveness boosts elite responsiveness, while others find the opposite or find no effect (Bernardi, 2018). As we argued before, this inconsistency may be due to a lack of empirical distinction between politicians' knowledge of constituent opinion and their *willingness* to be responsive. Non-competitive districts may appear to be more responsive, but the actual explanation may be that district opinion is more homogenous, making it easier for politicians to get a grip on the public's preferences (Jones, 1973). Though the empirical evidence is inconsistent, there is a clear theoretical consensus that electoral vulnerability incites responsiveness. Therefore, we expect that:

> *H1: Politicians who feel unsure about their re-election are more responsive to party electorate opinion information than politicians who feel sure they will get re-elected.*

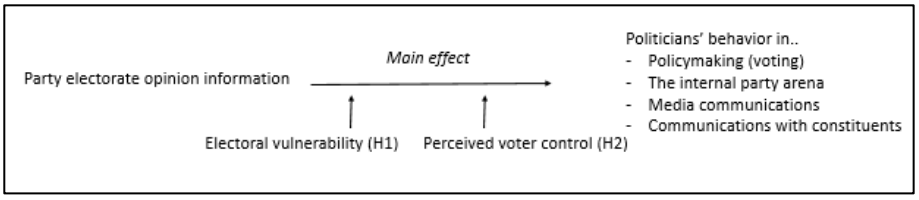
The idea that politicians respond to public opinion cues because their re-election depends on voter approval, hinges on the assumption that politicians believe voters will reward responsive behavior and punish politicians at the ballot for doing the opposite. Imagine that a representative holds another opinion than the majority of her electorate, and hence faces a trade-off between following voter opinion and following her own preferences. The reaction of this representative probably depends on the perception she has of what voters would do were she to decide to go against their opinion. If she expects retaliation for neglecting their preferences, the likelihood increases that she will be responsive; if she expects that the public would not care or would not even know were she to go against

majority opinion, the likelihood increases that she will follow her own preferences instead. Or, to frame it positively, that politicians respond to their voters' desires to ensure support, only makes sense (from a re-election perspective) if they believe that these voters will actually reward this kind of behavior at the ballot box (Arnold, 1992; Kingdon, 1968; Mayhew, 1974). Note that whether or not voters really hold politicians accountable should not matter; it is the perception of electoral accountability that presumably induces politicians to please, or at least not to offend, voters. As Stimson et al. (1995, p.545) argue: "*In a world of savvy politicians, rational anticipation of elections produces dynamic representation without the need for actual electoral defeats*". Interestingly, research has shown that the accountability beliefs of politicians vary, with some politicians feeling much more controlled by voters than others (Soontjens, 2021). This leads us to expect that responsiveness to voters should differ too, depending on whether politicians anticipate their voters are interested in and informed about their actions:

> *H2: The more politicians believe voters will hold them to account for their policy decisions on Election Day, the more responsive they are to party electorate opinion information.*

In sum, we expect perceived electoral vulnerability (H1) and perceived voter control (H2) to moderate the effect of party electorate opinion on politicians' behavior. Our core concepts and hypotheses are visualized in **Figure I**.

Figure I – Overview of key concepts and assumptions



Methods

Our empirical study into individual-level moderators of elite responsiveness is conducted in Flanders, the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium. The country is a small West-European multiparty system characterized by strong parties and multi-member districts. It has a semi-open ballot system: citizens vote for a party list, but they have the opportunity to give preference votes to specific candidates. This means that the electoral fate of individual candidates depends *both* on good relationships with the party leadership (in order to be placed high on the list, which increases chances of being elected) and on voter approval (because the number of preference votes matters too) (André et al., 2014). Our focus on the Belgian case has several implications for the study's design.

For one, because Belgian politicians' primary focus is on their party electorate, we test to what extent electoral motivations moderate responsiveness to *preferences voiced by the party electorate* (and not, for example, to general public opinion or to geographic district opinion). Evidence shows that Belgian MPs deem it more important to represent the party electorate than their geographical district or the full population (see Brack et al., 2012; Dudzinska et al., 2014). It therefore makes sense to focus on this type of responsiveness.

Second, we take into account that voter responsiveness in a country like Belgium is constrained by strong party discipline when it comes to formal voting. Whereas U.S. research often studies whether legislators adapt their (intended) voting behavior in response to public opinion (Canes-Wrone et al., 2002), this is not very realistic in the Belgian context where voting is highly disciplined (after internal party discussion) and where MPs do not have much leeway to diverge from the party line. We follow research showing that politicians in such proportional systems are, in the first place, responsive to their voters *during internal party discussions* as they can co-determine the official party position (see Butler et al., 2017). So, we ask politicians how they would position themselves within the party, before asking how they would vote. The latter measure is, admittedly, less realistic and probably taps rather how the politician would prefer the party to vote. As discussed in the theory section, we gauge two additional scenarios, namely communicative responsiveness towards one voter and towards the media.

Finally, we take into account that politicians in partitocracies like Belgium face different incentives than, for instance, legislators in de United States. In plurality systems like the U.S., where an individual politician's electoral fate depends entirely on constituent approval, we expect politicians to pander fully to voter preferences when feeling insecure about their re-election. Belgian politicians are also incentivized to be responsive because they need personal support (in the form of preference votes) to be placed high on the ballot list in future elections or to be rewarded by party selectors with a high-level position (André et al., 2015). But responding to voter preferences for Belgian politicians sometimes implies going against the (original) party line, which could also be considered electorally risky because of the central role of the party leadership in the re-election chances of politicians (see Öhberg & Naurin, 2016 who show that parties constrain individual politicians' responsiveness opportunities). We acknowledge that parties in Belgium play a significant role in the relationship between party voters and representatives by including politicians' perception of the *party position* on a certain policy (see further) as a control variable in our models predicting individual-level responsiveness. Also, in discussing the results we address the role of party constraints.

Specifically, to examine the individual-level moderators of elite responsiveness, we conducted a survey experiment with Dutch-speaking MPs in Belgium—who are either active at the federal or the regional level. The experiment[2] was embedded in a larger project in which Members of Parliament in Belgium were questioned about their knowledge of and relationship with public opinion, fielded between March and June 2018[3]. Specifically, a team of four researchers, including the authors of this paper, interviewed members of parliament in their offices in Brussels for about one hour during which they had to fill in a closed-ended questionnaire on a laptop that was provided by the researchers. A total of 164 MPs were willing to participate, which makes for a response rate of 78 percent. Note, however, that the number of politicians in the actual analysis will be slightly lower because thirteen politicians did not answer the questions related to the experiment (so the actual N=151), and moreover there are a few missing answers on specific variables. Importantly, our sample of MPs is not systematically biased in terms of party affiliation, age, gender or seniority (see **Appendix I** for more information on the sample). The experiment was included in the very beginning of the survey to avoid contamination by other questions.

In the experiment, we provided half of the politicians of each party with information about the preferences *of their party electorate* about a specific policy proposal. We aimed to include at least some proposals on which parties and (most of) their politicians would hold a *different* opinion than their voters. The reason is that we wanted to be able to test, for these politicians, whether learning about voter preferences that do not accord with their own preferences actually *changes* their position. For the others, the experiment tests whether learning about voter preferences they agree with *strengthens* their positions. After showing the information about their party electorate's preferences (for the treatment group) or immediately (for the control group) we asked questions about their intended behavior with regard to this proposal—aiming to test whether politicians in the treatment group acted more in line with their party electorate than those in the control group. Designing the stimuli required an examination of actual public opinion on a variety of issues, because for ethical reasons, we did not want any of the information to be false or misleading. Therefore, we measured the opinions of 1,625 Dutch-speaking citizens on a number of issues in a representative citizen survey fielded by SSI (applying quota on age, gender and educational level). This approach resulted in the careful selection of policy statements that were different for politicians of each party, but equivalent: we went for moderately salient issues[4], with which between 70 and 75 percent of the party voters agreed or totally agreed. An example of the policy statement for the Socialist party is: "*If the national railway company is on a strike, a minimum service should be guaranteed"* (See **Appendix II** for an overview of policy statements). We purposely do not focus on party differences (the policy proposals are similar, but not identical), but focus on testing whether the impact of electoral motivations on elite responsiveness (a *within*-party pattern) exists across the board. After presenting the policy statement, a randomly selected half (N=78) of the MPs was shown the following stimulus:

> *"Interested in what people think about this matter, our research group (Media Movements and Politics at the University of Antwerp) recently conducted a large-scale, representative survey among Flemish citizens. We found that a large majority of the citizens who indicate that they vote for [party], are in favor of [proposal]. More specifically, it appears that more than 70% of the [party]-voters agree/totally agree with the proposal."*

A balance test confirms that the random attribution of respondents to experimental conditions succeeded (see **Appendix III**). As a manipulation check, politicians were (after the experiment) asked to estimate (control group) or recall (treatment group) what percentage of their voters are in favor of the policy proposal. Results show that the manipulation worked: politicians who did not receive the party electorate opinion stimuli were a lot less accurate in their estimation of party electorate opinion, while the latter clearly recalled the information (see **Appendix IV**).

After being shown this opinion information (or just the policy proposal for the control group), various dependent variables were measured (see **Table I** for an overview). Concretely, politicians were asked how they would behave in different hypothetical situations. The introduction to these scenarios read as follows:

> *"For a variety of different reasons, politicians, regardless of their own point of view on a certain issue, may sometimes defend different points of view in certain circumstances or adapt their way of communicating about an issue. What position would you take in your communication on this policy proposal in the following situations?".*

First, addressing media and constituent communicative responsiveness as two types of behavioral responsiveness, politicians were asked about the position they would take in an e-mail to a voter, as well as towards a journalist asking them about the proposal. Then, we gauged internal party responsiveness by asking how politicians would take stance at an internal party meeting. For these three questions, politicians could answer on a seven-point scale going from *arguing totally against the policy statement* (-3), over *neutral* (0), to *totally in favor* (3). Politicians were also given the option that they *would not communicate*; these rare answers were dropped from the analyses (these were only two cases for constituent communication, eleven cases for media communication and two for internal party lobbying). Finally, addressing policy responsiveness, politicians were questioned about their intended voting behavior if the proposal was put to a vote in parliament; to mimic reality, they had three options: vote *in favor* (1), vote *against* (0), or *not vote at all* –only three politicians gave the latter answer, they are not included in the analysis.

The reader may wonder why we did not develop specific expectations for these different dependent variables. It seems theoretically plausible, for instance, that electorally vulnerable politicians would be particularly compliant to voter opinion in their private communications with constituents (trying to please voters), while being less responsive in the media, during party meetings or while voting (in order not to offend the party). The problem is that a survey-experimental set-up like ours is not very well suited to detect such differences, as respondents tend to give consistent answers. Their answers to the items are highly correlated indeed (see **Appendix VII**). We have to deal with this limitation of the method and therefore do not go into differences between types of responsiveness.

Table I – Overview dependent variables

Responsiveness	Question wording	N	Mean	Min	Max
Constituent communication	You receive an e-mail from a [insert party] voter who is interested in the theme and would like to know your point of view.	149	-.36 (1.62)	-3	3
Media communication	A journalist from a local newspaper calls you and asks for your opinion on the matter.	140	-.34 (1.63)	-3	3
Internal party lobbying	The issue is discussed on an internal party group meeting and you are asked for your opinion.	149	-.54 (1.96)	-3	3
Voting	Imagine that the policy proposal is put to a vote in parliament. What position would you take?	145	.4 (.49)	0	1

Whereas this basic setup allows to study elite responsiveness in general, our aim is to examine whether the effect of the experimental stimulus is moderated by electoral motivations. Analytically, this means that the analysis where politicians' intended behavior is regressed on the experimental condition and their estimation of the party's position on the issue (control variable), is extended with interaction effects between the experimental condition and politicians' electoral motivations. To grasp these motivations we asked politicians two additional questions —see **Table II** for the literal question wording. The questions were asked far enough after the experiment, with unrelated questions in between, so it is highly unlikely that our independent variables were affected by the experiment itself.

First, a measure was included that grasps politicians' overall *feeling of electoral safety*. The advantage of relying on politicians' self-reported feeling of electoral (in)security—compared to indirect measures such as district characteristics or the margin of victory at the preceding elections—is that it directly gauges how politicians envision their electoral fate, rather than assuming that rational politicians look at their past election to infer how much challenge they will face in the next. After all, research has shown that even politicians in objectively safe seats, for all sorts of reasons, may feel electorally vulnerable (e.g. Cohen, 1997). More than half of the Belgian MPs feel relatively safe, indicating it is (very) likely that they will be re-elected. Those who indicated that their re-election is (very) unlikely or that it could go either way, were classified as uncertain. For the eventual analyses, we take the inverse of this variable, measuring electoral *unsafety*.

Second, to measure politicians' *perceptions of voter control*, we ask them the indicate whether they believe that their voters will hold them accountable for what they do and say on Election Day. There is a lot of variation in the extent to which politicians anticipate such control; some strongly believe that voters will take into account what they have said and done in the previous legislature when casting their vote, while others do not anticipate much voter control. Politicians' perceptions of voter control are not significantly correlated with their feeling of electoral safety.

Table II – Overview moderating variables

Variable	Question wording	N	Mean	Min	Max
Electoral unsafety	How likely is it that you will be re-elected? 0. (Very) likely 1. (Very) unlikely or it could go either way	148	.42 (.50)	0	1
Perceptions of voter control	Think about all the people who are considering voting for your party (your potential voters). To what extent does their knowledge of your personal work in parliament and your policy views influence their decision at the ballot box?	151	4.7 (2.1)	1	10

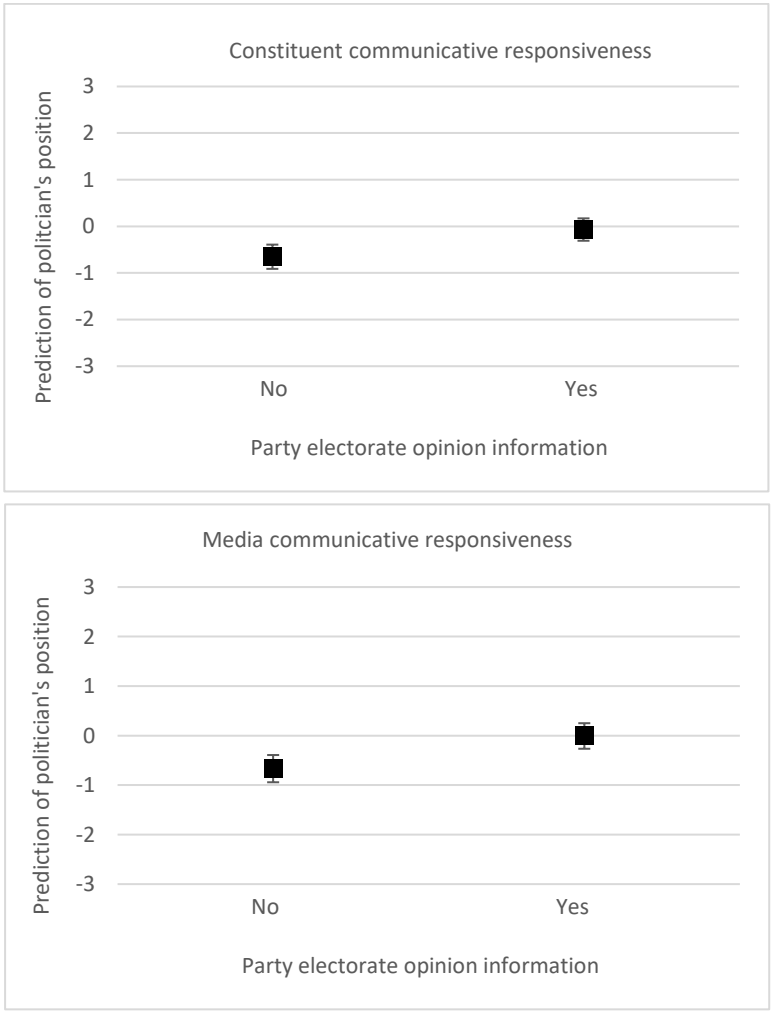
Before moving on to the results, we should address an often-heard critique on experiments, namely the (presumed) lack of external validity. After all, we force politicians in this experiment to inform themselves about their party electorate's opinion before responding to questions about their intentional behavior. This is different from field experiments where, for instance, politicians effectively react to constituent e-mails (e.g. Breunig et al., 2020). We at least partially respond to this external validity-critique by making the decision-making scenarios presented to politicians as realistic as possible, and we present them with *real* public opinion information, in a format politicians are familiar with. This approach turns out to be successful in that a majority of politicians, when asked about how realistic the scenarios were, indicates they were indeed realistic (see **Appendix V**). This strengthens our belief that the experimental design is well suited to examine what motivates politicians to be responsive.

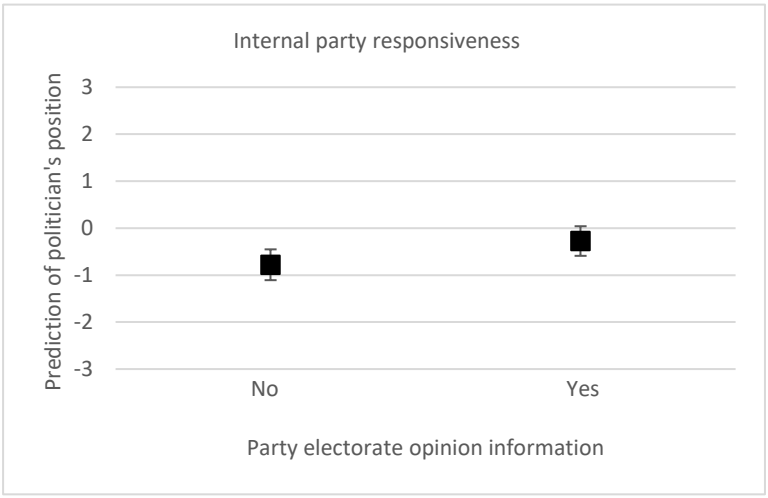
Results

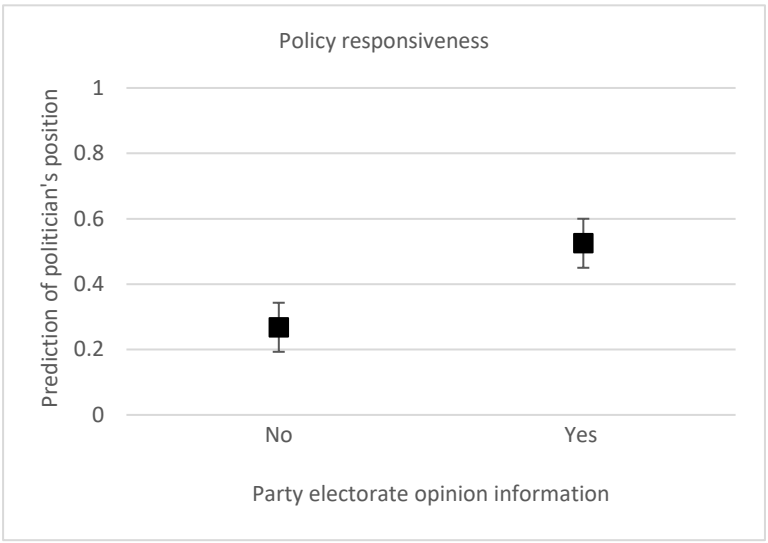
Before turning to our examination of whether electoral incentives drive responsiveness, we address the baseline effect of receiving party electorate opinion information on how politicians take position in different arenas. Specifically, politicians' intended behavior is regressed on the experimental condition and their estimation of the party's position is included as control variable. And, to account for the variation in policy proposals, party dummies are in the model (fixed effects). As is shown in **Figure II**, politicians who were told that the majority of their party voters agree with a certain policy proposal, take a position that is *more* in favor of the proposal than politicians who did not receive such information; and this is true for politicians from all parties, in all arenas we investigate (see **Appendix VI** for the full model). The similarity of effects across outcome variables is not surprising given the high correlations between the survey questions measuring them (see **Appendix VII**).

First of all, we see that politicians confronted with information about their party voters' preferences become more inclined to argue in favor of –or rather: less likely to argue against– the proposal in *an e-mail to a constituent* (b=.58; S.E.=.21; p=.007). On a scale from -3 (arguing totally against the policy statement) to 3 (arguing totally in favor), politician's position taken in the constituent e-mail increases with about .60 when (s)he received party electorate opinion information. A similar finding pops up when looking at how public opinion information affects what position politicians intend to *communicate to journalists*. Those who are exposed to the opinion stimulus are significantly less likely to argue that they are against the proposal (b=.66; S.E.=.23; p=.004). Third, politicians who learn that their party electorate is largely in favor of a specific policy, are slightly less likely than others to lobby against the proposition when the issue is discussed on an *internal party meeting* (b=.51; S.E.=.27; p=.068). Finally, regarding *policy responsiveness*, being exposed to public opinion information also increases the chance that politicians would vote in favor from 18% to 53% (b=1.61; S.E.=.45; p=.000). These effects come on top of a significant and stable effect of the perceived party position.

Figure II—Baseline effects of the experimental manipulation (predicted probabilities from the models in Appendix VI)







As can be noted from the figures in the control group, many (but not all) MPs were, overall, rather against the proposals we presented them with. This should not come as a surprise because in our issue selection we deliberately tried to include some items that we thought MPs and their parties would not be in favor of (as opposed to their voters) (see also methods section). This is interesting because it allows us to debunk the idea that the party electorate opinion stimulus merely had a reinforcing effect. Instead, MPs who originally rather opposed a proposal, changed their viewpoint too towards a more moderate position.

Having confirmed that confronting politicians with information about their voters' preferences being in favor of a certain policy proposal moves them towards that position, the next step is to examine what *drives* this responsiveness. Is the effect conditional upon politicians' extrinsic motivations? Is it electoral vulnerability, and/or the possibility of electoral retribution and reward at the ballot that induces politicians to respond to this information? To answer the question, we run multivariate regressions explaining each of our four outcome variables, with the explanatory variables (electoral vulnerability and perceptions of voter control) interacted with the treatment condition (the exposure to voter opinion information). Results of these regressions are shown in **Table III**.

We start by analyzing whether uncertainty about future elections affects politicians' responsiveness to information about their voters' opinions. Looking at the interaction effects between electoral vulnerability and the experimental stimulus, we see that the coefficient is positive in all four models, confirming the trend we expected (H1), namely that politicians who feel electorally unsafe are more sensitive to party electorate opinion information than politicians who are confident about their re-election. To facilitate interpretation, we calculate predicted probabilities for the electorally safe and unsafe respectively, to show that the effects are substantial. First, politicians who are uncertain about their re-election are, when learning about their voters' preferences, more inclined to argue in favor the proposal in an *e-mail to a constituent*. On a 7-point favorability scale, unsafe politicians' position increases with 1 point. Politicians who are confident about their re-election, on the other hand, hardly respond to the public opinion stimuli (an increase of .14). In other words, the main effect that we found above is nearly entirely driven by those politicians who feel electorally insecure. The pattern is similar for the other types of responsiveness. *Media communicative responsiveness* is stronger for electorally vulnerable politicians than for those who are safe (an increase of 1.1, compared to .16 for confident politicians). Similar findings emerge in the model explaining *internal party responsiveness*: the position the electorally unsafe ones take in an internal party meeting increases with 1.2, while those who are confident about their re-election do not respond to their newly required knowledge on voter opinion – in fact, they even position themselves *less* in favor of the policy on a party meeting after learning their voters are in favor (a decrease of .16). Finally, we see that electoral safety does not matter for actual *policy responsiveness* (b=.66; S.E.=.504; p=.504). The effect goes in the expected direction, but is not significant, implying

that safe and unsafe politicians alike adapt their intended voting behavior in parliament in response to public opinion information.

Next, we examine whether the anticipation of electoral accountability influences politicians' responsiveness to information about voter opinions. Looking at the coefficient of the interaction effects between perceptions of voter control and the experimental stimulus in Table 3, we confirm that the prospect of electoral accountability sensitizes politicians towards citizens' desires (H2). Again, we calculate predicted probabilities separately for politicians who do anticipate voter control (score 6.8 on a 10-point perceived accountability scale) and those who do not (2.7 out of 10) to interpret the effect sizes[4]. In the first model, predicting how politicians position themselves on a certain policy in an *e-mail to a constituent*, we see that politicians who feel closely monitored by their voters are more inclined to argue in favor of the proposal after learning their voters support it. The position of politicians who feel closely monitored increases with .96 out of 7, while those who hardly expect voter control do not respond to voter preferences at all (an increase of .04). Similarly, politicians who anticipate to be held to account on Election Day are, when confronted with information about party voter preferences, more inclined to position themselves in favor of the policy when asked about it by *journalists*. Their position increases with .93, while those who do not believe voters will hold them to account for their actions on Election Day clearly respond to the experimental stimulus less strongly (an increase of .13). Looking at the model explaining *internal party responsiveness*, we again confirm the expected positive relationship between feeling accountable and lobbying in favor of voter preferences on internal party meetings. The effect is potent; the position of politicians who strongly feel the weight of voter control increases with 1.03 when learning about voter opinion, while politicians who do not expect electoral accountability even respond negatively to the information about their party electorate opinion (a decrease of .22). Finally, we see that perceptions of voter control impact politicians' *policy responsiveness* in the direction we would expect; the more politicians anticipate voter control, the more likely they are to bring their vote in line with party electorate preferences after learning about these preferences. But the interaction effect is (just) not significant (b=.38; S.E.=.25; p=.119).

Table III – Electoral moderators of elite responsiveness to public opinion

	E-mail to constituent Coef. (S.E.)	Contact with journalist Coef. (S.E.)	Internal party Coef. (S.E.)	Vote (log) Coef. (S.E.)
Main effects				
Public opinion information	-.91 (.60)	-.76 (.63)	-1.6 (.77)*	-.53 (1.4)
Electoral unsafety	-.06 (.32)	-.14 (.35)	-.14 (.41)	.28 (.73)
Perceptions of voter control	-.19 (.08)*	-.20 (.08)*	-.24 (.10)*	-.54 (.20)**
Interactions				
Public opinion information * Electoral unsafety	.86 (.44)†	.95 (.47)*	1.4 (.57)*	.66 (.99)
Public opinion information * Perceptions of voter control	.22 (.10)*	.19 (11)†	.31 (.13)*	.38 (.25)
Controls				
Estimated party position	.31 (.04)***	.28 (.05)***	.34 (.06)***	.54 (.11)***
Party dummies				
Constant	-1.2 (.59)*	-1.0 (.62)	-.95 (.76)	-2.9 (1.9)
N	145	136	145	141
Adjusted R^2	.45	.42	.34	.38

Note. *** p<0.001, ** p<0.01, * p<0.05, † p<.10

In sum, we find that electoral vulnerability *and* the anticipation of voter control affect elite responsiveness to voter opinion. In fact, responsiveness is nearly entirely driven by those politicians who feel electorally vulnerable and/or anticipate voter control; the others almost do not respond to the experimental stimulus. The pattern is very clear for *journalist communicative, media communicative* and *internal party responsiveness*, it is weaker for the actual *intended vote* (although the effect goes in the right direction and is at one instance nearly significant). We have no ready explanation for why this is the case. One possibility is that electorally vulnerable politicians are very careful to antagonize the party leadership, and therefore in response to our question about real voting behavior were more reluctant to follow voter opinion (because this is the arena where the party leadership really demands discipline) (Butler et al., 2017). Another option is that even electorally safe politicians tend to be quite responsive when it comes to the real vote, anticipating that the party will decide to follow the voters anyway. Either way, this could explain why electorally vulnerable politicians are not *more* responsive in their intended vote than electorally safe ones (but note that responsiveness in general is quite high also for intended voting—see Figure II). In any case, what we retain from these findings is that most types of responsiveness seem to be fostered by electoral motivations.

With regard to the control variables, we see that all abovementioned findings come on top of a strong effect of *perceived party position* on politicians' attitudes and actions: the more their party is perceived in favor of a proposal, the more politicians will act in line with it. While we include party dummies in all our models, it is important to mention that our findings are not solely driven by one specific party, but exist across the board. When we consecutively remove each party from the analysis, we find that our main moderation effects hold; that is: the direction of the interaction effects remains the same, but it sometimes loses significant because the amount of observations drops when doing so (see **Appendix VIII**).

Conclusion

The point of departure in this study is the ample evidence that shows there is a causal flow from public opinion to elite behavior (Ibenskas & Polk, 2020; Soroka & Wlezien, 2010). We examine whether this responsiveness is motivated by electoral incentives. Note that we by no means aim to argue that representation should be considered as a one-way relationship and that politicians should always be responsive to voter preferences—there are many valid ways in which successful representation can come about. Yet elite responsiveness is a widely accepted key feature of a representative democracy, and it is therefore crucial to examine how it comes about.

That is what we did in this chapter, by looking at how electoral motivations moderate the extent to which politicians are responsive to party electorate opinion information. Adhering an individual-level, survey-experimental approach allowed us to measure politicians' motivations directly and to isolate the effect from politicians' varying *ability* to be responsive (i.e. information availability) which was kept constant.

We find that electoral motivations make politicians more susceptible to be responsive. More precisely, a politician who is not sure she will be re-elected, adapts her behavior more to be in line with the preferences of the party electorate. Electorally safe politicians instead seem to realize they have more leeway to "go their own way" without pandering towards voter preferences. While our findings are drawn at the individual level, they probably have implications at higher levels. Knowing that some political parties as a whole are more electorally safe than other parties—or even that in some systems there is more competition and hence more uncertainty about re-election than in other systems—our findings explain why these parties or actors are incentivized to stay closer to their voters' preferences. Not only electoral vulnerability encourages voter responsiveness, though. We additionally find that the anticipation of electoral accountability – the idea that voters can hold politicians to account on Election Day for what they do and say and that politicians anticipate such potential rewards and repercussions throughout the legislature – fosters responsiveness. Politicians who strongly believe that (some) voters may hold them to account on election day, are more inclined to adapt their position to be in line the preferences of party voters. While these ideas are not new, we are the first to isolate them empirically and demonstrate their foundations at the individual level.

In particular, we find that electoral unsafety and the anticipation of voter control affect communicative responsiveness and internal party responsiveness. A direct implication is one related to intra-party dynamics: within a party, the electorally unsafe politicians and those who feel the weight of voter control appear to be the ones who push the party most to stay close to the preferences of the electorate.

An often-heard criticism on experiments like this one is that politicians might give strategic (socially desirable) answers, that they might pretend responsiveness (but not be responsive in real life). We think this is unlikely, first because we know from observational research that politicians *are* quite responsive in reality, and second because we know from research that politicians in the abstract deem it desirable to take a trustee role, and stick with ideological convictions, rather than to follow voter opinion (Andeweg & Thomassen, 2005). Responsiveness is these days sometimes associated with populism which tends to have a negative connotation. In other words, displaying responsiveness is not necessarily the socially desirable option.

Due to the difficulties of doing elite research, our approach was limited in scope. We studied politicians in one country only: Belgium. In this context, we presented each politician with just one (moderately salient) issue proposal. Therefore, we encourage follow-up research to incorporate a more diverse set of countries and policy issues—e.g. including both highly salient and less salient issues—as this has shown to make a difference for how responsive representatives are (Jones, 1973). Still we hope that our study—showing how electoral motivations moderate responsiveness to voters—offers good inspiration for a further exploration of the matter.

Notes

1. Responsiveness can as such lead to congruence (i.e. overlap between public preferences and public policy) but this is not necessarily the case; and congruence can be established without elite responsiveness as well (e.g. through voter responsiveness) (Beyer & Hänni, 2018).

2. Note that the experiment is also discussed in Sevenans (2021). The results of the current paper are entirely original, though, with the new focus on the moderating effect of electoral motivations.

3. The survey experiment was fielded in the framework of the POLPOP project.

4. Strong accountability beliefs (6.8) = mean value of perceived voter control (4.7) + one standard deviation (2.06), weak accountability beliefs (2.7) = mean value of perceived voter control (4.7) - one standard deviation (2.06).

Appendix

Appendix I – Composition of politician sample

	Population	Sample	Response rate
Members or the Flemish parliament	124	95	79.3%
Female	52 (42%)	35 (37%)	
Age in years (SD)	48.2 (9.6)	47.4 (8.7)	
Political experience (SD)	10.1 (7.3)	9.5 (6.3)	
Members of the national parliament	87	69	76.6%
Female	39 (45%)	28 (41%)	
Age in years (SD)	48.6 (8.5)	48.0 (8.8)	
Political experience (SD)	10.6 (7.8)	10.3 (7.6)	
Total	211	164	77.7%

Appendix II – Overview policy statements for each party

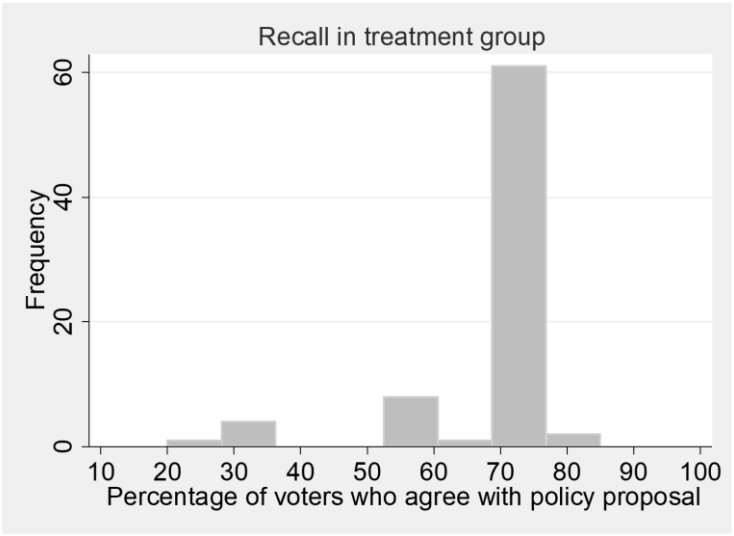
Party	Policy statement	% party voters in favor
Greens	All convicted criminals should serve their full sentence in jail.	73%
Socialists	If the NMBS is on a strike, a minimum number of trains should still run.	74%
Christian-democrats	A member of parliament cannot be a mayor at the same time.	72%
Liberals	Schools should oblige children to speak Dutch during breaks as well.	73%
Flemish-nationalists	Bus and tramlines that serve only few passengers should remain operational.	74%
Extreme-rights	Bus and tramlines that serve only few passengers should remain operational.	75%

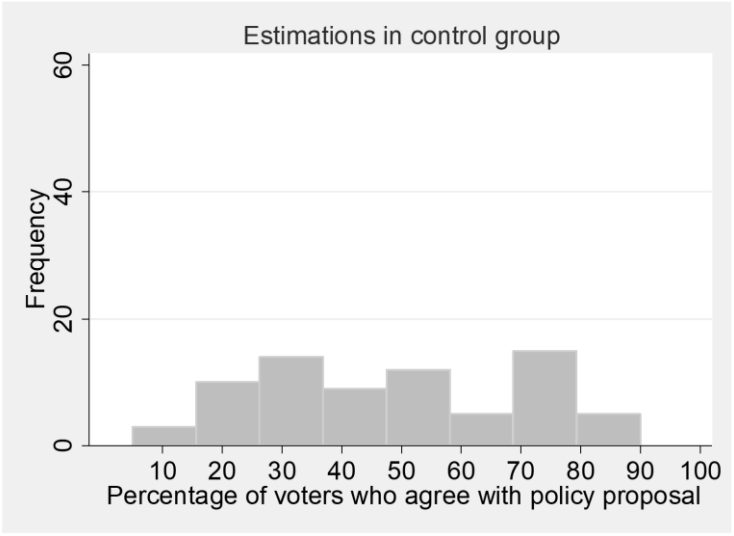
Appendix III – Balance test (logistic regression explaining experimental condition)

	Coef. (p-value)
Party (ref: Greens)	
Socialists	.218 (.718)
Christian-Democrats	.294 (.694)
Liberals	.498 (.793)
Flemish-Nationalists	.247 (.640)
Extreme-right	.574 (1.049)
Sex	.215 (.348)
Year of birth	.026 (.022)
Year of first election	.006 (.031)
Federal MP	.145 (.342)
Estimated party position	.017 (.072)
Constant	-63.350 (57.146)
N	150

Note. *** p<0.001, ** p<0.01, * p<0.05, † p<.10

Appendix IV – Manipulation check





Appendix V – Frequency table of realisticness of questions

Answer	Frequency	Percent
Very unrealistic	1	.66
Unrealistic	5	3.31
Rather unrealistic	23	15.23
Neutral	20	13.25
Rather realistic	65	43.05
Realistic	34	22.52
Very realistic	3	1.99

Note. Question asked: *In general, how realistic were the scenarios presented above to you?*

Appendix VI – Predicting elite responsiveness towards public opinion

	E-mail to constituent Coef. (S.E.)	Contact with journalist Coef. (S.E.)	Internal party Coef. (S.E.)	Parliamentary vote (log) Coef. (S.E.)
Main effects				
Public opinion information (vs. no information)	.58** (.21)	.66** (.23)	.51† (.27)	1.61*** (.45)
Controls				
Estimated party position	.30*** (.05)	.26*** (.05)	.33*** (.06)	.46*** (.10)
Party dummies				
Constant	-2.47 (.39)*	-2.34*** (.41)	-2.66*** (.50)	-5.27*** (1.48)
N	148	139	148	144
Adjusted/Pseudo R^2	.35	.32	.28	.31

Note. *** p<0.001, ** p<0.01, * p<0.05, † p<.10

Appendix VII – Correlations between dependent variables

	E-mail to constituent	Contact with journalist	Internal party	Parliamentary vote
E-mail to constituent	1	-	-	-
Contact with journalist	.94***	1	-	-
Internal party	.91***	.87***	1	-
Parliamentary vote	.68***	.70***	.68***	1

Note. *** p<0.001, ** p<0.01, * p<0.05, † p<.10

Appendix VIII – Robustness of moderator effects across parties

	E-mail to constituent		Contact with journalist		Internal party		Vote (log)	
	Vulnerability	Voter control	Vulnerability	Voter control	Vulnerability	Voter control	Vulnerability	Voter control
Greens	.34 (.46)	.24 (.11)*	.84 (.49)†	.21 (.12)†	1.2 (.60)†	.34 (.14)*	.69 (.99)	.37 (.25)
Socialists	.76 (.51)	.16 (.11)	1.0 (.52)†	.16 (.12)	1.3 (.66)*	.23 (.15)†	.69 (1.1)	.38 (.27)
Christian-Democrats	.77 (.46)†	.16 (.10)	.67 (.51)	.12 (.10)	1.1 (.57)†	.22 (.13)†	.55 (1.2)	.12 (.28)
Liberals	.85 (.46)†	.28 (.11)*	.88 (.48)†	.26 (.12)*	.1.4 (.59)*	.36 (.14)*	.23 (1.0)	.37 (.26)
Flemish-Nationalists	1.3 (.55)*	.28 (.14)*	1.4 (.60)*	.23 (.15)	2.2 (.74)**	.32 (.19)†	.1.7 (1.5)	.97 (.41)*
Extreme-right	.91 (.45)*	.21 (.11)*	1.0 (.48)*	.18 (.11)†	1.6 (.59)**	.31 (.14)*	.76 (1.1)	.36 (.25)

Notes. (a) Coefficients of interaction term Party electorate opinion information*Electoral unsafety, and Party electorate opinion information*Perceptions of voter control when party is excluded from the model are presented. (b) *** p<0.001, ** p<0.01, * p<0.05, † p<.10

CHAPTER 6

Inside the party's mind

Why and how parties are strategically unresponsive to their voters' preferences

Research shows that parties are not always responsive to their voters' preferences. Our understanding about why and how parties sometimes intentionally cross their voters' preferences predominantly stems from theoretical accounts of party behavior and observational studies that try to deduce considerations and strategies from party behavior. This study aims to add novel, direct insights to this literature by interviewing nineteen party leaders and ministers in Belgium to see what argumentations they spontaneously come up with when asked to reflect on party decisions they intentionally took against the will of their voters. Reflecting on why and how they pursued these initiatives, we add to the literature on *party responsiveness* (identifying four main reasons why parties ignore their voters' preferences) and *blame avoidance strategies* (identifying the role of anticipated electoral sanctions and different strategies parties invoke to contain these potential sanctions). In short, the current study identifies the conditions under which parties deliberately pursue ideas that are not endorsed by their voters by means of in-depth interviews with key party decision-makers.

Keywords: Party unresponsiveness, voter opinion, face-to-face interviews, blame avoidance

Reference: K. Soontjens (2021). Inside the party's mind. Why and how parties are strategically unresponsive to their voters' preferences. *Acta Politica.*

Introduction

In democratic societies, political parties are expected to represent their voters' preferences (Mair, 2008) and as such establish a vital connection between public preferences and policies (Dahl, 1956). However, while the overlap between party behavior and party voter preferences is substantial, it is far from perfect. Indeed, research shows that parties are not always responsive to their voters[1] (Ezrow et al., 2011; Klüver & Spoon, 2016; Romeijn, 2020). Think, for instance, of parties pursuing unpopular austerity policies against the will of their voters (Pierson, 1996; Vis, 2016; Weaver, 1986).

One possible explanation for parties being unresponsive to their voters' preferences lies in the perceptions party decision-makers have of voter preferences being flawed: misperceiving what their voters want, parties would *unintentionally* go against their preferences (see, for instance, Broockman & Skovron, 2013 who studied the accuracy of politicians' public opinion perceptions). Another explanation may be that parties *intentionally* cross voter preferences (Strøm & Müller, 1999). This study zooms in on the second, intentional, explanation for the observed mismatch between voter preferences and party positions and decisions. Specifically, we seek to answer the following two research questions: *why do parties intentionally go against their voters' preferences? And how do they do it?*

The literature on party responsiveness has tackled the issue of parties going against voter preferences. Next to ample theoretical reflections on party behavior (e.g. Strøm & Müller, 1999), scholars have tried to deduce causes for (un)responsiveness by observing when and to what extent there is a link between voter opinions and party behavior. They show that some parties (mainstream, government parties) are less responsive to their voters' preferences than others (opposition, niche parties), on some issues (rather on non-salient issues) and especially in the beginning of the electoral cycle (see for instance Ezrow et al., 2011; Klüver & Spoon, 2016; Romeijn, 2020). While these observations are highly insightful, the actual considerations that lead parties to refrain from acting on the preferences of their voters are simply not observable. In the United States, some scholars (notably Kingdon, 1989) have overcome this problem by interviewing legislators about their motivations for being (un)responsive in their roll-call behavior. Similar data on party decision-making is scant.

Insights on how parties behave when they decide to go against their voters' preferences, in turn, can be derived from the literature on blame avoidance. By theorizing about or (in rare cases) observing governmental decision-making, scholars have argued that governments invoke so-called "blame avoidance" strategies when they pursue unpopular austerity policies (see for instance Weaver, 1986; Vis, 2016; Hübscher & Sattler, 2017). Over the years, numerous scholars have come up with typologies of strategies that governments can invoke when pursuing seemingly unpopular policies (see König & Wenzelburger, 2014 for an overview of this work). Yet, with the exception of Wenzelburger's (2011) anecdotal evidence, empirical proof of which strategies parties invoke and with what purpose, is virtually non-existent. Moreover, blame avoidance has so far been discussed almost exclusively in the context of government retrenchment, preventing the phenomenon from being considered in its entirety (see Hinterleitner, 2017 for an elaboration of this criticism).

In sum, theoretical and observational studies contributed importantly to our understanding of why and how parties intentionally go against their voters' preferences. Yet, the considerations and strategic decisions of parties are not always observable. To fully understand the conditionality of voter responsiveness, then, one needs to learn about the motivations of key party decision-makers; how they balance goals, why they want and dare to go against their voters' will, whether they consider such incongruent behavior to be electorally risky and if so, how they deal with it (see Wenzelburger & Zohlnhöfer, 2020). As Jacobs and Shapiro (2000, p.6) posited; *'explaining how and why responsiveness to public opinion varies requires understanding the motivations of policymakers'* (see also Weaver, 1986; Wenzelburger, 2014).

This study aims to complement previous work on party (un)responsiveness by interviewing nineteen key party elites –party leaders and ministers– in Belgium (see Wenzelburger, 2014 who argues that interview evidence allows to uncover the reasoning that lies behind political decisions). In particular, I ask elites to reflect on party initiatives they intentionally proposed against the will of their voters, to explain why they decided to do so and how they dealt with the pursuit of this unpopular decision. This qualitative, inductive approach allows me to identify what considerations drive party's deliberate unresponsiveness to voter preferences, to establish that parties think in terms of blame avoidance, and to uncover the different strategies party elites invoke when they anticipate

electoral repercussions for unpopular action. As such, I add novel direct insights to the existing work on party responsiveness and the scholarship on blame avoidance.

Party objectives and the consequent lack of responsiveness

The starting point for understanding why parties are not always responsive to their voters' preferences lies in the objectives parties seek to pursue. Downs' (1957) classical economic theory of party behavior portrays parties as actors that are solely concerned about maximizing votes. That parties are driven by a desire to win or at least to consolidate voter support shows in their positions shifting towards those of their voters (see Adams, 2012; Romeijn, 2020), or, for instance, in parties emphasizing issue positions that are popular among their supporters (Rovny, 2012). That political actors are induced to act in line with their voters' preferences because their future hinges on this voter support, has been referred to as *anticipatory representation* (Mansbridge, 2003; Stokes, 1999).

In response to Downs the rational choice tradition has emphasized that a party's pursuit of votes is foremost instrumental; they need votes to pursue their idea(l)s (Budge et al., 2010; Wittman, 1973). Indeed, next to the predominant desire to win votes, or not to lose votes, (some) parties pursue office goals –the desire to wield executive power– and policy goals –the desire to enact certain policies or to influence the policy agenda of others (Strøm, 1990). In sum, while electoral success can be a goal in itself, it is foremost considered as a path to policy agenda influence (Przeworski et al., 1999).

Given that parties do not necessarily hold coherent views with their voters (see for instance Dalton, 2017 or Valen & Narud, 2007), a party's aspiration to pursue the policies it deems necessary could be a probable cause of voter unresponsiveness. After all, policy preferences of parties and voters being out of step, it is unlikely that parties' policy goals will be satisfied entirely by being responsive to voter preferences. Also, parties in government, because they have to compromise with coalition partners and potentially face other constraints such as budgetary discipline, may pursue initiatives that are unpopular with their voters (Green-Pedersen & Mortensen, 2010; Mair, 2009; Klüver & Spoon, 2016). As such, a party's policy and office goals may instigate unresponsive behaviour, if voter and party preferences do not coincide (Strøm & Müller, 1999).

In sum, that parties may want to advance their own policy agendas, in combination with the empirical reality that they (or their coalition partners) sometimes vision society in a way their voters do not, suggests that responsiveness crucially hinges on how parties balance their policy goals with their re-election goal, if the two collide (Pierson, 1996; Strøm, 1990; Wenzelburger & Zohlnhöfer, 2020). The idea of rational anticipation holds that the potential electoral consequences of a decision serve as the crucial deal-breaker (Stimson et al., 1995; or see Hübscher and Sattler's, 2017 work on fiscal consolidation). Asking U.S. legislators about their voting behavior, Kingdon (1989) indeed confirms that politicians are less inclined to follow their own opinion and go against their constituents' will if they think voters care a lot about the issue at stake because they assume chances are high that citizens will notice this unpopular behavior and hold them accountable for it. Jacobs and Shapiro (2000) as well, by means of two case studies, find that political actors' perceptions of the (electoral) costs and benefits of different policy alternatives play an essential role in their behavioral calculus. Yet, similar direct evidence on how parties arrive at the decision to go against their voters' preferences is scant. Therefore, the first research question this study aims to answer is the following;

> *RQ1: According to party leaders and ministers themselves, why do parties cross voter preferences?*

How parties try to avoid electoral blame for being unresponsive

Parties are not always responsive to voter preferences (Romeijn, 2020). Taking into account early findings on prospect theory (see Tversky & Kahneman, 1973), Weaver (1986) argues that political actors are loss averse and, therefore, are motivated to avoid electoral blame for such unpopular actions (König & Wenzelburger, 2014; Hübscher & Sattler, 2017). Hence, it is commonly assumed that political actors invoke strategies when they anticipate losing voters over certain unpopular decisions or positions (Hinterleitner, 2017; Mayhew, 1974). These so-called "blame avoidance strategies" are central to studies on welfare state and retrenchment politics[2]. Scholars working in this field were struck by the observation that governments pursuing widely unpopular retrenchment policies are rarely, or at least not always, punished for it in the elections. One possible explanation, they argue, lies in governments successfully invoking strategies to avoid electoral blame –of course, it might

as well be that citizens are simply unaware of these policies being put in place, do not care or do not know whom to blame for it (Giger & Nelson, 2011; Vis, 2016; Vis & Van Kersbergen, 2007). While the absence of accountability for unpopular retrenchment policies does not offer definitive proof for the existence of blame avoidance strategies, it did spark scholarly interest in the topic. As Pierson (1996) argues: '*if retrenchment policies are enacted in spite of anticipated punishment at the ballot, it is highly likely that blame avoidance strategies will be implemented to circumvent these consequences'* (see also Hinterleitner, 2017).

One of the leading works on blame avoidance is authored by Weaver (1986), who identified eight types of strategies that governments can invoke to avoid being held accountable by voters for budget reforms, ranging from compensating voters financially to passing the blame for the budget cuts onto others. McGraw (1990), then, classifies these blame avoidance strategies into *justifications* (or *presentational strategies*– see Hood, 2010) and *excuses* (or *agency strategies,* see Hood, 2010). By using excuses, political actors try to weaken the causal link between themselves and the unpopular budget reform (e.g. by claiming that financial institutions asked for it, see Wenzelburger, 2011; Cox, 2001). Justifications, on the other hand, are invoked to ensure that the consequences of a policy decision are perceived more positively by citizens (e.g. by claiming the policy will keep the country running, see Wenzelburger, 2011). Another categorization of blame avoidance strategies that is made in the retrenchment literature distinguishes between strategies that manipulate procedures (e.g. delegating responsibility to non-state actors), that manipulate perceptions and, finally, that manipulate payoffs (e.g. implementing tough reforms right after the start of the new government) (Vis, 2016). In sum, and this is also how König and Wenzelburger (2014) synthesized the work, to avoid electoral repercussions for (seemingly) unpopular policies, political actors can either manipulate the link between an unpopular decision and themselves (i.e. *agency/organizational* strategies or excuses), and try to increase the endorsement of the policy (i.e. *presentational*/*communication* strategies or justifications) (see Hering, 2008; Hood, 2010; Vis & Van Kersbergen, 2007; Green-Pedersen, 2002).

Importantly, with the exception of Wenzelburger's (2011) anecdotal evidence, proof of which strategies, when and with what purpose are invoked by parties when they go against their voters' preferences, is virtually non-existent. Recently, Hinterleitner (2017)

has argued that the presence of blame avoidance is a black box, because of its limited focus on retrenchment politics, and especially because it is assumed rather than measured (see Vis, 2009). After all, most of the observational literature suffers from omitted variable bias; it is unclear whether the lack of punishment for certain policy decisions is due to the decision not being electorally risky, or because this risk has been eliminated by blame avoidance strategies. Similarly, certain (invisible, for instance) strategies simply cannot be identified by observing the behavior of political actors. Therefore, the second research question this study seeks to answer is;

> *RQ2: According to party leaders and ministers themselves, how* do *parties try to avoid electoral retribution for going against their voters' preferences?*

Methods

This study relies on interview data collected among party elites in Flanders, the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium[3]. Studying party decision-making in Belgium has two particular advantages. For one, Belgium is the archetype of a "partitocracy" with powerful and rather homogeneous parties (Deschouwer, 2012). The fragmentation of the party system, and the necessity of strong multilevel coordination, have even enhanced the position of political parties in Belgium in recent years (De Winter, 2019). In this party system, we study the politicians who ultimately determine the party line, namely *party leaders* and *ministers*. Belgian party leaders are the undisputed party decision-makers and while Belgian ministers are expected to serve the cabinet's interests and decide by governmental consensus, they are loyal party servants that defend the party's interests at the government table. Ministers keep close contact with the party leader and other party officials to discuss their position within the cabinet and have large cabinets working on safeguarding the party's interests. Similarly, ministers have a strong bearing on party decisions because they attend the weekly meetings of their party executive, a select group of party elites that meets regularly to decide on the party line (De Winter & Dumont, 2006). While the position of party leader and minister is different –Belgian ministers ultimately have a collective responsibility in serving the cabinet by executing the government agreement– and while there may be differences in how loyal individual elites are to their party (see for instance Alexiadou, 2015

on different types of cabinet members), it is beyond doubt that both are key actors in party decision-making (De Winter, 2019). In short, I chose to interview party leaders and ministers because they, as key witnesses and actors, can provide essential insights into how party decisions are made (Wenzelburger & Zohlnhöfer, 2020).

The second advantage of this study being conducted in Belgium is the simple fact that the rather open political culture, in combination with our quite established relationship with Belgian political elites[4], allowed me to get high-ranking politicians to participate in our research. By interviewing party leaders and ministers, I circumvent one major issue researchers tend to struggle with: the need to rely on circumstantial observational evidence to make claims on the conditionality of party responsiveness. Having access to top politicians in Belgium offers a rare opportunity to study the cognitive processes underlying party unresponsiveness.

To examine *why* and *how* parties deliberately go against their voters' preferences, we conducted semi-structured face-to-face interviews with the leaders of all six parties currently holding seats in parliament and thirteen ministers –seven ministers were not able to participate[5]. The interviews with nineteen party elites were conducted between March and June 2018 by one experienced interviewer in their offices in Brussels. During approximately one hour[6], elites were questioned about the media, about representation and about candidate selection. The questions on intentional unresponsiveness that we rely on in this study were asked at the beginning of the interview, and all elites answered them.

The interviewer asked the exact same questions to all politicians –questions that were developed out of sheer interest in understanding the mismatch between party action and voter preferences. Keeping the inductive approach of the study in mind, the interviewer allowed politicians to reflect and elaborate freely on the questions asked: he did not present elites with existing theories of unresponsiveness or typologies of blame avoidance strategies because it would harm the main goal of our study, which is to see what considerations, and what strategies prominent elites *spontaneously* come up with. Only when the interviewer felt that respondents, advertently or inadvertently, did not answer, he repeated the question, sometimes formulated slightly differently, but not leading the interviewees towards certain responses via these interjections. Also, we recorded the interviews (which none of interviewees objected) to facilitate the analysis afterwards (see Harvey, 2011).

After a brief introduction in which the interviewer emphasized that we were interested in party decision-making he asked; *'Does it happen that your party proposes an idea or initiative of which you know it is not supported by a majority of the voters of your party? Can you give an example?'.* Making interviewees think of a particular situation makes their reflections more tangible and as such increases the likelihood of receiving honest answers (see Kingdon, 1989 for empirical evidence substantiating this claim). Most respondents referenced multiple examples of situations where they deliberately went against their voters' preferences, and gave a coherent explanation for why they took the initiative against the will of their voters. As a follow-up question, the interviewer came back to a specific example of an incongruent party decision that the politician had just mentioned and asked; *'How did you handle this situation?'*. Interestingly, most elites spontaneously mentioned how they dealt with other unpopular initiatives they had pursued or were pursuing. Our anonymity agreement prevents us from zooming in on the exact proposals elites mentioned, but the policy issues were very diverse, ranging from pension reforms, air travel taxes, abortion laws, the reintroduction of military service, to, for instance, the introduction of noise standards on music festivals.

To formulate an answer to our research questions, then, I performed a conventional qualitative content analysis of the interview transcripts. Qualitative content analysis is a research method for the interpretation of content through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying patterns, or put differently; of organizing text with similar content (Cho & Lee, 2014; Kuckartz, 2014). The aim of this study is to *inductively* build a typology of party unresponsiveness, which implies that categories were drawn from the data instead of starting off with preconceived categories (following the approach of Elo and Kyngäs, 2008). The analysis of the interview data followed several steps. First, student coders transcribed the interviews and we started with analyzing the responses to the first and second question separately. Reading the relevant parts of the transcripts, I developed categories from the material; similar arguments (i.e. sentences or even paragraphs with a similar meaning) were grouped together –that is: given the same code. Reading through subsequent transcripts, similar arguments got the same code, and new codes were added if other content was encountered. A second reading was imposed on all the transcripts to verify the first round of coding. In a next step, similar arguments identified by codes were placed into broader categories. For instance, arguments such as '*I will not showcase this decision'* and '*we won't make it public'*, were classified together under

the category "*obfuscating*". Finally, the categories withheld from the data –that are discussed in the result section by means of exemplary quotes[7]– are analyzed in connection to existing literature (notably on blame avoidance and responsiveness, theories that came in only *after* the data were collected and analyzed).

Some methodological decisions warrant additional explanation. A first matter to address is the possibility of elites giving desirable or strategic answers. I have good reason to believe that politicians gave us honest answers in the sense that they match their actual thinking. For one, the interview context discouraged strategic responses; politicians were assured anonymity and knew that their answers would never be made public in an identifiable format –in previous waves of elite interviews we did in 2013 and 2015 the same rule applied and no such information reached the public realm. Importantly, these repeated contacts allowed us to establish a trust relationship with some of the elites (Harvey, 2011). Another reason why I feel confident about the trustworthiness of elites' answers is that they were at times surprisingly honest, stating, for instance: '*What I will now tell you should never be published*.' or '*Don't tell this to my colleagues*'. Of course, I cannot rule out that politicians' responses were subject to post-hoc rationalizations. Still, what the elites told, is largely consistent with the findings of observational studies on party responsiveness and blame avoidance.

A second point to emphasize, is that this study focuses primarily on why and how parties *in general* go against their voters' preferences. With just six parties in our sample, it makes sense to focus on considerations and strategies that exist across the board rather than to explore differences between types of parties. There is one exception, though. Given that there are substantial differences between opposition and government parties –for instance because the former have more leeway to focus on popular issues while the latter are constrained by the coalition agreement (a compromise between all governing parties) and other (international, budgetary) constraints, which may weaken the link between their decisions and their supporters' preferences (Green-Pedersen & Mortensen, 2010; Klüver & Spoon, 2016; Romeijn, 2020), I do highlight differences between government and opposition parties as they emerge.

Why parties cross voter preferences

What first of all stands out in party elites' reflections is that pleasing, or rather *not offending*, their voters if top of mind because, they unanimously argue, public support is a precondition to 'survive' in politics: *'The "business capital" of each party is its voters. Your members are your shareholders and your voters are your customers. No shop can survive without customers. Therefore, no party is going to take many initiatives that may scare away customers' (PL5-M).* The opinions of their voters clearly guide parties in choosing which initiatives to propose, which to emphasize and, importantly, which *not* to propose. As one minister puts it; '*It does not happen too often that we propose things that could potentially offend our voters. We depend on electoral success for survival, and we obviously have a desire to survive.'* (M4). Parties are reluctant to launch ideas that might meet a great deal of resistance from their voters; '*You should always weigh the anticipated benefits against the potential repercussions. Sometimes it is just not worth going against your voters.'* (M6). Clearly, all parties feel constrained by their voters' preferences, which explains, at least in part, why observational work has identified a sizable overlap between party positions and party voter preferences (see for instance Adams, 2012; Romeijn, 2020).

Even though parties are careful not to act against their voters' preferences all too often, all elites emphasize that this does not mean they blindly let their behavior be dictated by their voters' will. Some even posit that '*Leaders should not follow. Leaders must lead.'* (M11). Asking elites to tell us about situations in which they intentionally did *not* follow their voters, we learn that the electoral incentive to keep voters on board does not always outweigh other considerations of the party. In particular, three considerations are commonly referred to as to why parties decide to disregard what they believe their voters want –even though they are, in general, careful to not put off these voters.

Ideology is key – First, parties go against their voters' will if it drastically opposes their core *ideology*. Parties want to unfold their own ideological story, I learn from the interviews, and their vision on society does not always coincide with their party electorate's preferences. As one party leader puts it; 'W*e would never betray our core ideals.'* (PL3-M). Or as another minister points out; '*Across the ideological spectrum, certain things are a no-go zone for our party'* (M3). In sum, and confirming Budge et al.'s (2010) hypothesis, a party's ideological

vision sometimes takes priority over keeping voters satisfied; *'This [..] ethical issue goes to the heart of our ideology, so we simply did not care whether our voters were ready for this… We felt we had to do ground-breaking work.'* (PL4-M).

The greater good should prevail – Second, elites posit that voter opinions can, or rather need to, be disregarded when they contradict the *general public interest*. Elites emphasize that '*the greater good*' (M4) or '*national interests'* (PL3-M) should sometimes prevail over the desires of their voters. Some emphasize that parties are obliged to take decisions in the best interest of *all citizens* rather than just their own voters (see for instance Ezrow et al., 2011 on mean voter representation versus partisan constituency representation), while others stress that citizens are inherently egoistic and that their preferences sometimes contradict what is best for society. As one minister argues; '*I knew some of our voters would resent this… But yeah, there are some serious economic interests at stake here… We just had to do it.'* (M3). Parties feel they have an obligation to the broader community (Mair, 2009). Or as another minister bluntly puts it; '*It is our duty to move opinions in a direction that benefits the general public interest.*' (M11). This second argument may be related to the previous one; parties likely consider their ideology to be consistent with the general public interest. Yet, this need not be the case; party positions may as well serve the interests of particular groups (of voters).

The ignorant should not (always) be followed – Finally, and related to the previous consideration, parties sometimes consider voter preferences to be uninformed and inconsistent. Elites stress that citizens are swayed by issues of the day; '*One day they are in favor of a certain policy and the next day they are against.'* (M5) or '*Public opinion can change in a jiffy'* (PL3-M). Not only do they consider these preferences to be rather fluid, elites also emphasize that voters '*often have preferences that contradict each other*' (M7). Party elites seem to believe that they can ignore their voters' opinions because they do not really know what is best for themselves anyway. Not that citizens are necessarily incapable of holding informed opinions, but they simply lack the information necessary to form such opinions; *'Their opinions are often built on wrong assumptions, on misunderstandings. For*

some issues, they cannot help it, though. They lack the information to form an opinion, information that we as politicians have access to' (M2).

Government parties need to compromise – There is a fourth reason, crosscutting the other three, for *government* parties to deliberately pursue initiatives that are unpopular among their voters. The (obliged) *loyalty* towards other coalition partners sometimes forces government parties to implement policies that are not supported by their own voters – which may explain why government parties tend to be less responsive to their voters' preferences (see for instance Klüver & Spoon, 2016). As one minister puts it; '*Some issues are raised by the coalition partner and we know they are not liked by our voters. You calculate your losses then. But, in turn, of course, we also raise issues that we know we can please our own voters with'* (M9).

Looking at the four considerations for parties to go against their voters' preferences, a clear difference between government and opposition parties becomes apparent. While government elites commonly argue that they opposed their voters' will because of coalition dynamics (coalition partners trying to please their own voters in combination with the fact that governments take decisions by consensus), opposition party leaders tend to stress that they disregarded their voters' preferences because they were seen as uninformed or driven by self-interest, *and* because the policy issue at hand mattered a lot to the party (i.e. an issue they 'own' see Lefevere et al., 2015).

One can conclude that parties care deeply about their voters' preferences; they pander towards their positions to keep them aligned, and they refrain from proposing things that may scare them away to other parties. In line with theoretical accounts on party behavior (see for instance Strøm & Müller, 1999), I find that the necessity of voter support is top of mind for all parties and instigates responsive behavior. At the same time, all elites give examples of policy proposals, initiatives and ideas of their party that, in their perception, went against their voters' desires. Hence, party unresponsiveness not only originates from parties misunderstanding their voters' preferences (see Broockman & Skovron, 2013), parties also *intentionally* go against these preferences from time to time. In particular, they do so when voters' desires are considered unfounded or inconsistent, or if

they feel their preferences contradict the ideological vision of the party or the general public interest. As one minister eloquently puts it;

> *'Our voters' will is one of the elements we take into account. We also need to look at what is financially possible, what is feasible and whether it is in line with our ideology. These opinions are just one of the objective elements that help us to choose a direction and take decisions, but it is certainly not the only thing that matters'* (M2).

How parties try to avoid electoral retribution for going against their voters' preferences

When the position of the party coincides with the preferences of its voters, as one party leader notes, they are golden; '*This is a goldmine, because our views are already in line with the sensitivities of our voters. We just have to formulate the right supply.'* (PL5-M). At the same time, I showed, parties occasionally want, or have to in the case of government parties, pursue a course of action that does not correspond with their voters' opinions. What is crucial in their decision (not) to go against their voters, elites argue, is the amount of retribution they anticipate; '*Our main concern is not losing votes… Winning support is always nice, and every politician would like the party to grow, but no one wants to lose, right?*' (M8). Or as another minister meticulously describes it; '*When we are considering ideas, we rarely say 'yes, let's do this because 90% of the electorate would like it', the discussion always is; 'we really need to watch out because some of our voters will not approve of this.'* (M3). These two exemplary quotes clearly indicate that party elites are risk averse.

Still, elites do not always consider it electorally hazardous to go against the will of their voters. Some stress that voicing unpopular positions or pursuing unpopular policies might sometimes even positively affect their election results. Opposing voter preferences *and* being honest about it, they can show their courage, demonstrate '*statesmanship'*, which they presume to be rewarded on Election Day. Their rationale holds that a party's reputation matters a great deal in elections. A party leader addresses this apparent

contradiction; '*It often is a paradox. On the one hand, people appreciate it when we know what is on their mind. But often they also appreciate it when we have a clear vision, an idea of where we want to go'* (PL3-M). Or as another minister puts it; '*sometimes people will vote for you even if you've done something they did not agree with. Because they respect you. Sometimes you meet people who say; "I disagree with what you've done, I was even mad and I still don't agree, but I appreciate that you've done it"'.* (PL4-M).

Usually, though, going against voter opinion *is* considered risky behavior, electorally speaking. Especially so when it concerns issues that belong to the core of the party, that are "owned" by the party (e.g. environmental issues to the Green party) (see Lefevere et al., 2015 for more information on this concept). The rationale holds that these issues are more important to party voters, and therefore, parties anticipate more electoral sanctioning when offending their voters on these issues that (often) made them vote for the party in the first place. As a party leader describes it; *'The closer an issue comes to your core themes, the more you need to handle it with care; the more you need to think about it, deal with it more strategically. Why? Because the more important the issue, the more going against your voters potentially costs you.'* (PL5). Interestingly, that (perceived) issue salience increases the fear of electoral retribution explains why observational studies have found that often, issue salience is positively related to responsiveness to public opinion (e.g. Lax & Phillips, 2009). At the same time, other observational work suggests that parties dare to oppose voter preferences more on these "owned" issues because they have a "trust advantage" on these issues. Whether or not parties are more or less responsive on issues they own, depends on the estimation of electoral consequences made by elites.

So far, the interviews have taught us that parties occasionally pursue ideas they assume are not supported by their voters, and that they sometimes consider this unresponsiveness electorally risky. When parties anticipate that such behavior may put off voters, they invoke strategies to avoid or at least reduce the odds of electoral punishment; *'When you feel you cannot just promote your position, you have to change reality in your advantage. It asks for a subtle quest for support, which is a matter of carefully building a strategy around certain issues.'* (PL5-M).

Make sure they don't see it – One way parties try to deflect electoral sanctioning for unpopular decisions is by simply *hiding* them. If it is not visible, it cannot be held against the party on Election Day, the rationale holds; *'We will not make it public. We might write a few sentences on it in our program, but we will for sure not showcase it.'* (PL1-O). Or as another party leader puts it, *'We will shut up about it. We will not send out press statements to promote it. We will not bring it up ourselves in debates, for instance, but won't lie about it either*' (PL6-O). Another minister argues; '*we will not communicate about it, otherwise people might take to the streets,*' (M12). Or, as a party leader claims; *If your view is not shared by your supporters then you best remain silent. Selective mutism happens, not only in parties. Trade unions, for instance, have been silent about the migration/identity issue for the past four years […]. They are trying to position themselves on non-salient leftist themes, but you do not hear the union leaders speak about asylum or identity because they know their supporters disagree'* (PL3-M). Besides passively hiding their decisions, parties also *actively* try to divert attention; '*We proposed a package of policies that were quite unpopular but in our communications we emphasized one specific part we knew people would appreciate, and care about.'* (PL4-M).

Hiding unpopular decisions for the public eye is not always feasible. Elites stress that *not* attracting attention is fairly easy for technical issues that do not generate much interest among voters. It is more challenging, though, with regard to initiatives that attract media and consequentially public attention. Also, and importantly, parties do not always *want* to disguise initiatives they believe are legit; '*We were well aware that our idea was unpopular at first but we had credible, clear objectives. We knew why we wanted to propose it and therefore had no problem publicly defending it.'* (M6).

Explain it – When party elites anticipate that a proposal may jeopardize the party's election result, and they can or will not cover it up, they try to *explain* it to their supporters. Government and opposition elites alike stress the importance of communicational strategies to reduce voter resistance; *'The crucial question always is; can we explain it?'* (PL4-M). Interestingly, explaining unpopular ideas is not necessarily the same as manipulating citizens to endorse it. Sometimes, interviewees argue, public resistance is founded upon false assumptions, assumptions that parties can remedy in their explanations; '*They simply did not grasp the technicities so we needed to explain them.'*

(M2). Yet, strategic communication often seems to go beyond factual explanations – confirming Jacobs and Shapiro's (2000) finding that US presidents try to lower electoral costs of going against public opinion by crafting their arguments to change public opinion in favor of their policy. If parties feel that a particular proposal or position may come back to haunt them at the ballot box, they try to reduce initial voter resistance by offering three types of explanations.

First, parties highlight the societal fairness of the proposal; '*You need to convince voters that the initiative is in their best interest, that you are proposing it for the greater good.'* (PL5-M). Moreover, some stress that it is easier to convince citizens that their proposition is fair if they understand that the status-quo is unfair and untenable, and therefore needs to change; *'A taxi home from the airport is often more expensive than the plane ticket. How on earth is that possible? We need to stress this is wrong. People are receptive of our argument once they realize this is wrong* (PL1-O).

Second, parties emphasize the future positive consequences of their proposal to reduce voter resistance. Often, the interviewees posit, initiatives that are only beneficial in the long run are perceived by voters as unpleasant. It is up to the party to make sure voters understand the (future) benefits, which they sometimes do by referring to '*successful examples in other countries.'* (M1). As a party leader meticulously describes it;

> *'Even our hard-core party militants show behavior that is not in line with our vision. We can blame them and say 'you cannot do this or that [...]' and lose their support, or we can think on it and try to get them along. We have an ideal, and it is pretty easy to communicate it straightforwardly, but we always have the reflex to think of ways to get our voters along. We emphasize the damaging consequences of [..], explain how it [the initiative] will help us in the long run. We make it 'digestible', so that they eventually realize it is not a punishment, but that it is in their best interest.'* (PL1-O)

Third, parties try to increase voter endorsement by claiming their proposal '*fits the ideological line of the party.'* (M5). In doing so, I learn from elites' reflections, they seek to appear trustworthy and consistent, which in turn can have a positive impact on their election results.

Interestingly, politicians stress that all of these justifications are more effective when they are backed by influential societal actors; '*Finding support for the initiative was crucial, so we made stakeholders do part of this work.'* (M10). Opinion leaders, interest groups or authorities in a certain policy domain may help the party to promote an idea that is not (yet) supported by their voters. Parties seem to be well aware of the potential mobilizing power of societal actors; *'The CEO of […] for example backed our last initiative on […]. That this CEO says something like that is golden. We suddenly had an ally to help us sell our idea.'* (PL1-O).

In line with existing typologies in the blame avoidance literature –Wenzelburger (2011) speaks of *communicational strategies*, McGraw (1990) of *justifications* and Hood (2010) of *presentational strategies,* I find that government and opposition parties alike, by explaining the seemingly unpopular proposal, stressing its fairness, future positive impact, and ideological consistency, try to ease party voter resistance.

Organize it so that it does least damage – Besides strategically tailoring their explanations, parties invoke *organizational* strategies (or in Hood's terms *agency strategies)* hoping to decrease the likelihood of being held accountable for unpopular propositions on Election Day. First, and this strategy is mentioned by government party elites only, parties strategically time the announcement of a policy (confirming Vis, 2016). It is electorally safer, they argue, to announce unpopular initiatives at the beginning of the electoral cycle –which explains why observational work finds that unpopular budget cuts are often implemented in the first year of the electoral cycle (see for instance Fernández (2012) on pension policy retrenchments). Indeed, a party leader argues; *'This is why 'tough' decision are mostly taken in the beginning of the term'* (PL4-M). The rationale holds that citizens cannot hold parties accountable immediately after the unpopular idea is announced, so the further away from elections parties announce it, the less likely it is that voters will recall it at the ballot; *'There are elections next year. Everyone realizes that now is not the right time to put an initiative on the table that is disliked. The distance from elections plays a big role… always.'* (M2). Or; *'I know that most people that vote for our party […] and would therefore be offended by this proposal. We decided to go ahead anyway, but only because we were able do it in the beginning of the legislature.'* (PL5-M).

In a similar vein, government parties try to postpone the unpleasant effects of an initiative. By lifting these effects over the election, they reason, citizens will not (yet) punish them for it. Interestingly, as the following quote exemplifies, postponing the immediate unpleasant effects of a policy influences the (rationality of the) public debate on the policy;

> *'This [policy initiative] has hardly any immediate impact on citizens. It is only effectively put in place by 2030, and human beings in general have a hard time imagining the future; they can look one year, perhaps in rare cases three years ahead. Therefore, discussions about these future policies are more rational. By making an abstraction of time, you get a different discussion, it is less emotional.'* (PL4-M)

Organize it in such a way that you can explain it – Not only do parties propose unpopular initiatives in the beginning of the electoral cycle to reduce the prospects of electoral accountability (see Hood, 2010; König & Wenzelburger, 2014), it additionally gives parties more time to *explain* their ideas. As such, the strategic organization of the implementation or announcement of a seemingly unpopular policy is related to the strategic communication; it simply gives parties a better shot at increasing the endorsement before the next elections take place. And, some interviewees stress, it is easier to convince voters of the benefits of what they propose if they have had the opportunity to actually experience the new policy before they are summoned to vote. As one minister elaborately describes it;

> *We recently decided to […], which received a lot of negative criticism. Journalists were covering the presumed drawbacks extensively, and the […] sector reacted quite vehemently. They claimed that we were deliberately boycotting them. We continued either way, and now everyone is on board. That it turned out positively is probably due to the fact that the next elections were quite far away. There was time for the industry, but also for people, to get used to the new guidelines and now they actually experienced it, they can see the benefits. If we proposed this right before the elections, people would only see the negative sides* (M2).

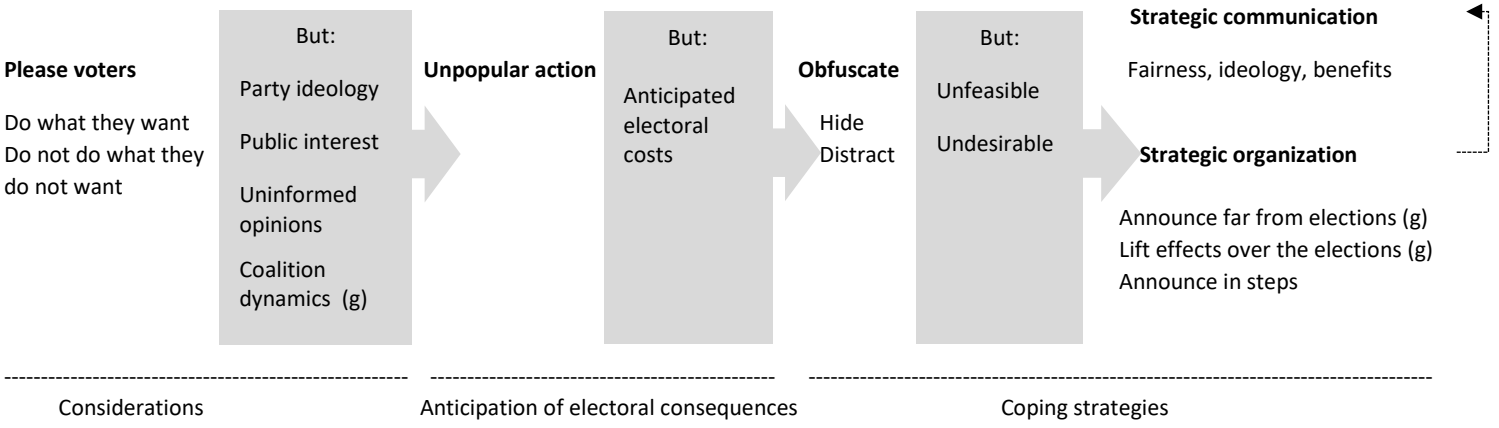
A final and related strategy is to announce an idea in different phases because it is less intrusive; citizens have time to get used to parts of it rather than having to process it all at once. In addition, a step-wise introduction allows for more fine-grained strategic communication. Parties, I learn from the interviews, first try to convince voters about a rather unobtrusive aspect of the proposal, and as soon as they have their support, they move on to propose and promote other, more tricky, parts, which is easier because citizens are already convinced about the baseline idea; *'Our voters are not ready yet for the radical ban on […] we want to propose. So we have to do it in different stages; subsidize alternatives […] for example, and get everyone on board by tacitly explaining why such a ban is necessary. If this works out well, we can introduce a total ban.'* (PL1-O).

Party strategic unresponsiveness

Summarizing the above findings, **Figure I** visualizes a party's decision-making calculus. First, I find that parties want to please their voters, and in particular, that they are careful not to offend them. Still, all party elites come forward with multiple examples of initiatives, ideas or policy proposals they did pursue against the will of their voters. The reasons for ignoring party voter preferences are in the first grey arrow; sometimes, voter preferences go against the party's core ideology (i.e. policy goals), go against what is considered best for society or are simply considered flawed, unfounded or inconsistent. Additionally, government parties need to compromise with coalition partners and take decisions by consensus and, therefore, they are sometimes forced to implement policies that go against their voters' preferences. These four considerations explain (in part, of course) why party decisions and positions do not always match with their voters' desires.

How parties behave in this situation of intentional incongruence, hinges on their estimation of the electoral consequences they might face (second arrow). Interestingly, we find that parties do not necessarily anticipate electoral losses when opposing their voters' preferences. They show statesmanship in doing so and this too may be appreciated by voters, elites reason. Often, though, parties do anticipate electoral repercussions for unresponsive behavior –and especially on salient issues–, and in that case, they invoke different strategies to avoid, or at least to contain the expected electoral retribution. If possible, parties try to hide these initiatives from the public eye, or even actively distract attention. Usually, however, this kind of obfuscating behavior is considered neither desirable nor feasible (third arrow). Assuming their voters are or will become aware of the unpopular initiatives, parties invoke two types of strategies. For one, they try to decrease voter resistance by communicating about the fairness, future positive effects and ideological consistency of their initiatives. Organization-wise, then, government parties propose unpopular initiatives at the beginning of the electoral cycle and postpone the immediate effects to avoid electoral accountability. Interestingly, strategic timing facilitates communication: the earlier an initiative is announced, the more time parties have to ease public resistance by unfolding communication strategies.

Figure I – Strategic unresponsiveness: party's decision-making process



Note. (g) = government parties only

Conclusion

The current study identifies the conditions under which parties deliberately pursue ideas that are not endorsed by their voters by means of in-depth interviews with nineteen ministers and party leaders in Belgium.

This qualitative approach adds insights to the existing observational and theoretical literature on party responsiveness and blame avoidance. With regard to the former, I show that all parties are keen on pleasing their voters and, in particular, are careful not to offend them, especially so on salient issues. Yet, although parties are overall reluctant to propose initiatives that might meet a great deal of resistance among their voters, they sometimes intentionally do. In particular when they deem their voters' desires uninformed, ideologically flawed or a threat to the general public interest. Parties are not mere agents of voter preferences, nor do they simply bring their ideological preferences to voters on Election Day. In balancing their electoral ambitions with the pursuit of policy goals, the anticipation of electoral sanctions plays a vital role. Yet, the expectation of future elections constrains rather than paralyzes parties; when they go against the preferences of their voters *and* fear that they will be punished for it on election day, they invoke strategies to reduce voter resistance and decrease the likelihood that they will be sanctioned. Thus, these strategies allow reconciling conflicting party goals; advancing policies parties deem necessary while minimizing the likelihood of electoral repercussions.

Adding to the blame avoidance-literature, then, we first of all show that parties think in terms of blame avoidance –something that has often been assumed, but that has rarely been shown empirically. Indeed, we show that *all* parties in their daily decision-making– not only government parties implementing tough retrenchment policies (e.g. Vis & Van Kersbergen, 2007) –invoke strategies to contain electoral losses when going against their voters' will, and we add more nuance as to what strategies are used. After all, we find that parties mostly accept responsibility for unpopular proposals and try to *justify* them rather than to run away from their responsibilities –in that sense, the concept "blame avoidance" is ambiguous because parties do seem to accept responsibility and try to move voter opinion in their advantage. It is true that parties try to avoid electoral retribution by proposing unpopular ideas in the beginning of the electoral cycle, but they also use this time until the next elections to find support for their ideas by carefully explaining why they

adhere to a certain position or pursue a particular initiative by stressing its fairness, benefits and/or ideological consistency. In that regard, the term "coping strategies" may be better suited to grasp how parties strategically handle being unresponsive to voter preferences.

These findings matter for democratic representation. It shows that Belgian parties tend to adhere to a *Burkean* view of representation in that they cross voter preferences when they feel that these preferences conflict with society's best interest. In light of a trustee view of representation, then, where political actors supposedly act *in the interest* of citizens rather than following their wishes (see Pitkin, 1967), the finding that parties occasionally oppose their voters' preferences for the sake of the "greater good" could be considered as positive for democracy. That political actors want to avoid electoral sanctioning by invoking coping strategies, in a way helps positions being chosen and decisions being taken that might otherwise fail because the risk of losing support is too high (Mayhew, 1974). Hence, a positive read of the findings would be that party politics is not capitalized entirely by short-term responsiveness to voters' desires and a refrainment from enacting politically costly (responsible) initiatives (Mair, 2009). From a *delegate* view on representation, then, the finding that parties dare to go against voter preferences is more problematic in that political actors are supposed to dutifully translate public opinion into public policy. Additionally, the fact that parties perceive voters as educable, or even manipulable, might be worrisome too; parties hiding certain initiatives, for instance, deny their voters a fair chance to hold them to account on election day.

The novelty as well as the limitation of this study is that we rely on accounts from party elites that are inherently subjective (Harvey, 2011). Even though interrogating key party decision-makers is the only way to grasp the considerations that drive party behavior, we are well aware that this method has its limitations. For one, our explorative approach enabled us to identify considerations and strategies that are top of mind for party elites while it does not offer definitive proof about *how regularly* parties oppose their voters' will, nor about how often they fear electoral backlash and invoke certain strategies. In that sense, it is important that our typology of party (un)responsiveness is validated (and elaborated on) in a more systematic, observational setting. By means of a content analysis of party communications and party initiatives, scholars could establish how often (certain) parties use (certain) strategic explanations for being unresponsive, or, for instance, what characterizes policy proposals that are announced early on in the electoral cycle. In general,

that we have identified what strategies parties use, may help scholars to look for them in observational data, data that would allow to examine variation between *parties*, *issues* and even *political systems*. Another way forward is to conduct (survey-embedded) experiments with party decision-makers; scholars could manipulate the degree of voter resistance and see whether it affects their (hypothetical) communicative reactions, and the likelihood to pursue responsible policies. Finally, this study asks elites about *party voters* only –a deliberate choice, in that parties are first and foremost expected to represent their *own* voters, which makes it interesting to understand why they intentionally go against their preferences. Yet, it would be interesting if future work could zoom in on how parties deal with the preferences of *potential* party voters, and those of the general public (e.g. Ezrow et al., 2011).

Overall, this study has taken a modest step in unravelling one particular aspect of the chain of representation; it has identified why and under what conditions parties want, or rather dare to, pursue unresponsive policies and take unpopular positions.

Notes

1. In this chapter, I use the term “their voters”, “party voters” or “the party electorate” to address all citizens who voted for a particular party in the previous election. While it is also interesting to consider how parties deal with the preferences of all voters, of course (see Ezrow et al., 2011), or with those of their potential voters, party voters are relevant to study in the context of party behavior (Brack et al. 2012). After all, it is clear who they are (this is less the case for potential voters), and they are the voters that parties should serve in the first place.

2. The emphasis on “blame avoidance” in retrenchment literature is no surprise since retrenchment politics is often an exercise in avoiding electoral blame because the costs for citizens are substantial and immediate while the benefits often are not (Hood, 2010).

3. Belgium is a federalized state with Flanders and Wallonia as the main regions and communities. Parties are divided along linguistic lines; Flemish (Dutch-speaking) parties can only receive votes from Flemish citizens and parties active in Wallonia, the French-speaking part of Belgium, only represent Walloon citizens. In a way, one could consider the Flemish (Dutch-speaking) party system as one in its own right.

4. The same senior researcher that interviewed party elites for this study conducted interviews with MPs, ministers and party leaders in earlier research projects in 2013 and 2015 and was therefore able to build a trust relationship with many of them.

5. Party leaders from Groen (Greens), Sp.a (Socialists), CD&V (Christian Democrats), Open Vld (Liberals), N-VA (Right-wing nationalists) and Vlaams Belang (Extreme-right) and thirteen ministers from the majority parties (Open Vld, N-VA and CD&V) were interviewed. That some ministers could not participate does not introduce a bias in our sample. Of course, because Open Vld, N-VA and CD&V were in power, I interviewed more politicians belonging to these parties. Nevertheless, I have no reason to believe that the results would be different if the ministers were members of other parties.

6. Note that we had asked the politicians to make themselves available for one hour. In reality, though, the interviews usually lasted about an hour and a half. Many elites forgot about the time and their usually quite busy schedules as soon as they started talking.

7. Each interview is labelled by a unique ID, and the subscript 'PL' for party leaders (PL-O for opposition parties, PL-M for majority parties) or 'M' for ministers. In addition, because we promised politicians that they nor their party would ever be identifiable in our academic output, some parts of politicians' reflections that would allow them to be identified are censored.

CONCLUSION & DISCUSSION

Conclusion and discussion

This dissertation's aim was to shed light on one of the factors potentially contributing to democratic representation, namely politicians' *accountability beliefs*. While ample scholarly work on representation hinges on the assumption that political actors anticipate electoral accountability and act accordingly, scholars have rarely studied the premise of such anticipatory representation (Mansbridge, 2003; Stimson et al., 1995). This thesis set out to fill this empirical lacuna, thereby enriching our understanding of how representation comes about, and sometimes fails to come about. In particular, the goal of this PhD was (1) to study how politicians conceive of electoral accountability and (2) to explore whether and how these conceptions influence their representational behavior.

Over the years, abundant scholarly work has zoomed in on the mechanisms establishing a relationship between representatives and the represented. Examining whether, and when, congruent policies are put in place, research has focused predominantly on *citizens* –on their vote choice, on the resulting composition of parliament, and so on– and to a lesser extent on *political actors* –on their responsiveness to citizens' preferences, on their own policy preferences, etc. By studying how politicians conceive of citizens' accountability behavior and by examining how these perceptions affect political action, this thesis connects both strands of research. This way, I add to ample observational work on elite responsiveness that alludes to the fact that elections prompt politicians to learn and to respond to voter preferences, but that hardly ever identified such "rational anticipation" empirically. This should not come as a surprise, given that its key assumption, namely that politicians anticipate electoral accountability and adapt their behavior to meet public demands, cannot simply be studied by observing external political action. Instead, one needs to understand the motivations and considerations of political decision-makers, and *talk* to them to be able to observe these beliefs.

Therefore, this thesis adopts a direct approach, asking politicians about their perceptions of voter control and their resulting behavior. It was inspired by some older American studies, notably the work of Miller and Stokes (1963) and Kingdon (1967; 1989), that tries to grasp politicians' perceptions of their voters and link it to their Congressional decision-making. By, for the first time, conceptualizing, systematically measuring and explaining politicians' *accountability beliefs* and their effects, this dissertation elucidates a key assumption of anticipatory responsiveness, namely that politicians *feel* monitored by voters and that this feeling of being controlled instigates responsiveness. I have put this premise, which is central to the representation literature, to an elaborate empirical test by means of survey questions, a survey experiment and interviews with (mostly Belgian) politicians.

In this concluding chapter, the findings of the empirical sections of this dissertation are summarized and integrated. The implications and contributions of the thesis are discussed, limitations are identified, and some suggestions for future research are made.

Overarching conclusions

In six empirical chapters, using different methods, various aspects of politicians' perceptions of voter control and its consequences are studied. Here I aim to integrate the results of these separate chapters –which are presented in **Figure I** at the end of this section– by drawing some overarching conclusions.

1) Surprisingly strong feelings of voter control

The premise of anticipatory representation is that politicians *feel* controlled by voters (Mansbridge, 2003). In this thesis, notably in the first two chapters, I show that this seems to be the case.

In **Chapter 1** of this dissertation, which studies Flemish politicians' *awareness beliefs*, it is shown that most politicians believe that voters know what they do. In particular, politicians were asked to estimate the extent to which party voters are aware of the oral questions they ask in parliament and of the initiatives their party pursues. Matching their estimations with citizens' actual awareness, it shows that citizens know far less about their political actions than politicians think. From the reflections of politicians in the open interview, I learn that they tend to overestimate how familiar voters are with their actions because they generalize feedback they receive, both on- and offline, from exceptionally engaged citizens and, consequently, get a biased image of how knowledgeable voters actually are of what they do. Another explanation for their disproportionate sense of voter scrutiny lies in the fact that politicians, and especially backbencher parliamentarians, only occasionally (if ever) gain some visibility with their work. As a result, they seem to overestimate the actual scope of awareness when their actions, exceptionally, do get some visibility (in the press, on social media,…).

Looking at politicians' accountability beliefs in their entirety –i.e. their *awareness*, *outcome*, and *voting beliefs*– in **Chapter 2**, it shows again that politicians anticipate a considerable degree of voter control. Most politicians believe that a substantial number of party voters know their positions on various policy issues and know what they are doing in parliament, that voters evaluate the consequences of their actions and, finally, that these voters take this knowledge into account in elections. This is true for politicians in Belgium, Germany, Switzerland and Canada, for high-level elites as well as backbencher MPs,

government as well as opposition members, senior as well as junior politicians, and electorally vulnerable and secure politicians alike. Apart from the fact that politicians in more candidate-centered political systems feel the weight of voter control slightly more than their colleagues who have less incentives to pursue a personal vote, this dissertation's findings suggest that politicians' perceptions of voter control do not accurately reflect reality. After all, we know from copious research on voters that their knowledge of politics and their ability to cast a retrospective, policy-induced vote choice, leaves much to be desired (e.g. Achen & Bartels, 2017).

For this conclusion, I introduce new evidence (i.e. evidence not yet reported in other chapters of this thesis) showing that politicians' accountability perceptions do not reflect the actual amount of voter control they can expect. By means of a content analysis[1] of newspaper articles in 2018, I calculate for all Flemish parliamentarians how often they are mentioned in the written press. Comparing their actual visibility with survey data on their accountability beliefs, it appears that politicians who *are* more visible and whose policy actions should be better known to voters, do *not* consider it more likely that they will be held accountable than their colleagues who are less visible and therefore less likely to be held accountable. The visibility of politicians in newspapers is not related to their beliefs on voter awareness (r=.10; p=.23) nor to their overall accountability beliefs (r=.02; p=.78).

In sum, the first conclusion of this thesis is that politicians believe that what they do and say is known to (some) voters *and* matters for their electoral prospects –when in reality citizens are fairly ignorant. This finding implies that the first premise for anticipatory representation, one that is commonly assumed but empirically ignored, is fulfilled: politicians do feel monitored by voters.

2) The paradox of voter (in)capabilities

In studying politicians' perceptions of electoral accountability using various measures, a striking contrast becomes apparent –both in Chapter 1 on politicians' awareness beliefs, and in Chapter 3, where I zoom in on politicians' beliefs about citizens' party choice considerations. In **Chapter 1**, politicians are first asked to reflect on citizens' *general* level of political interest and knowledge. They seem quite pessimistic, stating that most citizens are uninformed about and uninterested in politics, or that politics is simply too complicated for citizens to comprehend. At the same time, as I set out in the previous section, a

considerable number of politicians believe that some voters do know what specific oral question they had recently asked. If voters do not care about politics, or if politics is too complex to understand, why on earth would they be aware of the questions individual politicians ask in the fairly invisible parliamentary arena? Some citizens have a hard time recognizing MPs by name[2], let alone knowing what they do in parliament. Similarly, if voters are uninformed, how would they know about specific party behavior (which, again, is something MPs falsely believe)[3]?

Looking at the findings of **Chapter 3**, then, the same paradox becomes apparent. Asking politicians about the motivations that drive citizens' party choice on Election Day, they appear to have a rather cynical view of voters' considerations. Most of them posit that citizens vote for a party because they sympathize with (one or more) individuals on the party list or because the party has waged a convincing campaign. The reason that is put third in line is habit: politicians believe that some people just always vote, without much consideration, for the same party. Politicians are much less convinced that citizens choose a party for its policy profile –neither prospectively, based on the promises the party makes for the future, nor retrospectively, based on the party's past policy performance. Here again, politicians' views of citizens' party choice considerations contrast sharply with how they conceive of voter awareness of and potential accountability for their *individual* actions. In the minds of politicians, some voters know what they do and say, and some will hold them accountable for it, yet at the same time, voters are not even considered to be able to make a policy-induced party choice.

Overall, politicians seem to have a rather accurate impression of the general political interest and knowledge of citizens. At the same time, politicians believe that when it comes to their own policy actions, voters are capable of knowing things that most political scientists or political journalists, both insatiable political news consumers, are not even aware of. Politicians show a general disdain towards voters, yet overestimate the knowledge these same voters have of their concrete actions. "Voters don't care about politics, except for what I do", they seem to reason. In the psychological literature, the finding that people tend to overestimate the extent to which their actions and appearances are noted by others is referred to as "the spotlight effect" (see Gilovich et al., 2000). Therefore, despite their realistic view that voters are generally poorly informed about

politics, the misplaced sense of individual voter scrutiny they experience, does ensure that a key premise of anticipatory representation is fulfilled.

3) Accountability beliefs matter

The third conclusion of this dissertation is that politicians' perceptions of voter control *matter*. First, in **Chapter 4**, it is shown that politicians who score high on the anticipated accountability-scale say to engage more with ordinary citizens, talk more about public opinion with their fellow colleagues and spend more time looking for public opinion information. This is true for Belgian members of parliament as well as for local U.S. legislators. It seems that the anticipation of voter control –the fact that politicians believe that voters monitor their actions, know what they stand for and will hold them accountable for it– induces politicians to get acquainted with the desires of voters. It makes them look for public opinion information, talk about public opinion and simply interact more with voters. Such information-seeking behavior matters. On the one hand, the interactions that politicians have with voters have value as such: they ensure that these citizens *feel* represented, that they know politicians care about their concerns (see Saward, 2006). On the other hand, politicians' investment in getting to know public opinion should give them a more accurate understanding of the public's desires, which in a next step should also ensure that citizens *are* better represented.

Investing in knowing public opinion is one thing, effectively responding to it is another. In **Chapter 5**, the focus is on politicians' willingness to respond to voter preferences once they are known. The results of a survey experiment in which half of the politicians are informed about their party electorate's opinion on a specific policy proposal show that accountability beliefs induce responsiveness. When politicians learn about voters' opinion, those who feel the weight of voter control are more inclined to respond to the preferences of these voters than politicians who estimate the likelihood of voter control to be small. This is true for responsiveness in different arenas; politicians who anticipate (much) individual accountability are (or rather claim to be) more responsive to voter preferences in their communications with journalists, in interactions with constituents and on internal party meetings. In a similar vein, **Chapter 6** concludes that parties respond to the preferences of their voters because they fear losing support if they do not. In sum, the anticipation of voter control does not only prompt information seeking behavior (the first precondition for

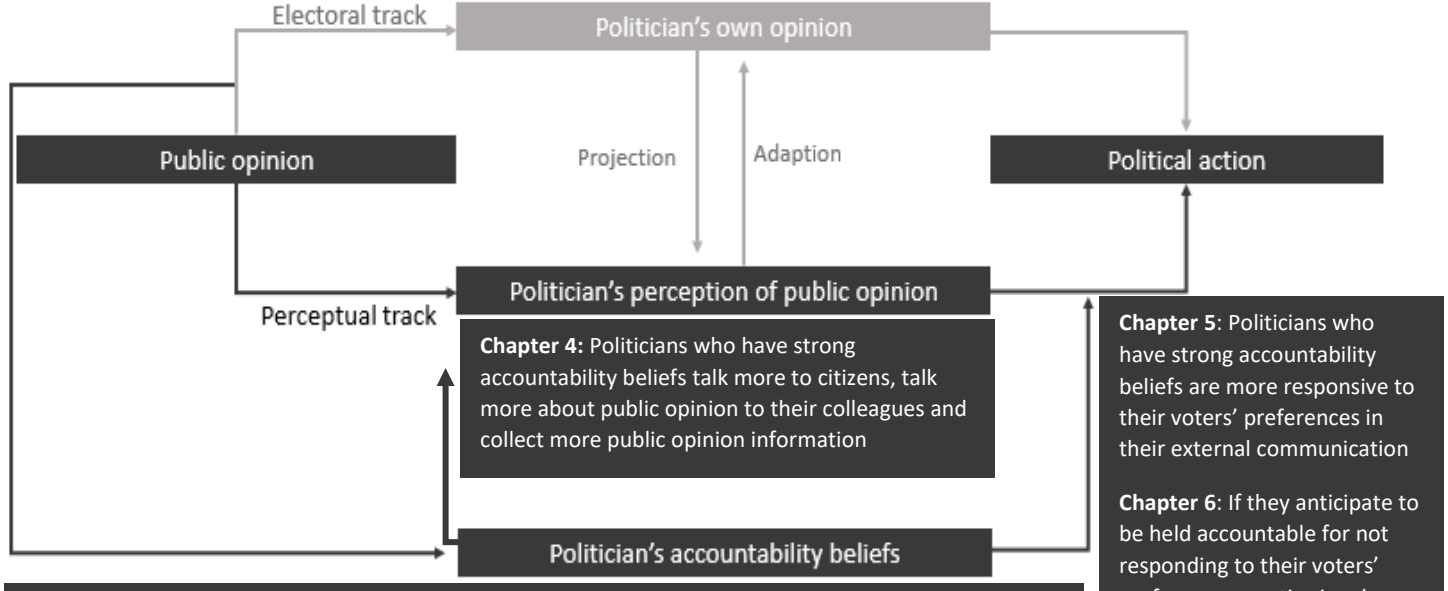
rational anticipation to result in responsive policies), but it just as well makes politicians more inclined to effectively respond to voter preferences in their actions once these preferences are known (the second precondition).

The anticipation of electoral accountability also influences political action when parties are *not* responsive to their voters' desires, I show in **Chapter 6**. If parties deliberately pursue a course of action that is unpopular among their voters, or at least if they *think* it is, and if they expect to be held accountable for it in the elections, they invoke "coping strategies" to avert possible electoral ramifications. Indeed, from interviews with Flemish party leaders and ministers, I learn that parties either try to *hide* (certain parts of) unpopular initiatives from the public eye, that they try to *explain* them to voters by stressing the fairness, the future benefits and the ideological consistency of the proposals or, finally, that they strategically *organize* the implementation of the proposal so that citizens would have forgotten about it by the time they have to go to the ballot again. Complementing the literature on governmental blame avoidance, I show that parties choose to implement unpopular policies in the beginning of the electoral cycle, not just to increase the likelihood that voters will have forgotten it on election day (as previous work argues), but also to have more time to explain to their voters why they pursued this course of action and allow them to get used to the measure that was initially unwanted. Note that even though Chapter 6 focused only on party decision-making, the interviews we conducted with Flemish members of parliament, in the framework of the same project, show that individual politicians invoke similar coping strategies when they do or say things that may result in electoral backlash (Walgrave et al., forthcoming).

To sum up: politicians' accountability beliefs matter. By comparing the behavior of politicians who hold different accountability beliefs, I show that the anticipation of electoral accountability constitutes a crucial incentive to get acquainted with and respond to voter preferences. This finding confirms the widely held scholarly assumption that rational anticipation of elections instigates responsiveness. Moreover, I find that the impact of the anticipation of voter control by political actors goes beyond responsiveness. When, exceptionally, political actors do go against voter preferences, they seek to secure viable electoral support by invoking all kinds of strategies.

The conclusions of this dissertation, for each empirical chapter respectively, are visualized in **Figure I**.

Figure I – Overview of empirical chapters and their findings



Contributions to the representation literature

Elections are a defining moment in democratic societies as they establish a representational relationship between the people and their representatives (Przeworski et al., 1999; Stokes, 1999). In particular, there are two main ways in which elections could contribute to the connection between voter preferences and public policy (Miller & Stokes, 1963). The election in itself is key, in that voters can elect the politicians and parties with whom they share their preferences and if those elected dutifully carry out their pre-election promises, voters' opinions should be reflected in proportionate strength in the political arena (Przeworski et al., 1999). For all sorts of reasons –ranging from voter incompetence to vote "correctly" to strategic promises being made by politicians that are not fulfilled– the votes citizens cast once every few years do not, in itself, establish a good connection between public preferences and public policy (see, among many others, Achen & Bartels, 2017; Lau et al., 2014).

This dissertation, in turn, deals with the *indirect* effect of elections. The assumption holds that political actors can ensure a representational relationship if they are responsive to what citizens want *in between* elections because of the rewards they will get for it *at the next elections* (Mansbridge, 2003). Abundant theoretical and empirical work on democratic representation, and elite responsiveness more specifically, draws on the assumption that the anticipation of elections induces politicians to advance the desires of voters (Arnold, 1992; Mayhew, 1974; Stimson et al., 1995).

In this dissertation, I argue that the key premise for such "anticipatory representation" is that politicians *believe* voters will hold them accountable for their actions, and I introduce the term "accountability beliefs" to grasp these anticipatory perceptions. Moreover, I argue that in order to understand politicians' anticipation of electoral accountability and to subsequently measure these beliefs and study their effects, three elements are important. As far as I can tell, it is the first time that accountability beliefs are conceptualized and disentangled in different elements. For one, it matters whether politicians believe that voters are aware of their policy actions and positions –their *awareness beliefs.* Next, politicians' accountability beliefs consist of their perceptions of whether voters are able to evaluate the outcomes of their actions– their *outcome* beliefs. And, finally, for politicians to feel controlled by voters, they should anticipate that voters

hold them accountable for their actions on Election Day –*voting beliefs.* Therefore, the first contribution of this thesis is *conceptual*.

A second contribution of this thesis lies in *measuring* politicians' accountability beliefs. So far, scholarly work that *measures* whether politicians anticipate voter control is scant, to put it with an understatement. In total, I am aware of just four studies, conducted in the 60s, that ask U.S. and French legislators about the importance of their individual records for their election result (Kingdon, 1967, 1989; Miller & Stokes, 1963; Converse & Pierce, 1986). In this dissertation, I test the assumption again, a few decades later and using a more elaborate measure of accountability beliefs. Surveying a large sample of politicians about their perceptions of voter awareness of their policy actions, about the outcomes of these actions and, finally, about the extent to which they expect voters to use this knowledge to hold them accountable on Election Day, I show that most politicians believe that voters control them. As such, this dissertation adds to the representation literature by showing that most politicians do anticipate voter control. To be clear, this finding is not totally unexpected. Miller and Stokes already in 1963 argued that politicians feel the weight of voter control. Still, this finding has hardly found confirmation outside of the USA. I show that politicians in proportional political systems, where individual voter control is in reality even more limited than the scrutiny American politicians are subjected to, also believe that at least some voters monitor them. As I argued earlier, this does not imply that politicians are optimistic about citizens' political knowledge and their ability to cast a policy-induced vote choice. Still, and paradoxically, they do think voters are aware of their individual actions and might hold them accountable for it.

Moreover, a third contribution lies in measuring the *accuracy* of politicians' accountability beliefs. Matching citizens' actual awareness of political actions with politicians' perceptions of voter scrutiny (notably their awareness beliefs) I show, for the first time, that their accountability beliefs are flawed. Politicians tend to overestimate citizens' awareness of their actions and positions.

A fourth and related contribution of this dissertation is that I establish that there is quite some *variation* in the level of voter scrutiny politicians foresee, and that I try to explain this variation. I show that politicians' accountability beliefs do not reflect their objective position –those who should feel more monitored because their actions are more visible, do

not feel the weight of voter control more. I do find that populist politicians anticipate voter scrutiny more than their colleagues of non-populist parties do.

That there is ample variation in politicians' accountability beliefs ties up nicely with the fifth contribution of this dissertation, namely that I show that the anticipation of electoral accountability makes politicians *respond* to voter preferences. Up until now, abundant scholarly work on congruence and responsiveness has not been able to offer definitive proof for the fact that future elections induce politicians to be responsive to public opinion between elections (see Bernardi, 2018 for an overview of these mixed results). As has been argued more extensively in the introduction, the main reason for these inconsistencies lies in ignoring the fact that electoral competition and perceptual accuracy may be related (Jones, 1973), and the use of indirect proxies to grasp the electoral incentives (Mann, 1978). I tackled the former point by isolating the moderating effect of accountability beliefs in a survey experiment in which politicians' *ability* to read public opinion is simply kept constant (all politicians in the experimental condition were informed about voter preferences). With regard to the latter problem of using proxies (such as district competitiveness) to grasp the electoral incentives of politicians, this thesis clearly shows that not only politicians in safe positions anticipate electoral accountability. Politicians who are very certain about their re-election also feel the weight of voter control, while some electorally uncertain politicians do not anticipate accountability at all. Therefore, studies trying to understand the conditionality of elite responsiveness should be aware of the fact that electoral safety as such, measured in whatever way, is not a good enough proxy to grasp "rational anticipation". In sum, this dissertation adds to the ubiquitous work on democratic representation by identifying and measuring a key independent variable that predicts elite responsiveness to voter preferences.

Sixth, my dissertation not only yields conceptual and empirical contributions. It furthers theory as well. After all, the findings presented in this dissertation show that politicians' *ability* to read public opinion and their *willingness* are connected. In Miller and Stokes' (1963) famous diamond model of representation, and in most work that followed in their footsteps, it is argued that congruent policy-making follows if (1) politicians have accurate perceptions of what citizens want and (2) if they are willing to follow-up on these perceptions in their actions (Stimson et al., 1995). In this dissertation, I show that the two preconditions are not independent from each other. After all, the anticipation of voter

control seems to motivate politicians to get better informed about voters' preferences. Therefore, one would expect that politicians who anticipate electoral accountability more, have a more accurate understanding of the public's desires. Exploratory findings, not yet reported in this dissertation, seem to confirm this hypothesis –albeit not convincingly. In the framework of the POLPOP project, comparative data is collected on the accuracy of the perceptions politicians have of their party electorate's preferences and of the general public opinion with regard to eight policy proposals. Looking at Flemish politicians, I find that those who anticipate voter control more, have a significantly better understanding of their party electorate's or the general public's preferences than politicians who do not anticipate to be held accountable for their actions. This finding is fully in line with the results in Chapter 4 where we show that the anticipation of electoral accountability motivates Flemish politicians to learn about public opinion; their investment in getting to know public opinion appears to result in a more accurate understanding of it. Yet, exploring the relationship between accountability beliefs and perceptual accuracy in the other POLPOP countries (Switzerland, Germany and Canada) and in Wallonia, I find no such significant relationship –note that in most countries, there is a positive correlation, albeit not a significant one. I encourage future work to tease this out further.

Strong accountability beliefs, a blessing or rather a curse for democracy?

This dissertation shows that the anticipation of electoral accountability helps to convert citizens' preferences into policies. In particular, it demonstrates that politicians who anticipate electoral accountability are more eager to respond to public preferences once they are informed about these desires. Also, it shows that politicians with strong accountability beliefs invest more time in understanding citizens' preferences. Therefore, *if* adequate public opinion information is available to politicians, accountability beliefs induce responsiveness. Importantly, this is not unduly utopian in light of recent technological developments, in particular the increasingly sophisticated use of big data analyses of social media, voter and consumer databases allowing to predict voter preferences better (see Kreiss, 2016; Hersh, 2015; Geer & Goorha, 2003). A positive reading of these findings would be that rational anticipation of elections contributes to the congruence between public opinion and public policies, which is a key feature of good-working democracies (Dahl, 1956;

Pitkin, 1967; Wlezien & Soroka, 2016). As Joseph Schlesinger (1966, p.2) argued: "*The desire for re- election becomes the electorate's restraint upon its public officials. No more irresponsible government is imaginable than one of high-minded men unconcerned for their political fort*".

The finding that most politicians feel controlled by their voters, and that this sense of voter control is positively related to efforts to get acquainted with and to respond to voter preferences, is all the more important for political representation because *actual* electoral accountability hardly puts any constraints on representatives (Achen & Bartels, 2017). Even in the assumption that we, as citizens, are perfectly informed about politicians' actions and hold them to account for it at the ballot (which is utopian, of course), there is nothing we can do to impel politicians *in between elections* to consider our concerns –we can contact politicians, start petitions or take to the streets, but politicians are not *obliged* to listen. There are no guarantees enforcing adaptive, responsive behavior on the side of elites. We cast one vote, once every few years (knowing a vote can only contain so much information) and after the election we cannot do much but to wait until the next election to (re)elect actors that furthered our desires, and/or retract our vote from those who did not satisfy us (Przeworski et al., 1999). That politicians feel controlled –even if elections are far away and even if their behavior is pretty invisible for the outside world– and that it keeps them on their toes, working hard to please voters, is all the more important in light of the absence of actual voter control.

In a similar vein, the findings presented in this dissertation could matter for citizens' trust in politicians, or more precisely: their *feeling* of being represented. After all, those who ultimately judge whether representation is legitimate or not, are citizens themselves (see for instance Saward, 2006; Rehfeld, 2006). I show that politicians who strongly feel the weight of voter control are not only more responsive to voters' preferences once informed about them, they are also more likely to talk to citizens. Interactions politicians have with citizens may have value as such. Even if politicians are only trying to convey a positive image of themselves in these conversations, it potentially increases citizens' much needed trust in politics (Clarke et al., 2018).

Additionally, it is widely assumed, and shown, that transparency of decision-making is a good thing because it '*mobilizes the power of shame*' (Fox, 2007). Politicians who are monitored by voters have incentives to "perform better"; not just to be responsive

to voter preferences, but also to avoid being caught violating ethical norms. This dissertation shows that most politicians do indeed *feel* controlled by (some) voters –even though actual transparency of political decision-making is rather limited– which may induce them to refrain from doing what is generally despised (see Ferraz & Finan, 2011 on the link between accountability and corruption).

Overall, a positive, and perhaps overly simplistic, reading of the findings in this thesis would be that: "the more politicians feel they are being watched, the better they behave; and most believe they are being watched". Yet, that the anticipation of electoral accountability sensitizes politicians to voter preferences also comes with a number of potential *drawbacks* (see Mayhew, 1974).

For one, I show that the anticipation of accountability instigates behavior that will be rewarded by voters, voters who are notably impatient (Streich & Levy, 2007). Therefore, that politicians estimate the likelihood of electoral accountability to be high, may create a bias in favor of policies that are visible and that generate immediate popular effects (Mayhew, 1974). The flipside, of course, is that some policies that are popular in the short run have (hidden) costs for the future (Fox, 2007), and important societal policy goals such as reducing public debt, conserving natural resources, restructuring the economy, pension reforms or slowing global warming, require politicians to impose costs on voters long before most of the benefits will arrive for them. Hence, political actors cannot "score" with pursuing such long-term responsible policies because citizens tend to discount the future (Streich & Levy, 2007; Jacobs, 2011; Mullin & Rubado, 2017). Research on politicians' behavior in term-limited states has indeed shown that term-limited politicians, who are less concerned about pleasing voters because they will not stand for re-election anyway, pursue better welfare policies for citizens (Smart & Sturm, 2013). The more general point here is that what citizens *desire* may not be in their own best interest, in the interest of society as a whole, or in the interest of certain societal groups or future generations, and the anticipation of voter control increases the likelihood that politicians will follow-up on what citizens desire (Fox, 2007; Mayhew, 1974). Citizens' so-called "unreflexive preferences", as Mansbridge (2003) describes it, are not necessarily in their own or in society's best interest.

It should be noted, though, that this dissertation does not offer empirical proof for such a "perverse effect". Chapter 5 shows that politicians with strong accountability beliefs are more responsive to voter preferences, but the policy preferences politicians are

informed about in the experiment do not object society's interests nor do they have a clear short-term perspective. Note, moreover, that the interviews with party elites about voter unresponsiveness (as presented in Chapter 6) show that politicians do make reservations about public opinion, and the fact that it sometimes objects the public's general interests is named as an important reason for why parties occasionally ignore the desires of their voters. Still, it is important to stress that a potential drawback of accountability beliefs lies in politicians pandering towards voters' preferences when these wishes are not in their/society's/some groups' *interest*.

Second, the anticipation of electoral accountability may not only encourage political actors to respond to voter preferences, but also to *manipulate* these voters into supporting policies they want to implement (see Jacobs & Shapiro, 2000). Indeed, in Chapter 6 it is shown that the anticipation of electoral repercussions motivates parties to invoke certain strategies to avoid electoral losses. While many of the strategies that are referenced imply that parties *explain* policy decisions to voters –i.e. what Mansbridge, 2003 would classify as "education", "crafted talk" that is in citizens' best *interest* instead of simply aiming to deceive (see also Page & Shapiro, 1992)– others could be described as sheer manipulation (that is: conscious deception). Most notably, political actors at times hide initiatives from their voters when they believe these initiatives will result in a loss of support, were these voters to learn about their existence. This finding matters: once political actors strategically hide information on their policy actions (or on their policy positions) from voters, these voters simply cannot adequately judge them in elections.

Third and finally, this dissertation establishes that the anticipation of voter control sensitizes politicians to voter preferences. What matters then, is who('s preferences) politicians consider as "electorally relevant". This may be problematic in that some social groups –notably the lower educated and lower class citizens– are perceived by politicians as less knowledgeable, less aware of politics and less likely to hold them to account on election day (Sevenans & Walgrave, forthcoming), which gives politicians fewer incentives to respond to their preferences (Griffin & Newman 2005; Miler, 2007). This may be especially important for political systems where voting is not obligatory and turnout is low. Politicians, after all, have little incentives to further the preferences of groups of people that are less likely to show up at the ballot in the first place (or that are in the minds of politicians less likely to show up –see Skovron, 2018 who shows that U.S. election candidates have a

biased image of who will show up at the ballot). As such, that the anticipation of electoral accountability influences elite responsiveness, potentially contributes to inequality in representation (see Bartels 2008; Gilens 2012; Hakhverdian 2015; Peters & Ensink, 2015). Note that this is sheer speculation at this stage: I have not examined whether politicians perceive the likelihood of electoral accountability to be higher for some societal groups than for others.

In conclusion, one could argue that this dissertation's findings are positive because accountability beliefs help to forge a link between voter preferences and public policies. Still, I am not oblivious to the potential downsides of the fact that politicians anticipate electoral accountability and act accordingly. I consciously do not to take a stance in this normative debate but limit myself to providing arguments for discussion. After all, I have not empirically addressed the possible negative consequences of "feeling monitored" in this dissertation. Still, future work is encouraged to provide a more complete image of the consequences of politicians anticipating electoral accountability. This, along with other suggestions for future work, is discussed in detail in the next section.

Limitations and opportunities for future research

Doing research implies making choices, and making these choices inevitably introduces some (methodological) limitations. In this final section of the conclusion, I outline the most important shortcomings of this dissertation, and offer some suggestions on how future work could fill in these blanks. In particular, I reflect on (1) the selection of country cases, (2) the downsides of relying on surveys and interviews with politicians, and (3) the focus on accountability beliefs as a static feature of politicians.

1) The country case selection

A first limitation of this dissertation is that the bulk of empirical chapters study politicians in *one country* only, namely in Belgium. The main reason for conducting the research primarily in Belgium, and in particular in Flanders, is of practical nature: it was feasible to convince a large amount of Flemish politicians, among them high-level elites such as ministers and party leaders, to participate in our research. Achieving this exceptional response rate (78 percent of all national and regional politicians participated) and conducting the extensive surveys and interviews, would simply not be feasible in another country where we do not know the politicians and the language they speak, and where politicians do not know us –remember that we have surveyed Flemish politicians in the past.

Practicalities aside, I am convinced that Belgium constitutes an interesting case to study politicians' perceptions of electoral accountability and its effects. For one because its political system is very different from the majoritarian system in the USA and France, where the few earlier studies on politicians' accountability beliefs have been conducted (Miller & Stokes, 1963; Kingdon, 1967; Converse & Pierce, 1986). Second, the Belgian system shows great similarities with other European proportional systems, so I expect the accountability beliefs of politicians and their effect to be more or less similar in these countries. Third and finally, the Belgian context is interesting to study because it serves as a conservative test of our findings. Finding that Belgian politicians believe they are controlled by voters, this should be even more the case in (majoritarian) political systems that foster more individual voter control. After all, Belgium is a strong party system with, comparatively speaking, rather weak incentives for politicians to pursue a personal vote (André et al., 2015; 2014).

Still, Belgium is only *one* case, which logically raises concerns about the generalizability of the findings presented in this dissertation. Regarding politicians' perceptions of voter control, the comparative study in Chapter 2 allows me to draw some tentative conclusions about how universal the findings are. Examining the accountability beliefs of Belgian, Swiss, Canadian and German politicians, I find that the electoral system matters (a bit). While politicians in all four countries anticipate a substantial degree of voter control, Canadian and Swiss MPs are slightly more convinced that citizens monitor them closely and will hold them accountable for their actions than Belgian and, in particular, German MPs. Politicians in Switzerland (a proportional, open list system where voters can vote for several candidates from different parties) and especially Canada (a majoritarian system) feel the weight of voter control more strongly than their colleagues in multi-party proportional systems as Belgium and Germany (notably those politicians elected on party lists). This finding confirms the premise that politicians in candidate-centered electoral systems feel the weight of voter control even more (and, therefore, that Belgium is a rather conservative case). When it comes to the *effect* of accountability beliefs on elite action, then, I have no reason to expect differences across countries (knowing that the *level* of accountability beliefs might differ). The only evidence I have to substantiate this claim is in Chapter 4, where I show that the impact of accountability beliefs on politicians' information seeking behavior is potent both in the U.S. and in Flanders. Still, it would be good to have the findings tested for their generalizability in other systems.

I therefore encourage future work to examine the perceptions of politicians and their effects in *more* countries. Doing so would allow for a more thorough examination of the differences between countries in politicians' perceptions of electoral accountability. After all, with only four countries, a comparison remains tricky. It could be, for instance, that the country differences found are due to the survey method applied, to the media system of a country, the ballot list system, the closeness of the interview period to the next elections, and so on. Hence, increasing the number of countries that are studied would allow to draw more firm conclusions on the role of particular political systems characteristics in shaping politicians' perceptions (and their resulting actions). Also, studying a more *diverse* set of countries –including majoritarian systems, but also newer (e.g. Eastern-European) democracies–, would allow for a more rigorous test of the robustness of the findings presented in this thesis.

2) The research design

This dissertation draws entirely on evidence that is directly acquired among politicians. Whilst understanding politicians' accountability beliefs and its effects inevitably asks for such a direct approach, it is important to take a moment to reflect on some inescapable drawbacks.

First, the fact that this dissertation's findings hinge on politicians' own, necessarily subjective, accounts, introduces the risk of results being distorted by *social desirability*. The truth is that I cannot be sure that politicians' answers reflect their true convictions, and one should consider the possibility of socially desirable answers when reading the conclusions of this dissertation. Still, we took some precautionary measures to reduce the likelihood of a social desirability bias –re-assuring politicians about the anonymity of their answers, for instance– and from the open interviews, I learned that politicians did not convey an overly positive image of themselves nor of politics in general. Moreover, for many questions I rely on in the empirical chapters it is unclear what the desirable position would be. Still, it could be that politicians deem it desirable to claim that they spend a lot of time monitoring public opinion (the dependent variable in Chapter 4) or that they are responsive to voter preferences (Chapter 5 and Chapter 6). It is important to emphasize, though, that this dissertation's aim was not so much to ascertain how much time politicians spend on certain activities, or on how often they respond to citizens' desires. Instead, my objective was to examine whether the anticipation of electoral accountability *moderates* these actions. Therefore, social desirability should only really be a concern if it affects the independent variable (accountability beliefs) and the outcome variables (responsiveness, public opinion monitoring) simultaneously. I have no reason to believe that this is the case.

Second, politicians' responses may be subject to unconscious *post-hoc rationalizations*, in that they bring up reasons for action that sound more rational and systematic than their initial behavior was. This may be particularly important for survey and interview questions grasping politicians' (intentional) behavior and their reasons for action. Still, by making politicians' reflections as tangible as possible, for instance by asking them about recent initiatives they had taken, I tried to preclude politicians from unwittingly drawing a distorted picture of their reasons for action. Whilst I cannot be sure that it worked, it is re-assuring that the findings of this dissertation match observational evidence on elite action. To validate the results, though, I do encourage future work to link politicians'

subjective perceptions (there is simply no other way than asking politicians) to their *actual* behavior (behavior scholars measure without politicians knowing it is measured).

A third downside of a thesis that is fully reliant on interview and surveys with politicians, lies in the *scarcity of research objects*. Politicians are typically quite busy, and not that eager to participate in academic research. Although the response rates in most of chapters of this dissertation are exceptionally high –around 78 percent in Belgium– the comparative chapter 2 does suffer from a low response rate in some countries, notably in Canada and Germany (but comparatively speaking these numbers are still quite okay, see for instance see for instance Bailer, 2014). That response rates differ from one country to another may be due to the political culture –politicians in some countries may be less inclined to collaborate in academic research–, the size of the parliament, and the efforts the different research teams put in convincing politicians to participate (remember that the data used in this dissertation is collected within the POLPOP project –see introduction). Especially in Belgium and Switzerland, researchers were very persistent in contacting politicians (see Walgrave & Joly, 2018 for information on the contacting procedure). Apart from the relative response rates, it is crucial that the sample of participants is representative of the population, which is more or less the case in all countries, and that the sample is large enough in absolute numbers to perform explanatory analyses on the individual (and party) level, which is also the case.

Still, even in Belgium where we convinced no less than 324 politicians to participate in our research, there is only so much that we can ask politicians in half an hour of survey, and half an hour of interview time. And, on top of that, there is only so much one can ask about the same topic. Needless to say, then, that in designing the survey instrument, difficult choices had to be made about which questions to include –all the more so because surveying politicians was a collaborative effort of several researchers, each with their own research interests. While I am tremendously grateful for the opportunity to survey and interview elites about their accountability beliefs, it is important to give some examples of where I had to concede, to allow future work to fill in the gaps.

A first example is that I only had *one* comparative question to gauge politicians' accountability beliefs. Ideally, though, this scale measuring politicians' accountability beliefs, that is used in Chapter 2 as the dependent variable, and introduced in Chapter 4 and Chapter 5 as an independent variable, is validated and developed further in future

work. In particular, it would be interesting to ask politicians about expected accountability to different groups of voters –now I ask about potential party voters only. Moreover, the measure used in this dissertation captures politicians' beliefs (their awareness, outcome and voting beliefs) on a ten-point scale, which complicates the interpretation of the findings– for example, what does it mean if a politician scores voter awareness a 3 out of 10? Future work could enhance the interpretation of politicians' accountability beliefs, in particular by allowing them to reflect freely on these perceptions in an open interview.

Another example of the time constraints inherent in elite surveys resulting in suboptimal research designs is the fact that I study the effect of accountability beliefs on a limited set of behaviors only. I examine the connection between accountability beliefs and the interactions politicians have with citizens and how often they talk about public opinion with their colleagues, and study the effect on (four types of) responsiveness. A good place to start for future work is to optimize these measures, for instance by including more questions grasping public opinion monitoring (e.g. how often do politicians conduct, or consult, polls?). Other types of behavior that may be relevant to study in relation to the anticipation of voter control, would include politicians' relationship with the news media, their parliamentary behavior, and their intra-party behavior –note that in the POLPOP survey we asked politicians about the loyalty to their party, and I find that Belgian politicians with strong accountability beliefs agree more with the positions of their party than those who do not anticipate voter control[4], future work could look into this.

3) Static accountability beliefs

A third limitation of this thesis is the focus on accountability beliefs as a *static* feature of politicians. While I do explore variation in accountability beliefs *between* individuals in this thesis, I do not account for the fact that the anticipation of voter control may also vary *within* these politicians. For instance, politicians might anticipate different levels of voter control depending on how close the next elections are, on how important the issues are they are dealing with, and even on which population groups they are thinking of (do they have different accountability beliefs when it comes to the lower versus the higher educated, for instance?). The main reason for relying on a static measure of accountability beliefs, as argued in the previous section, lies in the limited survey time. Yet, it may be that politicians' perceptions about voter control are not static, but vary. The qualitative evidence presented

in Chapter 1 and Chapter 6 indeed testifies to the fact that certain situations –the salience of a policy issue at stake, whether and how the media cover certain events, the closeness of elections and so on– affect the degree of voter control politicians anticipate. Therefore, while I believe that studying politicians' general perceptions of voter control was a good place to start given the dearth of work on this topic, I encourage future work to look into the conditionality of anticipated voter control, and to come up, perhaps by means of experimental research, with explanations for within-politicians variation in accountability beliefs.

Concluding remarks

Elections are commonly referred to as "the celebration of democracy". Eligible citizens can, on this exceptional occasion, cast a vote, thereby ensuring that individuals are put in the driver's seat of the country who will pursue citizens' wishes. This dissertation shows that the impact of elections stretches far beyond Election Day itself, and the resulting composition of parliament and the formation of the executive. I show that politicians anticipate electoral accountability during the legislature and that the prospect of being held to account on Election Day sensitizes politicians to voters' preferences.

The answer to the first research question *–how do politicians perceive the mechanism of electoral accountability?–* is complex. Overall, the weight of voter control is exaggerated in the minds of politicians. Politicians feel their actions create more awareness among voters than they in reality do, and they believe that some voters will hold them accountable for their policy actions on Election Day. This is not to say that politicians are entirely unrealistic about citizens' voting behavior: they doubt whether voters make an informed party choice and are skeptical about their political knowledge.

The answer to the second research question *–do politician perceptions about electoral accountability influence their behavior?–* is much more straightforward. I show that perceptions of voter control do influence political action. Politicians who anticipate voter control, compared to their colleagues who do not, put more effort in monitoring public opinion, are more likely to respond to voter preferences (in their communications) once they know what these preferences are and, finally, are more likely to invoke coping strategies when they go against their voters' preferences.

I began this dissertation by arguing that politicians, of which most adhere to a trustee view on representation, seemingly counter-intuitively care a great deal about (knowing) public opinion. In this dissertation, I show that the anticipation of electoral accountability constitutes a key explanation. Politicians who believe that voters keep a close eye on them and anticipate a substantial degree of electoral accountability –which most of them do– are induced to learn about and respond to voter preferences. As such, the anticipation of electoral accountability obscures the classic distinction between trustee and delegate politicians. The anticipation of voter control makes as good as all politicians behave as delegates, although many of them define themselves as trustees.

This study has endeavored to illuminate one particular aspect of the mechanism of anticipatory representation by examining politicians' views of electoral accountability and how these views influence elite action. To improve our understanding of elite behavior further, I encourage future research to continue this inquiry into the minds of politicians. As Richard Fenno (1978) has famously argued: '*We cannot understand the representative-constituency relationship until we can see the constituency through the eyes of the representative'.*

Notes

1. News articles were collected and coded by Annelien Van Remoortere. Using Gopress (www.gopress.be), the official repository of all Belgian newspapers, she scraped all articles of De Morgen, De Standaard and Het Laatste Nieuws in 2018. All articles (excluding "junk" news such as weather forecasts, sports and lifestyle news) were coded for the presence of Flemish politicians. Then, a variable was created that gauges, for all politicians, in how many articles they were mentioned. The amount of times politicians are referenced in the newspapers varies strongly, from 1 to 183 articles mentioning the politician in 2018. More information about the coding procedure can be found in Van Remoortere et al. (2021).

2. In a survey fielded in March 2018 (distributed by SSI, now Dynata) we asked a representative sample of Flemish citizens to indicate the names of Flemish MPs they recognized in a list of ten names, including three fake names, and afterwards we planned to ask them about the party the politician belonged to. In the end, we were unable to use this data because no less than 25 percent of the respondents selected a fake name. The other respondents on average knew, or guessed, the names of two out of ten MPs.

3. In the same survey we asked Flemish citizens whether they recognized the names of MPs, we also asked questions about their knowledge of the policy positions of their preferred party (the one they would vote for were elections to be held at the time of the survey). The only thing they had to do for eight highly salient policy proposals was to indicate whether their preferred party agreed or disagreed with the proposal (and, therefore, chances are very high that many of the correct responses were guesses). Citizens, on average, could only do so for half of them (i.e. four out of eight). Considering that chances are very high that some of the correct responses were guesses (there is a 50 percent likelihood of guessing correctly), and that voters were only asked about their favorite party, one could conclude that voter knowledge (or rather: most voters' knowledge) of party positions is inadequate.

4. Question wording: "*Compared to my colleagues within the party, I more often agree with the position of my party*". The Pearson correlation with politicians' accountability beliefs is positive and significant (r= .17; p=.003), which implies that the more politicians anticipate voter control, the more they say to agree with the party line.

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Abstract

When and why politicians listen and respond to citizens' preferences is a key question in contemporary political science. This thesis seeks to contribute to our understanding of elite responsiveness by examining one crucial mechanism that is referenced in ample scholarly work on representation, namely politicians' anticipation of electoral accountability –i.e. their *accountability beliefs*. Do politicians feel the weight of electoral accountability on their shoulders? And does the anticipation of accountability affect their (responsive) actions? I study politicians' perceptions of electoral accountability and its effects by means of a survey, a survey experiment and in-depth interviews with politicians in Belgium, and surveys with members of parliament in Switzerland, Canada, Germany and the U.S.

First, this dissertation shows that the weight of voter control is exaggerated in the minds of politicians. They believe that their actions create more awareness among citizens and matter more for these citizens' voting decisions than they in reality do. This is not to say that politicians are entirely unrealistic about citizens' accountability behavior: they doubt whether voters make an informed party choice and are skeptical about their political knowledge in general. Second, this thesis shows that politicians' anticipation of voter control affects political action. Politicians who expect to be held accountable for their actions, compared to those who do not, put more effort in monitoring public opinion, are more likely to respond to voter preferences and, finally, are more likely to invoke coping strategies when (exceptionally) they do decide to go against the preferences of their voters.

In short, this thesis establishes that the impact of elections stretches far beyond Election Day itself. The sheer anticipation of future elections by politicians, and more precisely the prospect of being held to account in these elections, sensitizes politicians to voters' preferences *in between* elections. By, for the first time, illuminating politicians' often-discussed beliefs about electoral accountability, this thesis enhances our understanding of anticipatory representation, and democratic representation more generally.

Author contributions

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Chapters	**Contributions of authors**
Chapter 1: The awareness paradox. (why) politicians overestimate citizens' awareness of parliamentary questions and party initiatives	Single authored
Chapter 2: Do politicians anticipate voter control? A comparative study of representatives' accountability beliefs	Single authored
Chapter 3: Voters hardly care about parties' policy profile. Politicians' pessimistic view of citizens' party choice considerations	Single authored
Chapter 4: Listening to the people. Politicians' investment in monitoring public opinion and their beliefs about accountability	Karolin Soontjens: theory development, data analyses, drafting and revising of the manuscript. Stefaan Walgrave: theory development and revising the manuscript.

Chapter 5: Electoral incentives make politicians respond to voter preferences. Evidence from a survey experiment with members of parliament in Belgium	Karolin Soontjens: theory development, data analyses, drafting and revising the manuscript. Julie Sevenans: designing the experiment, theory development and revising the manuscript.
Chapter 6: Inside the party's mind. Why and how parties are strategically unresponsive to their voters' preferences	Single authored

Chronicle of an election foretold:
Politicians' beliefs about electoral accountability and its effects

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Faculty of Social Sciences
Department of Political Science
Promotor: Prof. dr. Stefaan Walgrave
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