

Listening to the people

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

Abstract

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

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). All in all, 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 & Klemmensen, 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 communication 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 systematic research 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 (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 behaviour, but rather to create approval for their decisions afterwards by effective communication (e.g. Fenno, 1978; 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 — The electoral connection sensitizes 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 (Mayhew, 1974).

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 parliament¹. Flanders is the largest region of Belgium², 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 system provides politicians with little incentives to spend a lot of time tracking public opinion (André et al., 2015). In that sense, Belgium constitutes a conservative case for testing the hypotheses on 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

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.

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 where politicians have more 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 July 2018³. 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% (see **Table A1** in Appendix 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 questions grasp politicians' investment in getting to know public opinion (see Appendix **Table A2** for the exact question wording). We ask respondents about their general public opinion monitoring because Belgian politicians primarily care about citizens in general and about 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 (see 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 an 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

³ More information about the project to be added after anonymous review process. 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.

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 results⁴.

Second, politicians are asked how regularly they *talk about public opinion with their colleagues*. The conversations politicians have about citizens' desires 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 clearly has a central place; most politicians (62%) 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 what drives public opinion monitoring, we include four predictors in our analyses—see **Table A3** in appendix. First, to grasp politicians' *intrinsic motivation* (duty)(H1), we rely on a classic role conception-question asking politicians 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* (H2), namely whether they aspire to hold a political

⁴ 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.

mandate in the next legislature. Most politicians do. A large majority of 87% says they intend to run for re-election. Second, we ask politicians about their feeling of *electoral vulnerability*; how sure are they about their re-election (H3). A majority of 58% 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 to impact citizens' vote choice on election day (H4). While the average politician believes that citizens are somewhat informed about their behavior and that some will hold them to account at the ballot (a mean of 4.5 out of 10), there is a lot of variation. Some politicians are convinced that voters will hold them to account on election day, while others do not anticipate much voter control. Note that we also 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 (see Appendix **Table A4** for the correlation coefficients).

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 **Table A5** and **Table A6** in Appendix.

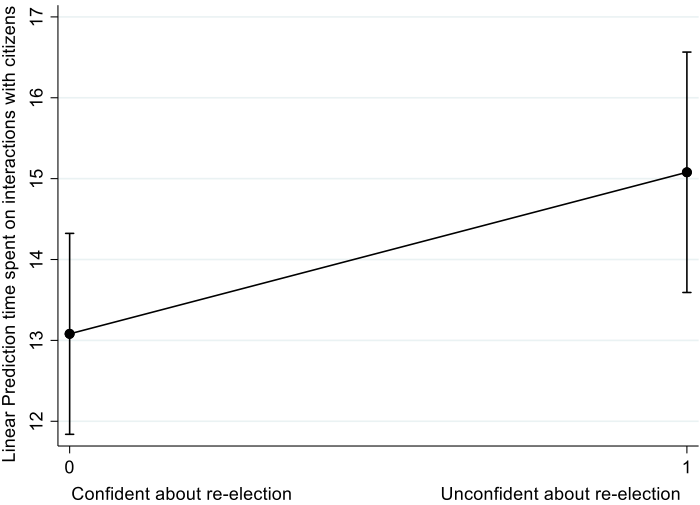
H1 held that, compared to their trustee colleagues, politicians who identify as delegates –intrinsicly believing it is their duty to get to know and act upon the public’s desires–, monitor public opinion more intensely. We do *not* find confirmation for a relationship between public opinion monitoring 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 either.

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 1** 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. So, all in all, the effect of electoral insecurity on public opinion monitoring is rather small.

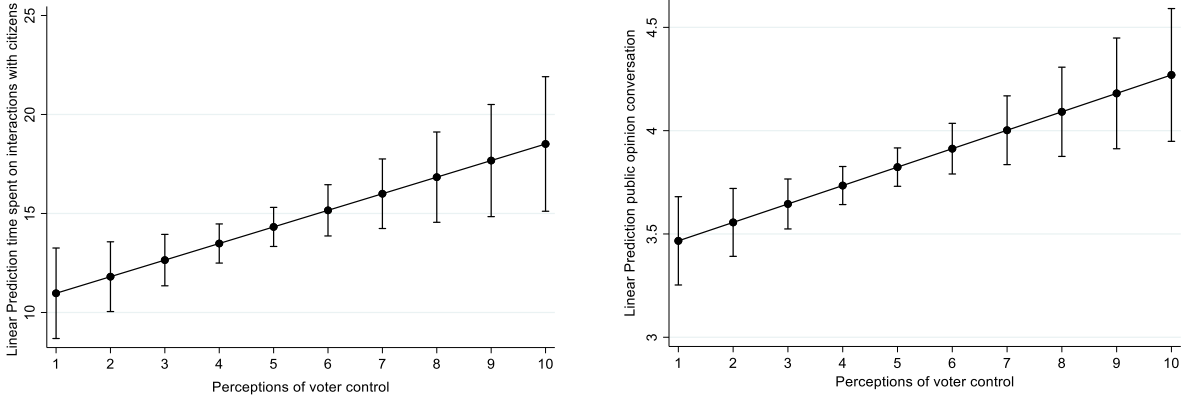
Figure 1 – Predicted probabilities of the effect of electoral vulnerability on interactions with citizens (90% CIs, from Table A5, model 5)



⁵ 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.

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 2** 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 (left-side 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 right-side graph of the figure).

Figure 2 – Predicted probabilities perceptions of effect of perceptions of voter control on public opinion monitoring (90% CIs, from Table A5 & A6, Full model)



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 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). In the U.S., plurality voting is the rule, also for local and state elections. Under this plurality system, every 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(s) winning the election. As a consequence, the accountability linkage between these representatives and their constituents is strong; they are much more visible as individuals 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 tough 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 the results.

In an online survey fielded in October-November 2020 by CivicPulse⁶, we asked 326 local U.S. legislators—officials from townships and municipalities as well as county officials—to complete a 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 that includes essentially all local elected officials serving a township, municipality, or county government. After the initial email invitation, participants with no or incomplete responses received 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 U.S. as a whole (see Appendix **Table A7**). The 326 respondents are divided across 47 states, 62% serves in municipalities, 20% in townships, and 17% in counties.

To tap into their public opinion investment, we ask politicians to provide an indication of the amount of time they weekly, on average, spend on *collecting information about their constituents’ opinions*—see **Table A8** in appendix for question wording and descriptives (and see Maestas, 2003 for a similar operationalization of public opinion monitoring). With an average of 23% of their work week 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%.

The independent variables are measured somewhat differently in this study—see **Table A9** in appendix. We do not have a measure of politicians’ *intrinsic* desire to get

⁶ 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/>.

acquainted with public opinion (their role conception), 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. It shows that a substantial majority (71%) of legislators aspires holding a public mandate in the future. Second, we measure politicians' *electoral vulnerability* by asking whether their previous election was competitive. This is 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% of the respondents indicates that 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 vulnerability, and perceptions of voter control are not significantly correlated (see Table A10A for the correlation coefficients). Also, we control for gender, seniority and level of office in our models.

Results

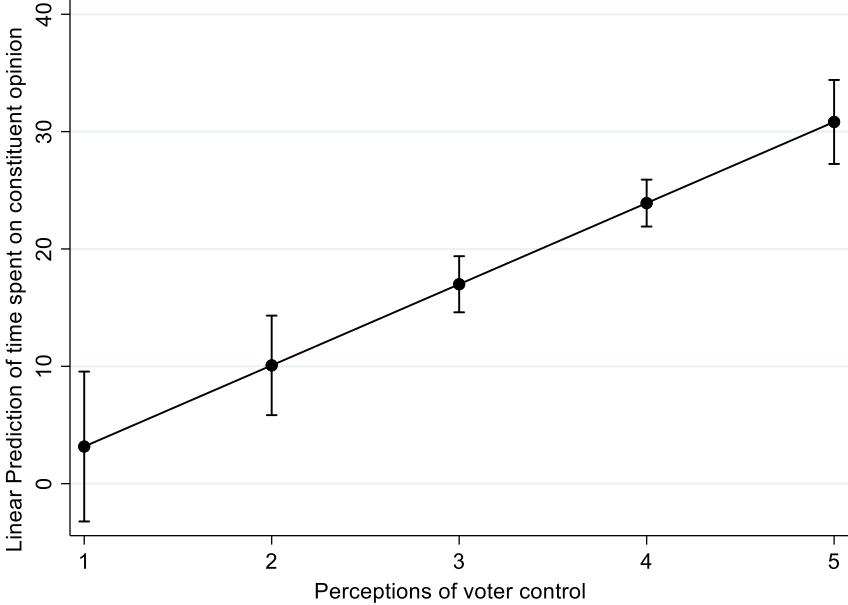
The analysis predicting U.S. legislators' efforts in monitoring constituent opinion is shown in full in **Table A11** in Appendix. First, and rejecting H2 again, politicians who aspire running in the next elections do not allocate significantly more time to monitoring constituent opinions compared to 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 got 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 very crude measure of future electoral (in)security, that might not fully grasp politicians' confidence in getting re-elected (see Sheffer and Loewen, 2019).

Finally, we do find strong confirmation for H4, just like 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 opinion compared to their colleagues who do not think that their electoral fortune hinges on constituents evaluating their actions ($b=7.8$;

S.E.=1.6; p=.009). The size of this effect is shown in **Figure 3**. Keeping the other variables in the model at their mean, the predicted share of working time spent on learning about constituent opinion is 3% 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 (5 on 1-5 scale), spend on average around 30% 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 3 – Predicted probabilities perceptions of effect of perceptions of voter control on constituent opinion monitoring (90% CIs, from Table A11, Full model)



Discussion

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 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.

Also, 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 indeed 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?

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