

Politicians' Reading of Public Opinion and its Biases

Stefaan Walgrave

Karolin Soontjens

Julie Sevenans

SUMMARY OF THE ARGUMENT — Politicians don't *care* about ordinary people's preferences and they don't *know* what ordinary people want. This is the harsh verdict of a majority of citizens about their political representatives today. In Belgium, only seventeen percent of the people agree that most politicians and parties care about ordinary citizens. Sixty-three percent declare that politicians and parties do not know what their greatest concerns are, and fifty-four percent say that politicians and parties are not aware of what citizens want (*De Stemming*, April 2020)¹. The popular dissatisfaction with political representatives is widespread. In other countries, too, large majorities of citizens believe that elected politicians do not care what ordinary people think (69% across Europe and 71% in the United States; see Pew Research Center 2020) and that they do not know about the problems of these people because they 'lose touch' (e.g. 77% agreement in the *Finnish National Elections Study* 2015). Many people in a variety of countries scorn their representatives for not caring about them, for not knowing their preferences, and for not being responsive to these preferences when in power (for an older study see: Norris 1999). The dissatisfaction is on the rise across the globe (Clarke, Jennings, and Moss 2018), and scholars debate about whether the growing discontent testifies to a crisis of democracy (Merkel 2014). It seems obvious that we are witnessing a crisis of representation. In many countries, populists capitalize upon these prevalent feelings of disconnected politicians: they accuse representatives of being alienated from the people, of not listening and of not giving the people the policies they want. Populists' siren song catches on and leads to large electoral successes and to dramatic policy change such as Brexit or the U.S. turning their back on international climate change agreements (Rooduijn 2013).

But are the citizens who complain about their representatives right? Are politicians inattentive to citizens' preferences? And, as a consequence, are politicians' perceptions of popular will really flawed? This book presents evidence suggesting that the latter accusation is true but that the former is not. The perceptions that politicians hold of public opinion are *not* very accurate but they *do* bother a lot about the public's preferences.

When politicians are asked to assess the size of popular support for various specific policies, their estimations are far off. A lot of politicians, somehow, do not seem to have a good feel for public opinion. Particularly striking is the tendency of politicians to perceive the public as holding more right-wing opinions than it actually does. So, citizens are, to some extent, right to claim that politicians are not fully aware of what they want, but not for want of trying. The evidence we present in this book establishes that the endemic misperceptions of politicians are *not* caused by carelessness or disinterest. In fact, politicians care a great deal about public opinion; their perceptions of the public are a key consideration in nearly everything they do and they spend a large part of their time finding out what citizens want. In other words, politicians are obsessed with public opinion but their fixation

on public opinion does not foster accurate public opinion perceptions. The intriguing paradox—or the democratic drama—this book highlights is that, although reading public opinion and getting a good grasp of what the public want is one of politicians' core pursuits, popular political preferences are lost in representation due to the inaccuracy and bias in politicians' perceptions.

These conclusions rest on extensive evidence about 179 Belgian—more specifically Flemish (Dutch-speaking)—national and regional political representatives. On the one hand, we interviewed our respondents in an open, in-depth fashion about the role of public opinion in their work. The insights these interviews produce into the motivations, dilemmas and tensions politicians experience when dealing with public opinion and into how they go about making sense of public opinion are center stage in the first part of the book. They illustrate that reading public opinion is a central component of politicians' daily work, and that their perceptions of public opinion exert a large influence on their doings. On the other hand, we asked participating politicians to complete a closed survey questionnaire largely dedicated to making them estimate public opinion about a series of specific policy proposals. In the second part of the book, to document the errors and biases in politicians' perceptions, we compare these estimations with actual public support for the same policies (derived from a large-scale population survey). Taken together, our qualitative and quantitative evidence sketches a detailed picture of how representatives' public opinion perceptions come about, of the effects of these perceptions on the representational process, and of the inaccuracy and the systematic biases in these perceptions.

One could maybe object that how politicians *read* public opinion is not important as only what they *do* vis-à-vis public opinion is relevant from a democratic representation perspective. That politicians care about knowing public opinion or have faulty perceptions is not something to worry about because their actions and decisions may still be in line with what the public prefers. We disagree. Politicians' reading of public opinion deserves to be studied thoroughly, we believe, because the quality of political representation depends on it, in several ways. We will elaborate this argument theoretically in Chapter 1, but since the relevance of politicians' reading and perception of public opinion forms the main motivation for devoting a full-length book to the matter, we briefly dwell on it here already.

First, the chance of *congruent* decision-making—a core feature of a good-working democracy according to many scholars (for an overview see e.g. Christopher Wlezien and Soroka 2016)—decreases drastically when politicians have inaccurate perceptions of voter preferences. There is compelling evidence that how elected politicians conceive of public opinion is highly consequential for their legislative action. Indeed, studies show that what politicians believe to be the people's position on certain policies is a chief, sometimes even the single most important, driver of their representative behavior (see for instance: Miller and Stokes 1963). This implies that erroneous or biased perceptions will most likely lead to decisions that deviate from popular preferences. It is *via* politicians' perceptions that responsiveness comes about. Accurate and unbiased perceptions are therefore essential. As good as all empirical work about the responsiveness of politicians' actions, even work that does not directly examine the public opinion perceptions of politicians, hinges on the fact that, before acting, politicians have properly 'sensed' public opinion (see for instance: Stimson, Mackuen, and Erikson 1995).

Second, even in models of representation that do not consider ‘congruence’ to be a requirement of good representation, perceptions of public opinion play a key role. Pitkin (1967), for instance, defines representation as “acting in the interest of the represented, in a manner responsive to them”. In the first part of the definition, she argues that politicians do not always need to follow the public’s preferences, for example when politicians believe these (sometimes short-sighted or uninformed) preferences are not in citizens’ real interest. However, the second part of the definition makes clear that politicians still need to know what these preferences are. They need to, what she calls, “consult” voters to take legitimate decisions and to be able to adequately explain these decisions (see also Mansbridge 2003 on “anticipatory representation”; or Disch 2011 on “a mobilization conception of political representation” as other examples).

Third, politicians’ effort to learn about public opinion is important since this is what citizens expect of their representatives. Citizens expect politicians to listen to them and invest in getting a correct picture of what they want (Esaiasson, Gilljam, and Persson 2017)—this is why they are so upset when they get the impression politicians do not care and do not know—and they (partly) expect them to follow up on public opinion in their acts (see for instance: Doherty et al. 2019). If politicians do not live up to citizens’ expectation, this damages the representational relationship. In short, for those interested in democratic quality, because of an interplay of theoretical, empirical and normative reasons, studying what politicians believe about public opinion is a relevant endeavor.

OUTLINE OF THE BOOK — In Chapter 1, we further buttress our argument that students of representation should bother about politicians’ reading and perceptions of public opinion. We do so by highlighting previous empirical, theoretical and normative work showing that how politicians make sense of public opinion, and especially the conclusions they reach about the state of public opinion with regard to policies, have an important impact on their legislative behavior in particular and on their political behavior more generally. Each time scholars have looked at the perceptions of politicians—that has happened not that often altogether—they found perceptions to matter.

The rest of the book, then, is divided into two parts, consisting of four chapters each. In Part One—*Politicians’ Reading of Public Opinion*—we mainly let politicians talk about the role of public opinion in their work, about how consequential their perceptions of public opinion are, about how they read public opinion, and about whether they think they are actually good at estimating what citizens want. In Part Two—*Inaccuracy and Biases in Politicians’ Perceptions of Public Opinion*—covering the last four chapters, we turn to politicians’ actual estimations of public opinion. This section tackles the accuracy of the public opinion perceptions of politicians, examines their biases and explores the causes of inaccuracies and biases.

More concretely, Chapter 2 explores the general attitudes Belgian politicians hold with regard to public opinion. The chapter finds that politicians’ feelings vis-à-vis public opinion are characterized by ambivalence. On the one hand, the principled attitude of many politicians is an attitude of reluctance to follow public opinion. Averse to anything that resembles populism, politicians declare in great numbers to operate independently from public opinion and to act as ‘trustees’, following their own convictions instead of public opinion. On the other hand, though, the chapter testifies that

politicians think that reading public opinion is a core part of their job. They find it crucially important, not only out of electoral necessity but also because they consider it their duty to know what the people want. Despite declaring in great numbers that ideology ought to trump public opinion as a driver of their actions, Belgian politicians are strongly committed to public opinion.

In Chapter 3, we find that the reluctance of politicians to follow public opinion is a normative ideal rather than an empirical reality. Once we ask politicians to think about their daily tasks such as drafting policy proposals, developing party viewpoints, asking parliamentary questions, and communicating about these initiatives, it immediately becomes clear that politicians' public opinion perceptions have a pervasive influence on their political undertakings. This confirms what previous work found: perceptions matter. Foremost, according to politicians' own saying, public opinion has a strong agenda setting effect. Elected representatives choose to invest in those initiatives where they have the public on their side and to abort or postpone initiatives that they would like to take but for which there presumably is no public support. They rarely deliberately cross their own electorate and when they do so, specific preventive measures are put in place to avoid (electoral) harm. Politicians confirm that besides generating congruent policies, communication is one of the reasons why having accurate public opinion perceptions is so important. If they (exceptionally) decide to go against public opinion, they want to be able to anticipate citizens' reactions and to adapt their explanations accordingly.

Given the importance politicians attach to reading public opinion, Chapter 4 deals with how politicians go about assessing people's preferences. How do politicians inform themselves about public opinion? How much time is spent on it? What sources do they employ? Most politicians say they primarily learn about public opinion by talking to ordinary people. Notwithstanding their often fierce criticism on the news media, consulting the traditional media is their second most preferred source of public opinion information. Interest groups and social media are the respective third and fourth course of politicians' public opinion diet.

As a bridge between politicians' self-reported dealings with public opinion (Part One) and the accuracy of their actual public opinion estimations (Part Two), Chapter 5 presents results of how good politicians *think* they are at estimating public opinion. Although a majority of politicians are confident about the accuracy of their estimations, they also display awareness of some pitfalls. In particular, politicians realize remarkably well that the information environment in which they operate is skewed both ideologically—in the sense that they are surrounded by likeminded people more than by dissonant voices—and socially, as there is an underrepresentation of people from, for example, poor or lower-educated groups. The actual effect of these ideological and social skews of their information environment on perceptual accuracy will be examined in the chapters of Part Two.

In the next four chapters forming Part Two of the book, we turn to the actual public opinion perceptions of politicians. Our methodology is explained in detail in Chapter 6. The essence of our approach is that we made politicians estimate the percentage of popular support for various specific policy proposals (e.g. *'The most polluting cars should be banned from inner cities'*) and that we compare their estimations with actual support for these policies as measured through a large-scale, representative public opinion survey. Importantly, we asked not only to assess the support among Belgian citizens in general but also among the politician's own party electorate. The chapter also

explains why and how we chose the policies, and presents the societal and political discussions surrounding the concrete policies.

Chapter 7 looks at politicians' estimations of public opinion in the *aggregate* and finds that, as a group, politicians do not really hold accurate perceptions. Collectively, they make relatively large mistakes, with misjudgements of popular support mounting up to 20 percentage points for certain policy proposals. Most importantly, the data reveal a clear right-wing, or conservative, bias in politicians' perceptions. They consider citizens systematically as being more supportive for right-wing policies and less supportive for left-wing policies than they actually are. Building on insights from Chapter 3, which showed how strongly these perceptions affect politicians' political actions, we speculate about the consequences of these inaccuracies for actual policy-making.

Chapter 8 looks at the disaggregated evidence and examines the inaccuracy of *individual* politicians. It demonstrates that the size of the error in politicians' individual public opinion estimations is overall quite large: politicians, although constantly preoccupied with public opinion, hardly do better at grasping public preferences than ordinary citizens (who we asked to perform the exact same estimation task). And, while certain politicians hold more accurate perceptions than others, it turns out to be very hard to explain these differences. Importantly, this means that the possible negative consequences of inaccuracy are *not* alleviated by influential politicians having more accurate perceptions than others. For example, leading politicians are not more accurate than backbenchers; the same applies to issue specialists, more senior politicians, and so on. Therefore, actual policies, probably mainly determined by these above average influential politicians, frequently draw on erroneous public opinion perceptions. Moreover, the chapter explains that understanding public opinion is not a matter of effort; those politicians who say they spend a lot of time mastering public opinion, are no better at it either.

Chapter 9, finally, zooms in on a possible psychological explanation for the inaccuracy of politicians' public opinion perceptions (established in Chapter 8) and the right wing bias (established in Chapter 7), namely their tendency to 'project' – that is: to let their perceptions of public opinion be influenced by their own opinions. We find that Belgian politicians' own opinion indeed affects their public opinion estimation, and that this partially explains the perceptual inaccuracy of politicians whose personal preferences do not match those of the(ir) voters. Yet, the tendency to project alone cannot account for the general right-wing bias because even left-wing politicians estimate the public to be more right-wing than it actually is. This is why the chapter moves on to more general, macro-level explanations for the pervasive right-wing bias in politicians' perceptions. Data limitations make it difficult to draw definite conclusions, but we argue that the electoral success of right-wing parties and their leaders, the potential right-wing bias in the traditional press, combined with the right-wing representation of public opinion that we see on social media, are the drivers of politicians' joint understanding of the public as being right-wing.

The baseline of the study, discussed in the concluding chapter, is that politicians care a lot about public opinion but that this engagement does not produce particularly accurate public opinion perceptions. On the contrary, the public opinion perceptions held by Belgian politicians are inaccurate and systematically biased. These perceptual flaws are not innocent. They have a direct effect on how responsive politicians act in the public realm and how they go about representing the people, they

taint politician's communication about their decisions, they may nurture popular political dissatisfaction, increase electoral volatility, and contribute to the mutual misunderstanding of citizens and politicians. In sum, some policy preferences of the public are lost in representation.