How Public Opinion Information Changes Politicians' Opinions and Behavior

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Numerous representation studies suggest that political elites are responsive to the expressed preferences of their voters, but scholars in the field have called for experimental research on the topic to shed light on the underlying mechanisms. This paper responds to this call. Results from a survey experiment with members of parliament in Belgium show, for the first time, that an important mechanism driving responsiveness is opinion adaptation by political elites. Just like 'ordinary' citizens adapt their opinions when learning where their preferred party stands on an issue, politicians update their position when learning that it opposes the preferences of a majority of their electorate. This implies that elite responsiveness involves less discord between politicians' own preferences and voter preferences than is often assumed.

Keywords

political representation, political elites, public opinion, responsiveness, survey experiment

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How are policymakers influenced by public opinion? More specifically, when learning that the opinion of the majority of their voters is not in line with their own views, how do politicians arrive at adapting their policy decisions accordingly? However old this question may be, it still puzzles political scientists today (Wlezien 2017). Whether politicians should be responsive to the public's wishes and demands is, of course, debatable. Some argue that responsiveness is desirable (following Dahl 1956); others take a Burkean view on representation and expect politicians to lead public opinion, rather than following it (Mansbridge 2003). Regardless of which normative stance one takes, elite responsiveness to public opinion is a key component of the democratic process and deserves careful scientific investigation.

The rich body of observational work on substantive representation has taught us a lot about the *occurrence* of elite responsiveness (for a recent, comprehensive overview, see Beyer and Hänni 2018). We know that politicians' and parties' positions—and the policy output they produce—are generally congruent with public opinion, although the public is generally a bit more moderate than elites (e.g. Arnold, Sapir, and de Vries 2012; Bafumi and Herron 2010; Kuklinski 1978; Lax and Phillips 2012). Moreover, time-series analyses have shown that changes in voters' opinions precede changes in political position-taking/policy output (e.g. Adams et al. 2004; Hakhverdian 2012; Page and Shapiro 1983; Soroka and Wlezien 2010; Stimson, Mackuen, and Erikson 1995; Wlezien 2004). This suggests that mass-elite congruence is not merely established by the behavior of citizens—who simply elect the 'right' politicians who share their views on policy (Lau and Redlawsk 1997; Miller and Stokes 1963); or who adapt their opinions in response to policy

(Broockman and Butler 2017; Cohen 2003; Lenz 2009)—but also, at least partly, by responsiveness on the side of political elites.[1]

Uncertainty remains, however, about the *mechanisms* underlying elite responsiveness. The observational literature's focus on outcomes (such as policy output, policymakers' roll call behavior, or party manifestoes), rather than on politicians' full decision-making process, makes it hard to test how responsiveness comes about. Theorizing about the matter, representation scholars generally seem to assume that responsiveness results from a trade-off made by politicians between following their own convictions and acting in line with what the public wants (Lax and Phillips 2009; Stimson, Mackuen, and Erikson 1995). Elites behave responsively if this trade-off—generally made with an eye on the next elections—is settled in favor of the public's wishes. An alternative possibility that was raised in Miller and Stokes' (1963) seminal representation study but that has, since then, received little attention is that responsiveness may follow from individual politicians bringing their opinions into line with these of their voters. No difficult trade-off needs to be made if politicians' own opinions can be influenced by what voters want, just like voters' opinions are influenced by what politicians say (Cohen 2003; Lenz 2009). The possibility that responsiveness involves an attitudinal change bears serious consequences. If

[1] Note that there is some ambiguity in the literature about how 'responsiveness' and 'congruence' are conceptualized and measured (for an extensive discussion, see Beyer and Hänni 2018). In line with most of the literature, we see responsiveness as a dynamic, causal process where politicians bring their behavior closer to what the majority of the voters wants. Ideally, they end up in line with the preferences of this majority, hence establishing congruence.

elites are responsive in a merely behavioral way, they likely keep on trying to convince people of their prior views, even though converting the public may require long-term efforts. If politicians embrace public preferences as their own, however, they probably more fundamentally revise their policy goals, ultimately supporting or even reinforcing movements in public opinion. Empirically examining this possible mechanism is crucial if we want to understand what it actually means when politicians 'act responsively'.

To tackle pending questions about the mechanisms underlying elite responsiveness to public opinion, this paper relies on a *survey experiment* with political elites. This innovative methodological approach allows to observe elites' line of thought on the very moment when they receive and process public opinion information. Concretely, we assessed what Belgian, Dutch-speaking members of parliament (MPs) think of a policy issue, and how they intend to deal with it, after informing a random half of the MPs about voters' opinion on the issue. The experimental results show, for the first time, *how politicians actually update their own preferences in response to voter information* about an issue, and how this affects their subsequent intended policy-making behavior. Symmetrical to how ordinary citizens tend to bring their opinions in line with the positions of the party they identify with, politicians take voter information into account when thinking about an issue. This partially explains subsequent responsive behavior by elites. As a consequence, the often-used distinction between 'delegates', who follow the preferences of citizens exactly, and 'trustees', who follow their own convictions while pursuing the interests of citizens, might be somewhat artificial and the behavior of trustees could be closer to that of delegates than we imagined.

Conceptualizing 'Public Opinion'

Before moving on to our theoretical expectations, we briefly reflect on the various possible meanings of 'public opinion' and clarify how it is conceptualized in this study. After all, there is no such thing as *the* public opinion (Blumer 1948). There are several ways to demarcate 'the public' and to conceive of their 'opinions' and this bears implications for what kind of elite responsiveness one is measuring. In this paper, public opinion information refers to *issue-specific polling information* about the *electorate of a politician's party.* We use this section to justify our choices.

First, an important choice is to look specifically at politicians' response to information about their *partisan electorate* rather than looking at opinions of a legislator's geographic constituency—as is dominant in U.S. models of dyadic representation (Miller and Stokes 1963)—or at the opinions of the public at large, as collective representation studies do (Weissberg 1978). The reason is that in European countries with proportional systems, like Belgium, MPs deem it more important to represent the policy preferences of the party electorate than their geographical district or the full population (see e.g. Brack, Costa, and Teixeira 2012), as to maximize the number of votes for the party on the national level. We therefore believe that the close relationship between politicians and their party electorate, in proportional systems, is equivalent to the link between politicians and their geographic district in majoritarian systems. In other words, we need to focus on the party electorate to stay as close as possible to U.S. studies on 'dyadic representation'. It is not our intention to say that MPs in proportional systems do not care about their geographic district—they are ultimately dependent on it for reelection and they for instance do constituency service (Eulau and Karps 1977)—or that they would not be sensitive at all to public opinion

information about the general population (see e.g. Ezrow et al. 2011). We only claim that the party electorate is their primary reference group and therefore most interesting to look at.

Second, we do *polls* to measure where the majority of a party electorate stands on a *specific policy issue*. Complementing a long tradition of research on responsiveness to general trends in public opinion (left-right distributions or global 'policy moods'; see e.g. Stimson, Mackuen, and Erikson 1995; Adams et al. 2004; Ezrow et al. 2011), scholars have emphasized the added value of studying specific issues because it is not always clear how broad ideology should translate in specific policy (Lax and Phillips 2012; Page and Shapiro 1983; Soroka and Wlezien 2005). Research has shown that politicians themselves deem polls important and organize them on a regular basis (Eisinger 2003; Geer 1996; Kingdon 1973); and that they moreover prefer issue-specific public opinion data to general ideological data, especially for important issues (Druckman and Jacobs 2006). It thus makes sense to observe how elites deal with information about an issue-specific opinion majority.

Conceptualizing public opinion as outlined above, we first aim to experimentally confirm the observational finding that politicians adapt their policy-making behavior when learning that public opinion opposes their viewpoint. Replicating the effect is a prerequisite for investigating our second and substantially most interesting question: is it (partly) driven by changes in politicians' own opinion? In the next sections, we discuss existing theory and evidence on the causality and mechanisms of elite responsiveness to public opinion.

The Causality of Elite Responsiveness

Successful policy representation is not solely depending on political elites' responsive behavior and the responsiveness question is therefore only relevant in certain, specific situations. In the first place, we expect citizens to elect representatives who share their preferences and beliefs (Miller 1999). If policymakers design policies according to preferences they share with voters, these are automatically in line with what the public wants. Even if new issues arise or unexpected events happen—that were not yet included in voters' electoral calculus—the reaction of a well-chosen representative is likely to be similar to that of his/her voters. As a consequence, elite-voter disagreement is the exception rather than the rule (Uslaner 1999). Second, even if politicians at some point take a different position than their voters, citizens can be convinced to adapt their policy positions to the stances of their preferred party or candidate (Hill and Hurley 1999). We know indeed that elites' preferences influence citizens' preferences, which leads to opinion-policy congruence as well (Cohen 2003; Lenz 2009). Only in situations where these two options do not work out—that is, where congruence cannot be established by 'correct voting' or 'opinion adaptation' on the side of voters—there is a need for politicians to be responsive to voters. To be clear, all three causal pathways are legitimate routes to representation, but only the latter route implies that politicians are truly responding to voters (Butler and Nickerson 2011).

Even if it has been challenging to empirically isolate the causal path of 'elite responsiveness', there now is relative consensus that elite decisions (from mere position-taking, over behavior like roll-call voting, to real policy output) are at least partially responsive to public opinion. Most evidence comes from time-series analyses showing that changes in public opinion, taking place

in-between elections (avoiding the possibility of representation through electoral turnover), *precede* (excluding opinion adaptation on the side of voters) changes in elite decisions (Wlezien and Soroka 2016). In response to concerns that omitted variables or endogeneity might confound the causal relationship between public opinion and elite behavior in this kind of research (Wlezien 2017), scholars recently turned to experimental research on the topic. The best-known study is the pioneering field experiment by Butler and Nickerson (2011). During the run-up to a vote by the New Mexico State House about how to spend an unexpected budget surplus, the authors sent public opinion information about the matter to a randomly selected half of the legislators. They show that politicians who received the information, were 10 to 30 percent more likely to vote in line with public opinion than legislators who did not receive the information—confirming the causality of elite responsiveness.

As the authors discuss, however, a different research design is needed to grasp the mechanisms driving these causal effects (Butler and Nickerson 2011). How do politicians arrive at adapting their vote? We believe *survey experiments* are well suited to explore the details of the process that takes place between learning about public opinion (the experimental manipulation) and the behavioral response (an actual vote), because intermediate factors can be measured (McDermott 2002).

The Mechanisms of Elite Responsiveness

In their founding work about voter influence in Congress, Miller and Stokes (1963) identified elite responsiveness as the 'second path of constituency control' (in addition to the first path that is

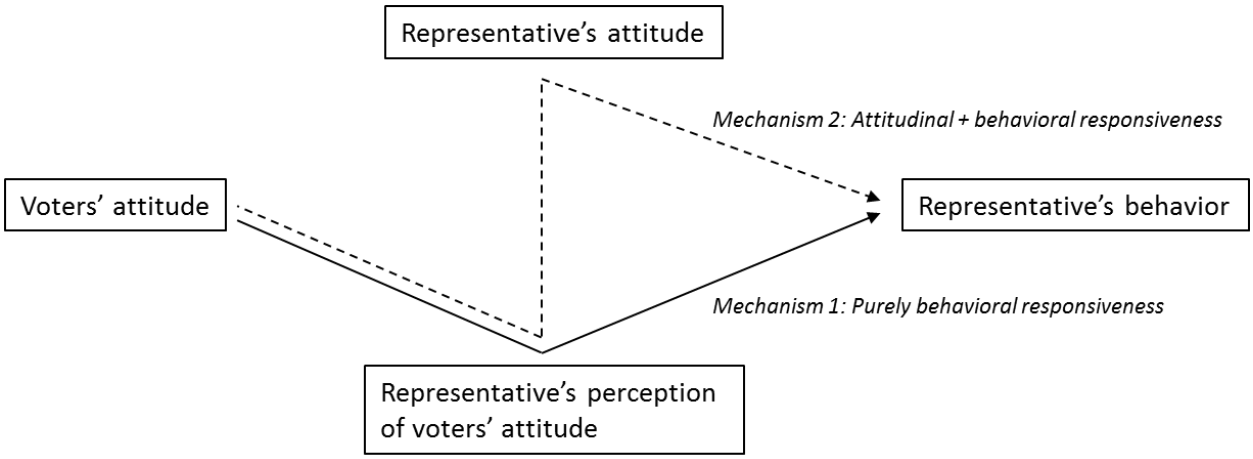
not central here[2]), see **Figure 1**. When politicians learn about voter preferences, Miller and Stokes posited with regards to this second path, they first update their perceptions of these preferences. Subsequently, elite responsiveness can come about via two mechanisms. Either politicians adapt their behavior directly based on this new information (mechanism 1, represented by the solid arrow), or they adapt their own views, after which they act upon these new, own attitudes (mechanism 2, represented by the dashed arrow). Indeed, "*out of respect for the processes by which the human actor achieves cognitive congruence*", Miller and Stokes raise the possibility that the representative tends *"… to bring his own opinion into line with the district's*" (1963, 51).

Since 1963, this second mechanism has received little attention as many scholars have portrayed politicians as highly strategic actors with unshakable convictions. They assume that elite preferences are exogenous and that elites—in situations of disagreement with voters—face a trade-off between obeying to public preferences and following their own opinions. On the one hand, it is generally argued, politicians are dependent on the approval of their voters to be re-elected (Canes-Wrone, Brady, and Cogan 2002). This offers a strong extrinsic motivation to design policies in line with (their perception of) public opinion (Stimson, Mackuen, and Erikson 1995). Moreover, politicians may want to represent the voters out of a sense of duty (Kuklinski and Elling 1977). On the other hand, it is assumed, elites have strong opinions themselves and they may

[2] The first path represents how constituencies exert control by electing elites who share their preferences—which we labeled 'representation through correct voting' above. The arrows corresponding to this path (starting with an arrow from *voter's attitude* to *representative's attitude*) are not shown in **Figure 1**.

not be prepared to diverge from their personal opinions (Poole 2007). Also, politicians could be worried that too much 'flip flopping' would affect their credibility (Cayton 2017). This results in a trade-off, which Stimson et al. exemplary formulate as follows: "*With both preferences over policy options and a continuing need to protect the electoral career from unwanted termination, the elected official will typically need to balance personal preference against electoral expediency*" (1995, 544). By thinking of it this way, scholars imply that elite responsiveness comes at the expense of a politicians' own preferences. The question characterizing this sacrifice, in Lax' and Phillips' words, is: "*To what extent do they represent their constituents and to what extent do they go their own way?*" (2009, 370).

Figure 1—Mechanisms of elite responsiveness (based on Miller & Stokes, 1963)



This common behavioral approach to elite responsiveness is in sharp contrast to how scholars typically look at *citizen responsiveness* to political elites. There is ample evidence that citizens' personal opinions on policy issues are endogenous and influenced by elite position-taking (Broockman and Butler 2017; Cohen 2003; Gabel and Scheve 2007; Harteveld, Kokkonen, and Dahlberg 2017; Lenz 2009). Explanations are found in social identity theory here (Tajfel 1982).

When people identify with a group and categorize themselves as member of the group—e.g. the group of supporters of a political party—they prefer to have shared attitudes with the group. Disagreement is perceived as cognitively unpleasant, and one way to solve the cognitive dissonance that arises because of disagreement with a relevant group is to adapt one's own views. When learning where 'their' party or legislator stands on an issue, voters move their own opinion towards the party's or legislator's position. This process does not require long or extensive arguments from elites about their positions; voters take partisan cues that oppose their own opinions even when these cues contain hardly any justification of the position of the elites (Broockman and Butler 2017). Still, the attitude change is not necessarily superficial: group information can be systematically processed and still be persuasive, for instance if the receiver thinks others' opinions are well thought-out (Wood 2000).

We think political elites could be susceptible to attitudinal responsiveness as well—and hence we see reason for resuscitating Miller and Stokes' second responsiveness mechanism. More specifically, we think that in the case of politicians, cognitive dissonance can actually arise on two fronts. First, there is no reason why the psychological effect of belonging to a group, and identifying with it, would not apply to politicians. Politicians are 'ordinary people' as well, susceptible to the same human psychological processes and biases (Arceneaux, Dunaway, and Soroka 2018; Sheffer et al. 2018). Their feelings of belonging to the group might be even stronger than those of citizens: many politicians have been strong partisans their whole lives, and working for the party likely reinforces feelings of party identification. What other partisan supporters—constituting a significant in-group of people who 'think like them'—think of an issue, is probably

important to politicians. They could (unconsciously) use the information about this relevant reference group to update their own position.

One could think that politicians are resistant to this effect because they have strong and well-informed opinions already. Yet we know from research with citizens that higher political awareness (and having better-informed opinions) does not necessarily prevent group influence from happening. It actually produces an ambivalence (Zaller 1990). On the one hand, people with strong opinions are less easily persuaded because they are confident about their own argumentation and more resistant to the new, contradicting information. On the other hand, they comprehend the new information better and recognize the cognitive dissonance that arises as a majority of their in-group disagrees with their views. This enhances their motivation to solve the cognitive dissonance, incentivizing them to reconsider their position. Due to this logic, the political aware and unaware are similarly influenced by relevant in-groups (Gabel and Scheve 2007). Politicians have strong opinions, but they also strongly desire to be in line with the voters—having opinions is central to their job and so they want to have the 'right' opinions. The motivation to solve cognitive dissonance increases as this dissonance has foreseeable negative consequences (Cooper and Fazio 1984); which is true for politicians who feel they are continuously being monitored by voters and will be held accountable at the next elections.

It is unlikely that this psychological effect occurs in response to weak cues (like it sometimes happens with uninformed citizens). We know for instance that politicians tend to discount the opinions of individual constituents they disagree with—even if these citizens are from their own party (Butler and Dynes 2016)—because they are convinced that they themselves understand the issue better. That said, there is a big difference between the opinions of one or a few voters,

and the opinions of *all* voters (or at least: a majority of them). Opinion information has more persuasive potential when it is prototypical for in-group norms (Van Knippenberg and Wilke 1992). Research has for example shown that protest has the potential to persuade politicians only if enough people take to the streets: the higher the numbers, the more likely politicians are to agree with the goals of the demonstrators (Wouters and Walgrave 2017). Our study deals with the preferences of the *majority* of politicians' own partisan support base, which might well be *the* most valued group of voters to politicians.

Second, in addition to cognitive dissonance arising from the conflict between their own opinions and the opinions of their partisan supporters, politicians may experience cognitive dissonance arising from the conflict between their opinions and their (eventual) future behavior (Cooper and Fazio 1984). Politicians may, through experience, know that they—for the strategic reasons outlined above (e.g. electoral punishment)—generally follow their party supporters when acting politically. This means that politicians also learn that, when public opinion information comes in that goes against their own opinion—friction will arise between their opinions and their future actions. One cognitive solution for politicians to avoid this future dissonance is to anticipate it and to already change their own opinion to be in line with voters'.

For all these reasons, it seems plausible that elites' behavioral responsiveness to public opinion is, at least sometimes, preceded by attitudinal changes as well on the side of elites. When learning that voters have conflicting preferences, do elites first adapt their opinions, hence solving the situation of disagreement (and is disagreement between representatives and their electorate thus only short-term)? Or do they stick to their original personal views and merely change their behavior? This is what we aim to find out.

Two further considerations deserve attention. First, in the theoretical framework outlaid above, as well as in the empirical study reported below, attitude change comes first and precedes behavioral changes in response to public opinion information. This means that we disregard the possible scenario where a politician changes his/her opinion after acting responsively. In other words, we do not look at politicians' post-hoc decisions to bring their opinions in line with their behavior but only at attitudinal change that occurs directly after learning public opinion. Our measurement of the total amount of elite opinion change that public opinion information may cause is in that sense conservative.

Second, the process of elite responsiveness partly differs between political systems. We do not anticipate that the key mechanism studied here—*opinion* adaptation—is dependent on any political system: we assume that the psychological mechanisms making politicians adapt their opinions in response to public opinion information are universal. Yet the subsequent legislative procedure differs. In countries like the U.S. where political parties are relatively weak, politicians can make their own legislative (voting) decisions. In strong party systems like Belgium, however, this works differently. Policy proposals are discussed within the party first. Individual politicians' opinions matter a lot in this phase, because party positions are not fixed (Adams et al. 2004; Ezrow et al. 2011): they are constructed and debated by the politicians who make up the parliamentary party group. All politicians have the opportunity to weigh on the debate. But once a party position is decided on, party loyalty kicks in for the actual vote and a politician nearly always respects the party position (Depauw 2003). Our survey experiment accounts for this by using politicians' position-taking *within* the party as a first measure of policy-making behavior (for a similar procedure see Butler, Naurin, and Öhberg 2016). We additionally gauge politicians'

intended voting behavior in parliament. Even if this second behavioral question is less realistic—because politicians do not decide autonomously on their votes most of the time—we still think it is informative as an indicator of how the politician personally *prefers* the party to vote. The results may travel to countries where politicians *are* actually free in their voting behavior, like the U.S.

A Survey Experiment

To lay bare elites' attitudinal and (intended) behavioral response to public opinion information, we conducted a survey experiment with Dutch-speaking members of parliament in Belgium.[3] Both national (federal) and regional (Flemish) MPs were invited to participate, with satisfactory response rates of 79% and 77% respectively. In total, 151 politicians personally completed the survey experiment (in the presence of an interviewer). In this section, we describe the design of the experiment. All practical information about the data collection can be found in **Online Appendix 1**.

In the experiment we provided a randomly selected half of the politicians with public opinion information about an issue, and then observed how these politicians thought about (attitudinal change) and intended to act upon (behavioral change) the issue, compared to the control group that did not receive any public opinion information. The selection of concrete issues is important

[3] The files for replication are published on Dataverse: https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataset.xhtml?persistentId=doi:10.7910/DVN/RTUBVV

here. We only considered real (and well-known) political issues we thought voters and politicians would care about and have real opinions on—rather than fictional (or new), non-salient or overly technical issues no-one would bother about. Moreover, to be able to test whether politicians are prepared to change their opinion and behavior in response to voter information, we aimed to identify at least a few issues for which politicians' position differed from that of their electorate, hence creating opportunities for elites to be responsive.

The issues that we ultimately selected met the following criteria: we suspected that the party disagreed with the policy proposal (but we did not *a priori* verify this with our elite respondents, since we did not want to draw their attention to these issues in the period right before the study); we knew that a majority of 70 to 75% of the electorate agreed with it, and that maximum 10% of the voters indicated to have 'no opinion' on it. The partisan electorates' opinions were measured by means of a representative, online survey with a sample of Belgian, Dutch-speaking citizens (via Survey Sampling International; N = 1,625). The full procedure we followed to identify these issues is discussed in **Online Appendix 1**. The proposals we chose to use for the final experiment are in **Table 1**.

Table 1—Public opinion about policy statements used in experiment

Party	Issue	Policy proposal	% agree (electorate)	N
Greens	Sentence enforcement	All convicts should serve their full sentence.	73%	260
Socialists	Minimal service for public transport	If the NMBS is on strike, a minimum number of trains should still run.	74%	183
Christian-Democrats	Cumulating mandates	A member of parliament cannot be mayor at the same time.	72%	193

Liberals	Speaking Dutch at school	Schools should oblige children to speak Dutch on the playground as well.	73%	143
Flemish-Nationalists	Bus and tram networks	Bus and tram lines with few passengers should remain operational.	74%	582
Extreme-right	Bus and tram networks	Bus and tram lines with few passengers should remain operational.	75%	264

Even though we tried to find functionally equivalent policy proposals for all parties, the issues are ultimately different, making it impossible to test whether differences in elite responsiveness between parties are due to party or issue characteristics. This is why we only focus on *within*-party differences (between treatment and control group). Our main interest lies in finding *similar results* across parties—allowing to generalize the results across a broad range of parties and issues—rather than explaining differences, which we cannot do here (even if the work on the conditional explanations of responsiveness is very relevant as well, see Beyer and Hänni 2018).

After having selected one issue per party, we confronted politicians with their party-specific policy proposal in the elite survey, telling the Green politicians, for instance, that:

> [*Sentence enforcement] is an issue that sometimes gets attention in Belgium. People have different opinions on the following policy proposal: "[All convicts should serve their full sentence.]*" (party-specific information in square brackets)

This introduction was followed by the experimental manipulation, where a random half of the MPs of each party (the treatment group, N = 78) got information about the opinion of their

electorate, while the other half of the party's MPs (the control group, N = 73) did not get any information at all.[4] We show the stimulus of the Green party as an example:

> *Interested in what people think about this matter, our research group M²P (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 [the Green party], are in favor of [forcing convicts to serve their full sentence]. More specifically, it appears that* ***more than 70% of the [Green party]-voters agree/totally agree with the abovementioned policy proposal****.*

After that, for control and treatment group alike, we assessed politicians' own opinion about the issue, their intended behavior within the party, and their intended voting behavior. The precise questions were:

1. *We are interested in your opinion about this policy matter. To what extent do you personally agree with the above policy proposal?*
   0 (Totally disagree) to 10 (Totally agree)

(next page)

[4] A balance test confirms that the randomization succeeded on characteristics like gender, age, parliamentary experience, party and parliament (regional/federal); see **Online Appendix 2**.

2. *For all kinds of reasons it is possible that politicians, irrespective of their own position on an issue, sometimes defend other positions, or that they adapt their communication about the topic. Would you communicate about the policy proposal in the following situations*[5] *and, if yes, which position would you take?*

   "The topic is discussed during an internal faction meeting and you are asked for your opinion."

   -3 (Argue strongly against) to 3 (Argue strongly in favor) OR I would not communicate

   (next page)

3. *Imagine that the policy proposal is up for a vote in parliament. Would you participate in the vote and, if yes, which position would you take?*

   A) Vote against the policy proposal; B) Vote for the policy proposal; C) I would not participate in the vote

Based on this between-subjects design, we can test whether politicians in the treatment group—who learned that many of their voters agree with the policy proposal—are more in favor of the proposal themselves (attitudinal responsiveness) and are more inclined to argue (in the party) or

[5] We asked politicians to judge two additional scenarios (about how they would communicate towards a journalist and a voter respectively), but as these items do not deal with how politicians represent voters *substantively* they are not discussed here.

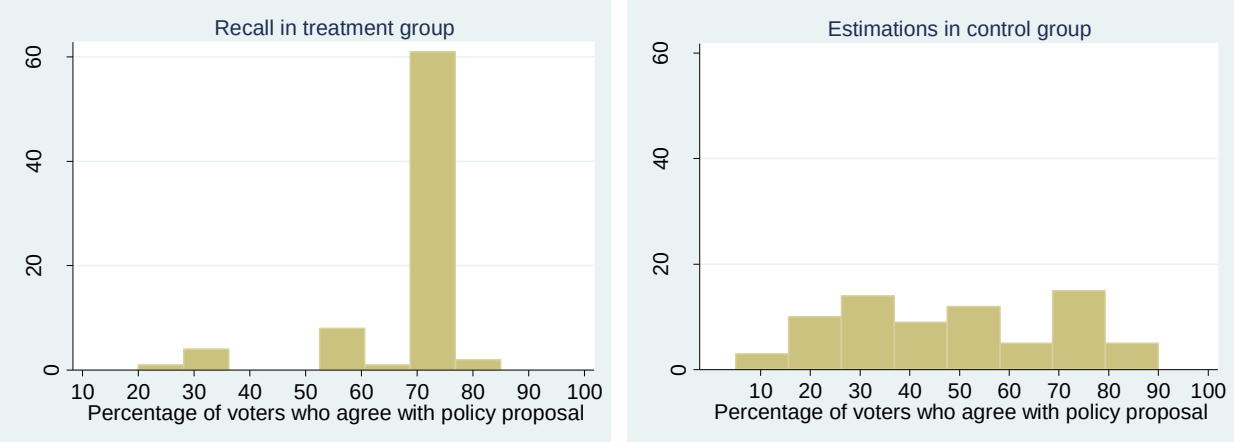
vote (in parliament) in favor of the policy proposal (behavioral responsiveness) than politicians in the control group who did not receive such information. Irrespective of the experimental condition, descriptive statistics for our main dependent variables show that politicians' own opinion is, on average, 3.98 (N = 151) and thus rather against the issue. Politicians would, on average, also argue "rather against" the proposal in an internal party meeting (average is -.54 on a scale from -3 to 3; N = 149). And with regards to voting in parliament, 87 politicians intend to vote against the policy proposal (59%); 58 tend to vote in favor (39%) and 3 politicians say they would not participate in the vote (2%) (N = 148). As the latter response occurred only a few times, and as it was not related to one specific experimental condition, we decided to keep those three respondents out of the analysis of intended voting behavior.

After the measurement of the dependent variables, we included several more questions that allow us to test (1) whether the manipulation succeeded, (2) whether the scenario was perceived as realistic (boosting confidence in the external validity), (3) whether the policy proposals we selected, as we aimed for, were deemed salient by the politicians and (4) whether they were characterized by voter-party disagreement. We briefly discuss these before we move on to the results.

First, we formally tested whether respondents in the treatment group noticed the stimulus (manipulation check) and whether it improved the accuracy of their perception of the public opinion (compared to the control group). After all, if politicians in the control group were aware of voters' opinion as well—e.g. due to pre-treatment effects in the real world (Slothuus 2016)—we would have no reason to expect differences between control group and treatment group. We asked all politicians from the treatment group whether they could *recall, approximately, what*

percentage of the voters of their party would be in favor of the policy proposal. Politicians from the control group, then, were asked to *estimate* this percentage. The results are reassuring: politicians in the treatment group clearly noticed that about 70% of their voters agreed with the policy proposal, while guesses about public opinion in the control group were spread out, with 50% of the politicians thinking the majority disagreed (see **Figure 2**).

Figure 2—Manipulation check

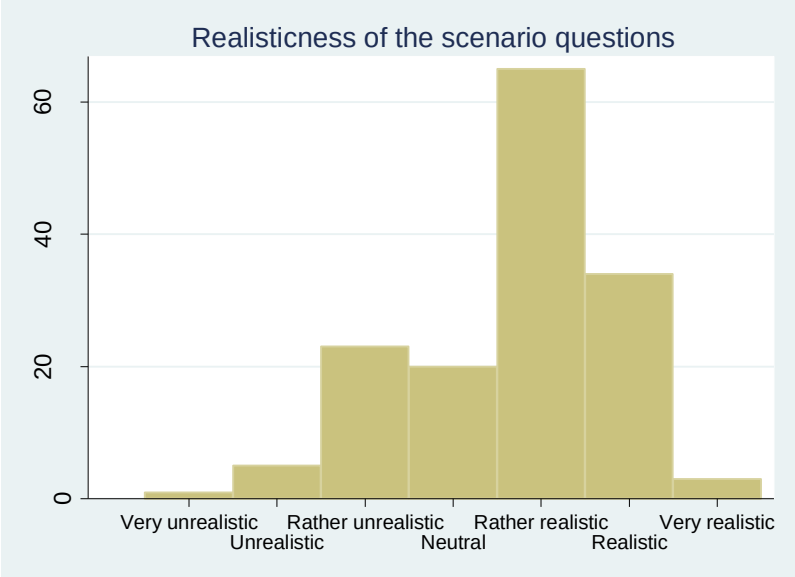


Second, we asked politicians to judge, overall, how realistic the hypothetical scenario questions were to them. The results are shown in **Figure 3**. A majority of the respondents deemed the questions at least rather realistic (68%), some were neutral (13%), and only 19% said the questions were rather unrealistic. For a survey with MPs, who tend to be critical about many questions, these results are comforting. In **Online Appendix 6**, we show that our results do not differ between respondents who deem the scenarios realistic and those who do not deem them realistic.

Third, right after politicians gave their own opinion on the issue, we asked politicians how important it was, according to them, that their party would pay attention to the matter in the

next 12 months on a scale from 0 (very unimportant) to 10 (very important), tapping salience. Overall, 65% of the elite respondents deem short-term action on their issue moderately (5) to very (10) important, indicating that the proposals we chose are not unimportant—though not *the* most important issues of the day either—which was fine as sudden public attention for the issues would disturb the experimental set-up. There are rather large differences in salience between the issues, though. Therefore, in **Online Appendix 7** we will show that the results are not affected by differences in salience.

Figure 3—Realism check



Finally, a question about the party's position on the policy proposal on a scale from 0 (totally disagree) to 10 (totally agree) came at the very end of the experiment. It allows us to assess the different party positions as well as the extent to which individual MPs are aware of that position. The results are mixed here, as can be seen in **Table 2**.

In four out of the six parties, MPs' responses confirmed that their party disagreed (average estimation below 5 on a scale from 0 to 10) with the proposal. For the liberal party and for the

extreme-right (populist) party, however, this is not true and MPs think (again on average) that their party agrees with the policy proposal—in contrast to what we assumed based on our preparatory research. Moreover, as the standard deviations in **Table 2** show, in all parties there is remarkably much individual-level variation in MPs' estimations of their party's position. Apparently, some MPs are not aware of the disagreeing position of the party (or of the extent to which the party disagrees). This illustrates that, within ideologically coherent parties, specific policy positions are not always clear.[6]

This variation offers us interesting analytical opportunities. It implies that for the larger part of the MPs, our experiment tests whether information saying that public opinion is *not* in line with the perceived party position has an effect on politicians' opinions, or in other words, whether it can lead to attitudinal *change* (unless the MP's personal opinion diverges from the perceived party position). But it also allows us to test—for some MPs of all parties, and for many MPs of two parties (liberal and extreme-right) in particular—whether information saying that public opinion is *in line* with the perceived party position, affects their attitudes. The question here is whether their prior attitudes are *confirmed* or *reinforced* by the information (again, unless the MP's personal opinion diverges from the perceived party position). As MPs are entirely randomly distributed over the treatment and the control group, this poses no analytical problems to the

[6] Note that these differences are not related to our experimental manipulation: the party position estimations of the treatment group are not significantly higher (nor lower) than the estimations of the control group ($t = -.52$; $p = .603$).

experiment (cf. the successful balance test, see **Appendix 2**). We simply include the 'perceived party position' variable as a moderator (and as a control variable).

Table 2—Estimation of party position

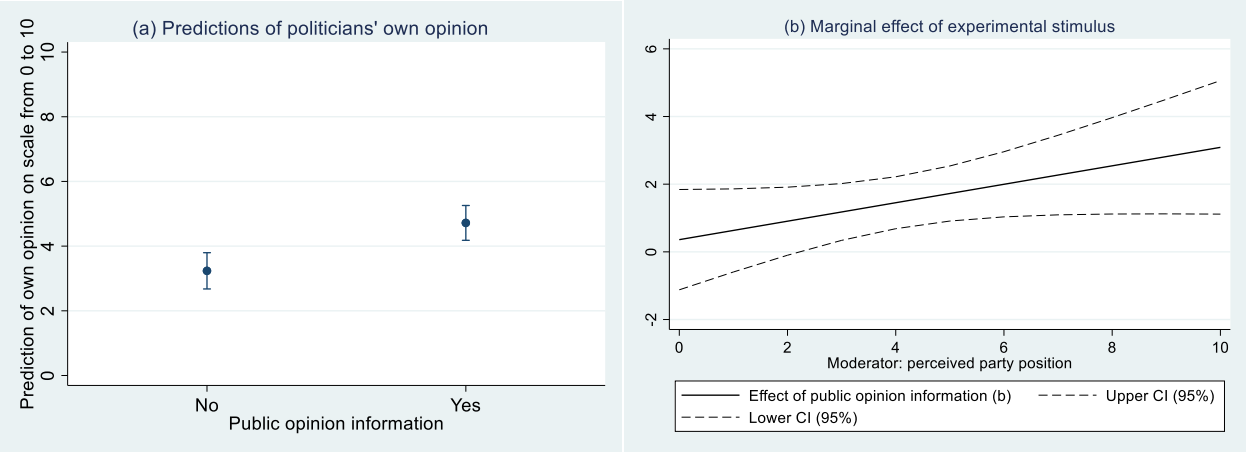
Party	Policy proposal	Estimation of party position (0-10)			Attention importance (0-10)	Party-voter disagreement? (in the aggregate)
		Mean	S.D.	N	Mean	
Greens	All convicts should serve their full sentence.	2.23	2.71	13	4.54	Yes
Socialists	If the NMBS is on strike, a minimum number of trains should still run.	3.67	2.43	24	4.79	Yes
Christian-Democrats	A member of parliament cannot be mayor at the same time.	4.31	1.84	35	2.97	Yes
Liberals	Schools should oblige children to speak Dutch on the playground as well.	5.53	2.37	17	5.41	No
Flemish-Nationalists	Bus and tram lines with few passengers should remain operational.	3.91	2.64	54	6.71	Yes
Extreme-right	Bus and tram lines with few passengers should remain operational.	6.57	2.23	7	7.86	No

Results

First of all, we find that public opinion information indeed has the potential to affect politicians' *own opinion*. Within a party, those politicians who just learned that their electorate favors a proposal, are themselves more in favor of the proposal than politicians who did not receive such

information. Evidence from a multivariate analysis, controlling for parties (dummies) and the politician's perception of the position of his/her party on the issue, is shown in **Figure 4a** (for the full model see **Online Appendix 3**, Model 1). A politician's personal opinion on an issue is about 1.5-point higher in the treatment group (on average 4.72 on a scale from 0 to 10) than in the control group (on average 3.24). The effect is substantive and comes on top of a stable and logical effect of the perceived party position.

Figure 4—Influence of public opinion information on politicians' own opinion



Note: predictions based on Model 1 (a) and Model 2 (b), Online Appendix 3

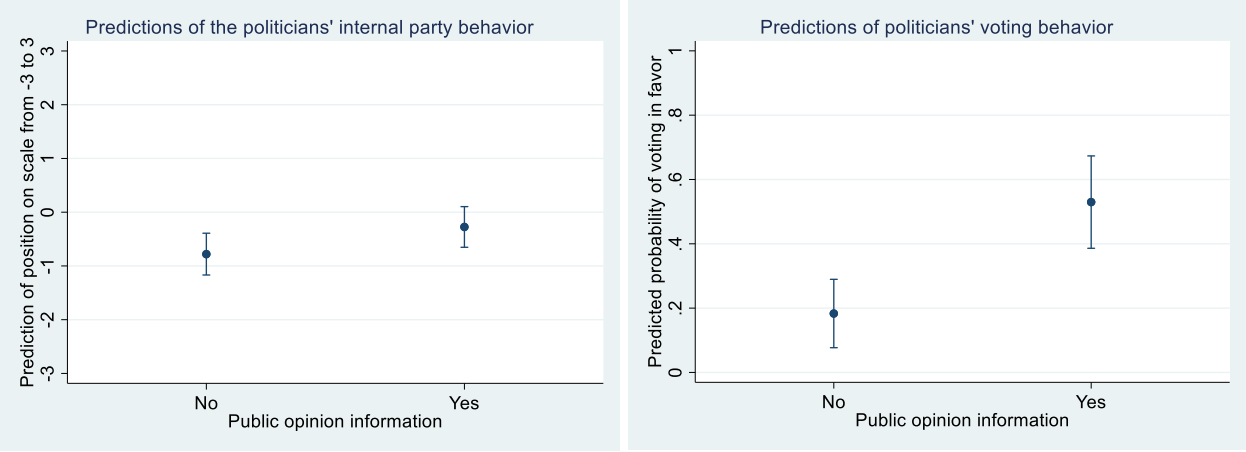
We tease out the effect further by including the perceived party position on the issue as a moderator. We want to know whether public opinion information has effects when the politician thinks the public *opposes* the party position (and not just when (s)he assumes the two are in line with each other). The full model is in **Online Appendix 3** (Model 2); the marginal effects are visualized in **Figure 4b**. We see that the interaction effect between the experimental stimulus and 'perceived party position' is positive and close to statistical significance. This means that public opinion information has a larger persuasive effect on politicians who think their party is in

favor of the proposal (and in line with public opinion), than on those who think their party is more moderate or even against (and hence opposes the public). However, this does not mean that there is no effect in the latter situation: the figure shows that the effect of public opinion information on a politician's opinion starts to be significant for politicians who perceive their party as being rather strongly against (from value 2 onwards). Opinion change thus occurs too (e.g. with politicians flipping from a position below the middle of the scale to one above the middle). All in all, these findings nicely illustrate how politicians do not follow voter cues blindly, but balance new information against their own predispositions. Public opinion information can cause both opinion *change* and opinion *reinforcement*—the latter typically being a bit larger.

The effect applies across parties and remains significant when leaving out a party of the analysis (done one-by-one for all parties, see **Online Appendix 8**). Interaction effects show, however, that politicians from the green party adapt their opinion on their issue a bit less than MPs from other parties after learning that their electorate is in favor; while the Christian-Democrats display a bit more opinion adaptation. We can only speculate about why these between-party variations in attitude change occur. Are the Greens more ideological than the other parties, and the Christian-Democrats less? Is there something particular about the issues we picked for these parties (i.e. sentence enforcement and cumulating mandates)? Or is this result a coincidence, resulting from the relatively low N for parties separately? The second explanation seems plausible, as **Table 1** showed that the Greens see their party as more outspoken on their issue than the Christian-Democrats. But the result might well be a combination of several reasons; what we take from this is that our finding regarding attitudinal responsiveness is robust, yet that its size varies across contexts.

What about politicians *intended behavior*, then, in their party and in parliament? First, our findings replicate what studies on elite responsiveness typically find: there is responsiveness in politicians' policy-making behavior. The evidence is shown in **Figure 5**. Politicians who received information saying that the majority of their voters agree with a policy proposal, are somewhat more likely to argue in favor of the proposal on an internal party meeting (or at least to present balanced arguments; average value of -.28 on a scale from -3 to 3) than politicians who did not receive such information (average of -.78). And, they are clearly more likely to vote in favor of the proposal in parliament (even if, as discussed above, such a vote intention is a bit artificial in the absence of party directives about how to vote). The predicted probability of voting in favor of the policy proposal—and thus in line with what 70% of the party electorate prefers—increases substantially when public opinion information is provided: from 18% to 53%. The predictions are based on full Model 3 and 5 (**Online Appendix 4**).

Figure 5—Influence of public opinion information on politicians' internal party and voting behavior



Note: predictions based on Model 3 and Model 5, Online Appendix 4

The perceived party position of a politician matters too, of course: the more a politician thinks his party is in favor of the proposal, the more this politician will argue and vote in favor of the proposal. However, the interaction effect between the perceived party position and the experimental stimulus is not significant here (see **Online Appendix 4**, Models 4 and 6). Irrespective of whether a politicians thinks his party is in favor of or against a proposal, receiving public opinion information increases the chance of arguing in favor of the proposal internally, and it increases the chance of a vote in favor with about 35 percentage point. This is close to the high levels of behavior change reported in Butler & Nickerson's (2011) unique field experiment. Note also that the effect of public opinion information on politician's voting behavior is not dependent on any specific party (see **Online Appendix 8**).

The crucial question is then to what extent the effect of our experimental manipulation on politicians' internal party behavior and on their voting behavior is *mediated* by changes in their own opinion (track 2: attitudinal responsiveness), and to what extent there is a *direct* effect of public opinion on the vote (track 1: merely behavioral responsiveness). For both dependent variables (internal party behavior and vote) we ran a model with both the experimental condition and the own opinion (measured after the stimulus) as independent variables (and with the usual controls). The results (see Model 7 and 8 in **Online Appendix 5**) show that politicians' own opinion takes over the effect of the experimental stimulus on politicians' internal party behavior *entirely* (there is no longer a direct effect; b = -.117; S.E. = .221; p = .599); and that it takes over the effect on the intended vote *partially* (there still is a direct effect but it is no longer significant; b = .993; S.E. = .644; p = .123). Combining the results from these model with the main effects models, mediation analysis shows that the effect of public opinion information on internal party

behavior is fully mediated by a change in the own opinion; and that 58% of the effect of public opinion on politicians' voting behavior is mediated by a change in their own opinion.[7] This is not surprising. In an internal party meeting, politicians simply defend their own position on the issue and there are less strategic reasons to be responsive to the public. When it comes to a formal vote, politicians may feel more tempted to follow their electorate as to please voters—even when this goes against their own opinion. Still, the larger part of politicians' responsiveness to voter cues (when they vote) is driven by an attitudinal rather than a purely behavioral change.

Conclusion and discussion

By means of a survey-experiment, we have tried to isolate political elites' reaction to public opinion information. The results boost our confidence in observational findings on elite responsiveness, showing that politicians who learn that the majority of their party electorate is in favor of an issue, are more likely to argue in favor of the issue within their party, and to vote in favor of the issue in parliament. Most importantly, we have discovered that a substantial part of this effect is driven by what we labeled 'attitudinal responsiveness'. In line with social identity theory, politicians change their own opinions to be more in line with what the majority of their voters, who are a relevant in-group to them, think of an issue. This attitudinal effect is strongest when politicians think that the gap between their party and their voters is smaller, but it also occurs when the public opinion information opposes the perceived party position. Only a small

[7] Calculated via the medeff command in Stata.

part of responsiveness is purely behavioral—meaning that politicians do not personally agree with their voters but intend to vote according to their wishes anyway.

While the attitudinal effect is not very big—politicians, on average, become 1.5-point more in favor of a proposal on a scale from 0 to 10—we think it is substantial. For some politicians, it implies that they pass the 'tipping point' from being rather against to being rather in favor (e.g. from 4.5 to 6). Others may stay on the opposing side and become only lukewarm to the proposal (e.g. from 2.5 to 4), but still, they seem to have become more moderate and maybe more willing to consider arguments in favor of the proposal. Note that politicians were exposed to just one piece of information here; it seems likely that repeated confrontations with this information would magnify the effect.

The findings suggest that elite responsiveness involves less psychological friction than is often assumed. Scholars often describe elected politicians as purely strategic actors with stable preferences, who face a difficult trade-off between acting in line with their own preferences, and with these of voters. This idea of pure rationality is challenged here (and increasingly gets support elsewhere as well, see e.g. Sheffer et al. 2018). We show that a mechanism is at play that reduces the difficulty of the choice to be made, because politicians are partially persuaded themselves by the voters' preferred position. This is consequential because it increases the likelihood that a politician tries to convince others of his/her new viewpoint as well; rather than that (s)he continues to try and gain support for his/her old viewpoint.

An important implication for representational theory is that the often-used distinction between politicians with a 'delegate' and a 'trustee' role conception may be somewhat artificial. Due to

the persuasive effect of voter information on a politician's own convictions, the difference between 'following voter preferences' and 'following one's own convictions' becomes small or even non-existing. This might explain why self-proclaimed delegates, in observational studies, seldom appear to be more responsive to voters than trustees (see e.g. Önnudóttir 2014).

The results were found in the Belgian context, but we believe they are generalizable well beyond its borders. Belgium is prototypical for many countries in Western Europe (proportional systems, strong parties), and there are no reasons why the patterns found here, would not apply there as well. Actually, the human psychological inclination to feel connected to—and want to be part of—one's in-group is universal, and in that sense, the findings may even travel to different systems (e.g. countries like Canada or the U.S.), even if it is possible that attitudinal effects are somewhat stronger in certain institutional contexts than in others (in small European countries, for example, MPs have less staffers and professional advisers, and may therefore be somewhat less 'strategic' then U.S. legislators).

It is important to acknowledge that the external validity of our survey experimental evidence is lower than that of observational or field experimental designs. The causal process we focused on here does not occur in such an isolated manner in the real world, where politicians can talk to each other while forming opinions and where our two central actors—politicians and voters—exert a reciprocal influence on each other. Moreover, the survey experimental questions only measured *intended* behavior in hypothetical scenarios. These are issues we cannot solve here. On a positive note, we know already from a large, existing literature on representation that responsiveness occurs in the real world. Our study's main goal was not to establish the effect but to *complement* this research by focusing on the psychological mechanism: *attitudinal* change.

Survey research is the standard approach here; it is also what we rely on to draw conclusions about attitude change of citizens in response to elite cues (and we accept these methodological limitations there). And, what reinforces our belief in our findings is the fact that two out of the six parties we studied, apparently changed positions on their policy proposal in the period before the elite interviews. We were first disappointed to learn that MPs from the liberal and the extreme-right party, contrary to our expectations, said their party agreed with the policy proposal we selected—making the party stimuli less comparable than originally planned. But paradoxically, this also boosts our confidence in the results: we were probably witnessing the manifestation of our findings in the real world.

Three other limitations deserve attention. First, a critical reader may argue that our results could be driven by social desirability and hence reflect strategic behavior anyway. However, we carefully created an interview context (private setting, guarantee of anonymity,…) that encouraged politicians to be honest. Given our good reputation with the elite respondents (we interview them three-yearly and there have never been confidentiality issues), they know it is safe to give honest answers. Interestingly, moreover, many respondents told us during the interviews that they aim *not* to blindly follow what the public wants. In an era where populists are gaining ground, many politicians feel it is there task to *lead* the public rather than to listen to it. This is confirmed by survey results showing that politicians believe that they should be trustees rather than delegates (see **Online Appendix 9**). This strengthens our belief that responsiveness is not perceived as socially desirable; and that we have measured a possibly even unwanted reflex to take the public into account in the formation of opinions.

Second, the nature of the attitudinal effect we found is open to debate. We believe that we found public opinion information to have an *informational* effect (as was demonstrated in **Figure 2**) and then *persuasive* effect on politicians' attitudes. However, our stimulus may at the same time have had some kind of a *priming* effect by increasing the salience of 'voter attitudes' in politicians' mind as a consideration when expressing their own opinions. In an ideal world, we would test the duration of the opinion effects or we would design a more extensive experimental stimulus including competing stimuli to tease out these possibilities. Due to the difficulties related to doing elite research, this was not feasible here.

Finally, due to severe time constraints, we could present each MP with one survey experiment only. We deliberately chose equivalent issues for different parties (relatively salient; clear opinion majority amongst voters), but this makes it hard to generalize our findings to other types of issues. It seems plausible that elites are less responsive, for instance, for more technical issues, or for issues on which the party electorate is more divided. That said, we did study six different parties, with stimuli about five different policy domains, on two levels of government (regional/federal). The effects we found were thus not a one-shot hit, but they are applicable to a variety of contexts. We hope further research can look into different types of issues and, possibly, also different kinds of public opinion signals. An interesting question is, for example, how politicians respond to partisan information when they, at the same time, receive information about the general public (the median voter).

Wrapping up, we conclude that attitudinal changes are an important mechanism underlying elite responsiveness to public opinion. Of course, politicians do not always *want* to be responsive: sometimes they are convinced of their views and they deem it more important to explain why

certain choices are made than to listen (see e.g. Grose, Malhotra, and Van Houweling 2015). Moreover, they sometimes *cannot* be responsive because they have inaccurate perceptions of the public opinion (see e.g. Belchior 2014). We found this to be true here as well: many politicians in the control group were not aware of the preferences of their electorate. However, we showed that if Belgian politicians are given solid information about the public opinion, they update these false perceptions. This, on its turn, not seldom makes them not only their behavior, but also their own attitudes on the policy issue at hand. Politicians' natural state of mind is to be fairly responsive, but they are unable to be so if adequate information is lacking.

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How Public Opinion Information Changes Politicians' Opinions and Behavior

Online Appendix

Online Appendix 1: Additional information on data collection

A) Elite survey

The survey experiment reported here was part of a larger project (not specified here for the anonymous review process) on how elites represent the public and how they inform themselves about public opinion. In the framework of this project, we asked Belgian politicians for a face-to-face meeting of approximately an hour between March and June 2018. Both national (federal) and regional (Flemish) Dutch-speaking MPs were invited (and repeatedly encouraged) to participate, with satisfactory response rates of 79% (69 out of 87 federal MPs) and 77% (95 out of 124 regional MPs) respectively.

During the face-to-face meeting, we first asked the respondents to fill out a closed survey on a laptop (approximately 30 minutes) and then went on to a semi-structured interview (30 minutes as well). To avoid uneasy situations waiting for the MP to fill out the survey, all interviewers took something with them to read in the meantime. The interviewer was, however, available for questions of clarification. We prefer our face-to-face approach to an online survey approach because it shows or commitment, leading to higher response rates, and it prevents politicians from asking their staffers to fill out the survey.

Ethical consent to conduct the experiment was obtained beforehand. The experiment came early in the closed survey—to avoid contamination by preceding questions—and was only preceded

by some questions unrelated to this study. The total number of politicians that participated in the survey experiment is 151. This means that 13 out of the 164 interviewed politicians did not complete the survey experiment questions. Our N is hence 151 but note that there are furthermore 5 MPs who missed at least one question—which is why the reported N in the analyses varies a bit—depending on which variables are included in the specific analysis.

B) Issue selection and citizen survey

To find suitable issues, we went through the following procedure:

First, we used various sources of information (such as recent public opinion surveys or mass media coverage) to discover issues on which a party and its electorate would *potentially* clash. Note that we only considered issues we thought voters and politicians would care about and have real opinions on—rather than non-salient or overly technical issues no-one would bother about. Between four and eight possibly suitable issues were selected per party and formulated as concrete policy proposals, all following the same pattern: we suspected that the party *disagreed* with the policy proposal, while the majority of the electorate *agreed* with it.

To test whether the electorate actually agreed with these proposals (and to know the size of the majority), we conducted an online survey with a sample of Belgian, Dutch-speaking citizens in February 2018 (via Survey Sampling International; N = 1,625). The sample was representative on gender, age and educational level. Respondents first indicated their party preference by responding to the following question:

Imagine that there would be national elections today. Which party would you vote for? (Answer options: list of all main political parties / Other party / I would not vote / I don't know.)

After that, citizens were confronted with the party-specific policy proposals and asked to indicate to what extent they (dis)agreed, measured on a scale from 1 (Totally disagree) to 5 (Totally agree).

Based on the survey results, for each party, we picked an proposal that (1) between 70 and 75% of the electorate indicated to 'agree' or 'totally agree' with; and (2) maximum 10% of the voters indicated to have 'no opinion' on. The latter criterion is an indicator of sufficient salience, we think: non-salient matters are generally characterized by a large number of people who 'don't know'.

Note that on the side of parties, we had indications (based on previously made statements by the party leader) that they disagreed with the policy proposals, but we did not *a priori* verify this with our elite respondents, since we did not want to draw their attention to these issues in the period right before the study.

Note, furthermore, that policy competences in the Belgian federal state are divided over two levels: the federal parliament deals with national issues (e.g. public finances, the army) whereas the regional parliaments deal with regional (e.g. spatial planning, public transport) or language/culture related issues (e.g. education). This means that some of the issues we selected are federal competences, whereas others are regional competences. We assumed that this would not matter for our experiment, because parliament is made up by the exact same parties

on both levels. Many MPs switch between parliaments throughout their careers and are aware of discussions taking place on both levels. Still, we ran additional models to show that our results about elite responsiveness do not depend on whether a politician is (or is not) a member of the parliament in charge of the policy domain. These are shown in **Online Appendix 10.**

Online Appendix 2: Balance test

	Balance test: Logistic regression explaining experimental condition
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 in parliament	.006
	(.031)
Federal MP (vs. regional)	.145
	(.342)
Estimated party position	.017
	(.072)
Constant	-63.350
	(57.146)
N	150

**** p<.001, ** p<.01, * p<.05*

Online Appendix 3: Full models explaining own opinion

	Linear regression explaining politician's own opinion *0 (totally disagree) – 10 (totally agree)*	
	(1)	(2)
Public opinion information (vs. no information)	**1.482*** **	**.361**
	(.394)	**(.756)**
Estimated party position	.422***	.300**
	(.0835)	(.109)
Public opinion information * Estimated party position	—	.273ǂ
		(.157)
Party (ref: Greens)		
Socialists	1.074	1.120
	(.836)	(.831)
Christian-Democrats	1.853*	1.806*
	(.800)	(.795)
Liberals	2.455**	2.299*
	(.928)	(.926)
Flemish-Nationalists	.843	.890
	(.756)	(.751)
Extreme-right	1.872	1.767
	(1.184)	(1.177)
Constant	.220	.716
	(.714)	(.765)
N	150	150
R^2	.300 (adjusted)	.310 (adjusted)

**** p<.001, ** p<.01, * p<.05, ǂ p<.10*

Online Appendix 4: Full models explaining internal party behavior / vote

	Linear regression explaining politician's internal party behavior *-3 (argue strongly against) – 3 (argue strongly in favor)*		Logistic regression explaining politician's vote *0 (vote against) – 1 (vote in favor)*	
	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Public opinion information (vs. no information)	**.505** ǂ	.186	**1.614*** **	**2.041** ǂ
	(.275)	(.533)	**(.454)**	**(1.088)**
Estimated party position	.330***	.296***	.460***	.504**
	(.058)	(.076)	(.100)	(.146)
Public opinion information * Estimated party position	—	.078	—	-.090
		(.111)		(.206)
Party (ref: Greens)				
Socialists	.282	.295	1.026	.962
	(.580)	(.581)	(1.417)	(1.379)
Christian-Democrats	.976 ǂ	.959 ǂ	2.360 ǂ	2.340 ǂ
	(.559)	(.561)	(1.364)	(1.319)
Liberals	1.186 ǂ	1.141 ǂ	2.892*	2.880*
	(.644)	(.648)	(1.465)	(1.424)
Flemish-Nationalists	.184	.197	1.982	1.909
	(.524)	(.525)	(1.348)	(1.310)
Extreme-right	1.060	1.029	2.589	2.543
	(.821)	(.824)	(1.605)	(1.566)
Constant	-2.662***	-2.522***	-5.268***	-5.463***
	(.495)	(.535)	(1.477)	(1.516)
N	148	148	144	144
R^2	.278 (adjusted)	.276	.306 (pseudo)	.307 (pseudo)

**** p<.001, ** p<.01, * p<.05,* ǂ *p<.10*

Online Appendix 5: Model explaining internal party behavior and vote including the own opinion

	Linear regression explaining internal party behavior *-3 (argue strongly against) to 3 (argue strongly in favor)* (7)	Logistic regression explaining politician's vote *0 (vote against) – 1 (vote in favor)* (8)
Public opinion information (vs. no information)	**-.117**	**.993**
	(.221)	**(.644)**
Own opinion (measured after stimulus)	**.445*** **	**.928*** **
	(.046)	**(.172)**
Estimated party position	.140**	.364*
	(.049)	(.147)
Party (ref: Greens)		
Socialists	-.194	.118
	(.450)	(1.843)
Christian-Democrats	.236	1.352
	(.438)	(1.805)
Liberals	.0964	2.142
	(.509)	(2.003)
Flemish-Nationalists	-.189	2.032
	(.406)	(1.745)
Extreme-right	.234	2.521
	(.639)	(2.154)
Constant	-2.772***	-7.803***
	(.383)	(2.145)
N	148	144
R^2	.570 (adjusted)	.623 (pseudo)

**** p<.001, ** p<.01, * p<.05, ϯ p<.10*

Online Appendix 6: Full models including an interaction effect with the perceived realism of the questions

	Linear regression explaining politician's own opinion *0 (totally disagree) – 10 (totally agree)*		Linear regression explaining internal party behavior *-3 (argue strongly against) – 3 (argue strongly in favor)*		Logistic regression explaining politician's vote *0 (vote against) – 1 (vote in favor)*	
Public opinion information (vs. no info)	1.483***	-.308	.573*	.144	1.590**	4.245*
	(.399)	(1.808)	(.277)	(1.249)	(.457)	(2.103)
Estimated party position	.422***	.412***	.325***	.323***	.482***	.489***
	(.0839)	(.0845)	(.0580)	(.0586)	(.105)	(.105)
Realism	.003	-.244	.182	.123	-.213	.160
	(.175)	(.300)	(.121)	(.207)	(.197)	(.348)
Public opinion information * Realism	—	.377	—	.090	—	-.562
		(.371)		(.256)		(.430)
Party (ref: Greens)						
Socialists	1.072	1.190	.165	.193	1.194	1.072
	(.847)	(.855)	(.582)	(.590)	(1.419)	(1.431)
Christian-Democrats	1.852*	1.905*	.973 ǂ	.987 ǂ	2.457 ǂ	2.443 ǂ
	(.803)	(.804)	(.557)	(.560)	(1.356)	(1.369)
Liberals	2.455**	2.557**	1.174 ǂ	1.198 ǂ	2.950*	2.820 ǂ
	(.931)	(.937)	(.641)	(.647)	(1.457)	(1.471)
Flemish-Nationalists	.843	.964	.198	.228	2.056	1.890
	(.758)	(.768)	(.522)	(.530)	(1.336)	(1.347)
Extreme-right	1.870	1.869	.938	.938	2.755 ǂ	2.806
	(1.194)	(1.194)	(.821)	(.824)	(1.598)	(1.617)
Constant	.206	1.366	-3.507***	-3.230**	-4.468**	-6.194**
	(1.084)	(1.575)	(.750)	(1.087)	(1.621)	(2.150)
N	150	150	148	148	144	144
R^2	.295 (adjusted)	.296 (adjusted)	.284 (adjusted)	.280 (adjusted)	.312 (pseudo)	.321 (pseudo)

**** p<.001, ** p<.01, * p<.05, ǂ p<.10*

Online Appendix 7: Full models including an interaction effect with perceived issue salience

	Linear regression explaining politician's own opinion *0 (totally disagree) – 10 (totally agree)*		Linear regression explaining internal party behavior *-3 (argue strongly against) – 3 (argue strongly in favor)*		Logistic regression explaining politician's vote *0 (vote against) – 1 (vote in favor)*	
Public opinion information (vs. no info)	1.583***	1.592 ☥	.555*	-.007	1.675***	1.999 ☥
	(.379)	(.844)	(.271)	(.612)	(.462)	(1.026)
Estimated party position	.374***	.374***	.309***	.307***	.447***	.444***
	(.0813)	(.0817)	(.0579)	(.0580)	(.101)	(.100)
Attention importance	.312***	.313**	.145*	.0977	.171	.203
	(.0859)	(.108)	(.0621)	(.0771)	(.105)	(.139)
Public opinion information * Attention imp.	—	-.002	—	.107	—	-.061
		(.144)		(.104)		(.171)
Party (ref: Greens)						
Socialists	1.060	1.061	.274	.234	.662	.703
	(.802)	(.807)	(.571)	(.572)	(1.348)	(1.363)
Christian-Democrats	2.438**	2.439**	1.251*	1.167 *	2.374 ☥	2.425 ☥
	(.784)	(.794)	(.563)	(.569)	(1.271)	(1.293)
Liberals	2.330*	2.330*	1.123 ☥	1.108 ☥	2.615 ☥	2.631 ☥
	(.891)	(.894)	(.634)	(.634)	(1.379)	(1.393)
Flemish-Nationalists	.242	.243	-.0969	-.127	1.399	1.423
	(.744)	(.747)	(.530)	(.530)	(1.288)	(1.302)
Extreme-right	1.035	1.037	.666	.564	1.874	1.906
	(1.159)	(1.170)	(.826)	(.832)	(1.574)	(1.583)
Constant	-1.135	-1.141	-3.295***	-2.989***	-5.797***	-5.995***
	(.780)	(.889)	(.558)	(.633)	(1.432)	(1.554)
N	150	150	148	148	144	144
R^2	.356 (adj.)	.351 (adj.)	.300 (adj.)	.301 (adj.)	.320 (pseudo)	.321 (pseudo)

**** p<.001, ** p<.01, * p<.05, ☥ p<.10*

Online Appendix 8: Robustness of the results for different parties

	Linear regression explaining politician's own opinion *0 (totally disagree) – 10 (totally agree)*		Linear regression explaining internal party behavior *-3 (argue strongly against) – 3 (argue strongly in favor)*		Logistic regression explaining politician's vote *0 (vote against) – 1 (vote in favor)*	
	Coefficient of *Public opinion information* if party is left out of the analysis	Coefficient of *Public opinion information* * Party	Coefficient of *Public opinion information* if party is left out of the analysis	Coefficient of *Public opinion information* * Party	Coefficient of *Public opinion information* if party is left out of the analysis	Coefficient of *Public opinion information* * Party
Greens	1.691***	-2.414†	.672*	-1.928*	1.545**	13.036 [a]
	(.419)	(1.389)	(.292)	(.960)	(.452)	(1251.691)
Socialists	1.367**	.673	.437	.391	1.467**	1.009
	(.441)	(1.075)	(.311)	(.747)	(.471)	(1.402)
Christian-Democrats	.870*	2.634**	.177	1.490*	1.559**	.679
	(.397)	(.908)	(.267)	(.651)	(.577)	(.981)
Liberals	1.619***	-1.316	.619*	-1.043	1.523**	.397
	(.405)	(1.263)	(.294)	(.875)	(.472)	(1.482)
Flemish-Nationalists	1.843**	-1.096	.644†	-.289	2.104**	-1.063
	(.539)	(.821)	(.368)	(.575)	(.612)	(.896)
Extreme-right	1.476***	.184	.494†	.287	1.646***	-1.238
	(.405)	(1.885)	(.283)	(1.307)	(.462)	(1.872)

*Notes: Full models not shown to save space. Models are comparable to Appendix 3, Model 1; Appendix 4, Model 3 and Appendix 4, Model 5 respectively. *** p<.001, ** p<.01, * p<.05, †<.10*

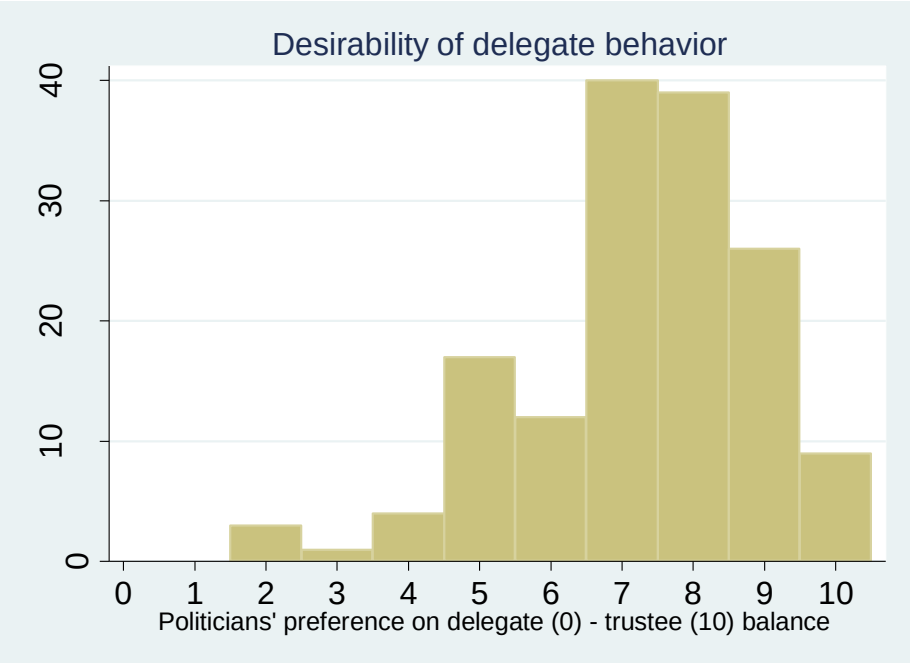
a Stata cannot estimate the effect properly (see large standard error) because 'Public opinion information' predicts the outcome perfectly for the green party. More precisely, 1 MP from the green party in the treatment group intends to vote in favor of the policy proposal (out of 6); compared to 0 (out of 7) in the control group.

Online Appendix 9: Desirability of delegate behavior according to politicians

Question: 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?

Scale: 0 (follow citizens' preferences exactly) to 10 (follow their own convictions while pursuing the interest of citizens)

Result:



Online Appendix 10: Full models including an interaction effect with parliamentary competence

	Linear regression explaining politician's own opinion *0 (totally disagree) – 10 (totally agree)*		Linear regression explaining internal party behavior *-3 (argue strongly against) – 3 (argue strongly in favor)*		Logistic regression explaining politician's vote *0 (vote against) – 1 (vote in favor)*	
Public opinion information (vs. no information)	1.419***	1.251 ⸸	.489 ⸸	.445	1.588**	1.964*
	(.387)	(.645)	(.276)	(.456)	(.456)	(.815)
Estimated party position	.418***	.418***	.329***	.329***	.465***	.464***
	(.0820)	(.0823)	(.0582)	(.0584)	(.102)	(.101)
Parliamentary competence	-1.123*	-1.266*	-.285	-.322	-.763	-.445
	(.450)	(.630)	(.318)	(.446)	(.534)	(.778)
Public opinion information * Parliamentary comp.	—	.265	—	.0697	—	-.543
		(.814)		(.578)		(.958)
Party (ref: Greens)						
Socialists	1.072	1.063	.281	.279	.991	.941
	(.821)	(.824)	(.580)	(.582)	(1.336)	(1.331)
Christian-Democrats	2.556**	2.558**	1.154 ⸸	1.155 ⸸	2.769*	2.734*
	(.834)	(.837)	(.594)	(.596)	(1.314)	(1.303)
Liberals	2.772**	2.779**	1.266 ⸸	1.268 ⸸	3.004*	2.973*
	(.920)	(.923)	(.650)	(.653)	(1.402)	(1.392)
Flemish-Nationalists	1.046	1.047	.235	.236	2.068	2.039
	(.746)	(.749)	(.527)	(.529)	(1.263)	(1.253)
Extreme-right	2.108 ⸸	2.156 ⸸	1.120	1.133	2.873 ⸸	2.781 ⸸
	(1.166)	(1.180)	(.824)	(.834)	(1.575)	(1.578)
Constant	.691	.783	-2.543***	-2.519***	-4.920***	-5.108***
	(.726)	(.782)	(.513)	(.553)	(1.404)	(1.440)
N	150	150	148	148	144	144
R^2	.361 (adj.)	.321 (adj.)	.277 (adj.)	.272 (adj.)	.317 (pseu.)	.319 (pseu.)

**** p<.001, ** p<.01, * p<.05, ⸸p<.10*