

## **Do politicians anticipate voter control?**

### **A comparative study of representatives' accountability beliefs**

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## **Abstract**

Representation literature is rife with the assumption that politicians are responsive to voter preferences because their re-election is contingent upon the approval of those voters, approval that can be won by furthering their desires or, similarly, that can be threatened by ignoring their wishes. Hence, scholars argue that the anticipation of electoral accountability by politicians constitutes a crucial guarantor of (policy) responsiveness; as long as politicians believe voters are aware of what they do and will take it into account on election day, they are expected to work hard at keeping these voters satisfied. If, on the other hand, politicians were to think what they say and do is inconsequential for citizens' voting behavior, they may see leeway to ignore citizens' preferences. In this study, we therefore examine whether politicians anticipate electoral accountability in the first place. In particular, we ask 782 Members of Parliament in Belgium, Germany, Canada and Switzerland in a face-to-face survey about the anticipation of voter control; whether they believe that voters are aware of their behavior in parliament and their personal policy positions, are able to evaluate the outcomes of their political work, and, finally, whether this knowledge affects their vote choice. We find that a sizable number of MPs believe that voters are aware of what they do and say and take that into account at the ballot box. Still, this general image of rather strong anticipation of voter control hides considerable variation; politicians in party-centered systems (in Belgium and some politicians in Germany that are elected on closed party lists), anticipate less voter control compared to politicians in more candidate-centered systems (Canada and Switzerland). Within these countries, we find that populist politicians are more convinced that voters know about their political actions and take this knowledge into account in elections; it seems that politicians who take pride in being close to voters (and their preferences), also feel more monitored by these voters. Finally, we show that politicians' views of voter control do not reflect the likelihood that they might be held to account; politicians whose behavior is more visible and whose policy profile should therefore be better known to voters do not feel the weight of voter control more strongly.

**Keywords**

Political representation, anticipatory responsiveness, accountability beliefs, perceived voter control,

MP survey

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

The degree of congruence between what citizens want and what politicians do indeed constitutes a crucial indicator of a democracy's health. While this does not necessarily imply that elected representatives are strictly bound by the public's desires, scholars agree that policy-making should reflect the wishes of the public (Mansbridge, 2003). One potential guarantor for such a substantial connection between citizens' preferences and representatives' behavior is the disciplining *mechanism of popular control* (Pitkin, 1969). Once every few years, parties and candidates present themselves to the public, ask for approval and once elected turn their programs into policies. In theory, citizens' ability to sanction or reward political actors at the ballot box enables them to steer policies in their preferred direction. However, while the accountability mechanism is supposed to give voters some leverage over future public decision-making (Miller & Stokes, 1963), the bulk of empirical work casts doubt about the capacity of citizens to properly exercise this control and vote in office politicians and parties with whom they share their preferences (see for instance Clinton & Tassin, 2008; Huber, Hill, & Lenz, 2012; Ashworth, 2012; Lau et al., 2014). Voters, it shows, pay little attention to politics to begin with (Lupia, 2016) and tend to elect parties and candidates based on social identities and partisan loyalties, rather than correctly rewarding or punishing their past behavior or voting based on their policy preferences (see Achen & Bartels, 2017). Even though the effectiveness of the mechanism of popular control may be hard to benchmark (see Nyhan et al., 2012), fact is that actual voter control cannot account for the lion's share of policy congruence.

That the failure to deliver congruent policies or to take congruent positions rarely results in voter retribution, or, similarly, that congruent decisions are not rewarded on election day, may not be all that important if politicians do *anticipate* such voter scrutiny. The assumption holds that, even if actual voter control leaves a lot to be desired, the mechanism of popular control still exerts a disciplining effect on politicians who expect citizens to hold them to account (Mayhew, 1974; Arnold, 1990). Their future being contingent on the approval of voters, re-election minded politicians are constrained by voters through the prospect of future electoral sanctions and rewards (Miller & Stokes, 1963). As long as politicians want to continue in office *and* believe that their behavior may impact their election result, they are unlikely to ignore the preferences of voters (Bernstein, 1989; Fiorina, 1974; Pitkin, 1969). As such, the sheer *anticipation* of popular control, regardless of whether such accountability effectively takes place, sensitizes politicians in between elections to the preferences of voters, encouraging them to stay abreast of their opinions and behave (communicate, shift positions and decisions,...) accordingly (Pitkin, 1969; Kingdon, 1968; Stimson et al., 1995; Maestas, 2003). That the anticipation of voter retribution or reward constitutes a crucial guarantor of (policy) responsiveness, is commonly referred to as “the rule of anticipatory behavior”, “rational anticipation”, “anticipatory responsiveness”, “perceived incumbent vulnerability”,... and so on (see for instance Kingdon, 1968, 1989; Mansbridge, 2003; Mayhew, 1974).

Importantly, the assumption that the anticipation of future elections instigates elite responsiveness only holds if politicians genuinely believe that what they do and say will have repercussions on election day (and, of course, if politicians have accurate knowledge of what these voters desire; see for instance Belchior, 2014). Indeed, that elections make it in the best interest of politicians to endeavor and respond to the public’s desires vitally hinges on politicians actually believing that voters might hold them to account for unresponsive behavior and reward them for popular initiatives or ideas (Stimson et al., 1995). If, on the other hand, politicians were to believe that what they do and say in their capacity as a representative is completely inconsequential for citizens’ voting behavior, they may see leeway to ignore their preferences. After all, enacting unpopular policies

or taking unpopular positions would not cause much fuss anyway and their efforts towards the public would go unnoticed (Mayhew, 1974). Therefore, the crucial question that is tackled in this study is whether politicians *feel* monitored – whether they believe voters are aware of their actions, and whether they believe this knowledge impacts their vote choice.

While there is a modest revival of scholarly interest in politicians' perceptions of public opinion (e.g. Belchior, 2014; Eichenberger et al., 2021), how they perceive these opinions to impact their electoral fate has received far less empirical attention. With the exception of three older studies, conducted by Converse and Pierce (1986) in France and Kingdon (1968) and Miller and Stokes (1963) in the USA, no scholars have studied politicians' perceptions of voter control in a systematic fashion. While these three works suggest that politicians believe that their re-election chances hinge on constituents' reactions to their voting records, we have no idea how politicians today, in other political systems, judge the prospects for voter control. The striking uncertainty regarding politician perceptions of popular control recently led Broockman and Butler (2017) to conclude that the question whether and why politicians think the constraints public opinion places on them are strong, is a fruitful avenue for further research. This study seeks to fill this important gap in the representation literature in four particular ways; by updating the evidence on politician perceptions of voter control collected several decades ago, by examining politicians' views of voter control in four different countries, by constructing a reliable scale that captures the different hierarchical steps voter control requires and, finally, by examining variation in how politicians conceive of voter control.

In this study, we ask 782 Members of Parliament in Belgium, Germany, Canada and Switzerland in a face-to-face survey about their perceptions of voter control. In particular, MPs had to indicate whether they believe that voters are aware of their behavior in parliament and their personal policy positions, are able to evaluate the outcomes of their political work, and, finally, whether this knowledge affects their vote choice. We find that a sizable number of MPs believe that voters are aware of what they do and say and take that into account at the ballot box. Surprisingly, this holds true

for MPs in all four countries, even in party-centered systems such as Belgium and Germany where individual accountability is in reality fairly limited. Still, this general image of rather strong feelings of voter control hides considerable variation; some parliamentarians do not feel the weight of voter control at all, while others feel closely scrutinized by voters and consider the likelihood of electoral sanctions and rewards to be very high. Although the differences between countries are small, we do find modest proof for the fact that politicians in party-centered systems (in Belgium and some politicians in Germany that are elected on closed party lists), anticipate less individual voter control compared to politicians in more candidate-centered systems (Canada and Switzerland). Within these systems, we find that populist politicians, in contrast to their colleagues in traditional parties, are more convinced that voters know about their political actions and take this knowledge into account in elections. It seems that politicians who take pride in being close to voters (and their preferences), also *feel* more monitored by these voters. Finally, we show that politicians' views of voter control do not reflect the actual likelihood that they might be held to account; it is not the case that politicians whose behavior *is* more visible and whose policy profile *should* be better known to voters feel the weight of voter control more strongly.

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

Responsiveness to voter preferences, it is commonly argued, should follow from the fact that (most) representatives want to be re-elected and depend on citizens' approval for achieving this goal, approval that can be secured by supporting policies endorsed by voters (Bernstein, 1989; Mansbridge, 2003). Crucial here is the anticipation of voter control; as long as politicians believe that their behavior will be evaluated by voters, they have an incentive to respond to their demands, or, similarly, to refrain from taking unpopular decisions or positions (Miller & Stokes, 1963; Mayhew, 1974). Ample theoretical and observational work on elite responsiveness rests on the assumption that politicians believe that what they do and say matters for their election result and because of this perceived voter scrutiny respond to voter demands (Arnold, 1990). That scholars unequivocally recognize the importance of the anticipation of voter control for elite behavior contrasts sharply with the scant work examining the key condition of this mechanism, namely whether politicians anticipate voter control at all.

The few studies that did attempt to grasp politicians' perceptions of voter control find that most politicians, at least in France and in the United States, believe that their policy record is key to their electoral result. In their seminal work on political representation in France and the USA, Converse and Pierce (1986) interviewed politicians about the extent to which they thought that their personal policy reputations had been important in gaining them votes. No less than 70 percent of the re-elected French incumbents thought their reputations had been either decisive or very important for their re-election, which is even more compared to US legislators, of which around 60 percent thought their records mattered. Miller and Stokes (1963) show, as well, that US legislators think their re-election chances depend upon constituency reactions to their voting records, and argue this is 'striking', given that citizens' knowledge about roll-call votes is inadequate. Kingdon (1968), surveying candidates in the USA, finds that 65 percent of the politicians who had recently won the elections believed that the positions they express in their roll-call votes impacted their election result, while only 35 percent of the losing candidates indicated that their records mattered for, in their case, losing the election. A



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

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

*are so enormous that the probability of defeat pales*” (Fiorina, 1974, p.124)). Although the probability of defeat at the hands of an individual politician’s voting behavior is limited, it is still common enough for politicians to have a healthy fear of electoral retribution, especially because they tend to recall the few examples in which a certain roll-call vote *did* lead to some electoral backlash (Arnold, 2004 and see Kahneman and Tversky’s (1979) prospect theory, positing that human beings tend to assign greater value to potential losses than potential gains). Finally, another reason why politicians might anticipate voter control while most citizens are hardly informed about what they do, may lie in the fact that they expect third actors such as interest groups and especially news media to play a vital role in notifying other voters about incongruent behavior – even though this so-called ‘indirect oversight’ is in reality rather limited. Fenno (1978), for instance, finds that politicians believe that interest groups and activists have the power to activate inattentive citizens, and as such increase the likelihood that they will be held accountable for their behavior (see also Kingdon, 1989; Miller & Stokes, 1963).

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

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

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

First of all, one would expect that politicians who *are* monitored more closely by voters, or whose behavior can be more easily checked by voters, also *feel* the weight of voter control more strongly. For instance, one would expect that politicians in candidate-centered political systems where individual MPs have clear incentives to pursue a personal vote by promoting their individual record and policy views to also believe that voters monitor them. In contrast, MPs in party-centered proportional systems, because their personal records and positions are often of less relevance to voters, may be less likely to believe that voters pay attention to their individual political actions and will hold them to account for it (André et al. 2014, 2016). Moving from the country to the party level, then, one could argue that politicians in government parties, who get more airtime and take more legislative initiatives than their colleagues in the opposition (see Vos, 2014), feel more controlled by voters. And, that politicians in smaller parties may have less difficulty gaining familiarity among voters than politicians in larger parties may also affect their perceptions of voter control. In a similar vein, we would expect that within countries and parties, especially politicians in high-level positions, because they more frequently get covered in the mainstream media and are better able to reach a wide

audience with their policy ideas and initiatives (Vos, 2014), believe more than their backbencher colleagues that voters know what they do and say and take it into account on election day.

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

## Data & Methods

To examine politicians' perceptions of popular control, we conduct surveys with politicians in Belgium, Canada, Germany and Switzerland. These country cases are interesting for two particular reasons. First, their political systems differ substantially from the U.S. and France, the only two countries where empirical evidence has so far been collected on politician views of voter control. Second, their political systems also differ from one another in various relevant respects. There is variation in the size of districts, the mode of election and ballot list system, the strength of parties..., all of which can affect the extent to which MPs are able and willing to run a personalized campaign, the extent to which voters can then control their actions and, therefore, potentially also the extent to which politicians *anticipate* voter control (Farrell, 2011). For instance in Canada, where candidates are elected in single-seat districts using a first-past-the-post system, politicians should be more incentivized to run a personalized campaign and distinguish themselves from their party colleagues than in (more) proportional systems such as Belgium, Germany and Switzerland (André et al., 2014). But things are more complex; Germany is a mixed system where some politicians are elected in single-seat districts under majoritarian rules while others run in multimember districts on closed party lists (André et al., 2016). Also, while Germany and especially Belgium are party-centered systems, even Belgian politicians have incentives to run a personalized campaign since the flexible-list system allows voters to cast one or more preferential vote(s) in addition to their party vote (see André et al., 2016 who show that politicians in flexible-list systems are more prone to run personalized campaigns than politicians in closed-list systems). Switzerland, then, is an open-list proportional system; voters can support a party and cast preference votes, even for candidates of different parties (Lanfranchi & Lüthi, 1999; Kriesi, 2001). Politicians in such open list PR systems have, more than those in closed and flexible systems, a strong electoral incentive to run a personal campaign (André et al., 2016). Overall, and knowing this is an oversimplification, we expect Canadian, Swiss and German MPs that are elected in single-member ridings to feel more controlled by voters than Belgian and German MPs elected on closed lists. In short, the country variation in this study allows 1) to examine for the first time whether

MPs' perceptions differ according to the political system in which they operate and 2) to thoroughly check the generalizability of the findings, especially regarding explanations for variation in views of voter control.

In total, we conducted surveys with 851 members of parliament in these four countries between March 2018 and September 2019<sup>1</sup>. Because they are federal countries with decentralized polities and important regional competences, we target both members of the national parliaments and of (some) regional parliaments. We contacted all MPs from the selected parliaments to participate in Belgium, Switzerland and Canada while in Germany, because of the large size of the *Budestag*, a stratified sampling procedure was applied<sup>2</sup>. The average response rate is 46%, which is rather high for elite research (see for instance Bailer, 2014 for a comparison). Response rates vary substantially from one country to another, though, with very high response rates in Belgium (77%) and Switzerland (74%), and lower rates in Germany and Canada – see **Table 1**. Important to note is that with regard to age, gender and seniority, the interviewed politicians are representative of the population and there is only limited bias in terms of party affiliation (see Appendix Table A1).

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

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

**Table 1 – Overview targeted and participating MPs in all countries**

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

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

*Dependent variables* – In total, 799 MPs<sup>3</sup> were asked to answer four questions regarding their perceptions of voter control. In essence, we carefully designed four items tapping into the different aspects of electoral accountability – what does it take for citizens to exercise control over politicians (Ansolabehere & Jones, 2010)? – and study these elements as how they are perceived by political

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

elites. For one, accountability as a retrospective mechanism requires citizens to be aware of politicians' policy positions and what they do in parliament. If voters are to hold MPs accountable, knowledge about them and their activities is required (Manin et al., 1999), which scholars refer to as 'the principal of minimal voter awareness' (Bernstein, 1989). Therefore, we first of all measure politicians' perceptions of voter awareness of their parliamentary work; *'Think about all people who consider voting for your party. To what extent are they generally aware of the parliamentary work you personally do?'* and their policy positions; *'To what extent are they generally aware of your personal position on different policy issues?'* Their answers could range from 0 (not at all) to 10 (totally). Besides knowing what politicians did in the past legislature, voters are expected to consider the *outcomes* of politicians' actions, whether they expect these decisions to generate positive or negative outcomes in the (near) future (Jones, 2011). Hence, our third question taps into politicians' perceptions of citizens' ability to grasp the consequences of their behavior; *'To what extent are they generally aware of the outcomes of your political work?'* – 0 (not at all) to 10 (totally). Finally, what matters in the end is to what extent this knowledge is decisive for citizens' vote choice on election day; do they actually hold politicians to account or not (Pitkin, 1969)? We grasp politicians' perceptions of this electoral evaluation by asking; *'To what extent does this knowledge influence these potential voters' decisions at the ballot?'*. Interestingly, these four constituting elements of perceived voter control align with psychological literature showing that, in general and outside of the electoral context, the feeling of being held to account encapsulates the expectation of certain behavior being made public, having to justify it and of it being evaluated (see Kunda, 1990; Lerner & Tetlock, 1999). Note that there is a clear hierarchy in the four items; if a politician believes that voters rely on their knowledge about her personal views and actions when casting their vote (cf. item 4), she should logically score voter awareness (cf. item 1-3) high as well.

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



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

From the 799 politicians that were asked about their perceptions of voter control, only seventeen (9 in Belgium, 4 in Switzerland, 2 in Germany and 2 in Canada) did not (fully) answer the perceived accountability-battery. They are not included in the analysis. Thus, in total we examine the accountability beliefs of 782 politicians, and the number of observations in the explanatory analysis is slightly lower due to some missing values on the independent variables.

*Independent variables* – To explore variation in politicians' perceptions of voter control, six independent variables are introduced in the analysis (and two control variables; gender and level of office). We examine whether politicians who are confident about getting re-elected (question asked elsewhere in the same survey), or who hold/have held high office, have been/are in parliament for a long time, are part of a government, a populist or a small party, feel more scrutinized by voters. To capture these latter five characteristics, we rely on publicly available data on MPs and their parties. More information on the independent variables can be found in Appendix Table A2.

Finally, whenever scholars rely on survey evidence to draw conclusions on the intentions or perceptions of their study objects, the danger of socially desirable and strategic responses looms around the corner. However, there is no reason to expect that politicians would have answered the questions about perceived voter control strategically. For one, it is not entirely clear what the

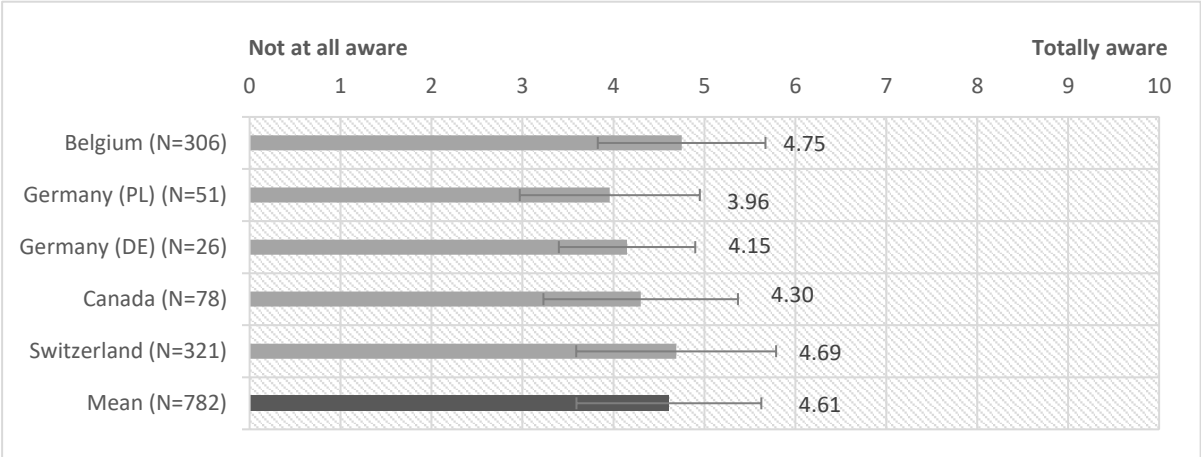
desirable/strategic answer would be. If anything, we would think that the desirable or ‘modest’ thing to do, is for politicians *not* to overstate the extent to which voters know and care about what they individually do and say. Most important, though, is that the interview context discouraged such responses; politicians were repeatedly assured that their answers would always be treated anonymously and would never be shared or made public in any identifiable way. Also, politicians were generally very comfortable with the interviewer being present in the room, and while they could easily skip survey questions they did not like or thought of as ‘threatening’, this hardly ever happened for the questions on voter control (remember that only 17 out of 799 respondents skipped (part of) the question).

## Results

Let us first consider each of the building blocks of perceived voter control separately. Overall, we see in **Figure 1**, with an average of 4.6 out of 10, politicians seem to believe that party voters are *aware of what they do in parliament*. In reality, however, voters have a rather limited knowledge about politics (Carpini & Keeter, 1996), and especially about what happens in the fairly invisible parliamentary arena (for studies on roll-call voting knowledge in the US see Lupia, 2016). A recent study in France shows that only about half of the citizens know the name of *their* representative (François & Navarro, 2020), which should not come as a surprise given the scant media attention most MPs, and especially backbenchers, receive (Bennett, 1996; Vos, 2014). It is not hard to imagine, then, that voters’ knowledge of individual MPs in party-centered systems is even poorer, let alone that they would know what these MPs do in parliament (see Soontjens, 2020 for recent evidence on the absence of voter knowledge of parliamentary initiatives). Of course, based on this average score of voter awareness, we cannot claim that politicians believe that a significant proportion of voters is closely following their activities in parliament. Politicians might as well reason that some exceptionally attentive citizens, or the news media, could inform others about what they do in parliament – something that, again, in

reality does not happen all too often (see Arnold, 2004). In sum, we find that MPs believe voter awareness of parliamentary behavior is substantial, in all four countries and, surprisingly, even most in Belgium where party discipline in parliament is very high and individual parliamentary authority is fairly limited (e.g. De Winter & Dumont, 2006). Yet, the differences between countries in MPs' perceptions of voter awareness of parliamentary behavior are not significant, nor do German politicians elected directly (DE) hold significantly different perceptions of voter awareness than German MPs elected on party lists (PL)<sup>4</sup>.

**Figure 1** – Politician perceptions of voter awareness of their parliamentary behavior

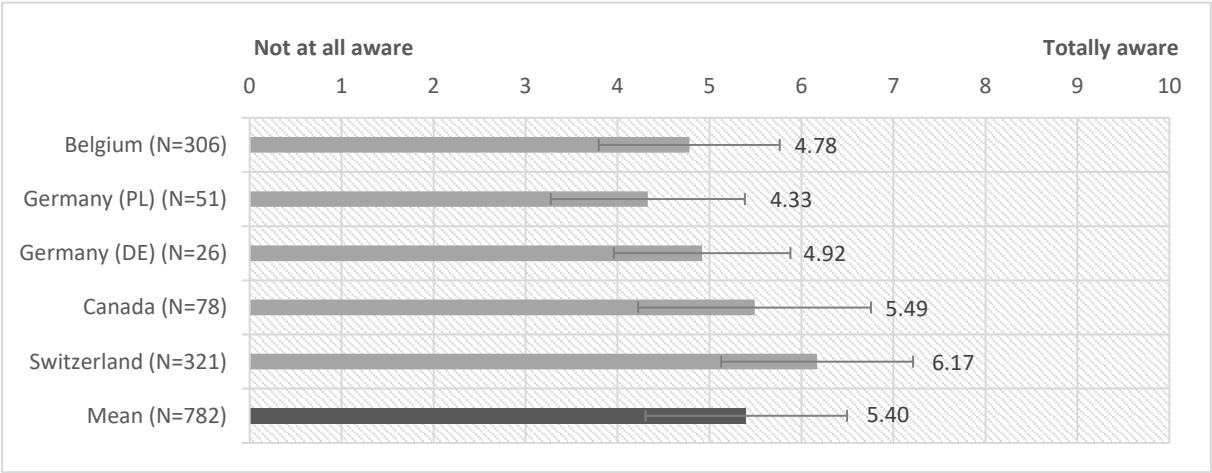


Second, we look at how politicians conceive of *voter awareness of their individual policy positions* in **Figure 2**. We see that, with an overall average score of 5.4, politicians consider their position to be better known, or more easier to grasp, for citizens than what they do in parliament. This makes sense in that citizens can to some extent deduce MPs' individual policy positions from the party ideology (see Dahlberg & Hartevelde, 2016). Still, and as has been argued before, it is striking that politicians think a substantial proportion of voters know their stance on various policy issues, when many of these voters do not even know who they are to begin with. Comparatively speaking, politician perceptions of voter

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

awareness of their personal policy positions sort of follow a logical pattern; in Canada, a first-past-the-post system where MPs are elected in single-member ridings, politicians are significantly more likely to believe that voters are aware of their *personal* policy positions than in Germany and Belgium where individual politicians' policy profiles indeed matters less for their re-election. And, as anticipated, Swiss politicians are also significantly more likely to believe that voters are aware of their individual policy preferences than Belgian and German politicians (both those elected on party lists and those elected directly).

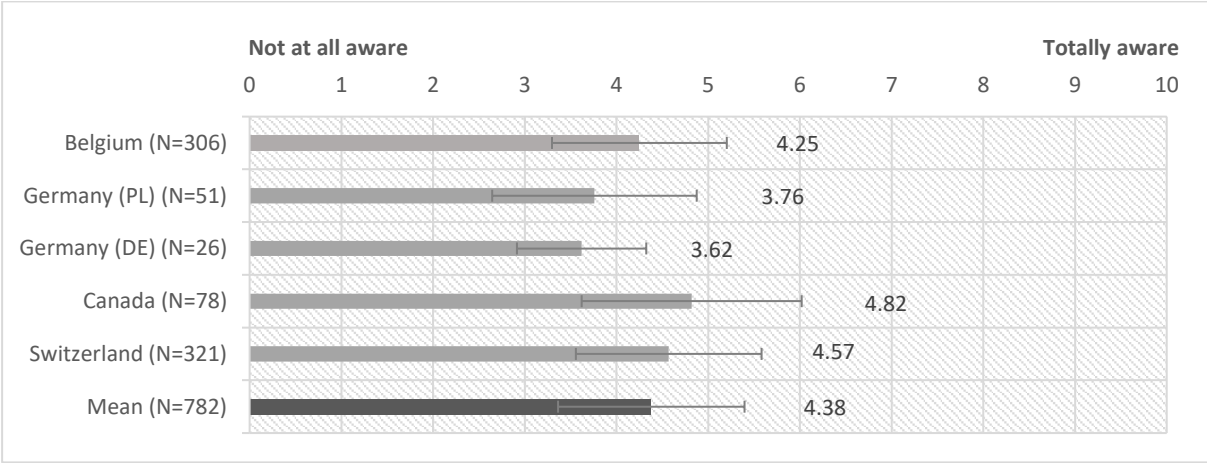
**Figure 2** – Politician perceptions of voter awareness of their personal policy positions



**Figure 3** presents politicians' perceptions of citizens' awareness of *the outcomes of their political work*. With an average score of 4.4, outcome awareness is rated slightly lower by politicians than the mere voter awareness of parliamentary behavior (an average of 4.6 – see Figure 1). Politicians seem to realize that evaluating their behavior, or rather estimating the future consequences of their actions, requires additional cognitive efforts from voters. Interestingly, it is again the politicians in the two more individualized political systems, Canada and Switzerland, who show the greatest confidence in citizens' ability to correctly gauge the consequences of their personal decisions – but note that only

the difference between Canadian and Swiss versus German politicians (both those elected on party lists and those elected directly) is statistically significant.

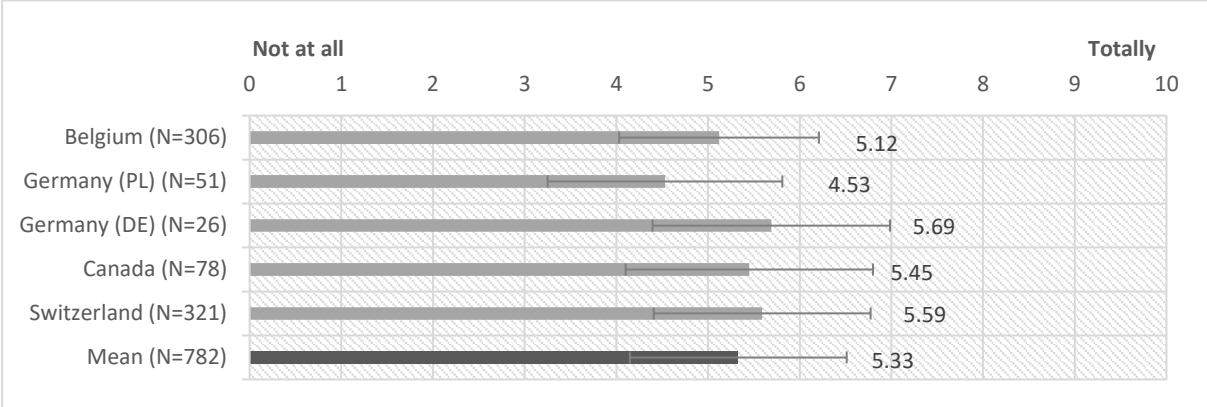
**Figure 3** – Politician perceptions of voter awareness of the outcomes of their parliamentary work



Finally, **Figure 4** visualizes to what extent politicians believe that the knowledge voters have of their parliamentary behavior, their personal policy views and the outcomes of their behavior affects their eventual vote choice. With this fourth and final question, we gauge politicians’ perceptions of the actual accountability behavior of citizens, for which they need some knowledge of politicians’ actions and policy views (Manin et al., 1999). With an average of 5.3, we can say that politicians estimate the likelihood that voters will hold them personally accountable on election day to be quite high. Overall, they believe that a significant proportion of voters are able and willing to perform their democratic duties of delegation and accountability. The finding that no less than 65 percent of the politicians believe that voters take their policy views and past decisions into account when casting a vote (i.e. score 6 or higher out of 10) contrasts with ample scholarly work showing that citizens’ knowledge of politicians’ records and positions is often not among the criteria that determine their vote (Bernstein, 1989; Huber, Hill & Lenz, 2012; Achen & Bartels, 2017). It is, again, Canadian and Swiss politicians and, interestingly, directly elected German MPs who anticipate electoral accountability the most – but only the difference between German party list MPs and Swiss politicians is statistically significant. Also, it

shows that in Germany, directly elected MPs (5.69) anticipate electoral accountability significantly more strongly than their colleagues elected on party lists (4.53). This finding suggests that the ballot list system impacts elite conceptions of voter control.

**Figure 4 – Politician perceptions of electoral accountability**



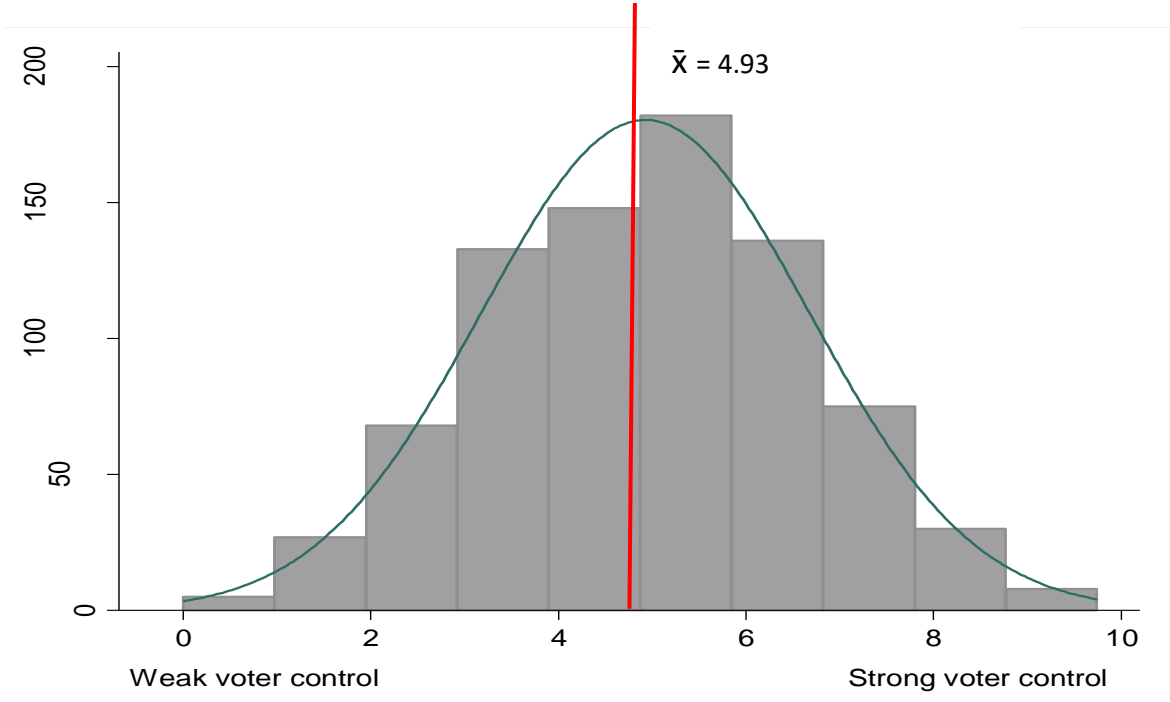
Do these four items gauge the same underlying theoretical construct of *perceived voter control*, then? A principal factor analysis confirms they do; with an Eigenvalue of 2.1, the four aspects of perceived voter control together – voter knowledge of personal policy positions and (the consequences of) politicians’ behavior in parliament, and the extent to which this all matters on election day – explain more variance than the variables do separately. All four items correlate strongly with the construct of perceived voter control; perceived visibility of parliamentary behavior has a factor loading score of .75, perceived awareness of policy positions of .71, outcome awareness of .78 and, finally, perceived retribution at the ballot has a slightly lower factor loading of .69. As for the scale, we may want to consider the hierarchy in the four items; after all, voter awareness of policy positions and (outcomes of) political actions is a prerequisite for actual accountability at the ballot. Or put differently; a high score on the perceived electoral accountability item should imply a high score on the first three knowledge items as well. Therefore, as a robustness test, a Mokken-scale analysis<sup>5</sup> is performed that takes into account this hierarchy. The findings confirm that the four items form a valid scale; the

<sup>5</sup> See Mokken (2011) for the technical details.

Loevinger H of all items are above 0.50 (.54, .56, .58, .61 respectively), implying very good scalability – the threshold for retaining items in a scale is usually set at .30. Therefore, we construct a single scale of perceived voter control by taking the average across the four items.

The distribution of this scale variable, depicting politicians' *perceptions of voter control*, is shown in **Figure 5**. First, we see that, with an average score of 4.93 out of 10 (S.D. 1.76), politicians' perceptions are right in the middle of the scale. This means that, across the board, politicians anticipate a substantial amount of voter control. Importantly, there is a lot of variation: some politicians expect no voter control at all (0), while others strongly believe citizens monitor them closely (a maximum score of 9.75).

**Figure 5** – Politician perceptions of voter control (scale) (N= 782)



Looking at the country differences in politicians' overall perceptions of voter control, we see that Swiss politicians feel the weight of voter control significantly more strongly than politicians in Germany and Belgium (see Appendix Table A3 for the ANOVA results). And, Canadian politicians do so significantly

more than German politicians. The difference between German MPs elected under different electoral rules follows the expected pattern; with an average score of 4.60, directly elected German MPs feel the weight of voter control more strongly than their German colleagues elected on party lists (4.15). The difference is not statistically significant, but mind that the N is low.

There is ample variation in the way politicians conceive of voter control, also within the four countries under study, which prompts the question; who are the politicians that expect to be held accountable by voters for what they do and say? To explore variation in politician perceptions of voter control, we run a multilevel linear regression model –individual MPs are nested in parties (random effects), in countries (fixed effects). The results are in **Table 2**. To ensure that the findings are not driven by one country only (keeping in mind the differences in sample size), we run the model in Table 2 again, excluding one country at the time. The results of this robustness test are in Appendix Table A4.

Let us first examine whether the variation in politicians' perceptions of voter control can be explained by the fact that the probability of being held accountable is greater for some politicians than for others. First, we do not find that elite politicians – those who have held the position of party leader, cabinet member, caucus leader or speaker and/or currently hold the position of caucus leader or speaker – feel the weight of voter control more strongly than backbencher MPs. While elite politicians (and their policy positions and decisions) are better known to voters than other politicians, it is not the case that they anticipate electoral accountability more. Although it is easier for voters to hold elite politicians to account, they do not perceive it that way. Nor do we find that government MPs, often more visible and more decisive in terms of policy-making than their colleagues in the opposition, feel the weight of voter control significantly more strongly. Finally, it seems that individual politicians in smaller parties do feel more controlled by voters than politicians in larger parties who presumably have more difficulty presenting themselves individually to voters and are less visible, yet the effect of party size is not robust across countries (see Table A4).



Next, we explore whether politicians tend to rationalize (expected) electoral success and come to believe that voters reward them in elections for their policy views and/or actions (this so-called “congratulation-rationalization effect” was brought up by Kingdon in 1968). First of all, we do not find that politicians who are in parliament for a longer time conceive differently of voter control than more junior politicians. Surviving multiple elections does not seem to affect how politicians look at the accountability mechanism and citizens’ monitoring behavior in particular. Interestingly, that more senior politicians believe just as much as their junior colleagues that at least some voters monitor them and take into account what they do and say when casting their vote, challenges the assumption that politicians feel freer to do whatever they want when they have more experience. Second, while we see that politicians who are confident about their re-election are somewhat more likely to feel the weight of voter control than their more insecure colleagues, the effect is not significant nor robust (see Table A4). Kingdon (1968) argued that successful politicians tend to believe they are voted in office because of their policy actions while those who are unsuccessful rationalize their defeat by blaming factors beyond their own control. However, we do not find confirmation for Kingdon’s assumption that such rationalization even occurs before the election takes place (which is in line with Kim & Racheter, 1973). Finally, we find that populist politicians – whose main objective is to represent ‘the people’ (Mudde, 2004) – are more convinced than their colleagues in mainstream parties that voters monitor them closely and will hold them accountable for what they do and say. In all the countries where we surveyed politicians from populist parties (Belgium, Germany and Switzerland), populists estimate the likelihood of voter control significantly higher than their fellow colleagues – predictive value of voter control of 5.5 out of 10 compared to 4.8 for politicians of non-populist parties. It seems that especially politicians who think they do a good job at representing citizens’ wishes also expect more voter control.

Finally, with respect to the control variables, we see that female and male politicians have similar perceptions of voter control, and that federal politicians are more convinced that voters know what they do and envision and hold them accountable than politicians in regional parliaments – but the effect is not robust (see Table A4).

**Table 2** – Multilevel linear regression explaining politicians' perceptions of voter control

	Coef. (Std. Err)	P>  z
Elite politician	-.19 (.16)	.248
Party size	-.01 (.00)	.041
Government politician	.28 (.20)	.150
Seniority (log) <sup>6</sup>	-.04 (.08)	.621
Electoral safety	.13 (.08)	.085
Populist politician	.79 (.28)	.005
Country (ref. = Belgium)		
Germany (PL)	-.45 (.46)	.327
Germany (DE)	.52 (.62)	.397
Switzerland	.36 (.23)	.107
Canada	.84 (.42)	.044
Control		
Gender	.20 (.13)	.137
Federal politician	.36 (.15)	.020
Constant	4.1 (.36)	.000
N (parties)	745 (41)	
Variance party level	.34 (.11)	
Variance residual	1.68 (.04)	
AIC (null model: 3,086)	2,939	

*Note.* 95% confidence intervals.

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

## Conclusion

One way in which successful representation can come about is through politicians responding to voter preferences between elections, prompted primarily by their desire to get re-elected (Mansbridge, 2003). Such so-called “anticipatory responsiveness” vitally hinges on the extent to which politicians believe that voters might hold them accountable for unresponsive behavior and reward their popular ideas or initiatives (see among many others; Stimson et al., 1995; Mayhew, 1974; Arnold, 1990). Simply put; if politicians do not expect electoral accountability, they might see leeway to ignore voter preferences, whereas if they do, they should be incentivized to follow-up on voter desires. Numerous representation studies are built on the assumption that the anticipation of electoral accountability sensitizes politicians to voter demands, but the key prerequisite, namely that politicians *expect* such accountability in the first place, has hardly ever been empirically examined. Therefore, the current study sets out to systematically study politicians’ perceptions of voter control –do they think their policy behavior and policy views are known to voters and that these voters will hold them accountable for it?– by surveying a large group of Belgian, German, Canadian and Swiss MPs.

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

we show that populist politicians feel the weight of voter control more strongly than politicians belonging to mainstream parties. Politicians who claim being close to voters and to pursue their preferences, turn out to also feel more monitored by these voters.

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

The purpose of the current study was to systematically examine to what extent, and which, politicians expect voters to hold them accountable for their personal political actions, and we did so by constructing a battery of four questions gauging politician perceptions of voter awareness of their parliamentary behavior, of their policy positions and of the outcomes of their behavior, and the extent to which this knowledge influences citizens' vote choice. Follow-up research could complement our exploratory findings, in particular by examining *variation within politicians*. While this study focused on politicians' overall perceptions of voter control, it would be interesting to see what circumstances or events reduce or intensify the sense of being constrained by voters. With regard to highly salient policy issues, for instance, politicians may feel more monitored. In sum, politicians' incentives to

respond to voter preferences are most likely influenced by both their general perceptions of voter control – which we study here –, and the specific context – which we encourage future studies to focus on. Also, it would be interesting for future work to go beyond their own (party) voters and ask politicians how they conceive of the general public’s accountability behavior. Comparing the anticipation of electoral accountability by their own voters, potential voters or the public as a whole would be another interesting contribution to the representation literature.

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

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