

## **The awareness paradox: (why) politicians overestimate citizens' awareness of parliamentary questions and party initiatives**

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The representative democracy is built on the idea that representatives must, at least to a certain extent, be responsive to popular demands in their decision-making (Pitkin, 1969). To establish this connection between citizens and public policy, the mechanism of anticipatory representation is an important guarantor (Mansbridge, 2003). Re-election minded politicians, the theory holds, are extrinsically motivated to get informed about and act upon their perceptions of what the public wants (Mayhew, 1974; Campbell and Zittel, 2020). Indeed, since a political actor's survival vitally hinges on the approval of voters, they calculate, or rather try to anticipate, the electoral implications of their behaviour and act accordingly. That politicians expect to be held accountable for unresponsive behaviour and to be rewarded for the opposite therefore sensitizes them to the public's desires, as Miller and Stokes (1963) classically argued. Thus, regardless of whether citizens actually hold politicians to account on election day, if politicians believe that they will, they are disciplined to follow-up on the public's preferences (e.g. Schlesinger, 1996; Arnold, 1990; Mayhew, 1974; Stimson et al., 1995). That the anticipation of popular control constrains elected representatives in their behaviour, is all the more important when actual citizen control at the ballot is in reality rather limited. After all, the well-established literature on retrospective voting concludes that voters' performance at the ballot leaves a lot to be desired; representatives do not always face

consequences for ‘bad policy’ (see Healy and Malhotra, 2013 for a literature overview; or Vivyan, Wagner and Tarlov, 2012 on a lack of electoral accountability for clear misconduct by politicians).

That the threat of electoral accountability prompts re-election minded politicians to act in line with the public’s wishes, vitally hinges on the assumption that politicians *feel* monitored in the first place (Mayhew, 1974). Indeed, that politicians believe citizens are aware, or can become aware, of what they do is an absolute necessity for anticipatory representation to come about. Were politicians to believe that citizens are completely unaware of what they are doing, they should not fear electoral retribution for unpopular decisions, nor should they feel extrinsically motivated to satisfy the public’s desires; they would not be rewarded for it at the ballot anyways. Overall, when politicians do not feel monitored at all, we could get them to drift away from the public. If politicians on the other hand believe that at least some citizens keep a close eye on them or that citizens may become informed about what they do by the intervention of influential actors such as journalists, regardless of whether this is the case in reality, they will attempt to anticipate their reactions to the decisions they make and the positions they take (Kingdon, 1989). Snyder and Strömberg (2010) indeed show that when the likelihood increases that politicians feel monitored – operationalized by the amount of coverage they get in their local newspaper –, they are induced to work hard, and to produce better policies for their constituents (see Besley and Burgess 2002, for similar findings). Thus, to understand better how the mechanism of anticipatory representation works in reality, we should first and foremost get an idea of the degree to which politicians believe voters are aware of what they do.

Despite the fact that politicians' perceptions of voter awareness are central to the mechanism of anticipatory representation, they hardly received any attention over the years. This is not to say that scholars have ignored the topic altogether, as many have emphasized the importance of studying perceived voter monitoring for representative democracy (see for example Converse and Pierce, 1986; Mayhew, 1974 and more recently Maloy, 2014). Empirical findings are extremely scarce, though; outdated survey evidence on US Members of Congress suggests that politicians fear citizen control, and believe citizens are quite informed about what they do in Congress (Miller and Stokes, 1963; Kingdon, 1968; Fenno, 1978).

What we do not know, however, is whether these findings hold outside the USA. Nor do we have insights in politicians' perceptions of voter awareness today, in a society where politicians' actual visibility is changing rapidly as a result of a continued mediatisation of politics and the widespread use of social media that allow politicians to be in touch with an unprecedented number of citizens (Larsson and Kalsnes, 2014; Thompson, 1995). Also, and importantly, what we do not know from previous research is whether politicians' perceptions of voter awareness actually match reality. If citizens are indeed completely unaware of, let's say politicians' roll-call voting, the fact that politicians do feel their votes are being monitored is all the more important in keeping them aligned with voter preferences – in contrast to when citizens are perfectly informed about their votes and as such can use this information to make an informed vote choice. A final shortcoming in the literature is that we are largely left in the dark about *why* politicians (mis)perceive citizen awareness in a certain way, with Kingdon being the only one to actually ask elected representatives to reflect on perceived voter awareness in 1968.

Addressing these limitations, this study centres around the following research questions:

RQ1: Do politicians believe voters are aware of what they and their party do?

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

RQ3: Why do politicians hold these perceptions?

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

specialized in.

## **1. Theory**

To exercise any form of electoral control, the theory of electoral accountability suggests, citizens should have some broad ideas about what representatives and/or parties have done in the past legislature (Bernstein, 1989). However, if politicians were confronted with the scholarly literature on this retrospective mechanism of popular control, they might conclude that they need not worry much about the decisions they make affecting their results at the polls (e.g. Anderson, 2007; Arnold, 1990; Maloy, 2014; Healy & Malhotra, 2013). After all, the average voter hardly ever recalls legislative behaviour on election day, nor do most of them even know their representatives (Arnold, 1993; Clinton and Tessin, 2008; Hutchings, 2003). Whether or not citizens actually need this knowledge to cast a meaningful vote is up for debate (see for example Adams et al., 2014 for a different perspective on the matter). Yet it is interesting to translate this principle of minimal voter awareness to the side of representatives.

After all, one could argue that it is vital for political elites to believe that voters are aware, or can potentially become aware, of what they and their party do. In the face of widespread voter ignorance, they might otherwise get away with incongruent decision-making or their benefits towards the public might simply go unnoticed (e.g. Severs et al., 2014). As Kingdon (1968) and Powlick (1991) claim, politicians feel more constrained by the public – and thus are more strongly incentivized to be responsive to their preferences – when they believe citizens pay close attention. Indeed, when politicians believe voters are sufficiently informed about policy issues, they will be more attentive

to their desires (Pétry, 2007). If the opposite is true and representatives do not feel observed by (some segments of) the public, they lack one important incentive to reflect public preferences in their decision-making (Butler and Nickerson, 2011; Cain, et al., 1987; Mayhew, 1974).

The concept of perceived voter awareness was first introduced by Miller and Stokes (1963) in their ground-breaking work on constituency influence in the American Congress. Specifically, they claim that *'the idea of reward and punishment at the polls for legislative stands is familiar to members of Congress, who feel they and their records are visible to their constituents'*. They argue that, of all conditions of constituency influence, the requirement that the electorate takes account of what representatives do is the hardest to match with empirical evidence, which is why they limited themselves to asking incumbent politicians about the extent to which they thought the election outcome was a result of their personal records (see Converse and Pierce, 1986 for a similar empirical approach). However, between politicians' behaviour and the actual vote cast, there are more factors that play a role than mere voter awareness – citizens still have to evaluate what they see, and decide whether or not to let this information determine their vote choice. Still, these early findings are relevant in that Congressmen seem to believe their individual legislative actions considerably impact their electorate's vote choice. Miller and Stokes (1963, p.54) argue that this finding contains a striking contradiction in that *'some simple facts about the Representative's salience to his constituents imply that this could hardly be true'*.

Building on the same idea of perceived voter monitoring, other scholars followed in Miller and Stokes' footsteps. First, a strand of literature focused on *politicians'*

*perceptions of citizens' general political knowledge or interest*, which could be considered a precondition for actual awareness of legislative activities. Indeed, as Besley and Burgess (2002) argue; an electorate that is considered to be politically informed strengthens incentives for politicians to be responsive. Kingdon (1989) finds that representatives often appear to believe that an informed public does exist. While politicians are generally rather pessimistic about how informed citizens are about politics, they do believe that an uninformed majority (or at least a subgroup) can become informed through the intervention of actors such as the media or interest groups, who reduce the need for citizens to actively follow-up on everything that happens in the complex political world (see Hutchings, 2003). He additionally derives from his interviews that politicians believe those segments of the public that are affected by certain policy measures can be(come) highly interested and monitor elite behaviour closely. In his observational study, Fenno (1978) confirms that representatives believe intermediaries have the ability to activate inattentive citizens, alerting them when representatives enact incongruent policies. Powlick (1991), on the other hand, finds that policy officials tend to have negative perceptions of the public's capabilities; they emphasize that citizens lack both the interest and the knowledge to hold politicians accountable at the ballot. Finally, and more recently, Pétry (2007) asked both politicians and policy officials about their perceptions of policy knowledge among Canadian citizens. While he finds that 25% of the officials in his sample agree or even strongly agree with the idea that policy issues are too complex for citizens to understand, a striking 75% is more optimistic about the public's capabilities.

Studying politicians' perceptions of voter awareness of specific elite behaviour instead of citizens' overall political knowledge, Kingdon's (1968) older work is unique. In his examination of candidates' beliefs and strategies, he asks politicians to what extent they thought citizens were informed about the key issues of the election campaign. While he was mainly interested in the difference in beliefs between winners and losers of the election, the absolute level of their estimations provides an indication of their overall perceptions of voter awareness. Results show that 23% of the winning candidates believed citizens were informed, while only 7% of the losing did, which could be explained by the mechanism of wishful thinking. However, we do not know whose beliefs are in fact more accurate.

Although few studies explicitly linked citizens' awareness of elite behaviour with politicians' perceptions of this awareness, abundant literature on voter knowledge suggests that politicians' rather optimistic view of voter monitoring is likely an overestimation of their actual awareness (see among many others Hutchings, 2003). Miller and Stokes (1963) make the same claim, and argue that this distorted perception of reality might be rooted in the fact that the interactions most politicians have within their district inevitably put them in touch with organized groups or interested citizens, interactions that are therefore heavily biased towards the well-informed, the politically interested. Moving beyond mere speculations, Kingdon (1968) actually asks politicians why they think some voters are informed about politics and he claims that politicians do so because it is simply socially acceptable in American political culture, certainly for incumbent officeholders. He uses the term 'congratulation-rationalization-effect' to describe this phenomenon, and argues that this finding is in line with the idea that



politicians have a natural tendency to praise voters in their qualities (their levels of political awareness, for example) because it is them who decide about their electoral fate. Also, politicians regularly deal with people involved in some aspects of government and may therefore think of themselves as the centre of attention.

## **2. Data and Design**

This paper focuses exclusively on the Belgian (Flemish)<sup>1</sup> case to examine politicians' perceptions of voter awareness. Belgium is known to be a party system that differs quite strongly from the more individualized US case. Not the least because the American political system triggers more individual responsibility because of smaller district sizes and a more direct connection between the representative and the represented (André et al., 2016). Belgium, an open PR system, finds itself in the middle of the continuum between individualistic and party-centred system – which basically means that even though parties fulfil a crucial role, personalized campaigning, for example, is quite common. Importantly, Belgian politicians are elected on provincial lists, while their primary focus is on the party electorate as a whole –survey evidence shows (e.g. Brack, et al., 2012). Important for the topic under study is that while parties are the key political actors in Belgium, the incentive for individual Members of Parliament to pursue a

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

personal vote is potent (see for example Bräuninger, et al., 2012). A strong party system, in which MPs still develop their own electoral strategies, allows us to examine politicians' perceptions of voter awareness with regard to two different yet central representational activities, namely *party initiatives* and *oral parliamentary questions*.

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

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<sup>2</sup> More information on the project to be added after anonymous review process.

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

To examine politicians' perceptions of specific voter awareness, we first of all zoom in on – given the Belgian partisan context – perceived voter awareness of *party initiatives*. Specifically, MPs were asked to estimate the amount of party voters that was aware of their party taking one specific initiative – again we should stress that the party electorate is the number one reference group for political elites in Belgium, hence methodological decision. To ensure some level of comparability across party initiatives, we applied three specific criteria to the selection of initiatives: the initiatives had to be taken more or less one month before the interview period, initiatives had to be covered in the written press (GoPress search) and they had to address one of the core issues of the party (e.g. immigration for the extreme-right party or social affairs for the socialist party). In addition, politicians working on the federal level were shown an initiative about a federal issue competence, those active on the regional level were presented party initiatives on regional competences. One example is the proposition of a right-wing party to make sure that people under the age of 21 are enabled to inherit from their parents

without paying taxes – a full list can be found in Appendix I. Specifically, with this party initiative in mind, MPs were asked: ‘*what percentage of your party electorate knows this initiative was taken by your party?*’. In total, 149 politicians responded to this question in the closed-ended questionnaire.

To formulate an answer to our second research question – *How accurate are politicians’ perceptions of their voters’ awareness of party initiatives?* –, we check politicians’ estimations against citizens’ actual knowledge. To do so, an online survey was distributed by Survey Sampling International (SSI) to a representative sample of 2389 Dutch-speaking citizens<sup>3</sup> in February 2018, right before the elite interviews were fielded. In this survey citizens were first asked ‘*What party would you vote for if it were elections right now?*’. Based on their party preference, then, respondents were assigned five initiatives: three randomly drawn from the total amount of twelve party initiatives (for distraction) and two that were actually initiated by the party they would vote for – the purpose of this being the identification of the electorate the MP is questioned about. Logically, only citizens’ awareness of their preferred party’s initiatives is used to calculate whether politicians’ estimations of citizens awareness match reality. Specifically, citizens had to indicate for each initiative what party they thought was the instigator (‘*Which party do you think took this initiative?*’), from a list of all parties

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

(including ‘don’t know’). Doing so, we create a benchmark to compare politicians’ perceptions of citizens’ awareness with.

Third, we examine to what extent politicians believe that voters are aware of the oral questions they ask in parliament – which is one of the most important tools for individual members of parliament to address public concerns and set the political agenda. Specifically, MPs were in the open interview part (for reasons of feasibility) asked to estimate voter awareness of an oral question they had recently asked during the plenary session in the Federal or the Flemish Parliament: ‘*What percentage of your party electorate knows you asked this question in parliament?*’. For all politicians the last oral question they asked before the interview was selected to ensure that our selection of questions is not systematically biased towards the more visible ones<sup>4</sup> (a full list of oral questions can be found in Appendix II). Importantly, while the careful selection of oral questions ensures some level of comparability across MPs, it does not rule out differences completely: some questions addressed topics that are broader in scope than other topics. Of course, when it comes to the accuracy of elite perceptions of public awareness, these differences matter less, because we somehow ‘control’ for it by including *actual* public

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<sup>4</sup> During the plenary sessions of both the Flemish and the Federal parliament, MPs get the opportunity to ask questions about topical debates. It is the most visible meeting in parliament as part of it is broadcasted live on television. While there are differences in how often MPs ask questions (see Dandoy, 2011), all MPs use the plenary session to gain some visibility and, importantly, to put issues on the agenda (Campbell and Zittel, 2020). Also, MPs mostly ask questions about their field of expertise.

awareness in our calculation. Since this question on the perceived awareness of oral questions was included in the open interview part, a lot of politicians did not answer it or left us with vague answers (such as: ‘a lot’ or ‘not much’) that were impossible to use in a quantitative fashion, leaving us with 59 responses to work with<sup>5</sup>. Even though we insisted quite strongly on providing us with an numerical estimation of the scope of attention for the oral question they recently asked, some politicians simply refused to do it – and obviously it is impossible to force them to.

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

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

<sup>6</sup> SSI (now Dynata) was asked to contact respondents from the previous survey wave, applying again quota on age, gender and educational level. 50% of the respondents were willing to collaborate again.

oral question with the politicians that asked it, will serve as a benchmark to compare politicians' estimations with.

Finally, to get an idea of *why* politicians hold certain beliefs on citizens' awareness, they were in the open part of the survey, directly after having estimated what percentage of their party electorate was aware of them asking this particular oral question, asked to elaborate on their answer; '*Why do you think [X%] of your party electorate knows you asked this question?*'. Depending on elites' initial answer, the question-wording was slightly adapted. In total, 113 MPs<sup>7</sup> provided us with an answer to this question – which means that a substantial amount of MPs who were not willing to estimate citizens' awareness about their oral question in numerical terms, did reflect on why they thought voters knew, or did not know, about this oral question. This makes sense in that politicians rarely refused to answer the question on voter awareness of their oral question, but it was the estimation in percentages that seemed to deter some of them. Thus, even for those politicians of whom we lack a numerical estimation of their individual visibility, their reasoning provides some interesting insight as to how they might (mis)perceive voter awareness. Specifically, politicians' reflections were recorded and afterwards fully transcribed. To take full advantage of the insights politicians provided, we rely on established method to build theory from qualitative interview data (see Glaser and

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<sup>7</sup> Missing values for this question stem from the fact that some politicians did not have enough time to complete the open-ended questionnaire.

Strauss, 1967). In a first round of coding this information, we analysed the transcripts carefully and inductively classified politicians' answers into different categories – without having decided beforehand how many categories we would allow. Doing so, five main categories were withheld. In a second step, then, we took another look at the transcripts and coded all categories as either present or absent in politicians' argumentations. Important to note is that all answers politicians provided were spontaneous mentions of what was on their mind, we did not know beforehand what we were looking for in the data. The count presented in the result section, in combination with exemplary quotes, thus gives an indication of what arguments are top of mind for elites, and while it provides us with important insights in the underlying patterns as to why politicians think voters are (un)aware of what they do, we cannot rule out the existence of other considerations that were not spontaneously brought up. Yet given that we ask MPs about a specific oral question right before, we make the cognitive task elites have to perform a lot less abstract, which helps to grasp their full considerations (see Kingdon, 1989 for a similar approach).

Finally, we should briefly discuss the possibility of social desirability affecting our results. While it is hard to avoid that politicians give socially desirable answers, we tried to deal with it by keeping the interview setting as informal as possible and by ensuring complete anonymity. Importantly, politicians were not concerned about this, we felt, which might have to do with the fact that we conducted two other waves of elite interviews where the same anonymity rule applied and where identifiable information has never reached the public realm. Thus, a relationship of mutual trust has been established with most of the elites, which also shows itself in the exceptional response rate. Also,



other questions asked in the survey that addressed even more sensitive topics on representation and the role of public opinion showed that many politicians did provide answers that were in fact *not* socially desirable. Therefore, we do believe that politicians gave us answers that match their actual beliefs – beliefs that might obviously in itself be affected by social desirability, yet this is part of what we aim to investigate.

### **3. Results**

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

Examining politicians' actual perceptions of voter awareness, we first of all take a look at perceived awareness of *party initiatives*. Politicians had to estimate the percentage of party voters that would know a certain initiative was initiated by their party. On average, we find, MPs estimated that 35% of them would be able to make this connection. Indeed, around 50% of all 149 MPs answering this question believes more than a quarter of their party electorate is aware of the fact that this particular initiative has

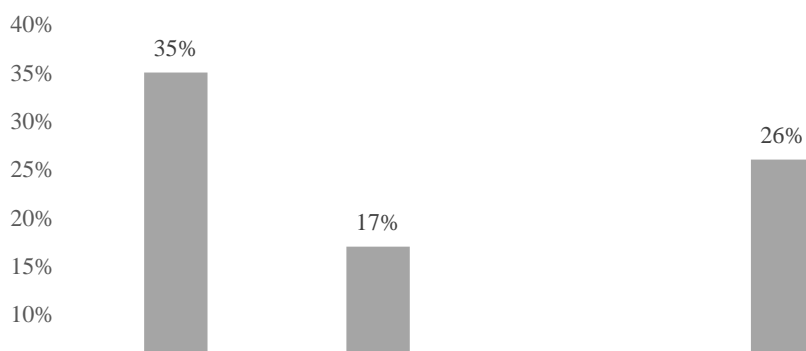
been initiated by their party. Only in rare cases do politicians argue that a majority would be able to link the initiative with their party.

When questioned about *citizens' awareness of an oral question they asked*, estimations are slightly lower: on average, politicians believe that 26% of their party electorate knows they asked a particular question in the plenary session in parliament. The difference between perceived voter awareness between party and individual behaviour makes sense in that parties are the most relevant political actors in Belgium and there are simply a lot more MPs for citizens to keep an eye on than there are parties. Politicians seem to take this reality, at least to a certain extent, into account in their estimations. Still, results are quite striking in that it implies politicians (on average) think they are individually known – that is: recognized by name – by 26% of their party electorate. Only three MPs argue their oral question was completely invisible for citizens, all 56 others believe that a substantial amount of party voters is aware of them asking a specific oral question during the plenary session in parliament. Importantly, the aggregate pattern in politicians' perceptions of voter awareness we find is robust, controlling for different individual or institutional characteristics (see Appendix III).

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

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

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



*-Figure 1 (In) accuracy of politicians' perceptions of voter awareness*

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somewhat monitored by voters, while it is in fact not. This would lead to the obvious conclusion that politicians are completely unrealistic when it comes to estimating voter awareness of the oral questions they ask. Reflecting on their assessment of awareness the open interview part, though, the image we get is somewhat more nuanced. Of all 113 MPs who told us why they thought voters are aware of the oral question they asked, no less than 49 start their argumentation by stressing the fact that politics is often too complex for citizens to understand and that most citizens are ignorant about what happens in parliament – which is perfectly in line what we derive from our quantitative evidence on politicians' perceptions of the public's overall informedness about politics. Some indicative examples:

Citizens are simply not concerned about what we do here in the Federal parliament.  
[federal MP, government]

We only get to ask one or two questions a year in the plenary session and they don't always get covered in the traditional media. And even when it does get covered, who is even interested in politics? [regional MP, opposition]

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

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

Politicians rely on various arguments to explain why they think this specific oral question was able to reach an (exceptionally) wide audience. We classify their responses into five categories to provide a structured interpretation of what politicians spontaneously mention in their reflections on voter awareness of oral questions. We additionally present counts on how often each of the arguments were mentioned and add some exemplary quotes. Since the literature does not provide empirical evidence to substantiate expectations in this regard, we opted to adhere this exploratory approach and let the answers of politicians speak for themselves.

***‘It was covered in the Traditional News Media’***

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

My question concerned an important topic that was covered extensively in the news media: it was on television and maybe also in some newspapers. I even received reactions from people saying: ‘I saw you on television!’. [federal MP, opposition]

It almost never happens, but this question even made it onto the front page of De Morgen [Flemish quality newspaper], it was for sure very visible. [regional MP, opposition]

***‘I posted it on Facebook/Twitter’***

In addition to the traditional news media, 44 politicians argue that social media outlets – either Facebook, Twitter and sometimes Instagram – were crucial in raising voter awareness of their oral question. Most MPs bringing up social media outlets say that they used those outlets to share a fragment of them asking the oral question. Additionally, politicians emphasize that the fragment received a lot of public attention, which they stress by referring to the specific amounts of comments, likes, shares and/or views the video received. Others argue more vaguely that ‘*it practically exploded on Twitter*’ or that ‘*it did very well on Facebook*’.

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

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

### ***‘It was a Salient Topic’***

Next to media coverage, politicians often (38/113) refer to the salience or obtrusiveness of their oral question – which, of course, is related to media attention. MPs tend to believe that issues ‘*people care about*’ or that ‘*affect everyone*’, are monitored more closely by citizens. This is in line with Kingdon's (1989) finding that politicians assume citizens are more concerned about law-making when it comes to salient or intense issues – with intensity referring to the fact that citizens have strong opinions on the matter. This finding can additionally be linked to the idea that interested third parties or affected citizens might

not only care themselves, but also alert others and therefore additionally increase awareness (see also Fenno, 1978). Interestingly, the range of topics politicians claim that are salient among the public is surprisingly wide, including issues that are traditionally not considered to be obtrusive, such as foreign affairs or agricultural policy.

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

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

### ***‘It is my Specialization’***

Additionally, 22 politicians stress voters are aware of the question they asked because it addressed a topic in which they are specialized. The underlying idea is that citizens associate MPs with a certain topic because they have been working on it for a while and they might have received some media coverage linking them with this issue over the years. And, as some claim: *‘repetition is key’*.

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

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

### ***‘My Party Communicated about it’***



Finally, 18 MPs spontaneously refer to party communication as positively affecting public awareness of the oral question they asked. Such internal communications, they argue, are generally directed towards members of the party or to close party supporters.

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

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

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

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

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

Until today, I have received ten reactions from very different people. So I estimate that around 20 percent or so of our voters will know about this oral question. I think so, yes.<sup>8</sup> [federal MP, government]

People generally don’t really care about politics, but it is striking that, after a while, some people were informed about this question. Some even called me about it. It should be that interest groups have covered it in their communications, or that some citizens have seen it and passed it on to others. [federal MP, opposition]

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

I recently [as a mayor] had to marry a couple, and they told me they knew I was working on this topic. It's surprising how well informed some people are. [regional MP, government]

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

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

Second, the exceptionality of gaining *any* visibility with their parliamentary work matters a great deal. Politicians strongly emphasize that gaining visibility is something most politicians struggle with on a daily basis. That they care a lot about their individual visibility, also shows in their efforts in dispersing their intervention in the plenary session via a lot of different channels. Except for their own social media accounts, though, they are completely dependent on others – journalists, party officials,... – to access those arenas that allow them widespread visibility. Additionally, MPs generally work on rather technical or complex issues, while the discussions in the plenary session usually deal with

more topical, accessible issues. In sum, it is simply common for most politicians, and for most aspects of their work as an MP, to be rather invisible. This causes their perceptions of public awareness to be disproportionately optimistic when they do gain some visibility with their parliamentary work.

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

#### **4. Conclusion**

For a democracy to function effectively many facets are important. One of them is creating extrinsic incentives (that is: the threat of electoral accountability) for elected representatives to respond to citizens' needs. In this study, we show that one crucial precondition to do so is fulfilled: politicians think that at least some voters keep track of, or become informed by others, of the initiatives their parties propose *and* of the oral questions they ask in the parliamentary arena. This is an important finding since politicians who believe voters are aware of what they do, are disciplined to follow-up on their desires – after all, they fear electoral retribution if they don't. As Kingdon (1968, p.150) argued about perceived voter monitoring; *It keeps politicians on their toes and working hard at the business of staying in office*'. Without taking a normative stance on the desirability of anticipatory representation, and by extent of policy congruence, these findings clearly matter for how representative democracies function.

Interestingly, when asking politicians to estimate voter awareness, a paradox arises. While politicians perceive the mass public as rather uninformed, they substantially

overestimate the public's awareness of *specific* party initiatives and oral questions. Inviting politicians to reflect on their estimations, we find two mechanisms that cause them to overestimate voter awareness. First of all, confirming Kingdon's (1968) conclusion, MPs generalize feedback they receive from interested citizens to the population as a whole. The interactions politicians have with the more politically engaged and informed citizens – both in real life and/or via their social media accounts – create an inaccurate understanding of how aware voters are in reality. Today, politicians do not only receive feedback in person, but often, and usually in large numbers (likes, shares,...), via their social media profiles. This immediate and seemingly abundant feedback, we learn from politicians' reflections, adds to their biased views of voter awareness. Second, we see that MPs struggle to gain visibility with their parliamentary work, while asking oral questions allows for some exceptional visibility. The exceptionality of them, mostly being back-bencher MPs, getting covered in the traditional media, for example, leads them to overestimate the actual scope of citizen awareness if they do get some visibility. Also, politicians' answers clearly show they believe intermediaries (mostly news media, but also interest groups or other interested citizens) inform other citizens about what they do.

Finding that politicians generally overestimate their voters' awareness of their behaviour in Belgium, an open PR system, we expect that politicians will feel more closely monitored in another political context that fosters more individual responsibility – such as the USA. More important, however, is the (psychological) mechanism driving this overestimation. The conclusions drawn from the interview evidence – the fact that the availability heuristic and the high level of engagement and/or frustration with the press distorts politicians' perceptions of voter awareness – are generalizable to other

political contexts, as well as to other types of behaviour. After all, we would not expect cognitive biases to be context-specific, and that our findings match the assumptions made by Miller and Stokes (1963) in a completely different setting substantiates this claim. At the very least, this study has provided some modest insights into politicians' reasoning about the public's awareness of different aspects of the political game that are applicable to other contexts.

Some limitations of this study should be addressed. First, we only ask politicians about their perceptions of the visibility of *one* party initiative and *one* oral question. Even though politicians generalized beyond those particular question in their reflections, addressing a more extensive set of activities both parties and individual politicians can undertake would allow for an interesting comparison. Especially if one would compare perceived voter awareness of behaviour that elites *want* to be seen (as is the focus of this study) with estimations of voter awareness of behaviour elites would rather want to hide (unpopular policies, for example). While oral questions and party initiatives are both very important tools to represent citizens in proportional political systems, examining a more diverse set of political activities would allow to see in which aspects of their job representatives feel most constrained by voter monitoring. In addition to our explorative findings on why politicians overestimate voter awareness, the literature would benefit from a more systematic approach, for example by asking politicians about each of the elements we find to matter or by experimentally testing what (causally) drives elites' overestimation. In that sense, our study derived some hypotheses that could be tested with other data in the future. Also, since perceived awareness is just one aspect of politicians' perceptions of citizens' accountability behaviour, other work is needed that tries to grasp

politicians' perceptions of other aspects of voter monitoring: citizens' evaluations of elite behaviour, or their actual behaviour at the ballot box, for example. Finally, to get a better understanding of the impact perceived voter awareness, future research could directly link politicians' estimations of voter awareness with their actual behaviour; does the feeling of being monitored indeed affect how politicians and parties behave?

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## Appendix

### Appendix I – List of party initiatives

Federal	Non-Belgians have to stay in Belgium for at least seven years and have worked here for at least three years before they are allowed access to social security.
Regional	90 percent of the social housing projects in our country should be reserved for Belgians. Only 10 percent may be assigned to foreigners.
Federal	Part-time work should be made more attractive by reducing the OCMW benefits for people receiving a living wage more slowly as they begin to earn more money in their part-time jobs.
Regional	Children under the age of 21 must be able to inherit from their parents without paying taxes.
Federal	There should be more controls on and higher fines for middle lane drivers.
Regional	The tax companies have to pay to install electric charging stations at car parks of the national railway station should be abolished.
Federal	Someone who retires before the age of 65, but worked for a full career of 45 years, should receive the same tax benefit on his/her supplementary pension as someone who retires at the age of 65.
Regional	Part of the estimated tens of thousands of old violations against building laws in Flanders should be regularized.
Federal	If the budget for new military investments approved by the parliament is exceeded by more than 15%, parliament must be informed and vote again on this budget.

Regional	A tough policy is necessary to tackle the phenomenon of teenage pimps, and at the same time the optimal care for victims should be prioritized.
Federal	A single person should be entitled to free assistance from a lawyer as soon as his/her income is lower than 1,500 euros/month; for families this should be the case with a total income that is lower than 2,000 euros per month.
Regional	There should be more investments in more punctual public transportation and in better real-time information for passengers.

## Appendix II – List of oral questions

Question about the impact of the closing of nuclear power plants by 2025 on the climate.
Question about the port of Antwerp.
Question about the alleged use of chemical weapons by the Bashar al-Assad regime.
Question about the expropriation of white farmers in South-Africa.
Question about the transition period after the Brexit-referendum.
Question about support for people with a rare diseases.
Question about the reform of the inheritance and donation tax.
Question about new food quality standards and behavioral rules for slaughterhouses.
Question about the replacement of prison guards by policemen during a prison strike.
Question about the route of the Maastricht-Hasselt express tram.
Question about the death sentence of professor Ahmadreza Djalali by the Iranian court.
Question about the use of a Luxembourg mailbox company by the ACW.
Question about the lack of progress municipalities make in public transport policy.
Question about the growing debt at the national railway company.
Question about the implementation of community service for long-term unemployed.
Question about digital electricity meters.
Question about the current prison strike and the idea off minimal service.

Question about a new Islam school in Genk.
Question about extending the limitation period for asbestos-related issues.
Question about the World Cup-song and the sponsorship of championships by government companies.
Question on how to divide European support for bio-agriculture.
Question about the employment of IS-fighters as actors by NTGent.
Question about an overall weather insurance for farmers.
Question about the use of a Luxembourg mailbox company by the ACW.
Question about the replacement of the F-16 aircrafts.
Question about the government's coordination with regard to food safety, in response to the Veviba (food) scandal.
Question about the realization of projects with solar panels along railways.
Question about the consent of both parents that is needed for their children to get access to mental health care.
Question about the packaging industry's waste plan.
Question about the reporting code for genital mutilation.
Question about the first results of the newly launched City-Pass.
Question about zero-emission buses.

Question about the control of fire safety and the risk of explosion of buildings.
Question about the location of Zalando's new distribution center.
Question about the renewed management contracts with the National Railway Company.
Question about three Flemish companies that exported chemical products to Syria and Lebanon without a license.
Question about artificial intelligence.
Question about outsourcing OCMW checks to private companies.
Question about the hospital helicopter in West-Flanders.
Question about the Unia study on inequality in the Flemish educational system.
Question about convicted terrorists should stay at the disposition of the justice Departement after being released.
Question about the health care of persons with a handicap who are in urgent need for a personal assistance budget (PAB).
Question about the non-signing of the residential elderly care protocol by the commercial residential care centers.
Question about the subsidies for the Integration and Integration Agency.
Question about the introduction of a tax on drinks packaging.
Question about temporary work in Flemish public services and local authorities.
Question on how to handle asbestos problems in schools.

Question about the extended use of the current F-16 aircrafts.
Question about the replacement of the F-16 aircrafts.
Question about the ever increasing traffic jams in Flanders.
Question about the retirement age and the so-called list of heavy professions.
Question about the problem with asbestos in schools.
Question about the CETA and the possible consequences for foreign policy.
Question about increasing the number of traffic controls.
Question about the introduction of deposit money on cans and PET bottles.
Question about the federal plans for a closed center for families with children awaiting deportation to their country of origin.
Question about the frauds detected at slaughterhouses and Veviba processing units.



### Appendix III – Robustness check aggregate data<sup>9</sup>

Figure A1. Perceived party initiative awareness by different groups of elites (N=147)

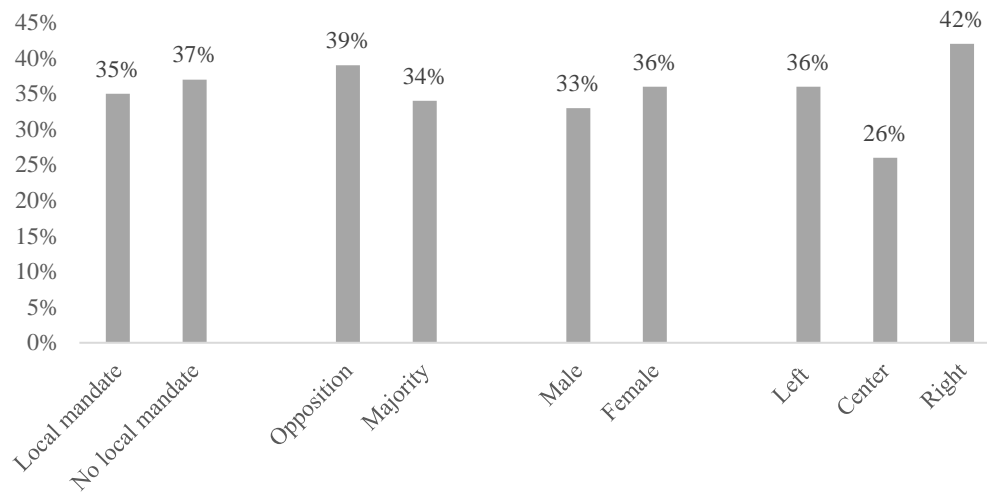
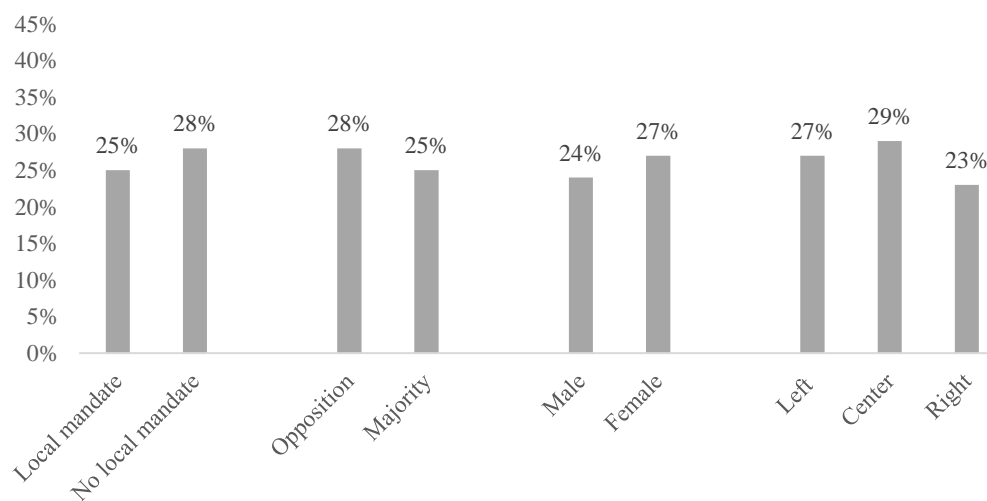


Figure A2. Perceived oral question awareness by different groups of elites (N=59)



<sup>9</sup> A t-test and one-way ANOVA with Tukey post-hoc test are used to compare means and check whether there are significant between-group differences. The only significant difference is found between party ideologies, which makes sense because the initiatives selected differ from one party to another. All other comparisons do not show any systematic differences.