Surviving Information Overload

How Elite Politicians Select Information

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INTRODUCTION

"Political information is to democratic politics what money is to economics."(Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996, p. 8). Broadly defined as being any stimulus from the environment that is perceived as being significant (Case, 2012), it is a truism that information forms one of the most vital resources for political elites. In all phases and facets of their daily business—from challenging government over drafting bills to monitoring citizen preferences—politicians draw on signals from the outside world. The particular thing is that information is not scarce; there is an infinite amount of potentially relevant information available to political actors. The matter is not so much whether politicians *can* be informed but rather how they can avoid information *overload*.

Following work in cognitive psychology on the human brain's limited information processing capacities (Miller, 1956), political scientists' thinking about information overload has been influenced mostly by the bounded rationality approach initiated by the Nobel prize winning work of Herbert Simon (e.g. Simon, 1947). Due to humans' cognitive architecture and the multiplicity of their goals there is too much information for an individual to process (Jones & Thomas, 2012). As a consequence, decision makers inevitably scramble to attend to the right bits of information while ignoring irrelevant bits. The standing answer to the question of

how political elites deal with the endemic information overload, is that they are extremely *selective* in what they devote attention to (Simon, 1956). In cognitive psychology the very notion of 'attention' actually refers to focusing one's cognitive powers on one signal while ignoring others; attention is by definition selective (Yantis, 2000).

The question then is: *How do politicians select information?* Bounded rationality provides a useful framework by suggesting that selection is key. But this framework is not very concrete as to *how* this selection task is accomplished. Bounded rationality simply pinpoints the fallibility of the human mind and says that drastic information reduction is unavoidable. One way in which politicians (and other humans) organize their selective processing of information, the literature says, is by relying on *heuristics* (Bendor, 2010).

Yet, again, extant work in political science is not very specific as to *which* heuristics politicians employ and whether there are other 'tricks' they have in place to wade through the information maelstrom. The extensive work on political agendas essentially dealing with information selection does not help us much further as it focuses on institutions and not on individuals (see for example: Baumgartner & Jones, 1993; Jones & Baumgartner, 2005). The odd study dealing with individual politicians (see for example: Kingdon, 1973) did not focus on information selection and most comparative individual-level studies deal with politicians' role conceptions (Andeweg, 2014). Also, the extensive literature on 'knowledge utilization' in public policy (e.g. Oh & Rich, 1996) that does deal with individuals, is not focusing on how information is selected.

While information overload and the concomitant information selection problem are endemic in politics, the challenge is even larger for elite politicians compared to back-benchers. The politicians that matter most, those that take executive decisions and/or that determine actual policies, face an even tougher selection task. More information is relevant

for what they do and they are more targeted by information providers. Even more than other elite decision makers, elite politicians decide on problems they are not experts in, they are held accountable for their decisions on an almost daily basis, and they operate in an extremely competitive environment. Not only do they need information about problems and potential solutions, they also need to stay abreast of the actions and plans of their opponents. As a consequence, elite politicians' selection process cannot be but even more stringent than backbenchers'.

This study explores how individual elite politicians select information. We provide evidence from in-depth, structured interviews with fourteen top politicians in Belgium. This material is unique because we got access to key elites—we interviewed *all* party leaders and seven ministers. That the interviews were fully devoted to information processing and elite politicians' selection strategies, is a second asset. We use these data inductively to develop a typology of information selection strategies. Such a typology is a necessary first step in developing a theory of why politicians employ certain selection strategies and how this affects actual decision making.

The Belgian elites' narratives suggest that there are three general strategies. Two of those strategies are selection mechanisms, one is an attitude. First, Executive politicians have explicit, organizational *procedures* in place that shield them from raw information: they partially outsource information selection to organizational procedures. Second, in line with the bounded rationality approach, elites employ a number of rules of thumb to decide quickly about what matters and what not. They apply those *heuristics* personally to the information that comes through their first line of procedural defense. Finally, even after implementing organizational procedures and heuristics, a good deal of uncertainty remains. Politicians alleviate this problem with an attitude of self-confidence. Convinced they got it right most of

the time, were they to get it wrong, top politicians are self-assured that they could make it up pretty easily. Together, procedures, heuristics and self-confidence shield politicians against information overload or, at least, it makes them feel in charge of the incoming signals.

<div align="center">*INFORMATION SELECTION IN POLITICS*</div>

The key reference when talking about information selection in politics is Simon's bounded rationality. An individual decision maker is someone: "(…) *who is limited in computational capacity, and who searches very selectively through large realms of possibilities in order to discover what alternatives of action are available, and what the consequences of each of these alternatives are. The search is incomplete, often inadequate, based on uncertain information and partial ignorance, and usually terminated with the discovery of satisfactory, not optimal, courses of action*" (Simon, 1985, p. 294). The single most important task of any decision maker is to find the right information to decide which problem and possible alternative courses of action to attend to (Simon, 1993). The crucial question for decision makers, then, is to decide on *"(…) how much of the actors' resources should be allocated to the search"* (Simon, 1972, p. 163).

The infinite number of stimuli our senses encounter makes that humans' information processing functions are constantly overloaded. The only way to overcome this problem is by being extremely selective (Simon, 1956). While compellingly formulating the problem of information overload and necessary selection, bounded rationality scholars have been much less vocal about *how* politicians precisely select their information. Just like any other person who is confronted with loads of information, they use heuristics. But which heuristics?

The role of information selection in politics has not exactly been neglected by political scientists. On the contrary, directly inspired by bounded rationality (Jones, 2001) and triggered

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by Bryan Jones' and Frank Baumgartner's work in the US (1993; 2005), there is an important stream of work on the role of information in politics that directly deals with information selection, also comparatively (e.g. Baumgartner et al., 2009; Green-Pedersen & Walgrave, 2014). This agenda-setting literature, though, does not study individuals but institutions. It studies policy output, the *result* of information selection, not the selection process itself. While underpinning the importance of information selection——this literature is not directly helpful at tackling the question of how individual politicians go about selecting information.

That bounded rationality studies in politics are mostly dealing with the aggregate level is paradoxical, as bounded rationality essentially is an *individual* level framework based on the limitations of individuals' cognitions. What is lacking is what Jones and Thomas (2012) call 'the micro-foundational underpinning' of the established aggregate output patterns. Jones (2003, p. 401) states: "*The relationships between organizational decision-making and individual decision-making are not metaphorical; they are causal. One cannot really understand how organizations operate without a strong sense of how individuals process information and make decisions.*" So, the question remains: How do individual politicians select information?

Apart from political agenda-setting, there is a sizeable knowledge utilization literature examining how individual policy makers use scientific information for public policy-making (Oh, 1997; Oh & Rich, 1996). While similar to our quest of how elite politicians *select* information, the knowledge utilization literature rather focuses on the *use* of information. Also, this work deals with scientific information only, it does not depart from the idea that there is 'too much' information to be processed and that selection is key. The knowledge utilization literature has, according to its own proponents, a 'rationalistic bias' that directly contradicts the bounded rationality framework we employ here (Rich, 1997; but see: Rich & Oh, 2000). Moreover, the investigated individuals (staffers, policy advisers, civil servants etc.)

are different from the top elites studied here; they are not the ultimate decision makers, the scope of issues they deal with is smaller, and they are (mostly) not elected and not publicly accountable. Therefore, this adjacent literature is not directly useful either for suggesting concrete selection practices employed by elected and overloaded top elites.

A third literature that might help us specifying how individual politicians select information, is the broad stream of non-political science work. In fact, the scientific study of information gathering, management and processing by individuals is large and expands from psychology, over library science to business studies (e.g. Edmunds & Morris, 2000; Case, 2012). Most of this literature deals with individuals and departs from the premise that decision makers are overloaded with information (e.g. Farhoomand & Drury, 2002). Again, this work is not directly useful for highlighting the precise selection practices of elite politicians. Most of it deals with the causes and symptoms of information overload or with the 'counter measures' organization members 'should' take to alleviate the problem of overload (e.g. personal training, adopting technology etc.)(Eppler & Mengis, 2004). Although there is work on what is called 'information avoidance' (Case, Andrews, Johnson, & Allard, 2005) or 'filtering' (Miller, 1960), not a lot of attention is given to how decision makers actually select information or use specific filters. For example, Farhoomand & Drury (2002) show that many managers suffer from subjective feelings of information overload. Their open interviews show that the most employed method to combat the information stream is to filter information, to eliminate information sources, to delegate, and to prioritize. Yet, *how* exactly this filtering, eliminating, delegating and prioritizing is accomplished, remains unclear. This is exactly the question the present study aims to answer for elite politicians.

So, there is a good deal of work in political science and beyond suggesting the importance of information and information selection. Yet, our reading is that hardly any of

this research is dealing with the actual information *selection* by individual politicians and definitely not by elite politicians. Consequently, it is hard to formulate a priori expectations as to how top elites select information. Therefore, our approach here will be inductive and consists of an effort to build rather than to test theory.

We deal with two types of elite politicians: national cabinet ministers and party leaders. We expect both to face slightly different information selection tasks. The executive strongly dominates the legislative branch in Belgium (Deschouwer, 2009) which makes ministers the most important policy makers. Yet, they are rivalled in power, and maybe even surpassed, by the major parties' party leaders. Belgium is a partitocracy with parties as ultimate agents of power (Deschouwer, de Winter, & della Porta, 1996). Within the party, the party leader is the undisputed central figure (Fiers, 1998). He or she decides on the party line and, when the party is in government, after personally negotiating the government agreement, also directly intervenes in controversial government decisions. Party leaders in Belgium are a kind of super minister. Party leadership is considered as the highest office in Belgium and comes with similar personal perks as with being a minister. Ministers and party leaders both have hand-picked personal staffers that help them in their information processing task. Both types of elites politicians are also similar in that they are the ultimate decision-makers that single-handedly take strategic decisions mastering their own agendas.

The key difference is that ministers are specialized policy makers mostly acting within their portfolio. Party leaders are generalists guarding the party line on all possible policy issues implying that almost anything that happens in the country is within the bounds of their function. A second difference is that a minister's work is more constrained as he or she is part of a coalition government and that he or she has formal authority. Party leaders act in a more loose context and are less formally constrained. Still, cabinet ministers in Belgium do not work

closely with their administration but with a ministerial cabinet that comes and goes with the minister (Suetens & Walgrave, 2001). This implies that government ministers can decide on their own procedures and are free to organize the context in which they work. Finally, a third difference may be that ministers mind their own business and mostly look at information that directly relates to their own position and plans. Party leaders, in contrast, acting in an extremely partisan and competitive environment, also care about information regarding *other* political actors. We explore below whether these differences between ministers and party leaders have consequences for how they select information.

METHOD

Elites were interviewed face-to-face for on average one hour in June-October 2013 drawing on a structured list of questions. We targeted all Dutch-speaking (Flemish) government ministers and party leaders, a population of about twenty Belgian top politicians. Fourteen were willing to grant us an interview; six refused or could not be reached. All seven party leaders granted us an interview, and there are four senior and three junior ministers among the interviewees. One of the authors of the study personally carried out all fourteen interviews.

The interview dealt with how politicians process information. We told the interviewees we were interested in which signals, relevant to any aspect of their work, they take into account. We made it clear to our interviewees that we considered any information coming from outside or inside the political system as relevant to our quest. Information could therefore originate from external sources such as citizens, media, social movements or business organizations or from inside sources such as other politicians, cabinet collaborators, political parties or the government. In sum, we defined information very broadly before the

start of the interviews. We then asked where they got their information from, what kind of information they prioritized, what their preferred sources of information were etc. Most questions were closed questions to be answered on iPads. The key question for the present study was about respondents' feeling of being able to cope with the incoming information: *"To what extent do you feel overwhelmed by the information you receive on a daily basis?"*.

While answering the closed questions, politicians were asked to give, and gave, extensive comments. These were recorded and transcribed in full. In particular the closed overwhelmed question was followed by open questions in which the interviewer asked the respondent to elaborate on his/her answer, explain why he/she was overwhelmed or not, whether this had always been the case etc. Previous studies of information overload in other fields have used a similar, open approach (e.g. Farhoomand & Drury, 2002; Savolainen, 2007). Most politicians came up with a coherent explanation of how they dealt with information, their answers and narrative came across as consistent. It obviously was something they had given some thought before. Additionally, the transcripts were scanned looking for ways in which politicians said they overcame information overload. In general, we found Belgian top politicians to be very willing to talk at length about their personal strategies to overcome information overload. It clearly is a matter they are wrestling with and about which they are prepared to share their thoughts.

Our typology of selection mechanisms is the result of our close reading of the interviews. It is a structured interpretation of what the interviewed politicians told us about their dealings with the stream of information. We did not impose a specific reading to the interviews; we did not have strong expectations when doing the interviews nor when we started analyzing them. We just took the interviews at face value and inductively systematized and categorized what they taught us about elite politicians' selection mechanisms. The

advantage of an open procedure is that we utilize the full wealth of the evidence without being constrained by existing theories or expectations (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). We did not ask the interviewees systematically about any of the mechanisms. The practices we highlight below were thus spontaneously raised. They are the top of mind things elites come up with when asked about how they deal with information.

As a consequence, we can only be reasonably sure about the positive mentioning of a mechanism but not about the absence of that mechanism among the politicians that did not raise it. The mechanism may not have been mentioned because the politician did not elaborate on the question, forgot about it, thought it was irrelevant, was steered away from it by follow-up questions etc. In sum, we cannot say with confidence whether some practices are more general than others. We can only say that a certain selection mechanism *exists*, not that its existence is frequent or not. Below we only mention mechanisms that were mentioned by several politicians.

Since we guaranteed total anonymity, our quotes just provides the interviewee's function. We do not give any information about age, sex, party or department as this may allow identification. In rare cases we even slightly adapted quotes, made them more vague in dates or numbers, to make sure their origin cannot be traced.

ELITE POLITICIANS FEEL OVERWHELMED

The interviewed Belgian high-level politicians clearly indicated that information overload was a core feature of their professional life. Information comes in from a large number of sources and covers such a large scope of policy fields that it is beyond human capacity to keep up with everything.

A party leader told us: *"Yes, it [the information flow] goes at a high tempo, it is excruciating, and also very tiring. I think it is one of the reasons political careers are becoming shorter..."*. Another party leader states: *"The truth is that you can never really see, read, follow, understand, study and discuss all of it at the same time."* A minister points at the endlessness of available information: *"There is proof for everything out there. You find thesis and antithesis. And you will find enough credible sources to support both points of view (…). The point is how to deal with it rather than what it says. That is the most important task for a politician."* Another minister admits that even he has periods when there is too much: *"Sometimes your head is just full. Then you have a natural stop. Then someone wants to give you another book and I would have to learn stuff from it. But that's just not possible anymore. It's full. There is no space for new things."*

In sum, the interviews provide clear narrative evidence in support of the basic assumption of bounded rationality; there is plenty of information available to elites and it is impossible to attend to everything.

SELECTIVE INFORMATION-PROCESSING

The interviews also abound with quotes testifying of politicians' extreme information selectiveness. A party leader confirmed that selectivity is key: *"You cannot let yourself be overwhelmed. Because if you're overwhelmed you lose grip and you're going with the flow (…). The essence of the matter is: if you as a politician let yourself be overwhelmed then you are lost (…). Non-overwhelmdness consists of giving things a place. Of all what comes in you must be able to say, that goes there and that goes there, this is what I need to worry about and this is something I should not worry about."* Or, according to another party leader: *"I am someone who can close-off himself pretty easily. I disconnect, I select (…). It takes a while before you are*

able to distinguish the major from the insignificant things but I am now extremely well-learned in that respect."

Not only party leaders are extremely selective, the same applies to ministers. An experienced minister told us: "*I am not overwhelmed because I don't read much that doesn't interest me. I strongly select what I read. I can select that myself very easily (…). I can fairly easily keep things at a distance and read what I like to read and don't read what I don't like to read (…).*" A junior minister put it succinctly: "*I filter [information] myself. Actually, I really filter an awful lot*" and his colleague stated in a similar way: "*The older I get the easier it gets to say: 'Look, this much I can handle and the rest is out'.*" Finally, a minister managing a major department confirmed: "*I'm not overwhelmed because I am selective. You've got to be selective.*"

### A TYPOLOGY OF SELECTION MECHANISMS

The interviews suggest three general ways in which elites fight information overload. Figure 1 summarizes these strategies. The first two deal with the actual selection of information. They form a kind of *funnel* through which redundant information is cut out; they form two chronologically consecutive 'lines of defense' elite politicians employ to protect themselves against information inundation. Politicians (1) set up *procedures* to systematically organize or categorize incoming information and (2) they use specific *heuristics* or short-cuts to quickly evaluate the relevance of the incoming signals. Both these mechanisms filter information and reduce it in size, or make it comprehensible and easier to grasp.

The third way in which politicians live with information overload goes beyond having in place specific rules to select information. Rather than a selection mechanism we could call it a selection *attitude*. Top elites (3) trust their own procedures and heuristics; they are *self-*

confident they make the right information choices and they can live with mistakes. This forms their ultimate line of defense

Note that the two selection mechanisms are different in several respects. Not only are they applied at different moments in time—although the chronological order is not fully fixed as heuristics, for instance, may in some cases precede procedural filtering. Also, procedures are largely applied by staffers surrounding the elite politicians while heuristics are rules of thumb that are implemented personally by the politician. Additionally, procedures are explicit organizational arrangements while heuristics are mostly informal practices.

Figure 1: Information Selection and Coping Mechanisms Employed by Top Politicians
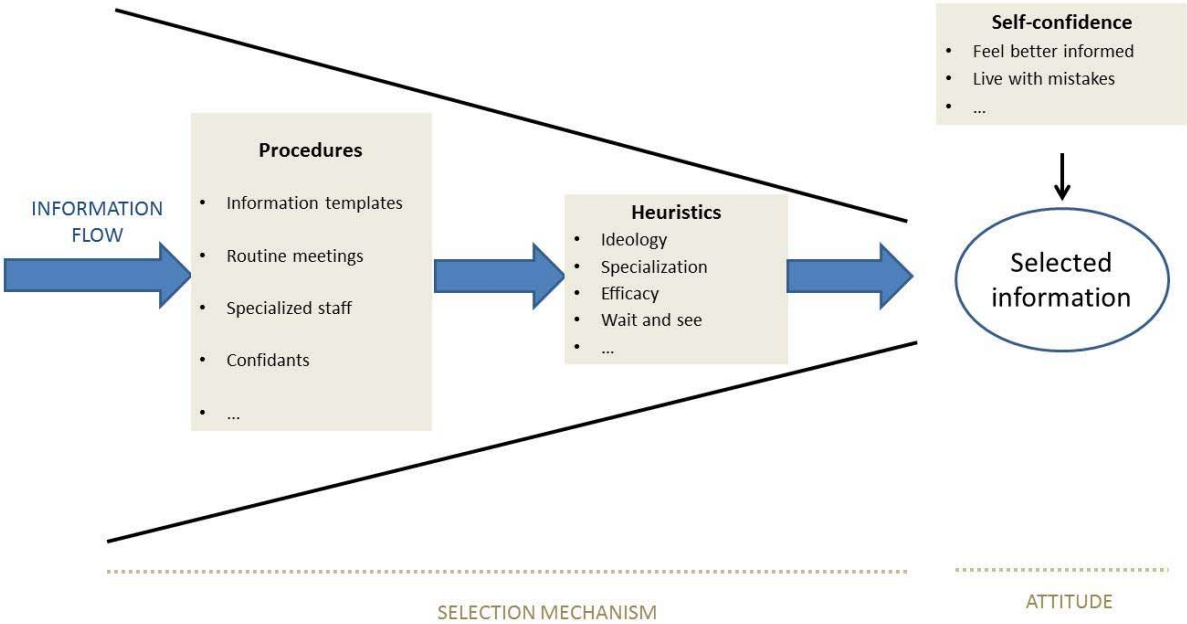
The rest of this section elaborates on these three mechanisms. It shows that Belgian top elites actually rely on them in their daily struggle with information intake.

Procedures

A first broad strategy elites employ, is organizing their information intake in a standardized way. They develop formal arrangements with their collaborators in order to pre-structure or preselect the information. Only things that match a certain format are attended to.

A minister told us extensively about how his collaborators have to follow a formal template in which he wants his information to be packaged: "*I have a template and they [collaborators] must follow it (…). I want them to use standard sentences (…). Thanks to that fixed pattern I can go through the notes much quicker.*"

A party leader organized his party internally with routine meetings so that he is always abreast of everything that goes on: *"I made my organization in such a way that Monday is the day that I meet everyone that matters in the party. I start with the ministers and fraction leaders, then the party bureau, the staff, all ministerial cabinet leaders, spokespeople, scientific service etc. (…). At the end of those Mondays, I have the feeling that (…) I know what everyone is up to (…). This gives me some peace of mind."*

Another party chair mentioned how he set-up his party's scientific agency so that each researcher monitors another competing party and gathers all necessary information to be used when needed. This dispatches him from processing all the information himself. Similarly, a minister explained how he forwards information he finds interesting to specialized staffers. He expects his staffers to be able to dig that information up at any given moment using his staff as an information archive. Every top politician we interviewed, had a system in place in which specialized staffers were assigned to topics and were used as a kind of life memory of facts and figures to be mobilized any time.

A fourth procedural technique is having like-minded confidants that can be used to test the importance of information quickly. "*There is a group around me that I have learned to*

trust in their reading of current affairs." Another party leader had one trustee who he considered to be a fellow traveler: "*I've got an excellent political secretary who has been with me for a long time. This is my buddy, my right hand. He knows very well what I need. He is a smart alter ego (…). He knows what I need to carry out my task as a party chair.*"

In sum, top politicians use different procedural mechanisms to keep out unnecessary information, to streamline information, or to monitor information's value routinely. The politicians we interviewed, mentioned the use of information templates, routine meetings, specialized staff, and confidants. There probably are other procedures that did not emerge from our interviews. All these formal procedures basically outsource information selection, or the decision to attend to information, to other people. They shield a politician from the crude data and make it possible to master more information in less time.

Heuristics

Most top politicians explicitly refer to their *personal* use of heuristics (without using that word) and rules of thumb to quickly evaluate signals as in need of attention or as fit for the bin. This is the second filtering device: when information comes through the procedural shield, how to evaluate it? Our interviews suggest that there are at least four sorts of heuristic filters elites personally employ: (1) ideology, (2) specialization, (3) efficacy, and (4) 'wait-and-see'.

Some elites use *ideology* as their main selection instrument. Information that fits their ideology, or that is ideologically relevant, is processed, other information is not. Especially party leaders, more than ministers, use ideology as their primary selection device. A party leader told us: "*It is important to be able to put information into a frame of reference. It makes it very easy to decide after just a brief reading whether you should deal with it or not. This diminishes the feeling of overwhelmdness (…). Without any doubt, this quality distinguishes top politicians from back benchers. I am sometimes really amazed about the lack of framework*

[of other politicians]. If you don't have such a framework then you dance the whole day on the rhythm of current events, and you keep dancing till you stumble." Other party leaders' statements support the idea that an ideological framework helps to stay on top of the information flurry. "*If people [of the party] don't know what they're doing, or what the party is doing, then they start inventing things and then you get those on your plate and you think: 'Oh shit'. As long as the people in the party know what we're aiming at, then my experience is that they try to do that.*" Many party leaders, declared that their ideological framework acts as a beacon, both in the positive as in the negative sense. Politicians keep tabs on what 'benefit' a piece of information has. For party leaders, this benefit will be in providing positive outcomes for their voters and ideology is a heuristics to identify such beneficial information.

Specialization is a second heuristic ministers use, much more than party leaders do. When one gains expertise in a field, coming to grips with new information becomes easier. Additionally, specialization leaves the politician with a more limited number of subjects he or she needs to be informed about. A minister told us "*Well, on the subjects I'm specialized in, I actually don't need that much information anymore.*" Another minister says: "*Other politicians pick many topics in which they specialize, but I've always done that much less. Even when in parliament I always said 'Choose your battles'. If you are a specialist in everything, you are a specialist in nothing.*" Another minister said he would not be able to do otherwise than to specialize: "*If I have to give advice to MP's, I tell them to specialize. I do not understand that you would occupy yourself with everything. It is just impossible to know everything.*"

Some ministers not only specialize in the (often broad) competences defined by their portfolio they even hyper-specialize further because of political agreements with other parties. An agreement among the government parties dispatches ministers from justifying their choice of a specific topic. A minister declared: "*One is actually not authorized to*

undertake anything because one has to translate the agreement as if you were in a notary office" and later on in the interview he continued *"I'm just passing on the box [of agreements], I'm the mailman."* Another minister called the government agreement her *"shopping list"* while another considered being part of a coalition government a *"golden cage"* as the field of action is extremely constrained due to inter-party agreements. Once a decision is made and an agreement reached among government partners, ministers can, and even must, close themselves off from the rumble and constant influx of possible distractions on other topics.

Our interviews strongly suggest that there is a major difference between ministers and party leaders regarding the role of specialization. Party leaders need to be generalists and able to comment on any given topic. A party leader said: *"I am the party chair. So, I also have to have an opinion about the sexual life of the ants. You have to pass judgment on anything and communicate about it, as they will shove a microphone under your nose for everything."* Another party leader talking about specialized information, confirmed: *"As a party chair you have to be honest: you just don't have the time for that"*. The chair of a third party equally refrained from specializing: *"Now I am a generalist, zooming out (...). I delegate now, because as a chair you need to keep the general overview of things."*

A third heuristic we label the *efficacy* heuristic. Since making a difference is labor-intensive and troublesome, many interviewed top politicians deliberately focus on just a few projects even within their field of specialization. This allows them to be even more selective in the information they actively attend to. More concretely, they decide to act on only those few micro-domains on which they think they have a high chance of being successful. The matter is not so much that politicians do not want to waste time or resources pursuing their goals but rather that they want their efforts to lead to results in the first place. Politicians told us they pick battles they want to win, but also battles they feel they can win. So, we witness a

lot of pragmatism and opportunism in concentrating efforts on concrete dossiers that allow more impact. A minister running a large department said: *"Let me be responsible for the things that I can have an impact on, but not for the rest (...). There are a number of things I will just not do (…). To the people of an important advisory commission I said 'Don't bother coming back next month to ask me that, because I'm just not going to do it. Unless one day I would have an immense amount of spare time on my hands'."* A minister from another party echoes: *"I think I'm much more in control because I'm very consciously not going to occupy myself with a number of issues."* Another minister speaks about a large unresolved issue within his broader policy domain as the one specific thing he really wants to get done: *"I've said to myself: 'Well, for once I'm in the government, I will actually do something about it'. And that is the only thing I actually want. All the rest you just have to take along with it."*

The efficacy shortcut is an information reduction strategy that seems to be employed more by ministers than by party leaders, but some party leaders as well acknowledge that in setting out the party strategy they pick their battles pragmatically. A party leader said: *"A party chair cannot keep himself busy with current affairs all the time. He has to think and develop a strategy and (...) try to decide: 'Ok, we'll pick 'this' up, because it fits and 'that' we just ignore because it's no use at all'."* Or, another party leader: *"We as a party have to decide, and I have a large say in that, in which dossiers we will try to make a difference."*

A final heuristic mentioned by top decision-makers, especially by party leaders, is the standing decision not to react on new information for the time being. Information that is not worth reacting to should not be processed thoroughly and this eases the overload. Some declare they often deliberately avoid to undertake immediate action as the information comes in. Their strategy is to *wait-and-see*. As it is hard to judge immediately whether information is relevant, by simply waiting these politicians basically postpone the decision and first observe

what others are doing. They gain time by stalling. It is not the case that this information is avoided or omitted. Rather the information is noticed but stored until it can possibly be used better in a later, more planned effort to regain the initiative.

A party leader said: *"You should give the problems time to solve themselves. I almost never read my email during holidays (…). 80% of the emails are without subject after two weeks. The art is, of course, to realize the first day that they will be without subject. It is also a matter of laziness, the biggest human talent."* Another party leader emphasized that a lot of his work consists of convincing co-partisans not to react but to communicate later: *"The key thing was to convince everyone not to start improvising about the house bonus [a policy topic on fiscal housing policy]. How difficult that may have been at that time. We just say: 'We don't do it, we don't react. It is not our agenda. It is the agenda of the [mentions other party] (…).' This is what is the hardest for me, to say each time: 'Don't react too quickly'."*

Ministers appear to be less in need of the wait-and-see heuristic, but some explicitly referred to it: *"People [from the media] want a reaction from you and preferably immediately. I call this the Dr. Oetker approach [brand of ready-made pancake mix]: you stir and it's done, but it is just no good. That's an important problem for politicians, reacting too early. What's important related to information is that not communicating is as important as communicating (…). This is something you learn. When you start as a minister—we are also just humans—you have an urge: 'Now I have to act immediately!' But sometimes it is better to just wait."*

The use of the wait-and-see heuristic by top elites is conditioned by their having agenda power, namely the capacity to attend to the information later and to correct for the fact that they erroneously neglected it in the first place. The interviewed dictate the pace of their department and their party and can stall or accelerate as they see fit. A party leader declared rather cynically: *"The advantage of being the party leader is that you can say that*

you do not understand. You then behave difficult during a meeting and you postpone the matter to a next meeting. By that next meeting you make sure you've read it (…). You yourself can decide what is important for the party and what is not. You then come up with an explanation why the thing you did not understand earlier was not important to start with."

Self-confidence

Procedures and heuristics limit the amount of information that comes through. Acting as sieves, they filter out the information considered relevant and get rid of the useless bits as information is caught in a funnel (see Figure 1). But relying on procedures and heuristics is risky. Most politicians acknowledge they make mistakes, and drop the ball from time to time. Being selective comes at a price. A party leader: *"The danger [of being very selective] is of course the cynicism, the typical dead angle that every inhabitant of the Law Street [street in Brussels where the government buildings are] develops at a certain moment. After a while you do not see it anymore, you think something is insignificant but suddenly after 48 hours it becomes the rope they want to hang you with. You see it happen time and again. It is unavoidable, I'm afraid. Information does not impact you anymore. You have been there, you have seen that. You get into a pattern (…). That is a danger. You are less overwhelmed but the question is whether this is linearly positive. There are always things that you don't see coming. By the time you see it, it is too late."* The reduced information set gathered through severe selection reduces the overload but gives politicians blind corners that they need to be aware off.

What the selection mechanisms fail to do—guarantee that one always gets the *right* bits of information—is compensated by an attitude of *self-confidence*. Our interviews provide remarkable evidence of the fact that top elites are not intimidated by the daunting task of

selecting information; they are confident that they make the right choices most of the time. And, were they to get it temporarily wrong, they are confident that they would get on top of things again pretty easily. Their high level of confidence seems to act as a kind of keystone, it is their ultimate line of defense. Information has come through the procedures, they have evaluated it and taken a decision based on heuristics, and now they have to live with the consequences. Note, that a necessary dose of self-confidence could also be conceived as being the *start* and not the end of the selection process. Indeed, it requires self-confidence in the first place to dare to rely on procedures and heuristics that are obviously going to fail some of the time.

A minister expresses his confidence as follows: "*I believe that I am mostly better prepared than many others. More critical, yes I think that. That has got to do with my experience, I heard a lot, heard a lot of arguments*." Other interviewees confirmed the fact that they consider themselves to be relatively better-informed (which does not imply that they are, of course).

A party leader says: "*I can live with the fact that I do not read everything. I can live with the fact that not everything is a must. I can live with the fact that the important things are under control and that the rest is unimportant.*" The same person says a little later: "*I am generally rather good at that (…): not bother about things that I haven't read and to think: 'I'll come to know later whether it was important or not'.*" Another party leader expresses a similar feeling: *"I have the feeling that I'm in control, but also well aware that I'm missing things, but I can live with that."* Top politicians are aware of the fallibility of their information processing, but they can live with mistakes.

A party leader admiringly told us an old anecdote of a former prime minister: "*The party bureau was meeting at Monday morning and everybody was chatting about what they*

read in the weekend papers, what they saw on the Sunday morning political broadcasts and so on. Then the prime minister said 'Well, this weekend, I have just been thinking for myself'." This is the ultimate state of being self-confident regarding the information flow. To have the highest office in the country and at the same time looking calmly down at the daily information tsunami as if it was a storm in a glass of water.

In sum, we found many examples of elite politicians expressing their self-confidence regarding their information choices. Top elites believe they are on average well-informed and declare that they can live with mistakes.

DISCUSSION

We embarked upon this inductive study with few a priori expectations. We expected that elite politicians would support the notion that here is too much information to process and that they would declare to be very selective. Also, we expected elites to have developed a number of strategies to select information and to cope with the information overload. Three such strategies, and some sub-strategies, emerged quite clearly from the interviews. Establishing that these mechanisms exist and analytically distinguishing them is an important first step in building a theory on how executive political decision makers process information. But the sheer discovery of these strategies in itself—even when presented as a series of consecutive steps in a funnel—does not provide a true theory yet. A real theory of information selection and coping by political elites not only describes which types of information processing exist, but explains which types are more used for what reason by whom and with what effect. Our explorative evidence provides several hints regarding elements of such a theory.

To start with, there are clear differences among the top elites we interviewed. Some mechanisms were shared by both groups—ministers and party leaders—but other

mechanisms or sub-mechanisms were more specific to one of the two groups. The most clear example is that party leaders use ideology as a key heuristic but do not have the luxury to be able to specialize. Government ministers display the opposite pattern: they specialize but they are less ideologically driven. Thus, a theory of information selection should take into account the different positions elites occupy and the roles that come with those positions.

A second element is the relationship between the mechanisms. Our interviews do not allow us to say which mechanism is most successfully used by elites—we have no clue as to how effective these mechanisms are. All we can say is that many top politicians appear to use several strategies at the same time. It appears that they form complementary strategies protecting against paralysis due to overload. We used the metaphor of consecutive 'defense lines'. We suspect that politicians who have put more stringent, outsourced filtering procedures into place, are less in need of rigorous heuristics to personally assess the limited information that eventually *does* come through. We also expect that self-confidence relates positively in particular to the personal use of heuristics; if elites are themselves individually responsible for processing a lot of information they need to compensate for that bigger risk of making personal mistakes by being more confident that they get it right most of the time.

Third, a crucial variable in a potential theory appears to be the power of the actor at stake. Power leads to the capacity to compensate for any bits of information that one may have missed. Our interviews contained explicit hints of how some interviewees, rather cynically, state they are able to stop the party from moving forward as long as they do not have found the time to digest the information. Put in an extreme way: the powerful do not have to bother about selecting information. Within the bounds of pre-existing agreements, they can singlehandedly decide what is relevant and what is not. Another example of the compensating relevance of power directly emerged from the interviews and relates to the

wait-and-see heuristic. Our evidence suggests that this mechanism is most applied to information that might lead to media attention. A specific advantage the most powerful elites have above others is that they know they can get personal access to the media almost any time. This means that they can rectify an earlier non-reaction in the media and broadcast their own interpretation on things if they want. This is a resource the less powerful lack. They need to react immediately on incoming information if they want to get into the media.

Fourth, a theory of information selection by individual political actors should address the question where these mechanisms come from. Have top elites *learned* to be selective and to systematically apply certain techniques to reduce the information flow or were they rather *selected* into their top position because they already had the skills and the capacities to oversee large chunks of information efficiently? Take for example self-confidence. It may be a matter of personality but also of self-assurance growing as one climbs up the political hierarchy. In other words: what is the predictive power of the selection strategies? Do they further political careers or are they irrelevant in predicting politicians' success?

CONCLUSION

Information in politics is overabundant. In particular elite politicians are bombarded with information and have to make sense of a constant stream of incoming signals. The influential bounded rationality approach has taught us that politicians cannot be but extremely selective in order to stay on top of the information torrent. Aggregate-level work within the bounded rationality framework has amply dealt with policy outputs. It has compellingly showed that information selection is at the core of political decision-making. Yet, we lack a good answer as to *how individual* elite politicians go about selecting information. We know that they unavoidably do, but how exactly they perform this daunting selection task remains largely

unknown. Ironically—bounded rationality basically is an individual level theory—what we are missing is a micro-level foundation of the well-established aggregate-level findings that policy outputs are (always) spiked and irregular.

The study set out to start addressing those issues by interviewing fourteen elite politicians in Belgium about their information processing behavior. Close reading of the interviews led to a typology, and a funnel, of consecutive information selection mechanisms and attitudes. Politicians partially outsource their information selection to procedures and/or staffers, they personally apply rigorous rules of thumb about what to attend to and what not, and they compensate the pressure and constant risk of messing up with a large dose of self-confidence.

We find that the massive selectivity of political attention at the institutional level established time and again in many aggregate studies is at least partially based on the underlying selection practices of individual actors. The carrying capacity of institutions is limited because the cognitive architecture of the individual position-holders *within* those institutions does not allow them to systematically process all information. Our study probably is one of the first in its kind to directly examine the selectivity connection between individuals and institutions, especially at the executive level (Jones, 2001).

Our evidence relates to top decision-makers and not to second-tier politicians. The decisions elite politicians take on a daily basis, and the information that triggers those decision or that they use to buttress their decisions, are consequential and important. The decisions of the people we interviewed affect parties' losing or winning elections, the composition of governments, the implementation of new policies and the abortion of existing policies, and ultimately the day to day output of the political system. The question of political information

selection, especially by top elites, is obviously important in itself, as information is the driver of political attention and, ultimately, policy making (Jones & Baumgartner, 2005).

The study draws on interview evidence from one country only. Some findings may be country specific and hard to generalize. The role of party leaders, for example, may be exceptional and typical for the Belgian situation compared to countries such as the UK and Germany, where the prime minister acts as the party leader, or such as France and the U.S. where the party chair as a low profile. Another specific element is the role of inter-party agreements as a heuristic which may be particular to Belgium and to other countries with multi-party coalitions. Still, we do contend that the strategies we found—procedures, heuristics and self-confidence—are somehow generic in the sense that they are likely to be employed in other countries and by other elite politicians as well. The proportional use of the three mechanisms and their concrete form probably differ across countries as we found it to differ across elite types.

Given these limitations, we think our study not only has empirical but also theoretical relevance beyond the specific case of Belgium. The selection of information by top elites is far from a haphazardous process. It has identifiable structural elements that to some extend form a logical funnel. Producing essential building blocks for a theory on information selection, our study opens up the field for further inquiry. A next step would probably be to systematically test the mechanisms emerging from our interviews in a quantitative study and associating them with other elite characteristics. Collecting a large enough dataset to do quantitative analyses is going to be the key challenge.

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