


# Surveying individual political elites: a comparative three-country study

Stefaan Walgrave<sup>1</sup> · Jeroen K. Joly<sup>2</sup> 

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**Abstract** This study examines and discusses survey strategies among political elites at different government levels in three countries; Belgium, Canada and Israel. More specifically, we discuss recruitment strategies that produce high response levels among hard to reach target populations in different political and cultural environments. Next, we also examine which political elites are most likely to engage in survey research and which ones are hardest to target. We find that (former) top elites (e.g. members of the executive, different types of leadership) are less likely to participate while regional politicians tend to be more likely to participate in this type of research. Finally, we analyze item non-response and find that the right mix of closed (survey) and open (interview-like) questions decreases item non-response. Moreover, after having established trust and rapport, respondents—even high profile elites—will provide answers to relatively personal and intrusive questions. While item non-response remains low in all three countries throughout the survey, there is a noticeable difference between Belgium and Canada on one hand, and Israel on the other, with markedly higher item non-response in the latter.

**Keywords** Political elites · Survey · Interviews · Participation · Non-response

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✉ Jeroen K. Joly  
Jeroen.joly@ugent.be  
Stefaan Walgrave  
stefaan.walgrave@uantwerpen.be

<sup>1</sup> Universiteit Antwerpen, Stadscampus Sint, Jacobstraat 2 - 4 S.LN55.012, 2000 Antwerp, Belgium

<sup>2</sup> Ghent University, Universiteitstraat 8, 9000 Ghent, Belgium

## 1 Introduction

Scholars of politics basically study two faces of politics: the politics that are occurring within political institutions on the one hand, and the politics that are occurring within society on the other. Strangely enough, both these political phenomena are studied relying on different methodological, or even epistemological, approaches. The politics that are happening in society are mostly tackled using methods firmly rooted in the dominant individualistic or behavioral paradigm. Individual citizens' political behavior—their voting, participation, attitude formation, protest, and so forth—is studied using surveys, interviews, experiments etc. The unit of analysis is the individual, and the bulk of this research implicitly draws on the idea that the political behavior of an individual citizen is not entirely determined by the social context in which he or she operates (otherwise it would not make sense to study individuals, but one should rather directly study the social contexts).

The politics happening within political institutions, though, are dealt with relying on a very different approach. Instead of examining the individual elites occupying the key positions within the institutions—which would match the individualistic approach used to study politics in society—the bulk of the research on politics within institutions analyzes the aggregate output of these institutions by means of content analysis, process tracing, or other observational accounts. The unit of analysis of these studies is not the individual elite person but the institution (party, caucus, parliament, government...), and the implicit message is that individual elites do not matter, as their behavior is fully determined by the institutional context in which they operate. This suggests that it does not make sense to study individual elites, as they all behave similarly giving their institutional position. There are, of course, notable exceptions and examples of research successfully using individual-level elite data for studying politics within institutions (see, for example, the older classics by Miller and Stokes 1963; Kingdon 1973; Fenno 1978; or the recent overview of studies drawing on legislative surveys by Bailer 2014), but overall the two faces of politics are generally studied using divergent approaches and designs.

There probably is a pragmatic reason for this contradiction in which politics in society is considered by political scientists as being a matter of individuals, while politics within the institutions is not. We believe the key reason for the relative neglect of the study of individual elites is that it is hard to gain access to them and to empirically study their behavior, attitudes and beliefs. Looking at two decades of publications in *Legislative Studies Quarterly* (1992–2012), Bailer (2014) notes that surveys (20%) are now used increasingly and much more often than interviews (8%), perhaps due to the high costs of interviews. Elites are hard-pressed for time, they are in high demand, attend to a lot of meetings and other requests, they have no personal gain in being examined by scientists, and they are in general overloaded with information (Walgrave and Dejaeghere 2017). Additionally, being part of the elite and used to being treated as an (important) individual, more than other research subjects, politicians want to be taken seriously as individuals with their own story and their own personal take on things. This implies that they dislike being treated as 'just another number' and are disinclined to collaborate in research that is quantitative in nature and for which their contribution is simply aggregated and diluted into larger numbers. Hence, elite surveys particularly suffer from low response rates as a consequence of these two problems. Recent research, for example, employing surveys among Members of Parliament (MP) has shown that response rates are rather low and suggest that they have even been further declining recently (Hoffman-Lange 2008; Deschouwer and Depauw 2014; Bailer 2014).

The problem of low response rates among politicians is not a typical politician problem, though. Among business leaders too, there are exceedingly low response rates (Bednar and Westphal 2006; Boudreau et al. 2001; Cycyota and Harrison 2006). Response rates of citizen surveys may be in decline as well, both within organizations (Baruch and Holtom 2008; Cho et al. 2013) and among the general population (Couper and de Leeuw 2002; de Leeuw and de Heer 2002; Lepkowski 2008), but this is largely compensated by the availability of all kinds of online panels managed by polling companies that allow researchers to get easy, and increasingly cheap, access to large numbers of willing respondents. Basically, researchers can ‘buy’ survey respondents from polling firms. The situation is very different for scholars interested in the behavior, attitudes and beliefs of political elites. There is no central research infrastructure with ‘willing’ elites that researchers can buy into, so that students of elites have to start all over again each time and acquire access through their own effort. In sum, getting access to political elites for survey and other types of research is tricky, and this is probably one of the main reasons elites are seldom the subject of quantitative research. Despite a recent increase in parliamentary surveys (Bailer 2014), very little methodological effort has been dedicated to analyzing elite survey strategies and quality in a more systematic fashion.

This study reports on a large-scale effort to survey political elites—in our case MPs, party leaders and cabinet ministers—in three very different countries. Our general aim is to facilitate future individual elite work by focusing on three specific goals: (1) showing how response rates among elites can be enhanced employing a personalized contact procedure, (2) analyzing the non-response and demonstrating whether and why non-response leads to non-response bias, and (3) testing whether ‘risky’ and potentially threatening questions lead to higher item non-response among elites.

## 1.1 Elite surveys in Belgium, Canada and Israel

This comparative research project has surveyed political elites—MPs, party leaders, and cabinet ministers—twice, in 2013 and 2015. We examined elites’ information processing, how elites ‘read’ society and inform themselves about the prevailing societal problems, about the solutions to those problems, and about public opinion’s preferences regarding problems and solutions. In the two consecutive survey waves, a large group of politicians, active at both the national and the regional level, was surveyed. This study reports on the most recent and extensive survey in which 395 politicians participated.

Our 2015 survey format was somewhat ambivalent in that it basically was a face-to-face survey with mostly closed questions respondents completed themselves on a laptop that was brought along by the interviewer (CAPI; Computer Assisted Personal Interview). So, it was neither a paper-and-pencil nor an online survey, the two methods most used for elite surveying (Dahlberg 2007). After completing the questionnaire on the computer, the interviewer, who was present during the entire process but did not observe the actual responses the politician gave to the closed questions, asked a few open ended questions that were recorded on tape and transcribed afterwards. In rare cases did the politicians who were filling in the questionnaire on the computer ask for clarification about the questions, which were then provided by the interviewer.

Another advantage of the interviewer presence was the fact that we are now sure that it is the politician him- or herself answering our questions, and not a staffer. Also, we know from the literature that interview requests are mostly met with more approval than survey requests (Maestas et al. 2003), which was another reason we opted for a mixed approach with an interviewer present. Politicians were asked to give oral comments while filling in

the questionnaire and many of them did so; this sometimes led to a brief open question–answer exchange between interviewee and interviewer after which the interviewee resumed his/her task on the computer. All politicians who accepted to be interviewed agreed with this procedure with only three exceptions.

Interviews most often took place in the offices of the interviewee who was most of the time interviewed alone (with a few exceptions in which collaborators were present; but did not look at the screen the politician was working on). The whole procedure took 45 min on average; in some cases interviewees took much more time and the interview lasted almost 2 h.

The interviews were carried out by local research teams in the three countries. Most of the time, the interviews were carried out by one interviewer only. Some of the interviews were done by well-trained Ph.D.-students with prior interview experience, some by post-docs and a number by the professors leading the project in the three countries. Professors were mostly assigned to interviews with high-ranking politicians.

The interview data were completed with bio and electoral data at a later stage. Drawing on public information sources (e.g. parliamentary websites) for the entire MP population in all three countries (including non-participants), we collected data on their age, education, votes, constituency etc.

## 1.2 Response rate

The population of potential politicians to be interviewed consisted of the following groups:

- in all three countries: all Members of Parliament at the Federal/National level;
- in all three countries: all Federal/National government ministers and secretaries of state, and the prime minister;
- in all three countries: all party leaders of parties with elected representatives at the Federal/National level;
- In Belgium: Members of Parliament of the Flemish Regional Parliament and of the Parliament of the French Community;
- In Canada: Members of the Legislative Assembly of Ontario.

In Belgium, attempts were made to contact and acquire participation by the full population of all 413 national and regional politicians; 272 of them agreed to participate. In the Israeli case, all 120 Members of the Knesset were targeted; 47 of them accepted to be interviewed. Additionally, 18 interviews were realized in Israel with ex-MKs. Israeli national elections were held on the 17th of March 2015, right before the start of the interview period. We decided to start by interviewing some ex-MKs right after the elections; these people failed to be re-elected just a few weeks before. We assumed they would still be able to respond to our questions as if they were still seated in the Knesset. The reported response rate is calculated for the actual MPs only.

In Canada, the situation was different. Almost half of the national MPs had been contacted in the earlier round of interviews in 2013. Those who refused to collaborate at that time were not re-contacted in 2015. Those who had accepted at that time were contacted again for a second interview. Those who had not been contacted in 2013 were also contacted and asked to participate (for the first time). Federal ministers were not contacted in 2015, given our experience in the 2013 wave that Canadian ministers were unwilling to grant interviews for research. Hence, at the federal level, 171 representatives were contacted (130 ‘new’ and 41 previously interviewed representatives). For the Ontario provincial parliament, all 107 politicians from the provincial legislature were

contacted, including members of the executive. So, in total, the Canadian target population consisted of 278 politicians.

Overall, we sought collaboration from 811 politicians. Table 1 shows that we were successful in securing 395 interviews with seating elites (and 18 additional interviews with ex-MKs—not included in the above table nor in our analyses), which gives us an overall response rate of 48.7%. Compared to other comparative political elite surveys, this is not a bad result. For example, a recent, major comparative MP survey carried out by the PARTIREP consortium and local teams in fifteen European countries in 2009–2012 reported response rates varying between 13% (France) and 43% (Netherlands) with an average response rate of 25% (Deschouwer and Depauw 2014). The European Election Studies, another recent major effort among candidates of the European Parliament at the 2009 elections<sup>1</sup> reported similarly low response rates of 22% with highs of 42% in Sweden and lows of less than 10% in Bulgaria and Poland (Sudulich 2011). In their PARENEL comparative research project examining political representation, Costa et al. (2012) also report varying response rates for face-to-face interviews, from a low 14% in France, to 45% in Belgium and 62% in Portugal. Bailer (2014) provides a more comprehensive descriptive overview of (openly available) international parliamentary surveys from different regions worldwide.

Thus, all things considered, even in our worst performing country, Canada, a response rate of 27% is well-above the average, compared to similar comparative studies. Both in Israel with 38% and especially in Belgium with 66%, our response rates are high, with the Belgian result being truly exceptional. This positive outcome is even more striking as, in contrast to these previous studies, we not only aimed for ‘ordinary’ MPs but also for top politicians (cabinet ministers and party leaders) among which response rates are expected to be lower. If we look at the Belgian respondents, we see that 70% of the 356 regular politicians participated, while 35% of the 57 politicians categorized as top elites (current party leader, minister, state secretary or speaker of the house) participated—still a relatively high response rate. High response rates are generally perceived as important to avoid response bias, even though we know this is not a linear relationship (Groves 2006).

Non-cooperation leading to non-response could be the result of two different dynamics: the politicians could either not be reached (non-contact), or they were reached but refused to collaborate (refusal). Hence, we can categorize refusals into two types: soft and hard. A hard refusal consisted of a clear negative answer to our request to collaborate: for example, when a politician told us on the phone that they were not interested in collaborating. Soft refusals mean that politicians implicitly conveyed the message that they were not willing to collaborate by postponing arranged interview meetings, not returning calls, repeatedly asking to call back later when they would have more time etc. In Table 1 both types of refusals are grouped together. Interestingly, there are differences between the countries in how politicians arrive at or communicate their non-collaboration. In Belgium, direct refusals are relatively rare—only 26% of the politicians who were reached successfully refused to collaborate. In Israel (where all politicians could be reached) and in Canada, refusals were more common, at respectively 61% and 65%.

The main issue here seems to be the striking difference in response rates among our three countries. How can this be explained? Doubtlessly, part of the explanation is cultural in the sense that in some countries elites are simply less accessible for and willing to collaborate with scientists. Johnson et al. (2002, p. 55) argue that “survey respondents are not merely autonomous information processors, rather, they exist within complex, social

<sup>1</sup> <http://eeshomepage.net/ees-2009-study/elite-study/>.

**Table 1** Response rates in three countries

|                      | Belgium | Canada | Israel | Total |
|----------------------|---------|--------|--------|-------|
| Interviews conducted | 272     | 76     | 47     | 395   |
| Refusals             | 95      | 182    | 73     | 350   |
| Non-contacts         | 46      | 20     | 0      | 66    |
| Total N              | 413     | 278    | 120    | 811   |
| Response rate        | 65.8%   | 27.3%  | 39.1%  | 48.7% |

matrices that influence their thoughts, feelings, and behaviours”. Stoop (2012, pp. 124–125) identifies the social environment as one of the main reasons people (do not) cooperate. Goyder et al. (2006) perceive of this survey culture as part of general cultural factors.

Politicians may, for example, consider social scientists to be ideologically inspired, they may feel that they have too much on their plates to concede an hour of their time, they may consider talking to scientists a waste of time and not useful, they may have had bad experiences with previous research, and so on. The results of our study do not allow us to provide systematic indicators of these attitudes leading to non-participation. It is clear, though, that Belgian politicians were particularly more willing and prepared to collaborate. Additionally, Belgian politicians seem to be extremely accessible. For example, for more than half of the targeted Belgian politicians, their personal cell phone numbers could simply be found in a public online database. They could be called directly by researchers, and most picked up their phones in person and could be asked directly about their personal participation. Quite often, they also return their own calls.

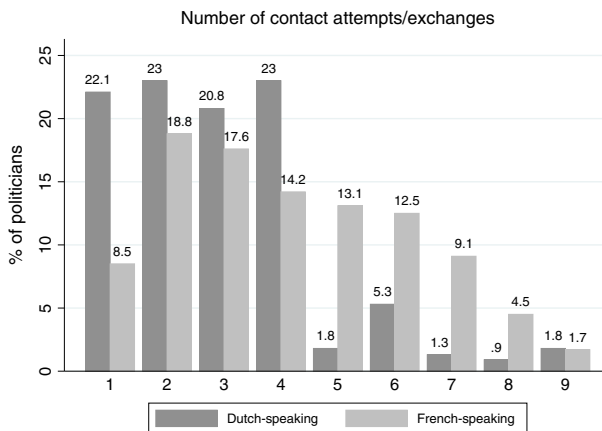
This was very different in Israel, and especially in Canada, where the personal and direct contact details of politicians are almost never publicly available. Researchers had to approach the politicians via their staffers or their office, were held at a distance and could rarely speak directly to politicians to convince them to participate. Note that also in the earlier cited study among MPs in Europe (Deschouwer and Depauw 2014), response rates in Belgium were clearly above average (35%, versus an average of 25%). Important cultural differences between countries have also been found in studies among the general population (Couper and de Leeuw 2002; de Leeuw and de Heer 2002). Looking at the reasons and motivations not to participate in the European Social Survey, Matsuo et al. (2010) confirm that there is great variation from one country to another. Given the relative ease of designing and sending out surveys to parliamentarians, we also believe representatives and other elites are flooded with such requests, which has decreased participation over time. Nowadays, it seems almost impossible in Western countries to arrive at response rates like Esaiasson and Heidar's (2000, p. 11) surveys in Scandinavian parliaments in the mid-1990s, with a participation of 97% in Sweden, 88% in Norway, 70% in Iceland, 63% in Denmark and 61% in Finland.

Another reason for our diverging response rates may be the slightly different contact procedure and availability of the elites in the three countries under study. The basic procedure was similar but there were some differences that may explain part of the differences in response. All country teams initiated contact through a formalized letter sent to politicians. The letter contained information on the goals of the project, a description of the interview's setup and the funding. This letter was personalized, as prior studies suggests this might increase response rates (Cook et al. 2000). To further improve response rates, the Canadian letter also highlighted that our study was approved or supported by their

caucus chair, as such sponsorship/endorsement has proven effective in studies among top executives (Bednar and Westphal 2006; Cycyota and Harrison 2006), as well as among general populations (Edwards et al. 2014). Following this initial contact, the way in which the actual interview was arranged depended on each country’s own strategy.

In *Belgium*, a few days after sending the letter, the principal investigator started making direct phone calls to all Dutch-speaking politicians (the French-speaking politicians were called by a French-speaking researcher, see below). As mentioned, personal phone numbers were largely available online. Politicians were called up to seven times and every few unanswered calls a new message was left on the voice mail. Calls were made over a period of about two and a half month. When politicians or their staffers promised to call back but didn’t, we called them back ourselves until we got a clear answer; refusal or acceptance with a set date. Often, politicians reported they had not seen the formal introduction letter, after which the letter was sent again via email. Some preferred to touch base with their party first. In these cases, we called them back a few weeks later. In some cases the politician or their staffer responded directly to our email with the introduction letter and arrangements were then made via email. If the politician/staffer stopped reacting, several reminder email messages were sent. In some cases up to nine email exchanges were needed to get a refusal or to set a date for the interview. There were no indications that the targeted Belgian elites got irritated after being repeatedly contacted to participate, a phenomenon known in the survey literature (Couper 2000); they simply neglected our attempts. Figure 1 below shows the frequency of contact attempts or exchanges by email or phone in Belgium.

Figure 1 shows that there are clear differences between the two parts of the country. Consider that in the Dutch-speaking part, the principal investigator was making the calls himself, while it was a younger researcher doing the bulk of the calls in the French-speaking part. This seems to have made a difference—in some cases in Flanders the politicians made clear that they knew or had heard of the professor they were on the phone with, confirming that perceived authority may increase response rates (Cialdini 2000). Still, it is possible that there are also cultural differences underlying the response difference between Flemings and Walloons. In any case, in Dutch-speaking Flanders a large majority of final answers was received after calling/emailing a maximum of four times. Only in rare



**Fig. 1** Frequency of contact (or exchange) before getting a clear and definitive answer (accept or refusal) in Belgium in % of politicians (N = 226 in Dutch-speaking part and 176 in French-speaking part of Belgium)

cases (10% altogether) were more than four attempts needed and in almost one quarter of the cases just a single contact attempt sufficed. This is different for the Francophone part of the country. Francophone politicians were much more difficult to get a hold of. In many cases up to eight contact attempts were necessary before receiving a final answer. The average number of contacts/exchanges needed in Flanders was 3.0, compared to 4.1 in Francophone Belgium. In their analysis of refusal conversion—attempts at convincing potential candidates to partake after initial refusal (Stoop 2012, p. 137)—in Round 4 of the European Social Survey, Matsuo et al. (2010) show that the success rate in ‘converting’ initial refusals from the general population varies greatly between countries—from below 10% (Turkey) to above 50% (Slovak Republic). The refusal conversion rate in Belgium was only slightly above 10%.

In Belgium, when politicians agreed to an interview and a time and place for the interview was being scheduled, the researchers were flexible and let the respondent decide on time and place. Belgium is a small country and researchers were able to travel the entire country to meet the interviewees in their place of preference; in far most cases, though, interviews were conducted in respondents’ Brussels office.

The number of Belgian politicians who were reached in person and who personally refused to collaborate directly and explicitly was small. Of the 413 cases for which we tried to get an interview, in only 19 (5%) did the politician themselves refuse in person by mail/letter (8) or phone (11). 53 of the refusals listed in Table 1 are refusals by collaborators or staffers and the large majority of those (34) were sent via more impersonal email message and less frequently in a phone call (19). We recorded the reasons for not participating when the politician/staffer gave one: in 26 of the 36 cases (72%) lack of time was the mentioned reason for non-participation. Note that when contacting politicians, the Belgian team always mentioned the survey would take about 1 h of their time, which is more than the elite survey literature would advise (Bailer 2014, p. 173). In fact, some politicians explicitly said that a full hour was too much.

In cases of acceptance during a phone conversation, directly after ending the phone call, an email was sent to confirm the meeting, time and place, including the contact details of the interviewer who was planned to interview them. This interviewer also sent a personal email to the same address to remind the politician of the upcoming meeting a few days before the planned interview. After each interview, politicians received a small token of appreciation (small box of chocolates with a ‘thank you’ card and the project logo attached). This seemed to be appreciated, and might help in increasing response rates in future research. The Belgian interviews were conducted over a period of 5 months. The primary reason for this was that the final interviews got postponed several times.

In the case of *Israel*, a slightly different procedure was followed after sending a similar formal letter. The letters were followed by a phone call either to the MPs staffer directly, or to his/her parliamentary office. Direct contact with Israeli MPs was rare, as their personal cell-phone numbers are not publicly available and contacting members of parliament directly is not customary in Israel. Hence, in most cases no personal contact could be established, while the literature on elite surveys tells us that having such a contact is very important to realize actual response (see for example: Dahlberg 2007).

The staffers were contacted not only by the Israeli principal investigator, but also by one of the two Ph.D. researchers working in the project. Immediate acceptance of the request for an interview was very rare. Staffers typically stated that they would look at the letter again, or asked for more information by email to present to the MP. Hard refusals to grant an interview were relatively uncommon (12). Those who refused explicitly typically stated that they could not meet due to their overly busy schedule. In general, contacting staffers



was the easy part of the process in Israel: as shown in Table 1, all MPs or their staffers were somehow reached. The great difficulty in Israel was setting a date for the interview meeting—a problem that was almost absent in Belgium but that is well-known in the literature on surveying politicians (Bailer 2014, p. 172). The date-setting process involved several additional contacts with staffers, and usually took several weeks—exact figures like those of the Belgian case are not available for Israel. In Israel, quite often, planned meetings were being cancelled and turned out to be impossible to re-schedule. This led to a large number of soft refusals (61) by MPs not willing to set a date or cancelling planned meetings. Again, this problem was much smaller in the Belgian case. The 47 successful Israeli interviews were held over a period of three and a half months.

In *Canada*, the procedure was very similar. The introductory letter was sent by email to federal and Ontario provincial legislators. A few days later, politicians were contacted by phone by those members of the Canadian team who would carry out the interview, which were conducted by senior (professor or post-doc), as well as junior researchers (Ph.D. students). Aside from rare spontaneous responses from MPs' offices to the initial contacting email, most contact was established through these phone calls. Contact was almost always established through staffers and almost never directly with MPs. Like in the Israeli case, a request for more information was the most common response as, most of the time, staffers had not read our information email. In those cases the invitation letter with information was resent and they were called back a few days later. Whether after request for more information, or after initial contact by phone, refusal was ultimately the most common response.

Most refusals were soft refusals where we gained initial and sustained contact. In many of those cases, and just like in Israel—but unlike in Belgium—MPs did not explicitly refuse to participate: we recorded few hard refusals (30 of 171 in the federal parliament, and 5 of 107 in the Ontarian parliament), but we were ultimately unable to obtain a meeting. Often, scheduling assistants told the team they would get in touch later, but never did. Similarly, we would be asked to call back later several times. In the end, we were unable to reconnect or book a meeting. A very common response was the lack of time of MPs. Insistence after softer refusals was fruitless, despite arguments that we were flexible time-wise and that the interviews could take place at a time and place of the politicians' choosing. Immediate acceptance was exceptional in Canada, in contrast to Belgium, where clear answers, often acceptance, were often obtained after just one contact attempt. Probably, the size of the country, the distance from certain MPs constituency, and their constant struggle to divide their time between the capital and their constituency may have depressed response rates as well. Acceptance was immediately met with a request for an appointment.

Despite having politicians' contact information (email and phone), we were unable to reach nine federal Canadian politicians, even over an extensive period of time. Our research team attempted to contact each politician repetitively to maximize the response rates, emphasizing our flexibility regarding the time and location of the meetings. In Ontario, we were unable to reach eleven politicians. Although fieldwork was initially planned to last 3 months, it had to be extended to increase the response rate, as it took a lot of time to schedule interviews with MPs and many interviews were rescheduled multiple times.

Comparing the three countries, we observe a number of striking differences that may partially help explain the largely diverging response rates we obtained;

*First*, Belgian politicians can, in many cases, be contacted directly on their personal cell phones, while this is not at all the case in Israel and Canada. One has to go through the

office or staffers of an MP, which strongly decreases the likelihood of getting an interview. The Belgian case shows that politicians, once personal contact is achieved, find it hard to explicitly refuse to collaborate. They ask their staffers to do the refusing.

*Second*, in many cases refusals are not explicit but soft. Meeting dates are unable to materialize, calls are not returned, planned meetings are cancelled etc. This seemed to have been the case more in Israel and Canada than in Belgium. Maybe the more aggressive approach of the Belgian team with numerous emails and calls produced relatively more hard refusals in the end.

*Third*, it may be a good strategy to let the principal investigators, or researcher with name recognition and legitimate authority, do the contacting. It is hard to say whether this really made a difference, but it seems to be the case that a professor's request for collaboration weighs a little heavier than that of a Ph.D. student's—see for example the difference in response between the Dutch- and French-speaking part of Belgium.

*Fourth*, getting satisfying response rates among political elites is hard work. It requires numerous and tenacious attempts and requires a large effort to continue contacting politicians to obtain a definitive answer. Yet, even when the potential respondents are contacted numerous times—in Belgium up to nine follow-up emails were sent and up to seven phone call attempts were made—some politicians simply seem to be unreachable. But tenacity seems to help somewhat.

*Fifth*, the geographical size of the country may play a role as well. In the smaller countries of Belgium and Israel elites spent most of their time close to the capital while in a country like Canada politicians frequently travel back to potentially extremely remote constituencies, which makes their time even more scarce and their schedule even busier.

### 1.3 Response bias

The personalized and face-to-face procedure with follow-up phone calls overall produced pretty decent response rates. Yet, a high response rate does not mean that there cannot be response bias. Put simply, response bias occurs when those who participated differ systematically from those who did not (Groves 2006; Stoop et al. 2010, pp. 29–32). Of course both groups are different—something must have made that some decided to participate while others did not—the question is how systematic these differences are. To test for response bias we ran a number of logistic regression models with participation in our survey as the dependent variable. As independent variables we included measures of personal, party and political system features. Results can be found in Table 2.

In contrast to earlier work (Deschouwer and Depauw 2014) the evidence in Model 1 seems to suggest that women are not more willing to participate than men, rather the opposite is the case in our survey. Age also does not seem to matter.<sup>2</sup> As Stoop (2012, p. 126) emphasizes, when examining who tends to cooperate more easily, age can be the correlate of many, sometimes even contrasting, factors, which might explain the lack of age effects.

Elite status is the strongest negative predictor in the model. Party leaders, ministers, state secretaries, speakers, or caucus leaders, or those who held such positions before, were less inclined to answer our call positively (see also Bailer 2014). Top elite respondents have a predicted probability of 24% of participating, non-top elites of 45%. The reason was

<sup>2</sup> We do not test for education in the model, as we do not dispose of the full information about the education level of the 811 targeted politicians. Preliminary tests including education suggested that the level of education did not matter for response.

**Table 2** Logit regression model explaining participation in three countries

|  | Model 1<br>All three countries | Model 2<br>Without Israel |
|--|--------------------------------|---------------------------|
| Gender (female)                        | – 0.327*                       | – 0.482**                 |
| Age                                    | 0.003                          | 0.004                     |
| (Former) Elite status (yes)            | – 0.984***                     | – 1.034***                |
| Popularity (% votes in party/district) | –                              | – 0.017**                 |
| Party size (% votes)                   | – 0.047***                     | – 0.061***                |
| Government–opposition (government)     | – 0.107                        | 0.041                     |
| Party ideology (right)                 | – 0.277                        | – 0.173                   |
| National–regional assembly (regional)  | 0.675***                       | 0.705***                  |
| Canada (ref cat = Belgium)             | – 1.506***                     | – 0.728*                  |
| Israel (ref cat = Belgium)             | – 0.895***                     | –                         |
| Constant                               | 1.689***                       | 2.055***                  |
| N                                      | 940                            | 813                       |
| Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>                  | 0.21                           | 0.25                      |

\*\*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*  $p < 0.1$

that, even in Belgium, top elites could never be reached directly but only via their staffers or office. Hence, we did not have the opportunity to convince them personally to participate in the study. Additionally, it is likely that these executive leaders had even less time, as scheduled top elite interviews were more postponed than interviews with other politicians. Moreover, top politicians might be more sensitive to the survey format, in which their answer would just be added to an aggregation of mostly ‘ordinary’ politicians, hurting their feelings of importance.

As for the party features, party size—measured as the proportion of votes the party received at the last election—is a first significant predictor of participation. Representatives of larger parties were significantly less likely to participate in our study; this matches previous findings (Wessels 2003). Government party members, however, were generally *not* less willing to participate, contrary to the findings of Deschouwer and Depauw (2014). And the same applied to the ideological position of the parties. Using the most recent *Comparative Manifesto Group* data for each country, all parties were given a rank ordered score between 0 (left) and 1 (right).<sup>3</sup> This variable turned out not to be significant.

At the systemic level, regional politicians—also targeted in Belgium and Canada—were more willing to collaborate than their national colleagues, a finding that confirms earlier work (Deschouwer and Depauw 2014). We can only speculate that they might have a little more time on their hands since their constituency is probably smaller and (in Canada) closer to home, which may make them more accessible in general. Finally, the data show that, even when controlling for all other variables, there still is a strong country effect, with especially Canadian but also Israeli elites less willing to collaborate than their Belgian counterparts.

Model 2 in Table 2 adds one extra variable only available in Belgium and Canada: electoral popularity. For Canada, this is calculated as the percentage of votes each representative received in their own district. For Belgium, it is the proportion of votes each

<sup>3</sup> Except for Israel where these data are not available. Instead, we asked four members of our Israeli team to rank order parties from left to right. Their independent assessments completely matched each other.

politician received as a proportion of the votes their party received within a given district to account for the success of their party. The variable is a significant and negative predictor of participation in the study. The more popular a politician is, the smaller the chance that he or she granted us an interview. Together with the earlier finding that top elite status has a negative effect, this suggests that our approach was systematically less successful in getting “big shots” to participate. This is, of course, not unexpected. The same has previously been found in other studies (for example: Deschouwer and Depauw 2014). The higher up the power ladder, the less preparedness to share one’s experiences with researchers.

Since Belgium is dominant in the dataset, we ran similar logit regression models on the three countries separately. Results are reported in Table 3 below. We must be careful when interpreting the results, as the number of observations can be rather small (e.g. Israel).

Interestingly, the models in Table 3 suggest that there are some differences in response biases among the three countries. Gender only matters in Belgium, not in both other countries. Elite status does not matter in Israel, as it does in Belgium and Canada. Popularity only matters in Belgium, not in Canada. The negative effect of party size only plays a role in Belgium. Most striking is the fact that the opposition-government position of the respondent’s party plays out differently in Belgium and Canada; while it has no effect at all in Israel—remember that this variable was not significant in the overall models presented in Table 2 above. Belgian members of government parties are more willing to respond than their opposition competitors; in Canada we observe the exact opposite. Finally, being member of a regional assembly is the only variable that matters similarly in the two countries for which we have data; in, Belgium and Canada, this has a positive effect on participation.

In sum, our response is skewed against powerful, national-level, and front-bench executive politicians and contains disproportionately more regional-level backbenchers without elite status and with limited electoral popularity. Still, the response biases found are often not very systematic and differ across countries. The local political situation, thus, seems to be an important factor.

**Table 3** Logit regression model explaining participation in three countries separately

|  | Belgium    | Canada     | Israel  |
|--|------------|------------|---------|
| Gender (female)                        | − 0.640*** | − 0.218    | 0.456   |
| Age                                    | 0.004      | 0.008      | − 0.000 |
| (Former) Elite status (yes)            | − 0.646**  | − 1.387*** | 0.252   |
| Popularity (% votes in party/district) | − 0.031*** | 0.001      | −       |
| Party size (% votes)                   | − 0.085*** | 0.014      | − 0.017 |
| Government–opposition (government)     | 0.474*     | − 1.575*** | 0.146   |
| Party ideology (right)                 | 0.815      | − 0.093    | − 1.936 |
| National–regional assembly (regional)  | 0.654**    | 1.204***   | −       |
| Constant                               | 1.808**    | − 1.808    | 0.321   |
| N                                      | 399        | 414        | 120     |
| Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>                  | 0.07       | 0.15       | 0.06    |

\*\*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*  $p < 0.1$

## 1.4 Item non-response

Acquiring access is not the only problem that may be particularly tricky for elite survey designs compared to surveys targeting other groups. Indeed, an additional difficulty may be that elites are—less than other types of respondents—prepared to answer specific questions. In other words, elites may display a lot of specific item non-response. When dealing with sensitive and/or personal issues, computer or web-based surveys are often perceived as superior to paper-based surveys, as respondents might more easily reveal personal information online or on a computer than on paper (Denscombe 2009; Kays et al. 2012; Weisband and Kiesler 1996) and, therefore, generate less socially desirable answers (Booth-Kewley et al. 2007). A recent meta-analysis comparing computer and paper surveys, however, suggests similar social desirability among different survey modes (Dodou and de Winter 2014). Questions relating to income (Loosveldt et al. 2002; Riphahn and Serfling 2005) and politics (Loosveldt et al. 2002; Scholz and Zuell 2012) are generally particularly sensitive.

Analyses of (item) non-response in panel surveys over consecutive waves show that higher item non-response during the initial wave is a good predictor of non-participation in subsequent waves (Frick and Grabka 2007; Loosveldt et al. 2002). This suggests that similar dynamics drive general refusals to participate and more specific item non-response.

For politicians, one important reason not to answer specific questions could be that, being public figures, their answers becoming public may feel particularly threatening to their position or career. Although we assured our respondents explicitly and repeatedly that their answers were confidential and anonymous, it might still have been the case that they refused to provide answers to the ‘tricky’ questions. Additionally, being elites, and aware of their status, a second problem might be that they do not want to be experimented with and play scenario games, for example out of fear of not getting the instructions right and making a bad impression on the interviewer. Third, being more pressed for time than normal citizens, elites might be less willing to answer open questions, as this typically takes more time than just ticking answers in a closed question format (Crawford et al. 2001).

Our questionnaire contained quite a few experimental modules in which we explained our respondents that the stories/vignettes we confronted them with were fictional and that we asked them to react to fictitious scenarios. Additionally, there was a good deal of open questions in our interview protocol that required politicians to type their answer in an open text field. Finally, we also had an extensive module in which politicians were asked to self-assess their personality, which can be considered as being a quite personal, intrusive, and potentially threatening exercise. This last module was, therefore, introduced in a very careful way:

*“Next, we want to understand whether personal characteristics affect the ways MPs process information or represent citizens. The following questions are designed to assess certain personality traits and have been used extensively in a wide variety of international studies, including a number with MPs and CEOs. We would like to remind you that all answers are anonymous and will never be used in a way that can identify you. Although some of the traits may seem contradictory, we would like you to rate the extent to which a pair of traits applies to you, even if one characteristic applies more strongly than the other. I see myself as...”*

**Table 4** Item non-response per question module (response in % of all respondents in a country)

| Question module   | Belgium<br>(N = 269) | Canada<br>(N = 76) | Israel<br>(N = 46) |
|---|----------------------|--------------------|--------------------|
| Amount of daily information                             | 100.0                | 100.0              | 100.0              |
| Issue salience (average of 12 random item responses)    | 97.4                 | 99.9               | 96.0               |
| Negativity bias (average of 5 random item responses)    | 98.4                 | 98.9               | 88.3               |
| Media stories recall—story 1 (first)                    | 97.4                 | 98.7               | 91.3               |
| Media stories recall—story 7 (last)                     | 97.0                 | 100.0              | 87.0               |
| <i>Most important action (open)</i>                     | <i>90.7</i>          | <i>97.4</i>        | <i>19.6</i>        |
| Initial source for action                               | 100.0                | 100.0              | 89.1               |
| Speech quality: give argument                           | 100.0                | 100.0              | 89.1               |
| Good MP quality   | 100.0                | 100.0              | 89.1               |
| Good MP behavior  | 100.0                | 100.0              | 89.1               |
| <i>Best MP in assembly (open)</i>                       | <i>90.0</i>          | <i>90.8</i>        | <i>71.7</i>        |
| <i>Most important policy theme (open)</i>               | <i>98.5</i>          | <i>97.4</i>        | <i>19.6</i>        |
| Representational role trustee—delegate                  | 95.9                 | 98.7               | 89.1               |
| <i>Sunk cost (experiment)</i>                           | <i>94.1</i>          | <i>98.7</i>        | <i>78.3</i>        |
| <i>Time discounting (experiment) item 1</i>             | <i>84.4</i>          | <i>97.4</i>        | <i>69.6</i>        |
| <i>Time discounting (experiment) item 14</i>            | <i>79.9</i>          | <i>97.4</i>        | <i>67.4</i>        |
| <i>Status quo bias (experiment)</i>                     | <i>93.3</i>          | <i>97.4</i>        | <i>78.3</i>        |
| <i>Personality—critical and quarrelsome (personal)</i>  | <i>97.4</i>          | <i>96.1</i>        | <i>71.7</i>        |
| <i>Personality—anxious and easily upset (personal)</i>  | <i>96.7</i>          | <i>96.1</i>        | <i>69.6</i>        |
| <i>Personality—disorganized and careless (personal)</i> | <i>96.3</i>          | <i>96.1</i>        | <i>69.6</i>        |

Table 4 below displays the item non-response for each of the three countries separately for almost all question modules in the survey protocol in the order they were presented. The sensitive or potentially threatening questions are in italics.

Table 4 shows that the response behavior of Belgian and Canadian elites is much different from that of Israeli politicians. Item non-response is *much* higher in Israel. In Belgium and Canada, comparing the simple and factual questions with the others (open, experiments and personal) shows, by and large, that the item non-response for open questions, for experimental questions and for personal questions is not very different. In general, item non-response is low—there are *no* modules with a response rate below 90%—and it does not seem to have been the case that item response decreased as the interview proceeded. The fact that the interviewer was present the whole time may have had a beneficial effect on the respondent fatigue that is commonly observed in (online) surveys. If anything, the data for Belgium and Canada show that open questions have a slightly response-depressing effect, as they seem to prevent an overall decrease in the response rate throughout the survey. Yet, experimental modules and the personal questions at the very end regarding the respondent's personality, lead to very high completion rates. This seems to suggest that in Belgium and Canada politicians' main concern is time, they do not like to fill in questions that take more time, but they seem to care much less about

whether questions are fictional or whether they have to provide intimate information about who they consider themselves to be.

The story is quite different in Israel, however. Open questions are more scarcely answered, see for example the barely 20% response rate for two open questions 6 and 12 in Table 4. The experimental modules are answered a good deal better in Israel, see the modules 14–17, and the same applies to the personal questions (e.g. modules 18–20) where item response hoovers around 70%. Even the non-sensitive and easy questions are answered worse in Israel than in the two other countries. In fact, on *all* modules the Israeli item non-response is the highest of the three countries.

## 2 Conclusion

Political elites are relatively seldom surveyed. While citizen surveys are the primary instrument of political scientists studying politics in society, students of politics in the institutions have much less relied on survey designs. We argue that this is probably partly due to the fact that politicians are a difficult type of respondent. They are hard to get access to, they are more pressed for time than citizens and are probably less inclined to let their ‘unique’ experiences straight jacketed into closed survey questions. Additionally, over time, elite survey response rates have been reported to be in decline (Hoffman-Lange 2008; Deschouwer and Depauw 2014; Bailer 2014). This study’s aims were to share our elite survey experience and draw lessons from this large project in three countries.

Low survey response rates are believed to have become a common problem, not just among politicians, but also among business leaders (Bednar and Westphal 2006; Boudreau et al. 2001; Cycyota and Harrison 2006) and the general population (Couper and de Leeuw 2002; de Leeuw and de Heer 2002; Lepkowski 2008). In our three-country study, we applied a number of strategies to increase the response rates.

We found that inviting politicians to participate in a survey combined with a personal interview and employing a personalized contact procedure featuring a tenacious approach with frequent contact attempts can produce an overall satisfying response rate in three very different countries. Much like Cialdini’s study (2000), our results suggest that name recognition and perceived authority of the researchers also affect response rates. However, response rates varied substantially across countries, still. We argue that these are mainly due to cultural differences—for example, the public availability of personal phone addresses of political elites in Belgium—and to differences in contact procedures—for example the varying involvement of the principal investigators in the different countries. These differences were not only found between countries, but also within, as we found differences in the contact and response patterns between Flemish and Francophone Belgian representatives.

Second, the response bias we detected in our sample of respondents was existent but not very large. The most important conclusion is that high-ranking, successful politicians from large parties were less willing to grant an interview compared to backbenchers from smaller parties. Yet, response biases systematically differed across the three countries and the only biasing factor that applied beyond a single case was the fact that regional politicians were more prone to collaborate with our research than national politicians. Moreover, low response rates do not automatically generate response bias (Groves 2006) and mainly matter when differences between participants and non-participants are related to the research topic—when these differences would affect the research outcome. In our

study, for example, lower response rates outside Belgium may affect the results of psychological assessments, whereby participants might, for example, display higher levels of openness and agreeableness.

Third, item non-response does not seem to be a pernicious problem in Belgium and Canada. Once politicians from these countries had granted us an interview, they were willing to answer time-consuming open question, to be experimented upon, and to answer sensitive, personal, questions. As soon as the researcher has got foot in the door, politicians, at least in our interview mode with an interviewer present, seem to behave not very differently from ordinary citizens. In Israel, the story is very different. Politicians seem to be much more sensitive to potentially threatening or difficult questions. Question type had a fairly strong effect on item non-response in that country. While this might be due to time or other constraints, this might also suggest that national cultural codes about what one can ask elites in interviews vary substantially.

Finally, surveying political elites in an interview style, with a researcher present, is a great investment of financial and human resources, none of which abound in academia. Hence, it is important, when the investment is made, to apply the appropriate techniques that will provide researchers with the necessary (number) or crucial (types of) respondents. This study examined a number of these strategies and their effects on participation and response bias. Future research should address the conditions and effects of survey (non-) response in a more systematic fashion, especially among political elites or in political surveys, so that future researchers can design and plan their studies accordingly.

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