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Funding

While conducting this research, Julie Sevenans was a postdoctoral researcher of the FWO (Fonds voor Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek Vlaanderen) in research group M²P (Media, Movements & Politics) at the University of Antwerp (Belgium). Grantee number: 12X6218N.

The data were collected in the framework of the POLPOP project. POLPOP is a transnational project examining the perceptual accuracy of politicians in four countries. It was initiated by Stefaan Walgrave from the University of Antwerp (Flanders, Belgium). Flemish funding came from the national science foundation (FWO) with grant number G012517N. We want to thank our colleagues who were part of the Flemish POLPOP data collection: Stefaan Walgrave, Julie Sevenans, Pauline Ketelaars, Karolin Soontjens and Arno Jansen.

Conflicts of interests
There are no conflicts of interests.

Abstract

An important challenge facing political decision-making today is inequality in representation. Political scientists have shown that the preferences of certain groups—especially those who have higher incomes or are better educated—systematically preponderate in political decision-making. Trying to elucidate the mechanisms behind these findings, this research note explores one specific possible driver of representational inequality: that politicians downplay the opinions of disadvantaged groups, and here specifically, of the lower-educated. By means of a survey experiment with politicians, we test the idea that politicians have a hard-wired inclination to assume that the opinions of citizens who received lower (i.e. vocational) education are less thoughtful than the opinions of citizens who followed a higher (i.e. general) education. The findings are somewhat ambiguous but the expectation is at least partly corroborated by the evidence. The findings illustrate the psychological foundations that may ultimately make politicians disregard the preferences of the lower-educated.

Word count

4,798 words

Introduction

Politicians gather information about public opinion constantly. They talk to their constituents and to interest organizations, read the newspaper, follow social media and consult opinion polls about policy issues in an attempt to gauge what the people want. Public opinion information is one important consideration in their decision-making (Miller and Stokes 1963). But do politicians deem all citizens' opinions equally valuable? Or are certain opinions deemed superior while others are downplayed in politicians' mind? This is the central question in this research note. More specifically, we rely on a survey-experiment with elected political representatives in Belgium to test *whether the preferences of lower-educated citizens are downplayed by politicians compared to the preferences of the higher-educated*.

The question is relevant as it taps into the problem of unequal representation. Evidence shows that the preferences of certain groups, especially those who have higher incomes (Bartels 2008; Gilens 2012) and are higher-educated (Elsässer, Hense, and Schäfer 2020; Schakel and van der Pas 2020), systematically dominate political decision-making at the expense of the preferences of the poor or the lower-educated. The pattern appears to be general not just affecting the United States but many European countries as well (Peters and Ensink 2015). Concerned about these findings, political scientists try to pinpoint the factors that cause these inequalities. While a growing stream of research looks into various explanations, the idea that politicians simply doubt the inherent quality of disadvantaged groups' opinions has received little empirical attention (but see Butler 2014). We put the idea center stage here, believing that it could be one reason why the preferences of certain citizens do not get an equal weight in

decision-making. To be clear, we do not study actual representational inequality. We focus on how politicians process information about different groups' opinions and, based on the results, theorize about how this may cause unequal policy responsiveness.

Our survey-experiment leverages a pending policy proposal to lower the voting age at local elections from 18 to 16 years old. We exposed politicians to polling information saying that a majority of citizens does not support the proposal, and we manipulated the group of citizens amongst whom the poll was allegedly conducted: lower-educated pupils, higher-educated pupils, the parents of lower-educated pupils, or the parents of higher-educated pupils. The analysis confirms our expectation that politicians downplay the preferences of the lower-educated pupils, considering them less thoughtful and intense than the opinions of the higher-educated. There is some ambiguity in our findings in the sense that we do not obtain similar results for the parents—probably because their educational level was not explicitly mentioned in the experimental treatment. We hope this issue can be tackled in future research.

Explanations of unequal representation

How come policies reflect the preferences of disadvantaged groups poorly? The literature focusing on unequal representation has predominantly focused on two types of explanations (for good overviews, see: Rosset 2016; Peters 2018). First, a lot of scholars have pointed out that unequal representation is the consequence of politicians' *poor understanding* of disadvantaged groups' preferences. Disadvantaged people participate less in politics in general—they vote less,

participate less in protest actions, and contact politicians less frequently than the advantaged do (Dalton 2017; Schlozman, Verba, and Brady 2013). As a consequence, their voice remains unheard and politicians erroneously generalize the opinions of the active and advantaged citizens to the whole population (Broockman and Skovron 2018). The poor understanding of certain groups' preferences would be reinforced by politicians having less affinity themselves with these groups, due to bad descriptive representation. When politicians rely on introspection and on their close network to estimate what citizens want, it is a disadvantage that they disproportionally often come from the better-off groups (Mansbridge 1999). A second explanation is not related to biased preference perceptions but to *strategy*. Politicians are strategic actors who foremost care about reelection and policy goals. Even if politicians *know* about the preferences of the disadvantaged, the lower turnout and campaign donations of these groups reduce the electoral and financial incentives for politicians to *act upon* these preferences (Griffin and Newman 2005). This is especially true if politicians do not share these people's opinions in the first place, and prefer to act upon their own opinions. Both abovementioned mechanisms have been studied empirically as drivers of educational inequalities (e.g. Elsässer, Hense, and Schäfer 2020; Schakel 2019).

In this study we draw attention to a third possible mechanism that has received much less empirical attention. The idea is that—even if a clear signal of preferences reached the elected representatives and even if they strategically cared about these preferences—politicians might still neglect the opinions of the disadvantaged groups because they doubt the thoughtfulness of these opinions. Their judgment can be based on various specific considerations: that certain citizens do not fully grasp the complexity of issues and hence that their preferences do not align

with their actual interests, that their opinions are not thought through and prone to change if people thought just a little longer about the issue, that certain groups fail to keep the general good in mind, and so on (see also: Butler and Dynes 2016). In short, the *perceived quality* of the received opinion could be considered inferior compared to the quality of the opinion of the advantaged, leading to an unequal treatment of that opinion.

As far as we know, Butler (2014) was the first to directly address this mechanism. In his book titled 'Representing the Advantaged', he demonstrates how state and local politicians react differently to a letter from a constituent who is a janitor (low-SES) than to a letter from an attorney (high-SES). They discount the janitor's opinion, assuming that he does not have a good understanding of the issue at stake. Inspired by this work, we collect further evidence of politicians' differential assessment of the quality of public opinion signals. Studying a very different type of public information signal than Butler (2014) did (an opinion poll instead of a letter from a single constituent) about another issue (voting age) thereby manipulating a different citizen characteristic (educational level) in a different context (politicians in Belgium, at the national/regional level), we test whether this mechanism deserves a more prominent place on the radar of unequal representation scholars.

How politicians downplay opinions

Our main expectation is that politicians tend to perceive the quality of the opinions of disadvantaged groups to be inferior. We specifically focus on educational level here, which is

increasingly being studied as a factor leading to inequality (Aaldering 2017; Elsässer, Hense, and Schäfer 2020; Hakhverdian 2015; Schakel and van der Pas 2020). Note, however, that income and education are correlated and hence that similar mechanisms probably co-produce both types of inequality (Rosset 2016).

Of course, the lower-educated (and hence the poor) *are* on average less knowledgeable about politics—especially regarding complex or technical issues—and judging their opinions as unthoughtful may in certain cases be justified or at least rational (Rosset 2016). But politicians probably downplay these citizens' opinions too strongly: Gilens (2012), for instance, has shown that the knowledge gap cannot fully account for extant inequalities. In particular, on concrete and easily comprehensible issues (like the one we investigate here) there should be no difference. We test whether politicians have a *general* tendency to assume that the lower-educated hold lower quality opinions, also regarding issues on which we expect everyone to have valid opinions. Hence, *H1: Compared to the opinion of the higher-educated, politicians perceive the opinion of the lower-educated to be of inferior quality.*

It is likely that politicians do not only downplay the opinions of lower-educated groups, but also of citizens whom they do not agree with. Numerous studies on motivated reasoning show that people tend to disregard information going against their own opinion, as to reduce the cognitive dissonance that arises from such information (Kunda 1990), and politicians are no exception (Baekgaard et al. 2019). The underlying mechanism is the same: the adversarial opinion is downplayed and set aside as 'unthoughtful'. Butler and Dynes (2016) showed how politicians indeed discount the opinions of citizens they disagree with. As our experiment allows to replicate

these findings, we formulate *H2: Compared to the opinion they personally agree with, politicians perceive the opinion they disagree with to be of inferior quality.*

Data and methods

COUNTRY — The hypotheses are tested by means of a survey experiment on Dutch-speaking politicians in Belgium. Belgium is an interesting case when it comes to unequal representation because politicians are, more than elsewhere, strategically encouraged to take disadvantaged groups' preferences into account (for a similar argument see Lesschaeve 2017). In contrast to the United States, where most of the existing research on the topic has been conducted, it has a system of compulsory voting, making disadvantaged groups participate at elections at higher rates than elsewhere. And, strict campaign finance laws prevent politicians from being dependent on private donors, which often come from richer and higher-educated groups. In other words, politicians are incentivized to take all groups seriously and Belgium is hence a conservative case to test our hypotheses: if certain groups' opinions are downplayed in Belgium, they are likely even more so elsewhere.

LOWERING THE VOTING AGE — The experiment deals with one specific issue: lowering the voting age at local elections from 18 to 16 years old. At the time of the study, there is an ongoing debate about the issue in Belgium. The Flemish Youth Council[1] supports the idea and so do four out of six of the main political parties in Flanders (Belgium's Dutch-speaking region): the socialists,

[1] See https://vlaamsejeugdraad.be/16-vragen-over-stemrecht-vanaf-16

liberals, Christian-democrats, and greens. The largest party, namely the Flemish-nationalist party, is against, however; and the populist-right party has no official stance but seems to be opposed to the idea as well. Also Flemish public opinion is not in favor at all. A survey conducted by the authors in 2018 (N=1,579) shows that 61% of the Flemish citizens rather or totally disagree with the statement that "*Youngsters should be allowed to vote from 16 years onwards*", while 29% rather or totally agree. Only 10% of the citizens have no opinion or are neutral. The issue is a typical, moderately salient policy issue: politicians know it is important to some citizens, but it does not—like issues such as the economy or immigration—dominate the public debate. Differences across electorates are small and majorities of all parties' voters disagree with lowering the voting age.

Importantly, people's educational level is *not* a significant predictor of support for the proposal[2]. This essentially means that there is no potential for actual unequal representation of the lower-educated regarding this policy issue. If politicians decided to lower the voting age to 16, *both* the opinions of the lower- and higher-educated would be disregarded. While it may seem paradoxical to study the mechanisms of unequal representation with regards to an issue where the two groups do not differ in their opinion, it actually is the perfect case to keep the information regarding the opinion of lower- and higher-educated groups—the stimulus in our experiment—*constant* but at the same time *truthful* and realistic. It is important that the information is constant: we want to see whether the *exact same* public opinion signal coming

[2] People who only received secondary education (e.g. vocational or technical) are just as much against lowering the voting age (average score of 2.44 on a 1 to 5 scale; N=808) as people with a higher, non-university degree (mean=2.52; N=507) or those with a university degree (m=2.49; N=167).

from different groups is evaluated differently by politicians (ruling out the possibility that differences in appreciation are the consequence of actual opinion differences). Had we chosen an issue on which both groups do differ in opinion, the experimental stimulus would have needed to contain deception (which is problematic since we are dealing with real policy issues and real politicians here), or could have come across as less credible if politicians had a notion of the groups' actual preferences.

There is a second reason why we choose lowering the voting age as a case. It is an issue that is not overly complex and is easy to understand also for people with lower education. The issue has a direct and tangible impact on people's lives, so most people can effortlessly form themselves a meaningful opinion about it. There are no real underlying complexities such as budgetary consequences or major trade-offs. In other words, the opinions of all citizens can be considered to be equally valid.

SAMPLE AND PROCEDURE — The data were collected in the framework of a larger research project on political representation. All Dutch-speaking politicians in Belgium were asked for a face-to-face meeting of approximately an hour, in which they first completed a closed survey (+/- 30 minutes) and then took an open interview (+/- 30 minutes). Meetings were scheduled between March and June 2018. Both national (federal) and regional Flemish MPs were invited to participate, with satisfactory response rates of 79% (69 out of 87 federal MPs) and 77% (95 out of 124 regional MPs) respectively. For all methodological details about the sample, the procedure, the experimental randomization, the questionnaire, quality checks, ethical approval, and so on, we refer to Online Appendix 1. In what follows, we only highlight the most important aspects.

The experiment confronted politicians (n=155) with results from a poll with 400 citizens. The information was fictional but realistic (as we also had information from a real population survey). The difference between the stimuli is the group whose opinion with regard to lowering the voting age was reported. There were two manipulations (2x2 between-subjects design). First, politicians got to see the opinions of 16- or 17-year-old *pupils*—who would be allowed to vote if the voting age was lowered—or the opinion of the *parents* of these pupils. Second, the education level of the students was manipulated: they were *lower-educated* pupils following an Electricity-Mechanics program (typical example of a vocational training called 'BSO') or *higher-educated* pupils in a Latin-Sciences program (typically preparing for university studies called 'ASO'). Every respondent was randomly presented with one of the four stimuli. In line with H1, we expected that politicians would discount the opinions of the lower-educated pupils (compared to higher-educated pupils), and also those of the parents of lower-educated pupils (compared to the parents of higher-educated pupils) as the educational level of the mother is known to be the best predictor of a child's education. Here is the full text, with the manipulated parts underlined (pupils/parents) and in bold (lower/higher educated):

> *Excerpt from doctoral research at the University of Antwerp about giving 16-year-olds the right to vote at local elections:*
>
> *Many young Flemish people/Flemish people are not convinced of reducing the voting age to 16. A survey of about 400 young people/parents of young people from* ***BSO education/ASO education*** *(3rd degree* ***Electricity-Mechanics/Latin-Sciences****) showed that almost three-quarters of the pupils/parents are not interested in voting at a*

younger age/do not support the idea of giving their 16- or 17-year-old children the right to vote.

VARIABLES OF INTEREST — After the treatment, respondents were asked to rate Likert items on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (totally disagree) to 7 (totally agree). Four items are relevant here. The first three items—measured first right after the stimulus and inspired by Butler and Dynes (2016)—assess the perceived quality of the opinion politicians were just confronted with. (1) *I think that the concerned pupils/parents understand the complexity of the debate about voting rights at 16;* (2) *I think that the concerned pupils/parents have a strong opinion about the matter;* (3) *I think that the concerned pupils/parents base their opinion on good arguments.* These items scale well (Cronbach's alpha of .79) and are collapsed into one variable (mean scale) that measures the perceived quality of an opinion. The fourth item measures the politician's own opinion: *I think that politicians should lower the voting age to 16.* Higher values (on a scale from 1 to 7) indicate more support for lowering the voting age. We will use the answers to this item to test H2.

For full descriptive statistics on the variables of interest, we refer to Online Appendix 2. Most notably, across conditions, politicians deem citizens' opinions to be of average quality (4.31 on a scale from 1 to 7). Appendix 3 contains information about politicians' own opinions. The individual opinions appear to clearly reflect the parties' stances (even if there is some variation between MPs within parties). Politicians' own opinion was not affected by them being exposed

to the public opinion signal: regressing *own opinion* on the experimental treatment shows that there is no effect whatsoever[3].

In the analyses below, we do not include party dummies (as they largely take away the variation in MPs' *own opinion*) but analyses with party dummies are reported as a robustness check in Online Appendix 4 and confirm all results reported here in the main text.

Results

Table 1 reports regression models with the evaluation of the quality of the received opinion as the dependent variable and the experimental treatment as the independent variable. In line with our first expectation (H1), the education level of the pupils appears to matter, Model 1 shows. Politicians think that higher-educated pupils' opinions are of a significantly higher quality than those of lower-educated pupils—the difference on a scale from 1 to 7 is .52, which is not huge, but nevertheless substantive. Whereas politicians tend towards 'rather agreeing' that higher-educated pupils understand the complexity of the issue, and have strong opinions, based on good arguments (average evaluation of 4.39, which is above the middle of the scale), they tend towards 'rather disagreeing' that the same is true for lower-educated pupils (average evaluation of 3.87, just below the middle of the scale). In standardized terms, the treatment effect expressed

[3] Note that, despite this finding, the downplaying of the opinion of the lower-educated may lead to inequality in policy outcomes. Indeed, there are several ways in which public opinion signals may affect politicians' decisions (and, hence, policy output); persuasion of politicians' own opinion is just one of these mechanisms. For example, politicians may be willing to act upon citizens' opinions even when they personally disagree with the position of citizens—but probably they are only prepared to take such opinion-incongruent action when they value the quality of the opinion of the citizens. Also, it could be that quality evaluations affect politicians' perception of the public opinion distribution with regard to the issue (how many people support/dislike a given policy proposal). And such public opinion perceptions, we know since long, affect politicians' deeds (see for instance Miller & Stokes, 1963).

in standard deviations of the dependent variable is .47, which can be considered a moderate effect size.

The results from the two other treatments (Model 1), referring to the opinions of the parents, are less unequivocal. We expected that politicians would infer the educational level of the parents from that of their children and also downplay the opinions from the parents of lower-educated pupils, but this does not appear true. It is unfortunate that we are not entirely sure what this means. Are politicians less inclined than us, social scientists, to associate children's education level with that of their parents, and is this why we do not find an effect? Or do politicians only downplay the preferences of young lower-educated people, and does H1 not hold when it comes to adults? Theoretically, we deem the former explanation most likely, maybe in combination with a possible issue-specific idiosyncrasy: politicians might think that it is in particular lower-educated youngsters who are not ready to vote, and this may explain why they think these children's parents have particularly good reasons to oppose the lower voting age. At hindsight, we had better manipulated the educational level of the adults directly—we hope future research can take up the issue to provide a definitive answer. Nevertheless, what we learn from this study is that politicians seem to adjust their evaluations depending on the education level of the opinion holder, at least when the information about education is explicit.

Moving on to our second expectation, the analysis in Model 2 suggests that there is motivated reasoning in politicians' evaluations too. More concretely, those politicians who are fully in favor of lowering the vote age consider the citizen opinion they received—remember that citizens spoke out *against* lowering the vote age—to be of lower quality (.67 on the seven-point scale) than those politicians who are themselves entirely against the policy proposal. Similar

results are obtained when using party dummies as a proxy of politicians' own opinion (instead of the post-treatment variable), see Appendix 4. The findings corroborate H2. They imply that the downplaying of lower-educated citizens' opinions (H1) comes *on top of* a motivated reasoning effect (H2).

[Table 1 about here]

Conclusion and discussion

Complementing research focusing on how politicians may poorly understand disadvantaged groups' preferences, or strategically ignore them (e.g. Elsässer, Hense, and Schäfer 2020; Schakel 2019), our study investigated a third, so far understudied mechanism of inequality in representation. We showed that politicians tend to downplay the quality of the opinions of the lower-educated, at least when the education level of the opinion holder is made explicit. This effect comes on top of the other explanations of unequal representation. Indeed, in our experiment, information and strategic incentives being kept constant, elected representatives discounted the opinions from lower-educated pupils (not from their parents) as less thoughtful and intense than the opinions of higher-educated pupils. To be clear, politicians' are not very impressed by the quality of the latter group's opinion either as they deem the opinions of the higher-educated of just-above-neutral quality; but the lower-educated are judged worse (just-below-neutral). The effect comes on top of a motivated reasoning effect, whereby politicians

downplay citizens' opinions more when they personally disagree with them. Assuming that politicians' judgments of public opinion information weigh on their decisions (Miller and Stokes 1963)—the downplaying mechanism that we found here probably contributes to representational inequality.

A limitation of our study—and of a lot of experimental elite research (Grose 2021)—is the relatively small sample in absolute terms (n=155). Statisticians typically warn for two risks: researchers may, falsely, not find an effect because of the high standard errors (Lenth 2001) or they may, due to the play of chance, find effects that are not generalizable to the population (Gelman and Carlin 2014). In an ideal scenario we would have had a larger sample, or more observations per MP (e.g. a conjoint experiment), not only to increase confidence in the main effects, but also to allow a more detailed analysis (e.g. interaction effects). Unfortunately this was unfeasible, given elite respondents' time constraints. All in all, and echoing Grose (2021), we hope that readers agree that the scholarly import of the research question outweighs the disadvantages of the small sample.

A second limitation of our study was elaborately discussed in the results section already: we did not explicitly manipulate the educational level of the parents. We believe this explains the ambiguity in our main findings, namely, that the opinions of the parents of lower-educated pupils are not discounted in comparison with those of the parents of higher-educated pupils. There did not seem to be a spillover from the education level of the youngsters to that of their parents. We hope future research can take up the issue and examine further to what extent the findings apply beyond the specific scenario studied here.

We have two more suggestions for future research. First, scholars could test whether our findings hold for other issues. For example, we would like to know whether the findings would have been similar, had we opted for a highly salient, socio-economic issue (e.g. shifting the tax burden from low-incomes to high-incomes) instead of for a moderately salient, procedural issue (the voting age). It may be that politicians recognize the quality of disadvantaged groups' opinions more when the issues are directly inequality-related. A challenge here, however, is that on such issues the lower- and higher-educated often actually *have* different opinions—making it hard to employ an experimental design without using deception (i.e. by providing fake public opinion cues). Second, we hope that future work can explore whether similar mechanisms are at play when considering other dimensions of inequality such as income or gender. While there may be a 'natural' link between education and the thoughtfulness of an opinion, this is less obviously the case for belonging to a lower-income group, and especially for being female. In sum, we hope our study may point the way to a systematic examination of why, in the eyes of representatives, the opinions of some matter more than those of others.

The study bears implications for remedying representation inequality. That politicians have incorrect perceptions of the preferences of disadvantaged groups may be alleviated by actively encouraging these groups to voice their preferences, or by making sure politicians form a better sample of the population as a whole, as proponents of descriptive representation have argued (see e.g. Mansbridge 1999). Strategic incentives to ignore certain preferences as well may be eased, for example, by introducing a compulsory vote (equalizing electoral incentives) or campaign finance laws (equalizing financial incentives). Yet, the psychological mechanism we

uncovered here requires a different kind of cure. It must be tackled by raising awareness among elected representatives of their cognitive tendencies demeaning some opinions.

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Appendix 1: Methodological information

Population and sample

In this study, we focus on Dutch-speaking politicians in Belgium. Let us briefly discuss Belgium's political structure. Belgium has two main regions: (1) Flanders, the Dutch-speaking region/community; and (2) Wallonia, the region including both the French-speaking community (which is dominant) and the German-speaking community (which is very small). (Note that there is a third region, the capital of Brussels, which has a special status, but that leads us too far here.) Importantly, these regions can be considered as distinct political systems, because they have entirely separate party systems with Dutch-speaking parties competing only in Flanders and French-speaking parties competing only in Wallonia. Also the media systems are different, and there are divergent public opinions (see e.g. Deschouwer, 2009). In other words, it makes sense to study one region separately—as an individual political system—as we do here with the Dutch-speaking region.

Because of the federal state structure, citizens in Flanders elect politicians at two levels (for an overview, see for instance Popelier and Lemmens, 2015). They elect politicians for the national (federal) parliament, which deals with issues of national importance, such as the budget, defense, foreign affairs or social security. And, they elect politicians for the regional (Flemish) parliament, which deals with issues relevant to the geographical regions—such as economy, labor, mobility and infrastructure, agriculture or water policy—and with language-based community issues, such as education and culture. As a consequence, our research population consists of 211 Dutch-speaking members of parliament (MPs): 87 at the national (federal) level and 124 at the regional (Flemish) level. All these MPs were asked to participate in our study. We obtained satisfactory response rates of 79% at the federal level (N=69) and 77% at the regional level (N=95), mounting up to a total of 164 responses. As is shown in Table A1.1, the data are fairly representative for the full population in terms of gender, age and experience in parliament.

Table A1.1 – Representativeness of sample

	Cooperated (N = 164)	***Population (N = 211)***
Female	63 (38%)	91 (43%)
Age in years (SD)	47.6 (8.8)	48.3 (9.1)
Political experience in years (SD)	9.9 (6.9)	10.3 (7.5)

The actual number of MPs that received the experiment is a bit lower, though. The reason is that we had a special (shorter) survey protocol for the most high-ranking MPs such as party leaders (N=7). We anticipated that this was necessary to obtain participation from these MPs, who are typically a lot more busy and receive more requests. So, in total, the experiment was conducted with 157 MPs. It is important to mention, however, that these are not merely 'rank-and-file' MPs: the sample contains, for instance, former party leaders (n=3), former ministers and junior ministers (n=9), and current (n=9) and former (n=17) parliamentary party group leaders, many of which are member of the party board. In other words, high-ranking politicians are represented in the sample and there is no reason to assume that the exclusion of seven MPs has, substantively, made any difference.

Note that furthermore 2 MPs have missing answers on all questions related to the experiment. The remaining 155 MPs completed all questions—this is the final N for the analyses (see also below).

Interview procedure

All participants were asked for a face-to-face meeting of approximately an hour, somewhere between March and June 2018. The actual time of the meetings varied: sometimes respondents had to leave earlier (or arrived late), sometimes they took more time to answer our questions. In any case, every meeting started with a closed survey that the respondent normally took on a laptop brought by the interviewer. Exceptionally (N = 4), the survey was filled out on paper because of problems with the internet connection. The interviewer was available for clarification questions but this did not often happen and we avoided conversation during the survey. Filling out the survey took approximately 30 minutes. This was followed by an open interview of another half hour. The survey experiment was included early in the survey, to avoid contamination by other questions.

Experimental conditions

Each respondent was assigned to one experimental group. Assignment was done entirely randomly in Qualtrics (except for the four versions that were filled out on paper, where the interviewer showed a paper copy—we printed paper versions with various treatments and the choice was arbitrary). The respondents are almost evenly distributed across conditions. Two respondents dropped out as they skipped all questions related to the experiment. This was not related to any specific experimental condition. This brings the N for our analyses to 155.

Table A1.2 – Number of respondents in each condition

	Pupils condition	Parents condition
Lower-educated condition	N = 42 (42 respondents)	N = 38 (39 respondents, but one missing)
Higher-educated condition	N = 38 (38 respondents)	N = 37 (38 respondents, but one missing)

Balance test

Balance tests (Table A1.3) indicate that the randomization succeeded. More specifically, we regressed belonging to an experimental group on socio-demographic characteristics: gender, age, and years of experience in parliament. We did four separate logistic regressions: one for each experimental group. None of the independent variables had a significant effect on belonging to any of the experimental groups; and none of the models was significant in its totality.

Table A1.3 – Logistic regressions of belonging to an experimental group

	Group 1	Group 2	Group 3	Group 4
Gender	-.306 (.392)	.084 (.387)	.286 (.390)	-.045 (.394)
Year of birth	-.039 (.024)	-.001 (.024)	.029 (.025)	.014 (.024)
Experience (year of first election)	-.003 (.028)	.026 (.032)	-.050 (.031)	.034 (.034)
Constant	81.441 (55.122)	-52.056 (61.981)	41.235 (56.044)	-96.742 (65.645)
N	155	155	155	155
LR chi² (probability of the joint null hypothesis between brackets)	4.65 (.20)	.91 (.82)	3.26 (.35)	2.33 (.51)

Standard errors in parentheses. **** p<0.001, ** p<0.01, * p<0.05, †p<0.10*

Full questionnaire

The question module consisted of an introduction to the fictional scenario, the stimulus, and a matrix table with seven statements. Three of these statements (intended for other research purposes; nrs. 4, 5 and 7 respectively) are not relevant to this paper and are hence not included in the study (but they are reported below). Although the participants were not aware that they

were taking part in a survey-experiment, they were not deceived in the sense that the introduction to the question contained the true research goals (understanding how politicians deal with information about public preferences), and the public opinion information itself was realistic and based on actual population research. Therefore, debriefing was not necessary. Here is the full questionnaire of the module, in which we present the experimental manipulations via bold and underlined text:

By means of the following fictional scenario about voting rights at local elections, we would like to understand better how politicians deal with information about the preferences of the public when taking decisions.

If the following information reached you, how would you judge the information?

Excerpt from doctoral research at the University of Antwerp about giving 16-year-olds the right to vote at local elections:

"Many young Flemish people/Flemish people are not convinced of reducing the voting age to 16. A survey of about 400 young people/parents of young people from **BSO education/ASO education** (3rd degree **Electricity-Mechanics/Latin-Sciences**) showed that almost three-quarters of the pupils/parents are not interested in voting at a younger age/do not support the idea of giving their 16- or 17-year-old children the right to vote."

Can you indicate to what extent you agree with the following statements?
(matrix with seven answer options: totally disagree, disagree, rather disagree, neutral, rather agree, agree, totally agree)

1. I think that the concerned pupils/parents understand the complexity of the debate about voting rights at 16
2. I think that the concerned pupils/parents have a strong opinion about the matter
3. I think that the concerned pupils/parents base their opinion on good arguments.
4. Politicians should take the preference of these pupils / parents into account when taking decisions about setting the voting right at 16
5. I think that the concerned pupils / parents would blame politicians, if they set the voting age at 16
6. I think that politicians should lower the voting age to 16.
7. I think that a majority of the Flemish people is against lowering the voting age to 16.

Engagement with stimuli

We decided not to do a formal manipulation check where we would ask the respondents, for instance, to recall information from the stimulus. The reason is that we faced severe constraints on the number of questions that we could ask (in a survey with national politicians like this one, space is very limited and hard trade-offs needed to be made). Moreover, we did not want our elite respondents to feel as if they were "tested" (which is often the case with typical manipulation check questions), because we know that elites do not like these kinds of questions. And we want to avoid upsetting them, as we need their willingness to participate in our future research.

As an alternative way to show that the elite respondents engaged with the stimulus and the questions, however, we look at the time stamps that we recorded for this question module. On average, politicians spent 102 seconds reading the stimulus and answering the questions (N = 151; we do not have time stamps for the four politicians who filled out the survey on paper). Not a single politician went over the question in less than 50 seconds. We believe this is quite long and indicates that politicians took their time to engage with the material.

Ethical consent

Ethical consent to do this experiment was obtained beforehand, from the ethical committee of the authors' university.

Appendix 2: Descriptive statistics

Table A2.1—Descriptive statistics of all four survey items (N = 155)

	Mean	S.D.	Min.	Max.
Politicians' *perceived opinion quality* (mean scale of three items)	4.31	1.11	1	7
Items separately:				
I think that the concerned pupils/parents understand the complexity of the debate about voting rights at 16	4.64	1.34	1	7
I think that the concerned pupils/parents have a strong opinion about the matter	4.16	1.38	1	7
I think that the concerned pupils/parents base their opinion on good arguments	4.14	1.22	1	7
Politicians' *own opinion* (item: I think politicians should lower the voting age to 16)	3.43	2.14	1	7

Appendix 3: Politicians' own opinion on the issue

Figure A3.1—Politicians' own opinion, by party

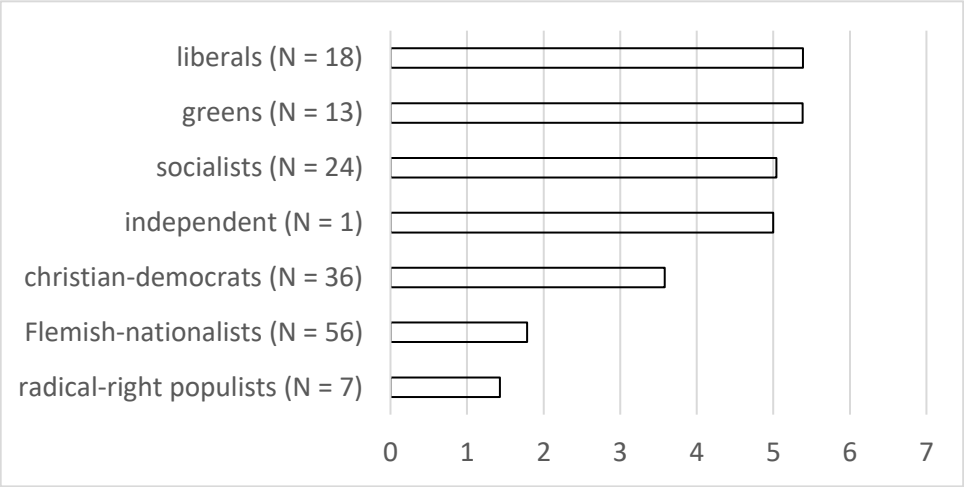

Table A3.1—Explaining politicians' own opinion

Experimental treatment (ref.=higher-educated pupils) (H1)	
Lower-educated pupils	-.061
	(.351)
Parents of lower-educated pupils	-.018
	(.355)
Parents of higher-educated pupils	-.050
	(.356)
Party membership (ref. = Flemish-nationalists)	
Greens	3.608***
	(.479)
Socialists	3.261***
	(.376)
Christian-democrats	1.799***
	(.328)
Liberals	3.601***
	(.417)
Populist-right	-.354
	(.624)
Independent	3.244*
	(1.566)
Constant	1.817***
	(.295)
Obs.	155
R-squared (adjusted)	0.485

Standard errors in parentheses. **** p<0.001, ** p<0.01, * p<0.05, †p<0.10*

Appendix 4: Analysis with party dummies

Table A4.1—Explaining politicians' perception of the quality of citizen's opinion (models including party dummies)

	Model 1	Model 2
Experimental treatment (ref.=higher-educated pupils) (H1)		
Lower-educated pupils	-0.554*	-0.559*
	(0.239)	(0.239)
Parents of lower-educated pupils	0.120	0.119
	(0.241)	(0.241)
Parents of higher-educated pupils	0.111	0.108
	(0.242)	(0.242)
Own opinion (H2)	—	-0.068
		(0.056)
Party membership (ref. = Flemish-nationalists)		
Greens	-0.302	-0.058
	(0.326)	(0.384)
Socialists	-0.681**	-0.461
	(0.256)	(0.315)
Christian-democrats	-0.459*	-0.338
	(0.223)	(0.245)
Liberals	-0.783**	-0.540
	(0.284)	(0.349)
Populist-right	-0.414	-0.438
	(0.425)	(0.425)
Independent	1.811†	2.030†
	(1.066)	(1.080)
Constant	4.743***	4.866***
	(0.201)	(0.225)
Obs.	155	155
R-squared	0.157	0.165

Standard errors in parentheses. **** p<0.001, ** p<0.01, * p<0.05, †p<0.10*