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*Politicians' perceptions of public opinion matter for substantive representation, but previous work has concluded that they do not have very accurate perceptions of voters' policy preferences. We add to the debate on the drivers of perceptual accuracy by exploring whether politicians have a more accurate understanding of public opinion when it matters either to voters or themselves, or when politicians think it matters more to voters. Drawing on survey data collected among elected representatives and citizens in Belgium, Canada, Switzerland, and Germany, we show that politicians have a better understanding of public opinion when they think the issue matters to voters. Further, when an issue is personally important to politicians they more accurately estimate their party supporters' opinions. The results confirm that politicians hold more accurate perceptions of voters' preferences when they think it is important to do so but not necessarily when the issues actually are important to voters.*

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## Introduction

Responsive policy-making can come about in two ways. First, elected representatives can follow their own policy preferences, and, if the voters select representatives who share their policy views then responsive policies will come about. Second, elected representatives can follow their perception of what the people want and, if their perceptions are accurate, responsive policies will follow (Miller & Stokes, 1963, Lucas et al., 2024). For this second path to work, politicians must have an accurate understanding of the public's desires. Even though politicians go to great lengths to learn about the public's preferences (Soontjens & Walgrave, 2021: Walgrave et al., 2023b), their understanding of public opinion is frequently inaccurate (e.g., Holmberg, 2003; Broockman & Skovron, 2018; Pereira, 2021; Pilet et al., 2023; Walgrave et al. 2023a). One recent study that draws on data from four countries finds that politicians do not have a significantly more accurate understanding of public

opinion than ordinary citizens do (Walgrave et al., 2023a). This underperformance of elected representatives is worrying for policy responsiveness, a key feature of democracies.

However, studies have shown that politicians are better at grasping public opinion on certain policy issues (Miller and Stokes, 1963; Hedlund and Friesema, 1972; Clausen et al., 1983; Walgrave et al., 2023a). We argue that one plausible explanation for why politicians are more accurate on some issues than others is that those issues matter more. When issues are more salient, politicians' estimations are more accurate. Echoing Clausen's (1977) argument, we explore three different conceptions of salience that are likely to positively affect perceptual accuracy by increasing politicians' (1) *opportunities* and/or their (2) *motivation* to learn about public opinion.

Firstly, the more salient an issue *really* is to voters, the more likely it is that signals about public opinion on this issue will reach politicians; hence, it should be easier for politicians to gauge public opinion on the issue as the public opinion information is more plentiful and accessible (opportunity). Secondly, the more politicians *perceive* that an issue is salient to voters, the more willing they are to learn about public opinion on that issue. The mechanism here is not more accessible information but rather more perceived accountability (motivation). In other words, the more they think people care, the more politicians think they will be held to account for their deeds on the issue and, consequently, the more invested they are in finding out what the public thinks about the issue. Thirdly, the more salient an issue is to politicians *themselves*, the more willing they will be to learn about public opinion on the issue (motivation). This third face of issue salience is not so much a matter of accountability but simply a matter of ideological preference. If a politician cares about an issue, almost by definition they focus more attention on it which leads to more learning about, among other things, what the public thinks about the issue.

We explore the relationship between (real, perceived and own) issue salience and politicians' perceptual accuracy—operationalized as identifying the majority opinion of the general public or their party electorate supporting the proposal. The study draws on face-to-face survey interviews with politicians in Belgium, Canada, Germany, and Switzerland about their estimates of public opinion and party electorate opinion on various policy proposals, benchmarking their answers against large-scale citizen surveys. Moreover, we ask citizens and politicians how salient each of these policy proposals are to them personally, and we ask politicians to estimate the salience the public attributes to each proposal. We test the expectation that the more salient a policy is (to citizens, to citizens according to politicians and to politicians personally), the more accurate politicians' understanding of public opinion and party electorate opinion on this policy issue is.

Our expectations are supported by the evidence to a large extent, but not entirely. We do not find a clear and consistent relationship between *real* public salience and perceptual accuracy.

However, politicians' estimations of public opinion and their party electorate's opinion are more accurate when politicians *perceive* an issue to be more salient to voters. Most importantly, and third, politicians are better able to estimate the opinions of their party supporters when an issue is important to them *personally*. Hence, we conclude that politicians' learning about public preferences seems to be better enhanced by them being more motivated to learn about public opinion on issues they personally care about, and on issues they think citizens care about. Since they do not appear to have a better understanding of public opinion on issues that are actually important to citizens and where public opinion information is more accessible; the opportunity mechanism receives much less empirical support from our data. These findings are robust across different electoral contexts.

## Salience as a driver of perceptual accuracy

For elected politicians to be able to satisfy the preferences of citizens, they need to have a good grasp of what those preferences actually are (Clausen, 1977). Recently, scholars have revived their interest in measuring politicians' 'perceptual accuracy' (Broockman and Skovron, 2018; Pereira, 2021; Pilet et al., 2023; Walgrave et al., 2023; Kübler, 2024), as in their ability to accurately estimate the preferences of the public. These studies have shown that politicians are generally rather poor at estimating public opinion (Walgrave et al., 2023) and frequently estimate public opinion to be more right-wing than it actually is (Broockman and Skovron, 2018; Pilet et al., 2023). Yet, we still know little about *why* politicians make more accurate estimations on certain positions, except that politicians have an easier time gauging unipolar public opinion signals (Clausen et al., 1983).

Nearly half a century ago, Clausen (1977) set out a theory of what factors may affect politicians' perceptual accuracy. These factors can be classified into three main areas—cognitive balance, personality characteristics and contextual variables. Within the recent revival of interest in perceptual accuracy, most of these have been tested empirically. See, for example, Pereira (2021) and Sevenans et al. (2023) on how projection affects politicians' estimations (cognitive balance), or Walgrave et al. (2022) on whether more senior politicians hold more accurate public opinion perceptions (personality characteristics). However, the main contextual variable identified by Clausen—issue salience—has so far received little attention.

A good deal of previous work, sometimes indirectly, suggests a positive link between salience and perceptual accuracy. For instance, the basic mechanism of Baumgartner and Jones' (1993) influential punctuated equilibrium theory is, in fact, that issue salience drives responsiveness. Their theory argues that policies are stable and tend to drift away from what the public wants; this is the 'equilibrium' part of policy development. Then, when the public and policy makers' attention is drawn

to some issue, there is a sudden dramatic correction and the policy is brought back in line with what the public wants; this is the 'punctuation' part. So, for Baumgartner and Jones, the key driver of policy responsiveness is issue salience, the increased attention to an issue drives the correction in the policy. Further, Burstein (2014) argues that public opinion only matters for policy-makers when it exists. When people do not have an opinion and are not concerned with an issue, politicians are not compelled to follow public opinion. These studies and others argue for a link between salience and policy responsiveness (see Burstein, 2003 for an older literature review) but they do not test whether politicians, when issues are salient, know better which policies people want.

A much smaller body of work does explicitly address the possible connection between public salience and perceptual accuracy. The evidence here is more circumstantial than direct. For instance, Hedlund and Friesema (1972) find that Iowa politicians were better at predicting referenda results in their constituencies for those issues where turnout was higher, although they only capture politicians' estimations on four issues. Helfer et al. (2021) found that Swiss politicians have a better understanding of public opinion on conflictual issues, i.e. issues where there was not an overwhelming majority in favour of or against the proposal. Issue conflict is probably related to public salience, but this research does not directly analyse the effect of issue salience. In a similar vein, Varone and Helfer (2022) show that politicians have a more accurate understanding of their party voters' preferences for issues that are 'owned by their party' than for other policy issues. Again, an issue owned by a party implies that it is more salient for the party (and its politicians) and probably also for is voters. So, this work as well suggests that salience drives accuracy, but it does not measure it directly.

Why would salience lead to more accurate perceptions? Following on from Clausen (1977), we distinguish between three related, but separate, faces of salience. First, 'real' public salience. If an issue is more salient among the public, public opinion signals come to politicians with less effort. Indeed, if people care about an issue they will advocate their preference more to those in power (Verba et al, 1993). Via these unsolicited public opinion signals, information is more accessible for politicians which increases the *opportunity*, even when not wanted, to learn about the public's preferences. If issues are non-salient, in contrast, this bottom-up exposure to public opinion preferences is more absent. Qualitative work on how politicians read public opinion indeed shows that public opinion signals often come to them unsolicited; e.g. via people who talk to them on the street (Walgrave et al., 2023b). Further, on salient issues voters' preferences are not only more visible but also more stable (Clausen, 1977, 1983; Zaller, 1992; Howe and Krosnick, 2017). This makes signals on these matters easier for politicians to interpret. Therefore, we hypothesize that politicians have a more accurate understanding of popular support for policy proposals with regard to issues that are salient among voters. Hence:

*H1. The more salient a policy issue is among the public, the more accurate politicians' public opinion knowledge on that issue.*

Note that, so far, we spoke about 'the public'. Yet, as we will explain in the data and methods section, in this study, we examine the accuracy of politicians' perceptions towards two different public opinions: the general public, and the politicians' own party electorate. However, the factors that we outline here and how we argue that they affect perceptual accuracy apply both to politicians' perceptions of general public opinion and to party electorate opinion. That is why we do not formulate separate hypotheses for the two types of public opinion. We consider examining the effect of salience on the two types of perceptual accuracy to be a double test of the same hypothesis.

The second face of salience that could exert an effect on perceptual accuracy is not the real public salience but politicians' *perception* of issue salience. After all, from a re-election perspective, it is only public opinion on issues that are likely to affect voting behaviour that politicians should really be concerned about (Zaller, 1992: 270). Assuming that voters especially reward responsive action on salient issues at the ballot, politicians have electoral incentives to learn about the general public's and party supporters' preferences and respond to them in their actions or, at least, in their communication (Rosset et al., 2017; Soontjens & Sevenans, 2022). Hence politicians concerned with re-election should be more *motivated* to learn about public opinion on issues they *think* matter to voters or party supporters, even if these perceptions of what issues are important are not accurate. In sum, a perception of salience leads to a perception of possible accountability with regard to actions on the issue, this then translates into a higher motivation to learn about public opinion on the issue, and this, in the end, leads to a higher perceptual accuracy. Hence our hypothesis:

*H2: The more salient politicians think a policy issue is among the public, the more accurate their public opinion knowledge on that issue.*

Finally, politicians themselves ascribe different importance to different issues, just like the rest of us. They may have been driven to enter politics on the basis of a particular issue, are specialized in some issues, or simply perceive that certain issues warrant greater attention or represent bigger problems. Where issues are salient to politicians themselves—as in Wittman's (1983) concept of parties' or politicians' 'policy goals'—we also expect politicians to have a more accurate perception of opinion among both voters and party supporters, since they ascribe a greater value to their own policy preferences being implemented. Therefore, they have a greater *motivation* to know about public opinion on that issue so that they know which groups agree with them or how best to frame the issue to maximise its public support. Note that when politicians care personally about an issue, we are dealing with a form of intrinsic motivation to learn about public opinion rather than the extrinsic motivation to please the electorate in their actions. Either way, our third hypothesis argues:

*H3. The more salient a policy issue is to politicians themselves, the more accurate their public opinion knowledge on that issue.*

**Data & Methods**

*COUNTRY CASES* – To examine whether politicians' perceptions of public opinion are more accurate on salient issues compared to less salient issues, we fielded surveys with politicians and citizens in Belgium, Canada, Germany, and Switzerland[1]. Note that the selection of countries is first of all a pragmatic one: these countries were part of a collaborative project survey-interviewing national members of parliament—a group of politicians that is usually hard to convince participating in research. The country selection is diverse in terms of political systems, which allows us to make some cautious generalisability claims. For one, the electoral systems in the four countries are different, which may influence the level of perceptual accuracy (see Walgrave et al., 2023a). Canada has a majoritarian first-past-the-post system, Belgium and Switzerland use proportional representation, and Germany a mix of the two. Moreover, district sizes differ in all four countries, as do the strength of, and the number of parties — Belgium and Germany have strong parties, Switzerland less so. Finally, Switzerland is unique because of its frequent referenda and substantial decentralization. All in all, this country variation allows for broader generalisation from our findings.

*MEASURING PERCEPTUAL ACCURACY OF POLITICIANS* – In all four countries, we contacted national and regional members of parliament to participate in our research. In total, 866 surveys were completed, representing a decent overall response rate of 45% (see Bailer 2014 for benchmarks on response rates in elite research). The number of participating politicians is substantially higher in Flanders (77%), Wallonia (75%), and Switzerland (74%). Lower rates are observed in Canada (17%) and Germany (15%) where it was harder to get MPs to cooperate. Importantly, the group of participating politicians resembles the respective country's populations in terms of gender, age, and seniority. Further, nearly all political parties are well-represented, with just a few small parties as exceptions (see **Appendix 1** for more information on the sample of politicians). Surveys were done in person; mostly in parliament,

[1] The data were collected in the framework of the POLPOP project. POLPOP is a transnational collaboration examining the perceptual accuracy of politicians in five countries, initiated by Stefaan Walgrave. The principal investigators (and funders) per country responsible for data collection were, for Flanders-Belgium, Stefaan Walgrave (FWO, grant G012517N); Wallonia and Brussels-Belgium, Jean-Benoit Pilet and Nathalie Brack (FNRS, grant T.0182.18); Canada, Peter Loewen and Lior Sheffer (supported by a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada Insight Grant and by the Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Science at the University of Toronto); Germany, Christian Breunig and Stefanie Bailer (funded by AFF 2018 at the University of Konstanz); Netherlands, Rens Vliegenthart and Toni van der Meer; and Switzerland, Frédéric Varone and Luzia Helfer (SNSF, grant 100017_172559).

and sometimes through a video interview. Politicians were asked to fill in a 30-minute survey on a laptop that the interviewer brought. Such Interviewer presence ensures that politicians themselves, and not their employees, actually filled in the survey.

The central theme of the politician survey was their evaluation of public opinion. To create a measure of perceptual accuracy, we asked politicians to estimate public opinion on various specific policy proposals, such as "*The most polluting cars should be forbidden in cities*". In all countries, we followed the same systematic approach to select one or two batches of eight policy issues (or nine in Switzerland). This resulted in unique but equivalent proposals being selected in different countries. To do so, we employed five selection criteria. First, we selected issues that were not too technical, meaning that citizens and politicians should understand the issue without requiring additional information. Second, the policy issues were all topical, meaning that they were (recently) discussed in the public debate. Third, there was ample variation in terms of policy domains; some of the selected proposals deal with traditional socio-economic left-right issues (e.g., taxes), others belong to the cultural left-right axis (e.g., immigration). Fourth, given that our focus is on clarifying the relationship between perceptual accuracy and issue salience, we did a pre-test to select proposals that differed in terms of how salient they were to voters. Fifth, drawing on the same pre-test data, we chose policy proposals varying in their distribution of public opinion support. After all, the clarity of a public opinion signal—how easy it is to read public opinion—in part depends to on the share of people (dis)agreeing with a policy. Note that the selection of equivalent but different policy proposals has the advantage that politicians were asked to estimate public opinion about policies that were actually a topic of debate in their country. The downside is that we cannot directly compare between countries, as the issues selected in these countries differ. We account for this by running analyses with individual countries removed as a robustness test for the general patterns we find. A full overview of policy proposals can be found in **Appendix 2**.

For each policy proposal, politicians were asked to estimate (1) the percentage of the general public[2] agreeing with the proposal, and (2) the percentage of party voters agreeing with the proposal on a scale from 0 to 100%. We always asked the estimation question in two steps: first politicians were asked to estimate the percentage of citizens/party voters that were *undecided* (neutral/no opinion) about the policy matter, and next, they were asked to estimate the level of *agreement* among the group of citizens that has an opinion on the matter. The full question-wording was:

[2] When we talk about 'general public opinion' this covers different meanings in some countries. In Belgium, we asked politicians about regional public opinion given that Wallonia and Flanders are separate political systems themselves—with separate parties, separate media, and hence a separate public opinion. The same goes for Switzerland where we asked politicians about district public opinion. Finally, in Germany and Canada, we asked politicians to estimate the opinion of all citizens in the country.

*What percentage of [country] citizens/[current voters of your party] do you think is undecided about this policy proposal? Please give us your best guess by dragging the bar to the correct percentage.*

*And, what percentage of those citizens who have an opinion agree or totally agree with this policy proposal?*

To create a measure of perceptual accuracy, we needed to know what citizens actually thought about the same policy proposals that politicians were asked about. Therefore, in all countries, we fielded online surveys with citizens of voting age to ask about the same policy proposals. Survey companies targeted around 1,000 (and more in most countries) respondents, applying quotas on age, gender, and education. In addition, we applied weights by age, gender, education and party choice to correct for some deviations. Hence, in each country, we know what the public, and what party voters[3], think of these policies.

By matching politicians' estimations of general public opinion and party electorate opinion with the citizen survey data, we can calculate two measures of perceptual accuracy. First, and following earlier work (see Walgrave et al. 2023a), we construct a measure that indicates whether politicians correctly place the *majority's* opinion on an issue. Knowing what is majority opinion is perhaps the baseline heuristic for politicians to understand the electoral implications of the position they take on that issue. Concretely, politicians' estimation is coded as correct if support for a proposal was at least 50% and they also estimated support at a minimum of 50%, or if support was 50% or lower and politicians also estimated that it would be lower than 51%[4]. As a result, our dependent variable is a binary measure denoting whether politicians correctly identified majority preferences on a specific policy proposal. A second way to grasp perceptual accuracy is by looking at the absolute difference (in percentage points) between politicians' estimations and actual public opinion on the policy proposals (e.g., Esaiasson & Holmberg, 1996). In this paper, we primarily work with the more crude, 'majoritarian' measure of perceptual accuracy and examine whether politicians know better where the majority stands on more salient issues. We therefore run a series of multi-level logistic models with a dependent variable capturing whether politicians correctly identified majority opinion. We use the *percentage error* measure as a robustness test and run all analyses again using this more fine-grained measure of perceptual accuracy.

[3] For most parties we have reliable estimates as we have enough party voters in the sample. For some very small parties we could not calculate party electorate opinion. As a result, we have fewer responses for estimates of party supporters' opinions since some estimations of party electorate opinion by elites could not be benchmarked for their accuracy.

[4] So, estimates of 50% are always coded as correct. This means that we have a rather conservative measure of perceptual accuracy.

*MEASURING ISSUE SALIENCE* – The independent variables of interest are our three faces of issue salience. The concept of salience originally alluded to the effect of different policy issues on individuals' vote choices (see Moniz and Wlezien, 2020). Whereas issue salience is often measured by analysing citizens' responses to questions about the most important problem or issue facing the country, studies have shown that these questions are not good at capturing what actually matters to voting behaviour (Niemi & Bartels, 1985; Johns, 2008), since they arguably capture more about the prominence of an issue than its effects on vote choice (Wlezien, 2005). Further, our policy issues sometimes straddle two or more commonly-used issue codes; for example, a question asking whether the most polluting cars should be banned in cities is both an environmental and a transportation issue (see **Appendix 2** for full details of our questions). Hence, for our first measure of salience, we use the strength of individuals' feelings about those particular policy issues (Krosnick, 1988). *Real public salience* captures the percentage of citizens/party voters in each country that is undecided (neutral/no opinion) about a certain policy proposal. The percentage of people answering they do not have an opinion is a good indicator of how much the policy matters to them. When an issue is salient, fewer respondents express neutral opinions (Weaver, 1991). Several studies of policy responsiveness have used a similar approach to measuring salience (see, for instance, Page & Shapiro, 1983; Pétry, 1999; Gilens, 2005; Wratil, 2018). Thus the higher the proportion of citizens without an opinion on a subject, the lower the salience.

Second, we also include a measure of *perceived public salience*, namely politicians' estimation of the percentage of citizens/party voters that are undecided or have no opinion on the policy matter. And finally, *personal salience* is a measure of how important a policy proposal is to politicians themselves. The question wording was the following: "*We just asked you to estimate public opinion on eight/nine different policy proposals. Could you look again at the themes of these policy proposals and indicate how important each of them is to you personally on a scale of 0 (very unimportant) to 10 (very important).*"

Of course, to estimate models with all three salience measures at the same time included as independent variables we need to check the degree of correlation between them. Results are shown as a correlation matrix in **Table 1** below. They reveal that the three measures are significantly correlated, most notably real and perceived public salience. Despite these correlations, the size of the correlation coefficients is never large enough to warrant concerns over multicollinearity. Therefore, it is possible to include all measures in a model to determine which has the greatest estimated effect on perceptual accuracy.

**Table 1a** - Correlation table of real, perceived and personal salience (for all voters)

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Real public salience** | 1.00 | | |
| **Perceived public salience** | 0.20*** | 1.00 | |
| **Personal salience** | 0.11*** | 0.09*** | 1.00 |
| | **Real public salience** | **Perceived public salience** | **Personal salience** |

**Table 1b** - Correlation table of real, perceived and personal salience (for party supporters)

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Real public salience** | 1.00 | | |
| **Perceived public salience** | 0.15*** | 1.00 | |
| **Personal salience** | 0.05*** | 0.13*** | 1.00 |
| | **Real public salience** | **Perceived public salience** | **Personal salience** |

**Table 2** provides an overview of our main variables of interest. Note that our unit of observation is an individual politician's responses to survey questions about an individual policy proposal. Our data show that politicians are better at predicting majority support among their party supporters (75% accuracy rate) than among voters generally (66% accuracy rate), but they are no better at estimating levels of support (percent error) for policies among party supporters (20.0 percentage points) than among the general public (19.1 percentage points). Further, party supporters, who are likely more politically engaged than those who do not have a party preference, consider most issues to be more salient—the average level of 'don't knows' among party supporters is lower than among voters generally. Another observation is that politicians rate most issues for them personally as being salient.

There is variation in all these measures, yet the variance of real public salience is much lower than the variance for perceived public salience. The minimum value of real public salience for an issue among all voters in a country is 77.9, with a maximum value of 96.8. However, over 56% of politicians' estimates of the salience of an issue (perceived public salience) are less than 79, with a standard deviation nearly four times higher than for real public salience. More data on the distribution of our main independent variables are presented in **Appendix 3**.

**Table 2** - Descriptives of main variables

| | Description | N | Mean | SD |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Dependent variables** | | | | |
| Correct majority placement (general public) | Dummy variable where 1 = politician correctly identified majority opinion among all voters | 6,713 | 0.66 | 0.47 |
| Correct majority placement (party electorate) | Dummy variable where 1 = politician correctly identified majority opinion among party electorate | 6,716 | 0.75 | 0.43 |
| Percent error (general public) | Continuous variable calculating the absolute error in politicians' estimations of the level of support among all voters | 6,713 | 19.1 | 15.1 |
| Percent error (party electorate) | Continuous variable calculating the absolute error in politician's estimations of the level of support among party electorate | 6,716 | 20.0 | 16.5 |
| **Independent variables** | | | | |
| Real public salience (general public) | Proportion of survey respondents who did *not* answer 'Undecided/No opinion' to the question 'Do you personally agree or disagree with this policy proposal?', i.e. who expressed an opinion | 7,151 | 88.6 | 5.7 |
| Real public salience (party electorate) | Proportion of party electorate who did *not* answer 'Undecided' to the question 'Do you personally agree or disagree with this policy proposal?', i.e. who expressed an opinion | 6,951 | 92.1 | 4.8 |
| Perceived public salience (general public) | Politicians' estimations of proportion of voters who expressed an opinion | 6,734 | 68.8 | 19.8 |
| Perceived public salience (party electorate) | Politicians' estimations of proportion of party electorate who expressed an opinion | 6,561 | 75.9 | 19.4 |
| Personal salience | Politicians' indication of how important issue is for them personally on a scale from 0 (very unimportant) to 10 (very important)? | 7,005 | 6.0 | 3.1 |

*CONTROLS* – We include variables for politicians' sex and seniority (defined as having ever acted as a Minister at the state or federal level, or as a party leader or parliamentary group leader). We also include a control for whether politicians serve in a committee that is responsible for the issue on which they are being asked to estimate voters' opinions. Finally, since politicians are better able to identify public opinion when it is more 'unipolar' (Clausen et al., 1983), we control for preference imbalance which measures the absolute difference between the proportion of voters (or party electorate) who agree and who disagree with the proposal. This captures the degree of unipolarity in voters' opinions. It should be easier for politicians to identify majority opinion when, for instance, 90+% of voters or party supporters agree or disagree with a proposal (a high preference imbalance), than when voters are split 55/45% on an issue, as the signal will be clearer. Preference imbalance is captured on a 0-1 scale, with 0 indicating an even split between voters or the party electorate's preferences, and 1 indicating complete unipolarity of opinion.

## Results

*GENERAL PUBLIC ESTIMATIONS* — We first examine if salience influences politicians' ability to estimate general public majority opinion on different policy proposals correctly. To better judge which of our independent variables of interest was most strongly associated with perceptual accuracy, we standardised our three measures of salience. **Table 3** below summarises the results. In Model 1, we test the effect of real public salience in isolation (controlling only for the country and individual politician fixed effects). In Model 2 we do the same for perceived public salience and in Model 3 for personal salience, introducing our individual issue level (we cannot include this in Model 1 since real public salience does not vary within issues). In Model 4, we combine all three salience measures with our control variables.

**Table 3** - Logistic multilevel regressions predicting accurate majority placement of general public

| | Model 1 | Model 2 | Model 3 | Model 4 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Real public salience (scaled)** | **0.27 (0.03)*** ** | | | **0.07 (0.03)*** |
| **Perceived public salience (scaled)** | | **0.18 (0.03)*** ** | | **0.19 (0.03)*** ** |
| **Personal salience (scaled)** | | | **0.12 (0.03)*** ** | 0.04 (0.03) |
| **Wallonia (ref cat. Flanders)** | -0.04 (0.09) | 0.16 (0.10) | 0.09 (0.10) | 0.28 (0.10)** |
| **Switzerland** | **-0.49 (0.08)*** ** | -0.54 (0.33) | -0.55 (0.34) | **-0.39 (0.08)*** ** |
| **Germany** | -0.03 (0.11) | -0.03 (0.35) | -0.04 (0.36) | -0.12 (0.12) |
| **Canada** | -0.01 (0.11) | 0.08 (0.40) | 0.09 (0.41) | 0.06 (0.12) |
| **Female** | | | | -0.03 (0.06) |
| **Seniority** | | | | -0.03 (0.08) |
| **Issue specialisation (committee)** | | | | 0.08 (0.08) |
| **Preference imbalance** | | | | **1.74 (0.13)*** ** |
| **Variance at politician level (intercept)** | 0.09 | 0.15 | 0.13 | 0.09 |
| **Variance at issue level (intercept)** | | 0.55 | 0.61 | |
| **AIC** | 8407 | 7906 | 7700 | 7802 |
| **BIC** | 8454 | 7961 | 7754 | 7890 |
| **Log Likelihood** | -4196 | -3945 | -3842 | -3888 |
| **Num. obs.** | 6,713 | 6,652 | 6,463 | 6,404 |

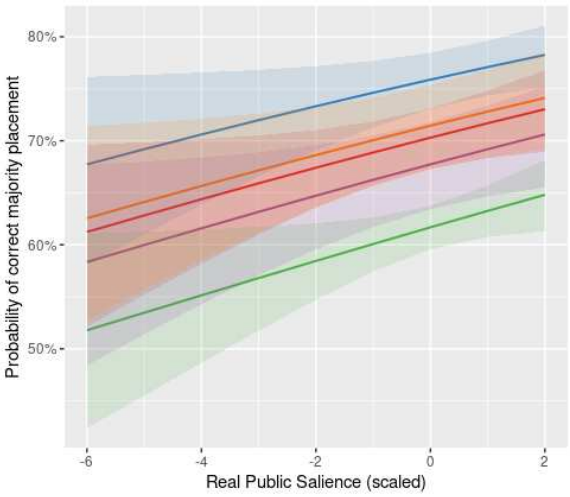
$^{***}P < 0.001$; $^{**}P < 0.01$; $^{*}P < 0.05$

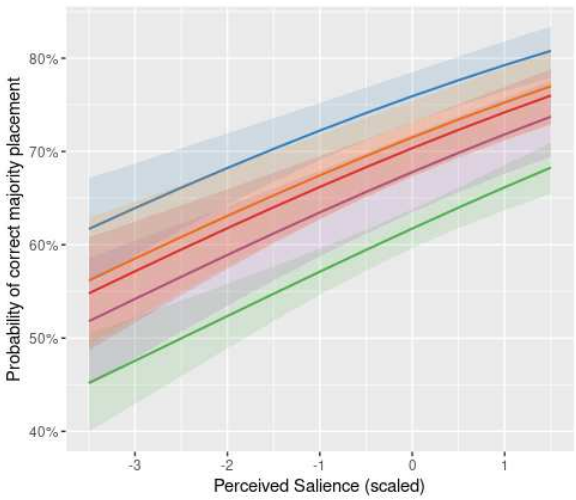
The results of the first three models show that, in isolation, all our measures of salience correlate with greater likelihood of correctly identifying the majority opinion of voters. However, when we include all salience measures with controls in Model 4, we find that politicians' perceptions of public salience have the greatest association with perceptual accuracy of our salience variables, with real public salience having the least association, and personal salience not reaching statistical significance. Overall, the combined predictive power of all salience measures is impressive: on the lowest level of real, perceived and personal salience the probability of making a correct majority placement is 38%, on the highest level it is 77% (controlling for sex, seniority, committee specialism and preference imbalance). Further, we see that some controls, especially preference imbalance, are significantly associated with perceptual accuracy.

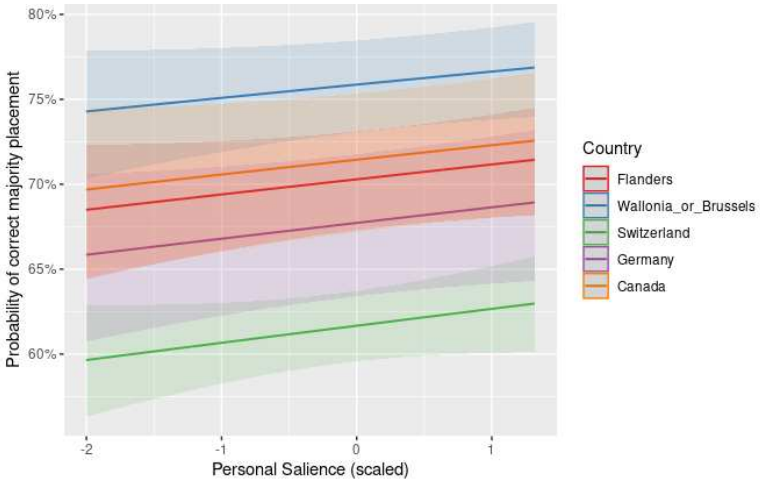
All in all, the data seem to strongly support our expectation that politicians are better able to estimate voters' views on issues that really are more important to voters, *and* on issues that politicians perceive to be more important to voters, although not necessarily on issues that they themselves consider to be important. That perceived public salience sticks out as the most important factor suggests that the willingness of politicians to learn about public opinion matters more than the opportunity to learn about public opinion (by the accessibility of public opinion information). Intriguingly, the accuracy of politicians' perceptions of public opinion is not significantly affected by their own opinion of which issues matters.

**Figure 1** below shows the predictive power of these variables by country, whilst holding constant all the control variables that were included in Model 4. The first graph demonstrates the strong predicted effect of real public salience, although we can observe that confidence intervals overlap in most countries. The second graph shows the same for perceived public opinion, and here as well we see that it matters substantively, with the slopes steeper than for our two other measures of salience. The third graph demonstrates the predicted effect of personal salience; here effect sizes are smaller as showed by the not very steep slopes. As a robustness test, we ran the full model removing one country at a time from our sample and the positive and significant association of perceived salience is stable across all models (the results are shown in **Appendix 4**).

**Figure 1** – Predicted effects of real public salience, perceived public salience and personal salience on probability of correct majority placement by country (Model 4)



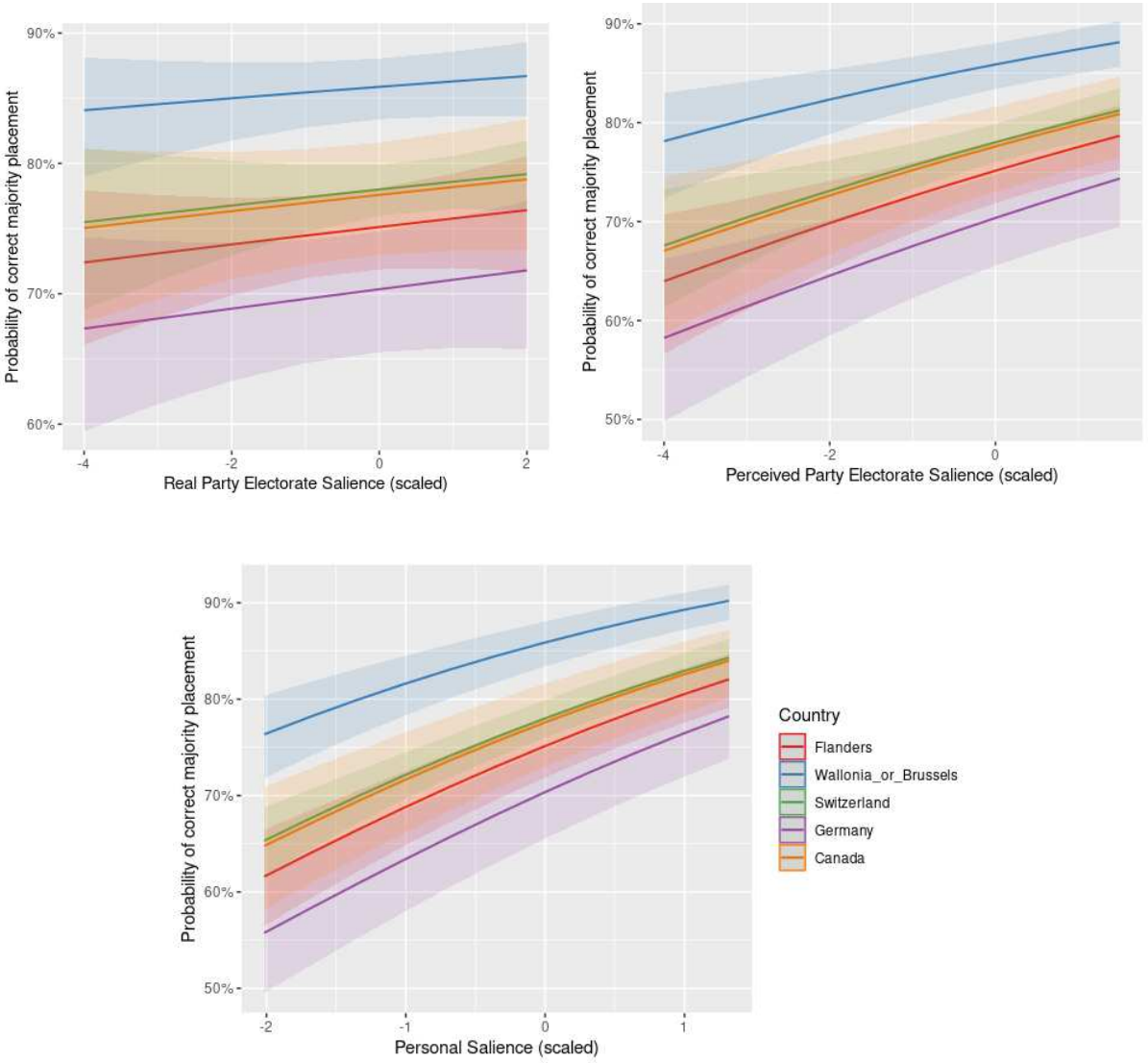

*PARTY ELECTORATE ESTIMATIONS* — Having found strong associations between our measures of salience and the accuracy of politicians' estimations of the general public, we test for the same associations on party electorate opinion – note that we do not expect to find different patterns here to begin with. Are predicted effects equally strong? **Table 4** below shows that they are. But the size and robustness of the predicted effects of the three salience measures is a little different this time. Politicians are still more likely to accurately estimate majority opinion among their supporters when they *think* that more party voters care about the issue (perceived salience). However, we find that the actual importance of the issue to the party electorate (real salience) has no significant predicted effect on accurate perceptions once other factors are controlled for in Model 8. The strongest association comes from personal salience—the factor that was least important when it came to general public opinion estimation accuracy.

**Table 4** - Logistic multilevel regressions predicting accurate majority placement of party electorate

| | Model 5 | Model 6 | Model 7 | Model 8 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Real party electorate salience (scaled)** | **0.31 (0.03)*** ** | | | 0.03 (0.04) |
| **Perceived party electorate salience (scaled)** | | **0.21 (0.03)*** ** | | **0.13 (0.03)*** ** |
| **Personal salience (scaled)** | | | **0.43 (0.03)*** ** | **0.31 (0.03)*** ** |
| **Wallonia (ref. cat Flanders)** | **0.56 (0.12)*** ** | **0.71 (0.12)*** ** | **0.58 (0.13)*** ** | **0.70 (0.13)*** ** |
| **Switzerland** | **-0.23 (0.10)*** | 0.03 (0.25) | 0.12 (0.25) | 0.16 (0.10) |
| **Germany** | -0.25 (0.14) | -0.19 (0.27) | -0.13 (0.28) | -0.24 (0.14) |
| **Canada** | 0.16 (0.14) | 0.23 (0.31) | 0.29 (0.31) | 0.14 (0.15) |
| **Female** | | | | -0.03 (0.08) |
| **Seniority** | | | | 0.08 (0.10) |
| **Committee specialisation** | | | | 0.06 (0.09) |
| **Preference imbalance** | | | | **1.93 (0.15)*** ** |
| **Variance at politician level (intercept)** | 0.32 | 0.34 | 0.30 | 0.25 |
| **Variance at issue level** | | 0.30 | 0.30 | |
| **AIC** | 7341 | 6998 | 6784 | 6573 |
| **BIC** | 7388 | 7052 | 6838 | 6661 |
| **Log Likelihood** | -3663 | -3491 | -3384 | -3274 |
| **Num. obs.** | 6716 | 6550 | 6477 | 6320 |

As before, **Figure 2** shows the size of these three predicted effects by country, whilst holding constant all the control variables that were included in Model 8. All lines are positively sloped, but the predicted effects of real party electoral salience are not significant, as showed by the broad confidence intervals.

**Figure 2 –** Predicted effects of real party electorate salience, perceived party electorate salience and personal salience on probability of correct majority placement of party supporters by country (Model 8)




Again, we run models separately with one country from our dataset removed (see results in **Appendix 4**). We find that personal salience is a strong positive predictor of perceptual accuracy in all models. The association of perceived party electorate salience with perceptual accuracy is driven by the Swiss observations—when these are removed we see no significant association.

In all, our results for the party electorate estimations do largely confirm what we found earlier for the general public opinion estimations: salience matters and is positively associated with perceptual accuracy. Yet, the exact interplay and predicted effect of the different salience dimensions varies across the two types of public opinion politicians had to rate.

*ROBUSTNESS TESTS* — Correctly estimating the direction of majority opinion is an important task for politicians, but it is also helpful for them to distinguish between whether support for an issue is, for instance, overwhelmingly high or only marginally in favour. We therefore re-run our models with an alternative dependent variable to measure the association of our salience variables of interest with the *inversed* absolute percentage error of politicians' predictions, both for all voters, and for party supporters. We retain a control for preference imbalance given previous findings that politicians are better at estimating opinion when it is not skewed in one direction (Varone and Helfer, 2022). The results of the combined models are displayed in **Table 5** below.

**Table 5** - Multilevel regressions predicting accuracy of politicians' estimation of general public and party electorate opinion

| | General public | Party electorate |
|---|---|---|
| **Real public/party electorate salience (scaled)** | 0.25 (0.21) | **-0.49 (0.22)*** |
| **Perceived public/party electorate salience (scaled)** | **2.05 (0.19)***** | -0.01 (0.22) |
| **Personal salience (scaled)** | 0.34 (0.19) | **2.80 (0.22)***** |
| **Wallonia (ref. cat Flanders)** | 0.78 (0.69) | 1.46 (0.82) |
| **Switzerland** | -3.25 (0.58) | 0.43 (0.71) |
| **Germany** | -1.29 (0.82) | **-2.25 (0.98)*** |
| **Canada** | 0.03 (0.83) | 0.67 (1.02) |
| **Sex** | -0.04 (0.44) | -0.08 (0.53) |
| **Seniority** | 0.19 (0.55) | 1.52 (0.66)* |
| **Committee specialism** | -0.07 (0.53) | -0.41 (0.58) |
| **Preference Imbalance** | **-11.66 (0.84)***** | **4.19 (0.95)***** |
| **Variance at politician level (intercept)** | 8.12 | 17.49 |
| **AIC** | 52,494 | 53,031 |
| **BIC** | 52,588 | 53,126 |
| **Log Likelihood** | -26,233 | -26,502 |
| **Num. obs.** | 6,404 | 6,320 |

$^{***}p < 0.001$; $^{**}p < 0.01$; $^{*}p < 0.05$

The results are consistent with some of what we found with the cruder task of placing the majority correctly: issue salience does affect the more demanding estimation of the share of people supporting a policy. We again see that politicians' perceptions of salience have the greatest positive association with accurate estimations of all voters, whereas it is the personal importance to politicians that drives more accurate estimations of party supporters—this is what we found earlier as well. But the results are more spotty this time, we have less significant coefficients although most of them have the expected positive sign. There is one anomaly in these percentage error results, though, and that is the significantly negative predicted relationship between real public salience and perceptual accuracy of politicians' estimations of party supporters. This suggests that when party supporters really care about an issue politicians have a harder time rating the exact share who support the policy. These intuitively contradictory findings necessarily nuance our conclusions, and caution us to draw too affirmative conclusions.

Finally, one potential weakness of our decision to use the proportion of respondents offering no opinion as our dependent variable is that such a measure may capture a gender-biased measurement of salience given the well-documented effect of women being less willing to commit to an opinion on political issues in a survey (Atkeson and Rapoport, 2003; Lizotte and Sidman, 2009). However, this would only matter if there were significant gendered differences in opinion on any of our survey items, otherwise even if men were more likely to offer an opinion the survey results would still capture aggregate public opinion. Therefore, we calculated if gender was a significant factor affecting citizens' views on any of our policy items, finding this to be the case in 14 of our 43 policy questions. We then re-ran the analysis excluding politicians' estimations of opinion on these items. We still found that perceived salience had the greatest relationship with perceptual accuracy of politicians identifying majority supporter or overall levels of support among all voters, and similarly for the predicted effect of personal salience on identifying preferences among party supporters. The results are contained in **Appendix 5**.

## Discussion and conclusion

With this study, we sought to contribute to the growing literature on politicians' perceptions of public opinion and the accuracy thereof. We found that issue salience matters for perceptual accuracy. When issues are more important, politicians' perception of majority opinion are more accurate as well. We show that when politicians have a greater willingness to understand public opinion, they are able to form more accurate perceptions. Predicted effects are quite robust, and in some cases they are quite strong. They are observed across specifications of perceptual accuracy and across countries, which

suggests that they may be generic and extend to other countries as well. We also found interesting differences across the two opinions politicians were asked to rate: for the general public accuracy is mostly driven by politicians' perception of public salience, but for their own electorate accuracy is mostly driven by politicians' personal salience. This suggests that mechanics leading to estimations of the general public and the own electorate are to some extent different.

Alongside these findings of an association between salience and perceptual accuracy however, we also find that the unipolarity ("preference imbalance") of an issue has a much stronger association with perceptual accuracy. Indeed, this is mentioned by Clausen (1977) as one of the main 'contextual factors' likely to affect perceptual accuracy alongside salience and politicians' sources of information. Whilst it is logical for politicians to be better able to identify majority opinion when opinions are more unipolar, this is not necessarily the case when politicians are estimating the exact percentage supporting a proposal. It is more electorally risky for politicians to perceive that 45% of citizens support a proposal when in fact 55% do, than it is for them to perceive 80% support when the true figure is 90%. Indeed, we observe that politicians make less accurate predictions on levels of support among voters when opinion is more unipolar (although not when estimating among party supporters). We propose that future research in this area should examine whether politicians make more accurate estimations of public opinion on more unipolar issues of similar salience, and to investigate more the reasons behind this.

The picture emerging from the body of work addressing politicians' public opinion perception was a rather bleak one: politicians do not excel at estimating what the public wants. This raised doubts as to their capacity to devise responsive policies, even if they wanted to. Our results form a reason to nuance the conclusions previous studies reached. Yes, politicians may be bad when estimating public opinion or their party electorate's preferences across issues, but when they think it really matters, they are considerably better at it. This good news is limited, however. In none of our models does the predicted effect of 'real public salience' outperform that of the two subjective dimensions of salience — perceived salience and personal salience. This implies that the reality of public opinion matters less for accuracy than the subjective versions of it. It suggests that accuracy is driven by the *motivation* of politicians to form an accurate image of what people want, rather than by the *opportunity* to learn what the population wants. The consequence is that when politicians under-estimate real public salience, they will also be less likely to correctly gauge support for a policy. And, when the salience they personally attribute to an issue does not match the real public salience, they will also be more likely to inaccurately estimate public support for the policy. The accuracy of politicians' estimations is more driven by an electoral logic (perceived public salience) and by an ideological logic (personal salience) than by public opinion reality.

For democratic systems to increase politicians' knowledge of what citizens want, perceptions of salience are centrally important. Voter control can be enhanced by citizens caring more about an issue, by communicating to politicians that they care, or by trying to make politicians personally care more about an issue. Citizens thus have an interest in communicating not only what they want, but how important it is to them. The established finding that issue salience drives policy responsiveness—when people care about an issue the chance increases that they get the policies they want (see for example Baumgartner & Jones, 1993; Burstein, 2004)—could in fact be partially due to salience driving the perceptual accuracy of decision-makers.

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## APPENDICES

### (1) Information about the politician survey

In the framework of the POLPOP project, we surveyed members of parliament (MPs) from Belgium (Flanders and Wallonia separately), Canada, Germany and Switzerland. In each country, *national* MPs were surveyed. In Belgium, Canada and Switzerland, we also surveyed *regional* MPs. In Belgium, exceptionally, we also targeted ministers and party leaders (note that ministers in Belgium are not in parliament, but some party leaders are).

In Belgium, Canada and Switzerland, *all* MPs from the targeted populations were invited to participate in the study. In Germany, a slightly different procedure was followed because of the large size of the German Bundestag (19th legislative period), which consisted of 709 members. A stratified sampling procedure was used and groups of politicians were contacted in several rounds. Sampling and contacting were terminated after 79 interviews were done—at that moment, 511 politicians had been contacted. Table A1.1 below shows the response rates for country and level.

**Table A1.1.** Population of targeted politicians, sample, response rate and timing surveys

| | | Population | Sample | Response rate (%) | Timing surveys |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Canda | National MPs | 334 | 50 | 15 | March-Sep 2019 |
| | Regional MPs | 124 | 30 | 24 | |
| | Total Canada | 458 | 80 | 17 | |
| Flanders | National MPs, ministers & party leaders | 98 | 77 | 77 | March-July 2018 |
| | Regional MPs, ministers & party leaders | 135 | 102 | 77 | |
| | Total Flanders | 233 | 179 | 77 | |
| Germany | National MPs | 511 | 79 | 16 | Sep 2018-Feb 20191 |
| Switzerland | National MPs | 236 | 151 | 64 | Aug-Oct 2018 |
| | Regional MPS | 259 | 217 | 84 | |
| | Total Switzerland | 495 | 368 | 74 | |
| Wallonia | National MPs and party leaders | 65 | 43 | 62 | March-July 2018 |
| | Regional MPs and party leaders | 149 | 117 | 80 | |
| | Total Wallonia | 214 | 160 | 75 | |
| | Total | 1.911 | 866 | 45 | |

Note, moreover, that the sample of participating politicians is representative for the full population in each country with regard to gender, age, and seniority. Table A1.2 shows the representativeness of the data on these key characteristics. The table shows that, some (substantively small) deviations notwithstanding, our data are representative for the full population.

**Table A1.2.** Population of targeted politicians and sample who participated

| | Canada | | Belgium | | Germany | | Switzerland | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Sample | Population | Sample | Population | Sample | Population | Sample | Population |
| Female (%) | 39% | 31% | 37% | 39% | 25% | 31% | 32% | 32% |
| Mean age in years | 52 | 52 | 50 | 50 | 50 | 49 | 51 | 52 |
| Mean seniority in years | 6 | 6 | 11 | 11 | 5 | 6 | 10 | 11 |

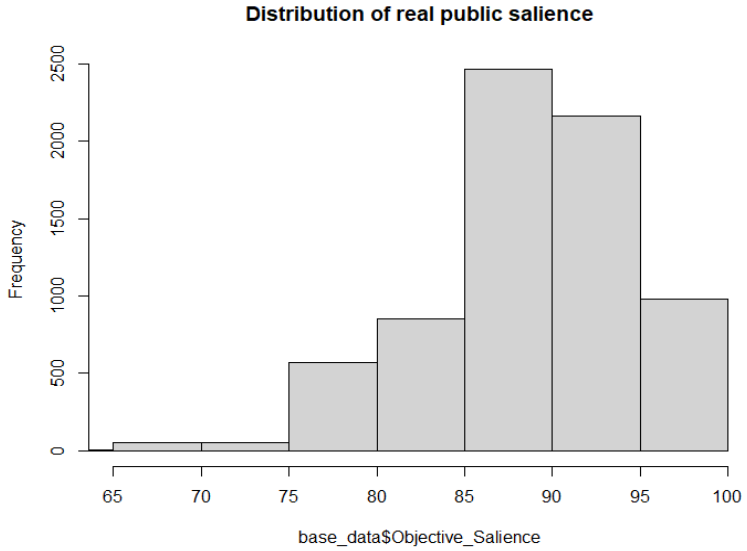
**(2) List of policy proposals for each country**

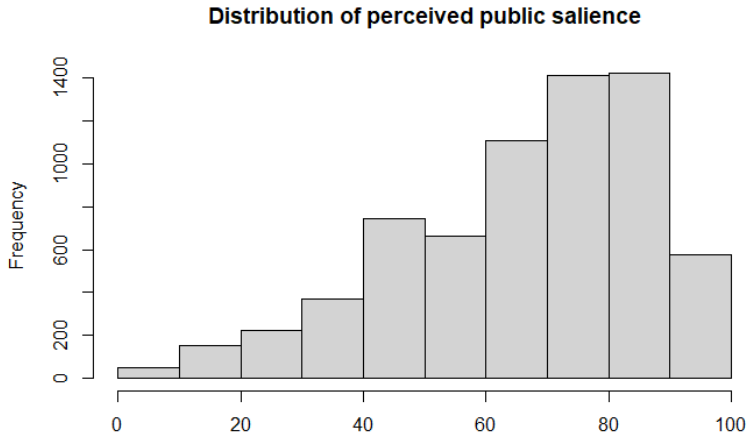
| | |
|---|---|
| Belgium (Flanders) | |
| 1 | National armies should be replaced by one European army. |
| 2 | Voting should remain compulsory. |
| 3 | The most polluting cars should be forbidden in cities. |
| 4 | Company cars should be more heavily taxed. |
| 5 | The right to strike should be restricted. |
| 6 | Belgium should never expel someone to a country where human rights are violated. |
| 7 | The full income of all parliamentarians should be published yearly. |
| 8 | The retirement age may not exceed 67 years. |
| Belgium (Wallonia) | |
| 1 | National armies should be replaced by one European army. |
| 2 | Voting should remain compulsory. |
| 3 | The most polluting cars should be forbidden in cities. |
| 4 | Company cars should be more heavily taxed. |
| 5 | The right to strike should be restricted. |
| 6 | Belgium should never expel someone to a country where human rights are violated. |
| 7 | The full income of all parliamentarians should be published yearly. |
| 8 | The retirement age may not exceed 67 years. |
| Canada | |
| 1 | Canada should increase the number of immigrants it admits each year. |
| 2 | The government should provide a guaranteed annual income. |
| 3 | The federal government should support the building of oil pipelines in Canada. |
| 4 | The federal government should have more powers to combat terrorism, even if it means that citizens have to give up more privacy. |
| 5 | A carbon tax is a good policy to help reduce greenhouse gas emissions. |
| 6 | The retirement age to receive Canada Pension Plan benefits should be raised to 70. |
| 7 | The Goods and Services Tax (GST or HST) should be increased. |
| 8 | Individuals who are terminally ill should be allowed to end their lives with the assistance of a doctor. |
| Germany | |
| Batch A | |
| 1 | The cooperation between EU member states should be strengthened. |
| 2 | Video surveillance in public spaces should be expanded. |
| 3 | Citizens with higher incomes should be taxed more heavily than today. |
| 4 | There should be referendums at the federal level. |

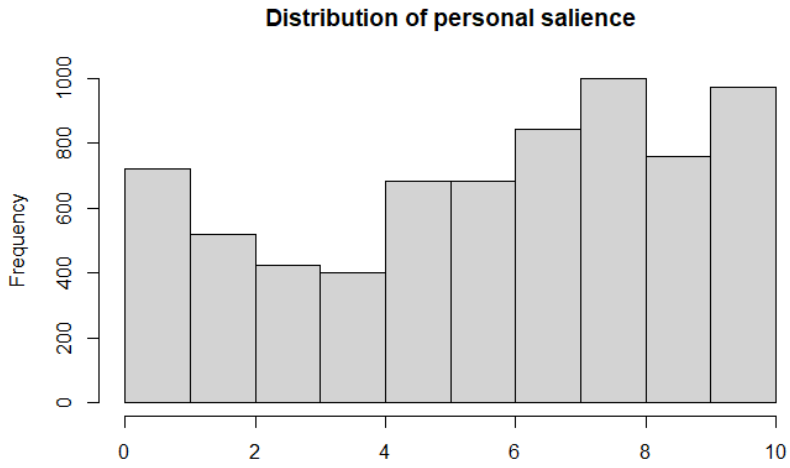
| | |
|---|---|
| 5 | There should be more driving restrictions in cities suffering from air pollution. |
| 6 | The retirement age should be raised step by step. |
| 7 | If equally qualified, women should be privileged on the labor market. |
| 8 | Foreign citizens' children that were born and raised in Germany should be allowed to keep their parent's citizenship in addition to the German citizenship. |
| Germany | |
| Batch B | |
| 1 | There should be no further EU enlargement. |
| 2 | Delinquents should be punished more severely. |
| 3 | Income and wealth should be redistributed in favor of poorer people. |
| 4 | The electoral age should be lowered to 16 years for federal elections. |
| 5 | Activities with high CO2 emissions such as air travel should be taxed more heavily. |
| 6 | There should be a right to full-time child care until the end of elementary school. |
| 7 | There should be an "opt-out" system for organ donations. Everyone that does not decline explicitly would be organ donor. |
| 8 | Declined asylum seekers should be more consequently deported. |
| Switzerland | |
| Batch A | |
| 1 | Switzerland needs to buy new fighter jets. |
| 2 | Jobs in my Canton need to be reserved for people residing in my Canton. |
| 3 | The concerned Cantons need to allow the hunting of wolves that attack flock. |
| 4 | Hospitals need to have a "Babyklappe" where parents can leave their infant anonymously. |
| 5 | Sexual harassment at work needs to be punished more severely. |
| 6 | Switzerland should only accept well-educated immigrants. |
| 7 | Citizens should be able to participate in federal elections via the internet. |
| 8 | Taxes on high-income should be raised while taxes on low-income should be reduced. |
| 9 | The pension age needs to be raised to 67. |
| Switzerland | |
| Batch B | |
| 1 | Civil defense facilities that are not in use need to be closed for good. |
| 2 | Elderly employees need to be protected better from dismissal. |
| 3 | Private households should be able to freely choose their electricity provider. |
| 4 | Same-sex couples who have registered their partnership should be allowed to adopt children. |
| 5 | The police needs to prevent unauthorized demonstrations at all costs. |
| 6 | My Canton should spend more on the integration of asylum seekers. |
| 7 | Foreigners who have lived in Switzerland for at least ten years should be able to participate in Cantonal elections and referenda. |

| | |
|---|---|
| 8 | Wedded people should be assessed separately for taxation. |
| 9 | My canton should create a cantonal health insurance institution for its residents. |

## (3) Distribution of main independent variables



## 4. Robustness checks: removing single countries

**Table shows the results of the determinants of correct majority placements with one country missing, and then combined**

| | NO SWITZERLAND | NO FLANDERS | NO WALLONIA | NO GERMANY | NO CANADA | COMBINED[5] |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **REAL PUBLIC SALIENCE (SCALED)** | 0.12 (0.05)$^{*}$ | 0.05 (0.03) | 0.05 (0.03) | 0.06 (0.03) | 0.08 (0.03)$^{*}$ | 0.07(0.03)$^{*}$ |
| **PERCEIVED PUBLIC SALIENCE (SCALED)** | 0.15 (0.04)$^{***}$ | 0.23 (0.03)$^{***}$ | 0.22 (0.03)$^{***}$ | 0.16 (0.03)$^{***}$ | 0.18 (0.03)$^{***}$ | 0.19 (0.03)$^{***}$ |
| **PERSONAL SALIENCE (SCALED)** | 0.06 (0.04) | 0.03 (0.03) | 0.04 (0.03) | 0.05 (0.03) | 0.05 (0.03) | 0.04 (0.03) |
| **FEMALE** | -0.15 (0.09) | -0.02 (0.07) | -0.02 (0.07) | -0.01 (0.07) | -0.02 (0.07) | -0.03 (0.06) |
| **SENIORITY** | -0.19 (0.11) | -0.01 (0.09) | 0.04 (0.09) | -0.05 (0.08) | 0.02 (0.09) | -0.03 (0.08) |
| **COMMITTEE SPECIALISM** | 0.13 (0.11) | 0.11 (0.09) | 0.04 (0.09) | 0.10 (0.08) | 0.06 (0.08) | 0.08 (0.08) |
| **PREFERENCE IMBALANCE** | 2.39 (0.23)$^{***}$ | 1.64 (0.14)$^{***}$ | 1.60 (0.14)$^{***}$ | 1.76 (0.14)$^{***}$ | 1.60 (0.14)$^{***}$ | 1.74 (0.13)$^{***}$ |
| **VARIANCE AT POLITICIAN** | 0.16 | 0.05 | 0.09 | 0.09 | 0.10 | 0.09 |
| **AIC** | 4133 | 6395 | 6440 | 7073 | 7150 | 7802 |
| **BIC** | 4208 | 6474 | 6519 | 7152 | 7230 | 7890 |
| **LOG LIKELIHOOD** | -2055 | -3186 | -3208 | -3524 | -3563 | -3888 |
| **NUM. OBS.** | 3636 | 5193 | 5191 | 5776 | 5820 | 6404 |

**$^{***}$P < 0.001; $^{**}$P < 0.01; $^{*}$P < 0.05**

[5] Country-level coefficients not shown

**Table shows the results of the determinants of correct majority placement of party supporters by individual country, and combined**

| | NO SWITZERLAND | NO FLANDERS | NO WALLONIA | NO GERMANY | NO CANADA | COMBINED[6] |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **REAL PARTY SALIENCE (SCALED)** | -0.11 (0.06) | 0.05 (0.04) | 0.05 (0.04) | 0.04 (0.04) | 0.05 (0.04) | 0.03 (0.04) |
| **PERCEIVED PARTY SALIENCE (SCALED)** | 0.09 (0.05) | 0.16 (0.04)*** | 0.15 (0.04)*** | 0.13 (0.04)*** | 0.12 (0.03)*** | 0.13 (0.03)*** |
| **PERSONAL SALIENCE (SCALED)** | 0.29 (0.05)*** | 0.31 (0.04)*** | 0.30 (0.04)*** | 0.33 (0.04)*** | 0.34 (0.03)*** | 0.31 (0.03)*** |
| **FEMALE** | -0.19 (0.11) | 0.02 (0.09) | -0.00 (0.08) | 0.04 (0.08) | -0.03 (0.08) | -0.03 (0.08) |
| **SENIORITY** | 0.02 (0.14) | 0.04 (0.11) | 0.09 (0.10) | 0.08 (0.10) | 0.14 (0.11) | 0.08 (0.10) |
| **COMMITTEE SPECIALISM** | 0.07 (0.13) | 0.08 (0.10) | 0.07 (0.10) | 0.07 (0.10) | 0.03 (0.10) | 0.06 (0.09) |
| **PREFERENCE IMBALANCE** | 2.67 (0.22)*** | 1.60 (0.16)*** | 2.04 (0.16)*** | 1.95 (0.16)*** | 1.74 (0.16)*** | 1.93 (0.15)*** |
| **VARIANCE AT POLITICIAN LEVEL** | 0.35 | 0.20 | 0.20 | 0.28 | 0.28 | 0.25 |
| **AIC** | 3420 | 5355 | 5603 | 5856 | 6047 | 6573 |
| **BIC** | 3494 | 5433 | 5681 | 5936 | 6127 | 6661 |
| **LOG LIKELIHOOD** | -1698 | -2665 | -2789 | -2916 | -3012 | -3274 |
| **NUM. OBS.** | 3464 | 5136 | 5185 | 5709 | 5786 | 6320 |
| | ***p < 0.001; **p < 0.01; *p < 0.05 | | | | | |

[6] Country-level coefficients not shown

**(4) Robustness checks: excluding survey items with a gendered difference in opinion**

| | MAJORITY PLACEMENT: ALL VOTERS | PERCEPTUAL ACCURACY: ALL VOTERS | MAJORITY PLACE PARTY SUPPORT |
|---|---|---|---|
| **REAL PARTY SALIENCE (SCALED)** | 0.10 (0.05) | -1.02 (0.31)*** | -0.16 (0.06) |
| **PERCEIVED PARTY SALIENCE (SCALED)** | **0.13 (0.04)*** ** | **1.28 (0.28)*** ** | **0.14 (0.05)** ** |
| **PERSONAL SALIENCE (SCALED)** | **0.12 (0.04)** ** | 0.54 (0.28) | **0.19 (0.05)*** ** |
| **WALLONIA** | 0.12 (0.13) | 3.10 (0.83)*** | 0.93 (0.15)*** |
| **SWITZERLAND** | -0.08 (0.11) | 0.67 (0.75) | 0.47 (0.14)** |
| **GERMANY** | 0.01 (0.14) | -0.79 (0.96) | -0.16 (0.16) |
| **CANADA** | 0.35 (0.28) | 0.02 (1.82) | 0.89 (0.40)* |
| **SEX** | 0.02 (0.08) | 0.88 (0.58) | 0.07 (0.10) |
| **SENIORITY** | 0.01 (0.10) | 0.17 (0.73) | 0.04 (0.13) |
| **COMMITTEE SPECIALISM** | -0.01 (0.11) | -0.41 (0.74) | 0.02 (0.13) |
| **PREFERENCE IMBALANCE** | 1.26 (0.22)*** | | 1.85 (0.22)*** |
| **VARIANCE AT POLITICIAN LEVEL** | 0.02 | 5.09 | 0.21 |
| **NUM. OBS.** | 3284 | 3284 | 3200 |