Mechanisms of political responsiveness : the information sources shaping elected representatives' policy actions

Mechanisms of political responsiveness

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Abstract

This paper examines the micro-level foundations of how policy responsiveness may come about. Our study builds on the assumption that elected officials' information source use shapes their policy actions. We analyze the variation in information sources elected officials rely on for agenda-setting and policy formulation, distinguishing between public opinion sources, advocacy sources, and expert sources. Additionally, we examine how elected officials' public opinion sources vary across individuals, parties, and political systems. Based on a 2015 survey with 345 Members of Parliament in Belgium and Canada, the results indicate that the actions of elected representatives are more affected by public opinion sources like citizens and the mass media when they initially prioritize issues for policy action, while interest groups are prominent in both stages, and parties and expert sources are more used in the policy formulation phase. Furthermore, politicians in majoritarian systems, those belonging to the opposition and members of populist parties, tend to rely more on public opinion sources than their peers in proportional systems, those in the majority and non-populist parties.

Keywords. Political elites, information sources, representation, public opinion, responsiveness

Introduction

In a democracy, policies are expected to reflect citizens' preferences, and there should be no persistent and systematic discrepancy between public opinion and policies (Dahl, 1998). Policies reflecting citizens' preferences provide legitimacy, affect citizens' overall satisfaction with the functioning of democracy, foster democratic trust and support, and create leeway for the acceptance of 'unpopular' decisions (Esaiasson et al., 2017; Linde & Peters, 2020). Of course, policies should not always blindly follow public opinion majorities as this may collide with elected representatives' need to 'act responsibly' or harm minority rights. Hence, policies unreflective of broad public preferences might sometimes be democratically desired, but a minimal overlap between citizens' preferences and policies ought to be present for political representation to function.

This simple expectation has been examined in numerous studies (for an overview, see Wlezien, 2017). The results of most of these studies pointed in the same direction. In the majority of cases, policies indeed align with citizens' preferences to some extent. Although policies are not always *congruent* with popular wishes—a policy in place is often not the exact outcome citizens want (see: Lax & Phillips, 2012)—policies tend to be *responsive*, meaning that changes in popular preferences precede matching changes in policies (Brooks & Manza, 2006; Page & Shapiro, 1983; Stimson et al., 1995).

Despite the widespread contention that 'democracy works', scholars still debate the specific factors that make policies reflect popular preferences. Various factors have been identified, including citizens' political information and participation levels, descriptive characteristics of elected representatives, the issue context, and political institutions (Elkjær, 2020; Lax & Phillips, 2012; Schakel, 2021; Soroka & Wlezien, 2010). Most work has been conducted at the aggregate, macro-level—or what Golder and Stramski (2010) have defined as

'*many-to-many*' relationships between citizens and representatives—providing much-needed insights into broad patterns of policy responsiveness.

In contrast, this study contributes by focusing on the micro-level and exploring one of the individual-level mechanisms that may explain responsiveness: elected representatives' use of information sources. We build on the assumption that information sources shape elected officials' policy actions. Different sources provide different types of information, affecting which societal problems get tackled (priorities) and what solutions are proposed (positions) (Blom-Hansen et al., 2021; Broockman & Skovron, 2018; Hertel-Fernandez et al., 2019; Hesstvedt, 2022). This is all the more the case since elected representatives suffer from daily information overload and inevitably are highly selective in what they pay attention to (Walgrave & Dejaeghere, 2017).

Specifically, we examine elected representatives' use of information sources for their self-defined most important, recent policy action. We distinguish between three primary types of information sources: those providing public opinion information, those offering expertise, and those that offer both. We analyze how elected officials utilize these sources across two distinct phases of the policymaking process: (1) agenda-setting, which involves the initial prioritization of an issue for political action, and (2) policy formulation, which encompasses deciding on the direction of the policy, evaluating policy alternatives, assessing costs and benefits, and gauging solutions' effectiveness. We assume that the more public opinion sources are used, the higher the chances that actual actions are responsive—meaning that actions match popular preferences—and that this applies both to the prioritizing and policy formulation stages. A greater reliance on policy expertise may constrain representatives' responsiveness, but prioritizing expertise over public opinion information could foster 'responsible' governance and evidence-based policymaking to effectively solve problems—an equally essential outcome aligning with voters' expectations of legislators (Fagan & McGee, 2022). As such, our study

contributes to the work on responsiveness by examining its individual-level mechanisms and comparing responsiveness across two policymaking phases, thereby further elucidating how variations in responsiveness may occur. Moreover, it clarifies when elected representatives prefer expertise over other information types when representing their constituents.

Our empirical analysis relies on a survey fielded in 2015, in which we asked Belgian (N=217) and Canadian (N=69) MPs to write up their most important policy action of the past six months and queried them, first, about the information source they used to conceive their initiative and second, about the sources they relied on to buttress their idea and turn it into concrete action. Our results indicate that the actions of elected representatives are more affected by public opinion sources (e.g., citizens and mass media) when initially prioritizing issues for policy action, while interest groups are prominent in both stages, and parties and expert sources are more used in the policy formulation phase. In contrast to public opinion and expert sources, interest groups dual information function – supplying both signals of societal support and expert knowledge – might explain their central role in both prioritization and elaboration. Additionally, we find that politicians of the opposition, those belonging to populist parties, and those residing in majoritarian systems are more likely to consult public opinion sources than their peers in the majority, non-populist parties, and those within proportional systems.

Information sources and policy responsiveness across policy phases

Information matters for responsiveness. Politicians cannot respond meaningfully and effectively to citizens' preferences without information about what the public wants. For politicians to follow or react to citizens' policy preferences, they must have a clear understanding of public sentiment and be able to provide justifications if they undertake actions running counter to the electorate's preferences (Esaiasson et al., 2017). However, assessing the state of public opinion and developing well-founded explanations for policy actions is a difficult

task involving much uncertainty. Accurate evaluations of issue urgency, popular support for political action, and policy gains and losses for affected constituents and stakeholders are hard to come by due to issue complexities, policy interdependencies, or changes in the distribution of voter preferences over time.

Enter the information supplied by third actors, such as ordinary citizens, and the mass media. These actors can signal societal concerns and urgent issues to elected officials and hold them accountable – at least to some extent – for acting on these pressing issues. Consulting ordinary people or the mass media can help politicians reduce the uncertainties associated with the information problems they face in responding to citizens' preferences. Recent research by Walgrave and co-authors confirms that elected officials spend vast amounts of time monitoring public opinion and detecting what the public wants (Soontjens & Walgrave, 2021; Walgrave et al., 2022). In other words, taking information cues from 'public opinion' sources is a prominent way for elected officials to keep themselves informed about citizens' wishes and demands (Kingdon, 1989).

However, apart from information on where the public stands, elected representatives also need specialized knowledge on the matter at hand; they need information about technicalities, legal aspects, and the societal and economic consequences of various policy alternatives. Although elected officials can specialize in a particular issue area and consult their colleagues and own staff when conceiving and elaborating policy actions (e.g. (Curry, 2019; Salisbury & Shepsle, 1981), they are increasingly inhibited from acquiring background information, advice, and draft documents via their staff because labor has been relocated to the central party apparatus (Crosson et al., 2021; Flinders & Kelso, 2011; Pattyn et al., 2017). This means elected representatives are often not only confronted with an 'informational deficit' concerning the public's concerns and wishes but may also lack the necessary expertise to develop efficient and effective policies. This second type of information comes from vastly different sources—we

call them 'expert sources' —such as scientists, civil servants, and governmental services. Contrary to public opinion sources, the actors providing expert information are (mostly) just there to aid the politician in creating sound policies without necessarily considering the whims of public sentiment.

A final set of information sources holds information on both public opinion and expertise. Examples are interest groups and political parties; we label them 'advocacy' sources as they have a dual information function. We do not argue that sources from this third category provide a distinct third type of information apart from public opinion signals or expertise. Yet, we argue that these sources almost unavoidably convey both public opinion and expert information. On the one hand, these organizations aggregate diverse interests and viewpoints in society, thus representing a public opinion information signal. Instead of the multitude of unorganized information signals engulfing politicians through citizens or the news media, interest groups and parties reduce complexity and bring focus – they organize public opinion information on issue urgency while relaying societal support for and opposition to policy actions. On the other hand, interest groups and political parties possess valuable policy expertise through their professional structures. The possession of not one but two types of information makes these organizations appealing to elected representatives.

But, what types of information sources do politicians primarily rely on? Elected officials, facing a daily information overload, are selective in their information intake due to limited processing capacities (Walgrave & Dejaeghere, 2017). Their choice of specific information sources thus significantly shapes political actions, influencing which societal issues are addressed and what solutions are proposed (Blom-Hansen et al., 2021; Broockman & Skovron, 2018; Hertel-Fernandez et al., 2019; Hesstvedt, 2022). Elected representatives' selectivity creates disparities in source use, making the type of information sources they rely on a crucial factor to consider when examining responsiveness.

In this regard, we argue that the informational needs of elected representatives differ across distinct phases in the policy process. Roughly speaking, one can distinguish between two steps: the initial discovery or prioritization phase and the later policy elaboration phase. Politicians' attention is first drawn to a particular issue or problem; it becomes urgent in their minds, and they consider that action should follow. Then, they prepare for action, decide what form it will take, what direction to pursue, and weigh the pros and cons of different solutions to a problem. We expect that relative to the later elaboration phase, public opinion information is more attractive to politicians than expertise in the initial prioritization phase. Conversely, expert knowledge is relatively preferred above public opinion information in the elaboration phase compared to the prioritization phase. When deciding what to prioritize, politicians tend to be especially sensitive to public opinion information because they want to put their scarce energy and time into actions they think the general public cares about. However, when they devise policies, public opinion information does not suffice, as they want those policies to be effective and solve the problem that bothers the people. Therefore, more specialized information is needed.

Failure to address public concerns may result in voters' electoral retribution, and – perhaps more importantly – politicians anticipate such voter control (Marsh & Tilley, 2010; Soontjens, 2022). As stated by Kollman (1998): "Politicians want to know what proportion of constituents, when voting in the next election, will weigh the actions of their elected representatives on a particular policy issue. More salient issues will weigh more heavily on voting decisions than less salient ones" (p.9).

However, while the public cares about *whether* urgent problems are tackled, they arguably care less about *how* politicians achieve this goal—this is Stokes's famous valence issue argument; for many issues, there is no apparent positional conflict among voters (Stokes, 1963). This gives politicians more leeway to explore alternative policy solutions, for which they

rely on experts. Complex problems are often elusive, and elected representatives may not even understand the nature of the problem, much less be aware of a practical solution (Baumgartner & Jones, 2015). At the same time, elected officials are risk-averse and tend to select policies that will succeed, deliver intended outcomes, and avoid those with too high a chance of failure or adverse effects (Ryan, 2018; Simon, 1957; Weaver, 1986). Their stake in electoral success drives this cautious approach, as policy failures can backfire electorally. Consequently, expert knowledge—information about technicalities, legal aspects, and the societal and economic consequences of various policy alternatives—is needed more than public opinion information in this phase.

In the elaboration phase, this information allows elected officials to react *responsibly* rather than responsively (Bardi et al. 2014; Hänni 2017; Linde & Peters 2020; Mair 2009). Constraints from international commitments, government agreements, or concerns toward future generations limit elected officials' ability to fully align policies with voters' immediate preferences, requiring them to explain their differing views (Esaiasson et al., 2017). Additionally, elaborating a policy initiative is more costly. While simply devoting attention to issues the public deems urgent can often be accomplished through uncostly symbolic actions such as asking questions in parliament or voicing positions in the media; policy elaboration tends to require a real investment, as cheap talk will not solve the problem. If elected officials do not seek expertise for this stage of the policy process, they are unlikely to effectively solve the problems voters signal as most crucial to address (Baumgartner & Jones, 2015; Fagan & McGee, 2022). Furthermore, in contrast to the initial prioritization of issues, politicians are constrained by their (party's) ideological dispositions when elaborating policies. Going against their own position and that of their party when taking policy initiatives is something policymakers only do under exceptional circumstances (Walgrave et al., 2022), while devoting attention to issues they do not consider a priority is something many may consider doing (Jacobs

& Shapiro, 2000; Kingdon, 1989). Dealing with issues that do not belong to one's ideological core is not considered a betrayal of one's ideas; it does not contradict one's ideology. Hence, in general, there is more maneuvering space for elected officials to address and be responsive to the priority concerns of citizens than to answer to their positional preferences.

Our expectation that source use will vary across policy phases fits prior research looking into the use of information sources across policy stages, particularly the studies of Kingdon (1984) and Gray and Lowery (2000). Kingdon found that what he calls 'visible participants' (e.g., parties, news media) were most influential in the problem identification stage for legislators in the US Congress. Conversely, 'invisible participants' (e.g., civil servants, staffers, and policy specialists outside government) were more influential in the policy formulation stage. Replicating the study by Kingdon in the US state legislatures, Gray and Lowery (2000) also found that state legislators primarily work from their own experiences and their constituents' concerns to generate initial policy ideas, while party-political staff, civil servants, and other sources providing expertise are key for later policy formulation. Both studies thus highlight how reliance on distinct types of information sources varies across policy stages. We believe this observed but untheorized distinction between visible and invisible participants in these studies has a theoretical foundation in policy responsiveness: politicians aim for more responsiveness in the prioritization than in the elaboration phase—hence they rely on 'visible participants' when prioritizing actions as these participants are to some extent a reflection of public opinion. Conversely, this responsiveness incentive is less prominent in the later elaboration stage. Hence, elected officials rely more on 'invisible participants' to develop sound policies. Following this discussion, we put forward two hypotheses:

H1a: Policy actions of elected representatives are relatively more affected by public opinion sources in the initial prioritizing phase compared to the later elaboration phase.

H1b: Policy actions of elected representatives are relatively more affected by expert sources in the later elaboration phase compared to the initial prioritization phase.

Concerning advocacy sources, we have no clear expectations as to why this would differ across phases. In contrast to public opinion sources like citizens and the news media or expert sources like civil servants and academics that are only connected to one specific type of information, interest groups and parties possess the unique capacity to deliver two distinct but valuable types of information. We assume that elected representatives value interest groups both for providing information on key constituencies' priorities and support for particular policy alternatives and their ability to provide technical knowledge related to the content of these policy issues. This dual information function entails that interest groups and parties are likely to be central in both stages of the policy process.

PUBLIC OPINION SOURCES—We coined the concepts of public opinion sources, advocacy sources and expert sources, but what specific sources are we talking about? We need to be more specific to assess the above hypotheses. Public opinion sources include citizens and the news media.

First, political science research has repeatedly demonstrated that ordinary citizens' policy priorities and preferences impact elected representatives' policy actions (for an overview, see Wlezien and Soroka 2016). Most work on political representation assumes politicians monitor public opinion closely, try to stay in touch with citizens, and invest a lot in finding out what citizens want (Soontjens & Walgrave, 2021). Empirical work in this regard indeed suggests that politicians tend to react to citizen-initiated contacts (Öhberg & Naurin, 2016) and that this 'incentive to listen' is motivated out of duty, driven by the anticipation of electoral competition (Soontjens & Walgrave, 2021), and the political ambition to gain higher office (Maestas, 2003). In this respect, political agenda-setting studies have repeatedly found legislative attention to be

affected by what voters consider urgent issues (e.g., (Bonafont-Chaqués & Palau, 2011; Klüver & Sagarzazu, 2016). Recent work by Walgrave and colleagues (2022), drawing on in-depth interviews with individual Belgian legislators, further confirms that when asked about the impact of public opinion on their work, many declare that the general public's priorities set their agenda.

Second, not only studies directly measuring public priorities but also work drawing on public opinion *proxies,* such as media attention for issues, almost invariably concluded that issue-specific news coverage impacts political priorities (see among many others: Vliegenthart et al., 2016). Many studies devoted considerable effort to when and how these effects materialize. While these studies have observed variations depending on characteristics of the sender (e.g., newspapers vs. television), issue (e.g., obtrusive vs. unobtrusive), receiver (e.g., government vs. opposition parties), and political agenda (e.g., parliamentary questions vs. bills), they widely show that such effects do in indeed exist (e.g. Clinton & Enamorado, 2014; Van Aelst & Walgrave, 2011). Media attention often leads to symbolic political action, which in turn serves as a precondition for establishing substantial policy positions (Sevenans, 2018b). This observation goes hand in hand with the fact that the effects of the mass media's issue prioritizations on the political agenda are larger earlier than in later decision-making stages (Melenhorst, 2015). Indeed, studies of political agenda-setting emphasize the crucial role the news media play for politicians to learn about prevailing societal problems. The media not only signal issue salience but also offer concise and focused signals of public opinion that politicians can readily utilize to inform and support their policy efforts (Van Aelst & Walgrave, 2016).

ADVOCACY SOURCES—Interest groups and social movements are usually expected to act on behalf of their constituents and thus promote the interests of their members and supporters (Schlozman et al., 2012). However, they can also be intermediaries between citizens (or public opinion) and elected officials. Indeed, interest groups provide collective interest aggregation

and articulation before government. Through the size and nature of the organizational constituency and internal democratic procedures, members and supporters can participate in decision-making processes. Furthermore, interest groups can claim broader societal representativeness by monitoring public opinion and giving specific constituencies a louder voice. As such, interest groups' endorsement of policy preferences provides a public opinion cue for elected officials. Empirical research has demonstrated that these groups respond to citizens' issue priorities, communicate issue salience, make claims in which they emphasize benefits to the economy or the public at large, and thereby affect the extent to which elected representatives address public concerns (Binderkrantz, 2020; De Bruycker & Rasmussen, 2021; Klüver, 2015; Klüver & Pickup, 2019; Rasmussen et al., 2014).

Yet, interest groups not only provide legislators with public opinion information but also with technical expertise based on the preferences of the constituency the group defends (e.g., Chalmers, 2013; De Bruycker, 2016). Interest groups' direct engagement with affected constituencies means they hold specialized (sector-specific) knowledge that others may not easily access. Interest groups also obtain expert information through their professional network, in-house research programs, and hiring of specialized staff. Both types of information – expertise and societal support/opposition – are vital to effective advocacy efforts (De Bruycker, 2016). As detailed in the methods section, our measurement of source use does not allow us to discern whether the interest group was mentioned because they delivered a public opinion signal or provided expert knowledge. Though, existing research has demonstrated that politicians rely relatively more on groups' information concerning societal priorities and signals of support/opposition during the agenda-setting stage, while this shifts toward expert information in later policy formulation and decision-making stages (Stevens, 2023).

Second, like interest groups, political parties are key intermediaries linking voters with political decision-making (Dalton et al., 2011). Several studies have confirmed that parties

listen to their electorates by prioritizing issues of concern in election manifestos (e.g., Abou-Chadi, 2018; Spoon & Klüver, 2014), and intra-party democratic procedures, for instance, make parties responsive to their members and supporters (Lehrer, 2012). Moreover, political parties invest a lot in monitoring public opinion, following and ordering polls, and subsequently adapting their positions—especially when polls show the party is losing voters (Pereira, 2019; Schumacher & Öhberg, 2020). Elected representatives' parties can thus be considered an information source to learn about citizens' concerns and, more specifically, their electorates' preferences. Yet, as with interest groups, party signals are not purely public opinion signals. Parties have scientific study services and employ policy specialists to help MPs substantiate their policy actions, which means that parties are also a source of expertise for their MPs.

EXPERT SOURCES—We argue that scientists, civil servants, and the government (ministerial advisers) are typical expert sources. First, scientists and policymakers have long been regarded as belonging to separate communities, but this image has been challenged by recent empirical work and the associated turn toward 'evidence-based' policymaking (e.g., Baekgaard et al., 2019; Head, 2016; Hesstvedt, 2022; Newman et al., 2016). Because of their unique epistemic authority, scientists can benefit policymakers as they can provide practical arguments in favor or opposition to specific policy solutions. Science can offer credible, neutral information about the potential outcomes of policy alternatives. As such, scientific results can be used to design adequate policy solutions (but also to substantiate own policy preferences).

Second, in contrast to elected officials, civil servants accumulate information and knowledge over time and combine this with specialized training (Ban et al., 2023; Christensen & Opstrup, 2018; Gailmard & Patty, 2012). As a result, civil servants possess valuable expertise on which policy action will be effective, especially regarding complex and technical dossiers. Though this often results in tension between the civil servants and their political principals

when their ideological preferences differ (Blom-Hansen et al., 2021), empirical research demonstrates that the core tasks of civil servants are to produce policy drafts and documents, to manage policies and provide information to their political principals (Page & Jenkins, 2005).

Third, ministerial advisers available to executive members are a central source of expert information in many Western democracies. In contrast to civil servants, these advisers are temporary servants appointed to provide partisan advice and are thus exempt from impartiality requirements (Shaw & Eichbaum, 2018). These advisers are selected to bring in additional expertise and foster a relationship built on personal trust between the expertise delivered and the minister using it (Brans et al., 2017). In many Western democracies, these ministerial advisers prepare and initiate most policy output, while the role of parliaments in drafting legislation and budgets has been circumscribed. Still, parliamentary control over government actions has not waned. To oversee government actions, MPs, especially those of the opposition, request and use information from ministers' offices. This information stemming from ministers' offices can, of course, also help MPs to buttress their policy ideas.

Differences in public opinion source use across politicians, parties, and political systems

So far, we argued that source use would vary across policy stages and that public opinion sources would be relatively more consulted in the prioritizing phase compared to the elaboration phase, where expert sources would be relatively more prevalent. Yet, it is likely that there are also differences across politicians, parties, and political systems in source use. The assumption underlying these variations in the use of information sources is that the informative value of public opinion sources is more prominent for some elected representatives than others (cf. Sevenans, 2018a), for some parties more than others, and in some systems more than others. We identified five possible predictors.

First, we expect variation depending on the type of function the representative holds. Although politicians are overloaded with information, this is even more true for politicians in higher-ranked positions (e.g., ministers and party leaders) (Walgrave & Dejaeghere, 2017). As a result, they must deal with information more selectively than ordinary MPs. Not only are ordinary MPs generally targeted less by various societal actors, they are also less dependent on specialized information about existing problems and their solutions compared to their higher-ranking colleagues. This is because, unlike their colleagues in the executive, they have fewer responsibilities in developing policies and party stances. At the same time, ordinary MPs enjoy greater flexibility to engage in day-to-day party politics. They depend on public opinion sources to challenge competitors and gauge the public mood. By being responsive to salient issues, they strategically aim to make their mark on 'hot topics' potentially enhancing their visibility both in the parliament and the news media.

H2: The policy actions of ordinary representatives are relatively more affected by public opinion sources than the actions of those representatives who hold higher positions.

Second, we expect representatives who view themselves as a conduit of the public—we call them 'delegates'—to be more inclined to rely on public opinion sources than those acting on their own judgment—trustees. Since delegates aim to follow the public's immediate preferences, they need to know public opinion better than trustees, hence their greater reliance on public opinion sources. In contrast, trustees are expected to put their platform first, believing this best serves the people in the long run, and thus are expected to rely somewhat less on public opinion sources than delegates (cf. (Zoizner et al., 2017).

H3: The policy actions of elected representatives who adhere to a delegate role are relatively more affected by public opinion sources than the actions of those who adhere to a trustee role.

Third, we expect opposition members to rely more on public opinion sources than majority members. Recent empirical work demonstrates that opposition members react more strongly to, for instance, (organized) public opinion signals and media information than majority members do (Hutter & Vliegenthart, 2018; Vliegenthart et al., 2016; Walgrave et al., 2022). For one, opposition members have fewer alternative information sources at their disposal (Sevenans, 2018a). For example, they cannot access information inside the government. Moreover, news reports are typically negative in tone – containing conflict and blame attributions– focused on problems rather than solutions. This information is inherently more helpful for opposition members as it gives them ammunition to criticize the government. At the same time, members of the governing majority are more conflict-avoiding and focused on policy formulation, making public opinion sources less relevant (Sevenans, 2018a).

H4: The policy actions of elected representatives who belong to opposition parties are relatively more affected by public opinion sources than the actions of those who belong to the governing majority.

Next, we examine whether politicians' use of sources depends on how populist their party is. While there is some disagreement regarding the conceptualization of populism, in general it is believed that populists tend to divide society into two antagonistic groups, namely the 'pure' people and the 'corrupt' elites (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). As a result, populist rhetoric is characterized by anti-establishment claims that emphasize the need for representatives to adhere to the will of the people, as the general public is claimed to be the only source of legitimate

democratic authority (Norris & Inglehart, 2019). However, to abide by the people's wishes, populists must first learn about those wishes.

H5: The policy actions of elected representatives who belong to populist parties are relatively more affected by public opinion sources than the actions of those who belong to non-populist parties.

Finally, at the system level, we look at the use of information sources by representatives of different political systems. Representatives in majoritarian systems elected in single-member districts rely more directly on their constituents' support than those elected in multimember districts within proportional systems (Blombren & Rozenberg, 2012). Politicians in single-member districts are directly electable, unlike politicians in multimember districts, where a politician's electability depends on the number of votes their party receives in their district during elections. We expect these different dynamics to result in different behavior, with politicians from majoritarian systems more strongly connected to their constituents and thus more adherent to public opinion sources.

H6: The policy actions of elected representatives active in majoritarian systems are relatively more affected by public opinion sources than the actions of those active in proportional systems.

Data and methods

We use data from the 2015 Elected Representatives' Survey of the INFOPOL project. Politicians in Canada, Belgium, and Israel were surveyed. This study only uses data from the survey administered to politicians in Canada and Belgium due to the specific response rates on the survey questions of interest in this study. Fieldwork was conducted by local research teams

between March 2015 and August 2015, usually in the representatives' offices. The full population of Belgian national and regional politicians, all Ontario provincial politicians and a sample of national Canadian politicians, were contacted[i]. Those who decided to participate were asked to complete a survey in the native language of the MP (English, Dutch, or French) on a laptop brought by the researcher. In total, 345 politicians participated in the study, representing an overall response rate of 50%. Of these, 272 Belgian politicians were surveyed: 113 active at the national level and 159 at the regional level. This represents an overall response rate of 66%, which is exceptionally high compared to response rates in other countries and studies (Deschouwer & Depauw, 2014). In Canada, 76 politicians were interviewed: 45 national politicians and 31 regional politicians. This corresponds to a response rate of 27%. Despite a lower response rate in Canada, it can still be considered average compared to similar elite research, where response rates typically hover around 25% (for an overview, see Bailer, 2014 and Kertzer & Renson, 2022). Furthermore, prior research has shown that response bias is limited in our sample, making it sufficiently representative of the elite population (Walgrave & Joly, 2018)[ii]. Data representativeness is further discussed in Appendix 3.

The two countries in our sample constitute developed parliamentary democracies. Specifically, Canada and Belgium both have federal systems, with separate elections at the federal and regional levels. However, while in Canada, representatives are elected in single-member districts on a first-past-the-post majoritarian basis, in Belgium, representatives are elected in multimember districts using a proportional system. These differences result in different representational role conceptions for representatives in both countries, with Canadian politicians more strongly connected to their constituents than their Belgian counterparts (Blombren & Rozenberg, 2012). That said, party discipline is strong in both countries, with MPs rarely deviating from the party line (Marland, 2008, p8; Pilet & Meier, 2018). Furthermore, whereas the political landscape in Belgium is fragmented, with eleven parties

currently represented federally, Canadian politics revolves around only five parties holding seats in the federal parliament. Due to their different electoral system and party landscape, the government formation differs between the two countries. While the federal government has thus far consisted of only one party in Canada, governments in Belgium are characterized by multiparty coalitions. Finally, the two countries differ in how (interest) groups and other non-governmental expert sources influence policy. Canada is characterized by its pluralistic system in which individuals, political parties, interest groups, and other non-governmental expert sources compete for influence. Belgium has a neo-corporatist system where the government, a privileged set of interest groups, and other non-governmental expert sources systematically shape public policy. All this implies that the way politicians make decisions and act differs between the two countries. Therefore, although our sample is not straightforwardly generalizable to other political systems, the variation across both countries represents a most-different systems design, allowing us to cautiously generalize to a more extensive set of developed democracies.

DEPENDENT VARIABLE: SOURCE USE—The starting point of our study is politicians self-declared most important policy action from the past six months. Specifically, politicians were asked: "*When you reflect on your policy activities, what is the most important single action you have taken in the past six months?*" Following this question, politicians were presented with examples of what these actions might entail. The full instructions given in the survey can be found in Appendix 2. Politicians wrote down their most important action (MIA) in their own words in an open text field. The data shows that politicians in both countries primarily engaged in prepping and submitting parliamentary documents (e.g., '*proposed a decree on speed limits*'; '*drafted a resolution on social dumping*'). As for the other actions, while Belgian politicians were more likely to ask questions, participate in debates (e.g. '*parliamentary question about*

the problems of prison overcrowding', '*debate in parliament on budgetary control'*), and engage in policy actions related to their party's internal working (e.g. '*decide on the parties position on the indexation of rent'*; '*interference at party meetings'*), Canadian politicians were more involved in public advocacy (e.g. '*advocacy on behalf of missing and murdered indigenous women and girls'*; '*coordinated a protest in my riding on electricity rates'*). A detailed description can be found in Appendix 3.

To find out how the issue underlying this action got on their radar and why they chose to prioritize it, politicians were then asked where their initial idea to take this action came from: "*When you think about your most important action, can you tell us where you got the initial idea to take that action? In other words, what was the source of information that caught your attention?*". Here, politicians could indicate among multiple closed options which source they consulted for the initial conception of their policy action: (1) mass media or journalist; (2) citizens; (3) family, friends, acquaintances; (4) interest group or social movement; (5) company; (6) (member of) another party; (7) civil servant; (8) a scientist or other expert; (9) (member of) own party; (10) ministerial cabinet; (11) foreign example; (12) government; (13) themselves; and (14) other. Concretely, 'family, friends and acquaintances' was combined with 'citizens', and 'ministerial cabinet' was combined with 'government'. Furthermore, for each of the 60 politicians who chose 'other' as their primary source, we examined the open answer they provided. After inspection, 48 answers could be coded under the existing categories. The remaining 'other' answers were excluded from the analysis.

In a final step, respondents were asked to indicate which sources they consulted to further elaborate on their most important action (MIA): "*What were the two most useful sources of information that helped you develop your action? This can of course also be the source from which you got the initial idea. Please indicate below the two most important sources of information.*"[iii]. Politicians were presented with the same answer options as in the initial phase

but were asked to specify two sources instead of one. As in the initial stage, we recoded, out of 71 open 'other' answers, 63 responses under existing categories.

To run our analyses, we constructed a stacked data set, so each politician is repeated once for every stage, and which contains three dichotomous variables capturing the use of information sources: whether a politician relied on (at least one) public opinion source(s), whether they relied on (at least one) expert source(s), whether they relied on (at least one) interest group source(s), whether they relied on (at least one) political party source(s), or whether they relied on their own ideas and experiences. The other categories (i.e., foreign example and other) could not be classified under any of these denominators and were therefore excluded[iv]. To signal the data's representativeness, Appendix 3 details the elected representatives' use of sources across types of actions and policy areas.

INDEPENDENT VARIABLES—To check elected officials' role orientation, respondents were asked to indicate whether they believed their task to be mostly about "responding to citizens' demands" (i.e., delegate) or "acting on behalf of the citizens" (i.e., trustee). Based on these results, a dummy distinguishes those who see themselves more as trustees (1) from those who see themselves as delegates (0). To specify the politician's status, we computed a dummy indicating whether they hold/held a high-ranking position (i.e., minister, party leader, or state secretary; 1) or not (0). At the party level, a dummy was added, stipulating whether the politician was part of the governing majority (1) or the opposition (0) at the time of data collection. In addition, we added a variable based on data from the Global Party Survey (2019), capturing the extent to which the party a politician belongs to uses populist rhetoric. A country-specific group of experts scored parties (including from Belgium and Canada) on a scale from 0 to 10 based on the amount of populist or pluralist rhetoric they used[v]. The final value was then calculated based on the average of these scores. Finally, at the system level, a dummy

indicates whether the politician operates in the majoritarian Canadian (1) or the Belgian proportional system (0). Apart from the variables above, several control variables at the individual level were included in our models, such as gender, age, political seniority, left-right ideology, whether the politician is active at the regional or national level[vi], and whether the politician self-identifies as a policy specialist or generalist. A detailed description of these variables can be found in Appendix 2.

Results

To assess whether politicians use different sources for their most important action (MIA) in the initial phase compared to the elaboration phase, we first inspect the percentage of politicians using various sources per stage. The results in **Figure 1** demonstrate that the politicians in our sample relied most on their own ideas (22%) and interest groups (21%) in the initial stages of the policy process. This is partially in line with the study of Gray and Lowery (2000), who also found that own ideas are the most important source for the conception of policy actions. In addition, about the same number of politicians indicate they rely on citizens (13%), the media (12%), their party (12%), and the government (10%). Finally, fewer politicians refer to scientists (5%) and civil servants (2%) as their primary sources of information.

Figure 1 - Initial and elaboration sources
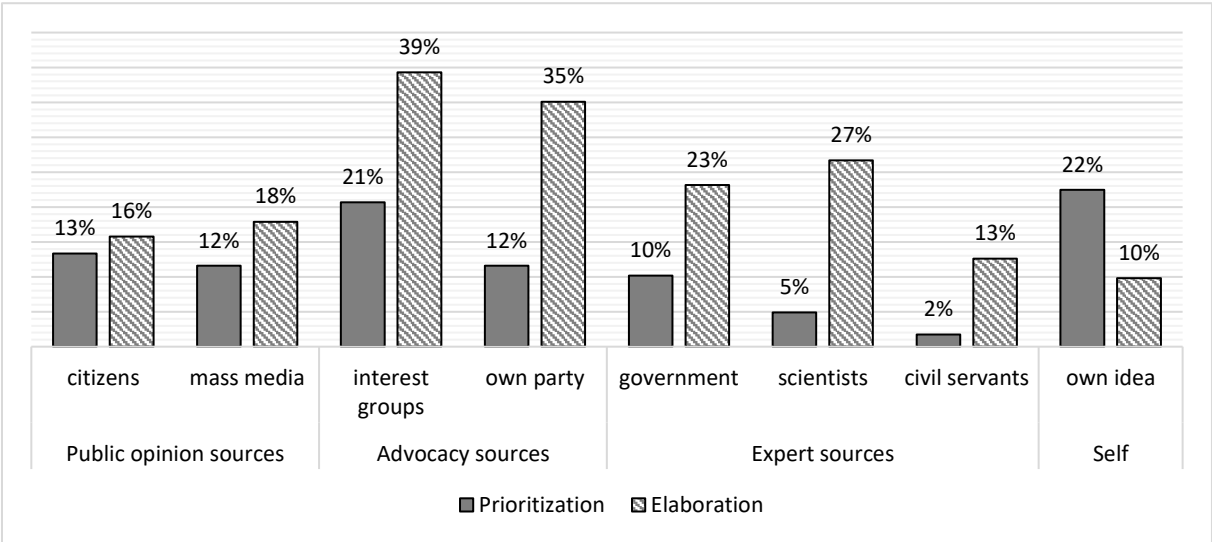
This pattern looks different in the follow-up phase. The striped bars in Figure 1 show the percentage of politicians who claim to have been inspired by the various sources to elaborate on their MIA. Unlike the initiation stage, the percentages here do not add up to 100%, as the politicians could indicate up to two sources. Like the initial stage, politicians are highly impacted by interest groups (39%), their party (35%), and the government (23%) in the elaboration stage. However, relative to the initial stage, they rely less on the mass media (18%), citizens (16%), and own ideas (10%) to further develop their policy actions. Instead, representatives claim to rely more on scientists (27%) and civil servants (13%) at this stage of the policy process. Based on these descriptive results, politicians, as expected, seem to rely relatively more on public opinion sources in the initial stage of the policy process, while they use more expert sources when they further elaborate their policy action.

To better examine our hypotheses, we performed a logistic regression analysis—on the stacked data set described in the methods section—with the type of source indicated by the politicians as the dependent variable and the policy phase as the independent variable. This results in five regressions: one modeling the use of public opinion sources (Model 1), one modeling the use of interest groups (Model 2a), one modeling the use of the own political party (Model 2b), one modeling the use of expert sources (Model 3), and one modeling the use of own ideas and experiences (Model 4). Robust clustered standard errors were estimated to account for the nesting of observations at the level of politicians[vii]. Results are presented in **Table 1**.

The results in Model 1 reveal that elected representatives rely less on citizens and mass media—both 'pure' public opinion sources—when further refining their policy ideas, as opposed to when they prioritize issues for action. This confirms Hypothesis 1a, stating that the actions of elected representatives are more affected by public opinion sources in the initial prioritizing phase than in the elaboration phase. The odds of elected officials using citizens and

media as sources are 0.71 times lower in the policy formulation stage than the odds of using these types of sources when deciding which issues to tackle. The utilization of interest groups in Model 2a and one's own party in Model 2b—two sources that we categorized as advocacy sources capable of providing both public opinion and expert information—is demonstrated in more detail. Model 2a shows that interest groups are used as much in the initial stage as they are used as information sources in the elaboration stage (no significant effect). Model 2b indicates that parties are used *more* during the elaboration than during the initiation phase; compared to the agenda-setting phase, the odds of utilizing one's own party as an information source are 1.83 times higher in the policy formulation stage. Building on prior research, we can assume that as elected representatives delve deeper into the intricacies of policy formulation, interest groups and political parties are more likely to be employed for their expertise and specialized knowledge instead of as a source supplying public opinion information (e.g., Stevens, 2023). In summary, our analyses reveal nuanced patterns in the use of public opinion and advocacy sources by elected officials during the policy process. While citizens and mass media have a stronger influence during issue prioritization, interest groups are equally prominent in the initial stage as they are in the elaboration phase, and political parties play a more prominent role during the subsequent policy elaboration stage.

Furthermore, based on Model 3, we can confirm Hypothesis 1b: elected officials are more likely to prefer expert sources in the elaboration phase compared to when they initially conceive of their action. Finally, Model 4 shows that the likelihood of politicians solely using their own ideas and experiences to further develop their actions is significantly lower than when first conceiving the idea—we did not formulate any expectation regarding this category. All these effects are robust after controlling for the individual, party, and system-level variables we identified as possible predictors of politicians' choice of information sources and that we tackle more explicitly in the section below[viii].

Table 1 - Logistic regression models predicting source use

	Model 1 Public opinion	Model 2a Interest groups	Model 2b Political parties	Model 3 Expert	Model 4 Self
Elaboration (ref.cat.= Initial)	-0.35†	0.21	0.61**	1.70***	-1.02***
	(0.19)	(0.19)	(0.23)	(0.20)	(0.22)
Constant	-0.46**	-0.64***	-1.22***	-1.55***	-1.19***
	(0.15)	(0.16)	(0.20)	(0.16)	(0.14)
Model fit statistics					
Number of Observations	468	456	430	560	560
AIC	601	606	529	652	485
BIC	609	615	537	661	494

Note: † *p<0.10, * p<0.05, ** p<0.01, *** p<0.001*

To assess how public opinion source use differs across elected representatives, a second analysis was performed with individual, party, and system-level predictors. A new dependent variable was created, indicating the number of times a politician referred to public opinion sources across the two stages. **Table 2** presents the results. The model confirms Hypothesis 4; majority members use fewer public opinion sources than opposition members (i.e., the predicted count is 0.22 lower for government members). Additionally, the model shows politicians from parties engaging in populist rhetoric to be more likely to consult citizens and media sources, confirming Hypothesis 5. The predicted count is 0.35 higher for them (value=1) than those belonging to less populist parties (value=9). Finally, Canadian politicians rely significantly more on public opinion sources compared to their Belgian counterparts(i.e. predicted count is 0.22 higher). Given the majoritarian nature of Canadian politics as well as the proportional nature of the Belgian political system, we confirm Hypothesis 6.

Against expectations, no significant effects were found concerning politicians' role orientation and status. Consequently, we reject Hypotheses 2 and 3. The reliance on public opinion sources does not differ significantly between those adhering to a delegate conception compared to those who consider themselves trustees nor between ordinary MPs and high-ranked politicians. Additionally, no effects could be detected among the control variables,

namely gender, competence level, seniority, age, being a specialist or generalist, and ideological party affiliation.

Table 2 - OLS regression predicting number of public opinion sources

	Model 1 (0 – 2)
Trustee (ref.cat.=delegate)	0.04
	(0.11)
Top politician (ref.cat.=ordinary MP)	-0.04
	(0.14)
Majority member (ref.cat.=opposition)	-0.20*
	(0.10)
Populist party	0.04*
	(0.02)
Canada (ref.cat.=Belgium)	0.27*
	(0.11)
Controls	
National politician (ref.cat.=regional politician)	0.04
	(0.08)
Women (ref.cat.=men)	0.04
	(0.09)
Specialist (ref.cat.=generalist)	0.01
	(0.09)
Seniority	-0.01
	(0.01)
Age	0.01
	(0.00)
Right-wing politician (ref. cat.=left-wing politician)	0.10
	(0.11)
Constant	0.02
	(0.26)
Model fit statistics	
Number of Observations	276
AIC	577
BIC	621

Note: [†] $p<0.10$, * $p<0.05$, ** $p<0.01$, *** $p<0.001$

Discussion and conclusion

This paper examined elected officials' reliance on various information sources. We distinguished public opinion sources, advocacy sources, and expert sources, assuming the

consultation of public opinion sources leads to more policy responsiveness. Based on a survey with 345 Members of Parliament in Belgium and Canada, the results suggest that elected representatives rely more on public opinion sources like citizens and mass media when deciding which issues to prioritize for policy action. Results concerning interest groups point toward their substantial presence in both phases, while we observed that representatives tend to rely more on their own parties and expert sources during policy formulation. Moreover, opposition politicians, those from populist parties, and those in majoritarian systems are more inclined to consult public opinion sources (citizens and media) than their counterparts in the majority, non-populist parties, and proportional systems. All in all, our findings tentatively support the notion that policy responsiveness is higher during the prioritization phase than in the elaboration phase, at least when one looks at the sources politicians use, and that variation among individual representatives, parties, and systems matters.

Our results suggest several broader observations. First, interest groups emerged as prominent sources of information in both stages. This highlights their omnipresent influence in shaping policy initiatives and warrants further investigation into the specific groups that are consulted and the advantages (e.g., staff, financial means, information, access) they have over other types of interest groups, considering the emergence and maintenance of biases in collective political representation. The dual information function groups have resulting from their aggregation of diverse viewpoints in society and (sector-specific) expertise likely explains their prominence in both prioritization and further formulation. Additionally, scientists play a significant role in the elaboration stage. Politicians' rejection or delegitimization of scientific expertise is a vital worry for democracies, but our results provide an optimistic outlook on the matter, at least when it concerns the use of science by elected representatives. Moreover, in the elaboration stage, we observed a preference for information from one's party and the government. This preference for party-political expertise is particularly notable in Belgium,

where a weak link exists between public administration and parliamentarians. The presence of comprehensive personal cabinets among government members further reinforces the de facto monopolization of policy preparation in the hands of the government, to the detriment of civil servants.

We acknowledge that our measurements did not capture the consultation of sources where no subsequent action was taken. Consequently, we could not assess any negative form of agenda-setting where specific sources keep an issue off the agenda. We need further research to explore the full spectrum of information sources consulted by politicians, including those consulted but subsequently deemed irrelevant or not useable for further action. Another limitation of our study pertains to the dual information function ascribed to interest groups and political parties. Since we did not explicitly inquire about the precise nature of the information politicians deemed most vital for their policy activities, we cannot definitely disentangle the exact nature of information relied on by elected representatives for prioritization and further policy formulation. Nevertheless, drawing upon previous research, we can presume politicians predominantly utilize public opinion information from interest groups and their parties in the initial formulation of policy ideas, while they are more likely to depend on the expertise offered by these sources during the subsequent development of their actions (e.g., Stevens, 2023).

In sum, this study examined one of the mechanisms—information sources—of political responsiveness. Legislators consult more public information sources like citizens and mass media when initializing policy actions, reflecting their commitment to addressing societal concerns at this early stage. This changes toward consulting more expert sources in later policy formulation stages, demonstrating an adherence among legislators to evidence-based decision-making based on specialized knowledge. By and large, we consider this to be good news from a democratic perspective. Politicians let their priorities depend on what the public wants, but the substance of their policy actions is grounded in specialist knowledge. Legislators need –

next to public opinion signals – expert information to realize their constituents' demands and effectively solve the problems voters signal as most crucial to address.

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Endnotes

[i] For a detailed description of the sampling method and response rates, see Appendix 1.
[ii] See Appendix 3 for an overview of data representativity.
[iii] See Appendix 2 for full question-wording.
[iv] Companies were also excluded from the analyses, as this category did not contain a sufficient number of observations.
[v] There were 16 experts for Belgium and 18 for Canada.
[vi] Substantial differences in competencies between regional and national levels in Canada and Belgium exist, and the salience of these competencies could vary significantly.
[vii] To disentangle the source type from the phase, we created a stacked dataset consisting of 660 observations in which each politician (i.e., 341 unique MPs) has two observations: one for the source they used to conceive of their policy action and one for the sources they used to elaborate their policy action.
[viii] See Appendix 4 for an overview of the results.