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Projection in Politicians' Perceptions of Public Opinion

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Research has shown that politicians' perceptions of public opinion are subject to social projection. When estimating the opinions of voters on a broad range of issues, politicians tend to assume that their own preferences are shared by voters. This article revisits this finding and adds to the literature in three ways. First, it makes a conceptual contribution by bringing together different approaches to the analysis of projection and its consequences. Second, relying on data from surveys with politicians (n = 866) in four countries (Belgium, Canada, Germany, and Switzerland) conducted between March 2018 and September 2019, it shows that there is more projection in politicians' estimations of their partisan electorate than in their estimations of the general public or of their geographic district. Third, comparing the data on politician projection with data from parallel surveys with citizens, the article reveals that—at least in three out of the four countries studied here—elected politicians are not better at avoiding erroneous projection than ordinary citizens. The article discusses the implications of these findings for the workings of representative democracy.

KEY WORDS: social projection, public opinion perceptions, elected politicians, public opinion

Elected representatives' public opinion perceptions matter. When politicians think that a majority of their voters are in favor of a policy proposal, for instance, they are more likely to vote in favor of the proposal (Butler & Nickerson, 2011; Converse & Pierce, 1986; Miller & Stokes, 1963). Public opinion perceptions can thus bring about responsive policies, but only when these perceptions are accurate. Accurate perceptions are also important in situations where politicians choose not to follow public opinion: Even when citizens dislike a policy, they feel better represented when politicians recognize the incongruence and offer tailored explanations for the decision (Grose et al., 2015). Ethnographic work has confirmed that politicians keep a firm eye on public opinion—or better, their perception of public opinion—in everything they do (Kingdon, 1989; Walgrave et al., 2023).

An important research question, then, is whether politicians have accurate perceptions of voter preferences. A growing body of research demonstrates that politicians hold rather inaccurate perceptions of what voters want: Politicians regularly assume that a majority of their voters supports a proposal, while most voters actually oppose it, or vice versa (see, e.g., Broockman & Skovron, 2018; Clausen et al., 1983; Eichenberger et al., 2021; Hedlund & Friesema, 1972; Norris & Lovenduski, 2004; Walgrave et al., 2022, 2023). Their perceptions being flawed, politicians risk acting unresponsively, communicating poorly, and, ultimately, disappointing citizens. It is therefore crucial to understand better the degree of politicians' misperceptions and how they come about.

In this context, we revisit *projection* as a crucial driver of representatives' perceptions (Esaiasson & Holmberg, 1996). The projection account is based on straightforward logic: Politicians have the tendency to let their own opinion affect their perception of others' opinions. The idea is firmly grounded in classic work in social psychology about "social projection," the general human inclination to expect that one's own features are present among others as well (Krueger, 2007). A handful of studies have shown that there is projection in politicians' perceptions of voter opinion (e.g., Belchior, 2014; Esaiasson & Holmberg, 1996; Holmberg, 1999; Pereira, 2020). The studies find that politicians do not manage to overcome this psychological fallacy, even if they have electoral incentives to form accurate perceptions, and even if many politicians therefore invest heavily in reading public opinion (see, e.g., Kingdon, 1989).

This study adds to our knowledge on politician projection in three ways. First, we make a conceptual contribution. While extant research is largely unanimous in its conclusions that there is projection in politicians' perceptions of public opinion, it is surprisingly ambiguous regarding how projection can be analyzed and what its consequences are. We try to bring clarity by

mapping different approaches and by showing how seemingly conflicting interpretations can be reconciled. Second, we study politicians' perceptions of party electorate opinion, electoral district opinion, *and* general public opinion—representing the different representational foci that politicians may have. Previous work typically looked only at one type of estimation, lacking theory about how incentives to project may differ between types of estimations. Third, in response to rising scholarly interest in whether politicians are more or less susceptible to psychological decision-making biases than ordinary citizens, and whether political environments exacerbate or mitigate these biases (see, e.g., Linde & Vis, 2017; Miler, 2009; Sheffer et al., 2018), we investigate whether politicians project more than citizens, less, or just as much.

We rely on comparative data covering the public opinion perceptions of 866 elected politicians in four different countries (Belgium, Canada, Germany, and Switzerland), on a diverse range of issues. Our emphasis is not on variation between countries. Because our cases differ from each other in a multitude of ways—different electoral systems, different relevant policy issues, and different informational contexts (e.g., availability of polls), to name just a few—we cannot pinpoint what drives country variations in average levels of projection, insofar as these are observed. However, our comparative design demonstrates the robustness of our findings. That our results apply across such diverse countries suggests they should generalize to other contexts.

Our findings reestablish that there is projection in politicians' estimations: Their own opinion affects their perceptions. Importantly, however, projection only contributes to incorrect public opinion perceptions when politicians themselves hold an opinion that diverges from the opinion of the majority of the voters; if they hold congruent opinions (which they mostly do), politicians' projection leads to correct estimations. While all types of estimations are susceptible to projection, the effect is strongest for perceptions of the opinions of one's party electorate. Finally, although they have strong incentives to maintain an accurate picture of public opinion, in three out of the four countries studied here, politicians are no better at avoiding erroneous projection than citizens.

Social Projection Among Politicians

Social psychologists have long examined the innate human tendency to perceive one's own properties as being prevalent in the group one belongs to, at least since Allport (1924) coined the term "social projection" in the 1920s. The idea is simple. When making judgments or predictions about others, people tend to rely on introspection, on information about themselves. The self is used as a kind of (very small) sample to answer the question: "*What does my having this attitude tell me about how others feel?*" (Krueger & Acevedo, 2005, p. 20). The underlying driver is the desire for cognitive balance, as first argued by Heider (1946). People want to be congruent with things/people they like or identify with (and in discord with those they dislike). The absence of congruence leads to strain, and to avoid this unpleasant feeling, people are prone to adapt their perceptions of others (DiDonato et al., 2011; Festinger, 1957; Machunsky et al., 2014). Psychological research early on confirmed that projection frequently occurs in human perception (see, e.g., Travers, 1941, 1942). The process supposedly is unconscious and happens largely automatically. The consistency of the findings led Bronfenbrenner et al. (1958), as far back as the 1950s, to conclude: "It is now a well-documented fact that in making estimates of how others will respond to a questionnaire, most people tend to assume similarity" (p. 35).

Miller and Stokes (1963, p. 51) were the first to apply the concept to politicians; they suggested that representatives' own opinion with regard to a policy might affect their perception of district opinion with regard to the same policy. Since then, a number of studies empirically examined the matter. In an early study of U.S. community leaders, Sigel and Friesema (1965) presented the first empirical proof of social projection by politicians onto the general public of their community: "[M]

isperception often occurred in the very area where leaders' personal preferences varied considerably from those of their constituents" (p. 892). In France, Converse and Pierce (1986, p. 652) found similar things regarding politicians' perception of *district* opinion. Other studies established similar findings about politicians' perceptions of *party electorate* opinion (Belchior, 2014; Clausen et al., 1983; Esaiasson & Holmberg, 1996; Pereira, 2020). One study shows that projection is pervasive also among politicians at the European level (Holmberg, 1999), and recent research established that legislative staffers too exhibit projection (Hertel-Fernandez et al., 2019). In sum, a small but consistent body of work argues that politicians are inclined, just like any human being, to think that others hold the same opinion as they do.

The Ambiguity of Projection and Accuracy

The scholarly unanimity on the occurrence of projection masks considerable differences in how projection is approached. To start with, that politicians are "projecting" does not necessarily mean that they make incorrect inferences about others. In fact, it is likely that politicians' views on political affairs are to some extent shared by citizens—especially their *own* partisan voters who presumably support the party's political views. More often than not, this is true (Esaiasson & Holmberg, 1996). So, the tendency to consider others as similar to oneself may lead to correct perceptions. A few existing papers illustrate this claim (see, e.g., Belchior, 2014; Clausen et al., 1983). Although they do not say it very explicitly, what these authors show is that "projected" (in their terminology: "attitude-consonant") estimations actually have a higher chance to be correct than nonprojected (attitude-dissonant) estimations. It is confusing that projection is sometimes equated with terms like "false-consensus effect" or "the irrational tendency to think wishfully," because this terminology suggests bias (see e.g., Ross et al., 1977), while baseline social projection does not automatically imply defective inferences.

At first sight, these conclusions seem different from those of scholars who stress how projection does lead to erroneous perceptions (see most notably Esaiasson & Holmberg, 1996; Holmberg, 1999; Pereira, 2020). This is the case when politicians' opinions differ from that of the majority of the voters. The hypothesis is that, due to projection, politicians have a larger chance to misperceive what the majority of their electorate wants when their own opinion is incongruent with that majority than when their opinion is congruent. The pattern is confirmed in the various studies (Esaiasson & Holmberg, 1996; Holmberg, 1999; Pereira, 2020). These authors acknowledge that erroneous projection is limited in scope (because politicians are more often congruent with their electorate than not), but they stress the conditions under which projection is problematic.

We want to show that these seemingly opposing interpretations do not contradict each other. We demonstrate this with the example in Table 1. Imagine that a politician needs to estimate voter opinion on 100 policies. The politician is congruent with the voters for 75 out of 100

Table 1. Fictional Scenario as Illustration (for 100 Issues)

	Projected Estimation	Nonprojected Estimation	Total
Opinion *congruence* between politician and voters	*60*	**15**	75
Opinion *incongruence* between politician and voters	**20**	*5*	25
Total	80 25% inaccurate estimations	20 75% inaccurate estimations	100

Note: Accurate estimations are in italics. Inaccurate estimations are bolded.

policies. The politician "projects" (i.e., assumes similarity with voters) in 80 of the policies, and in the remaining 20 policies his perception of the public's opinion differs from his own opinion. The problem is that congruence and projection are unrelated: The politician sometimes projects when there is incongruence and sometimes assumes dissimilarity even when there is congruence. In such a scenario, projected estimations are more often right (only 25% is wrong) than nonprojected ones (75% is wrong); even if the projected estimations lead to large errors when politicians are incongruent with the voters (here: 20 out of 25 inaccurate estimations, so 80% of the estimations are erroneous).

The example suggests that projection is sort of a double-edged sword. It is a psychological fallacy, but one that often leads to correct estimations of public opinion. This can explain why Pereira (2020) found, experimentally, that raising awareness about projection among politicians effectively reduced the amount of projection in their estimations yet did not make these estimations any more accurate in the end. The cue given by Pereira appears to cause politicians *not* to project in situations where they would actually be *correct* if they projected.

Extant studies have not clearly differentiated between what we would like to call "baseline" projection and "erroneous" projection, and they typically highlighted *either* the negative consequences of projection *or* its benefits. In this article, we combine various analytical strategies for a more complete picture.

Differences Between Voter Groups

Politicians can have various representational foci. First of all, they represent the geographic district in which they are elected. Dyadic representation is particularly important in majoritarian, first-past-the-post systems (e.g., Soroka et al., 2009). In proportional systems, the party electorate is what the district constituency is in a majoritarian system: the primary group that ensures reelection. Especially in countries where parties are strong and cohesive, elected representatives are highly focused on their own partisan voters (Dudzińska et al., 2014). Work on collective representation, finally, stresses how politicians in any type of system ultimately represent the entire nation as well (Andeweg, 2014). As politicians do not consider all voter groups equally important, it is important to examine the degree of projection in a comparative manner. If politicians projected less when it came to the voter groups most important to them, this could mitigate concerns about the problematic effects of projection.

Psychologists have shown how people's tendency to project mostly occurs towards the ingroup, that is, the group the projector wants to belong to or does belong to, because disagreement with this group causes the most strain (Bronfenbrenner et al., 1958; Orive, 1988; Robbins & Krueger, 2005). In most countries we look at, a majority of politicians consider the party electorate to be the group they primarily want to represent (see Dudzińska et al., 2014, for evidence related to all countries, except Canada, of this study). So politicians probably experience more psychological strain when being discordant with their own voters than when being discordant with the general public or their geographic district. That politicians operate in a competitive environment nurturing ingroup-outgroup categorizations should strengthen this mechanism (Gross et al., 1995).

A counterargument for our hypothesis is that projection is typically exacerbated by a lack of information about the other. In the absence of cues about what others prefer, or when cues are ambivalent, the vacuum is filled with one's own opinion. Projection is a substitute of real social comparison (see e.g., Gross et al., 1995, p. 223). If we assume that politicians have better information about their own voters' preferences than about the district's or general public's preferences—because they are surrounded by copartisans in their interpersonal networks,

provided with information from partisan polling, and so on—this should lead to less projection. However, that assumption is questionable. Politicians may not see the need to collect issue-specific information on their electorate's preferences as they may assume that these voters share their views anyway. Moreover, mass media probably cover nation-wide public opinion more frequently. Ongoing research suggests that politicians' perceptions of their party electorate are not much more accurate than those of the general public (Walgrave et al., 2023). Taking these observations together, we expect in Hypothesis 1 that:

H1: There is more (baseline and erroneous) projection in the perceptions of the own electorate than in the perceptions of the general public or the electoral district.

Politicians Versus Ordinary Citizens

There is growing scholarly interest in understanding whether politicians are more or less susceptible to psychological decision-making biases than ordinary citizens, whether any such differences are the result of selection effects or of acquired expertise and whether the unique features of life in elected office exacerbate or mitigate such biases (see e.g., Hafner-Burton et al., 2013; Kertzer, 2020; Linde & Vis, 2017; Miler, 2009; Sheffer et al., 2018). Ideally, democratic representation overcomes ordinary decision-making biases by well-functioning procedures and by putting incentives in place that make representatives resilient against cognitive biases. This makes it relevant to compare how politicians' inclinations to project compare to citizens'. If politicians showed a similar tendency to project than common citizens did, this would imply that the exceptional institutional position they are placed in—with its procedures and routines aimed at counteracting the role of individual psychological bias—does not protect representatives from suffering from known common judgment biases (like erroneous projection).

Considering psychological strain first, politicians probably experience more strain than citizens when realizing they are in disagreement with a majority of citizens. Being on the wrong side of an issue is much more consequential for politicians than for citizens. Politicians feel the weight of voter control and consider it likely that they will be held to account come election day (e.g., Arnold, 1992; Soontjens, 2022; Stimson et al., 1995). When rating public opinion, there is something at stake for politicians: their reelection and their career. This could exacerbate projection. Citizens do not face a similar incentive.

However, the flipside is that *because* of this psychological strain, politicians should be much more motivated than citizens to engage in a thorough information search. With their electoral livelihood depending on it, politicians must be more inclined to gather information about public opinion than citizens (Kingdon, 1989). Their wish to be accurate—Kunda (1990) speaks about "accuracy goals"—should enable them to keep their cognitive distortion under control better than citizens do. Moreover, the professional environment politicians are in (e.g., the availability of staffers) is meant to facilitate a thorough information search and a bias-free perception formation.

Extant empirical evidence is inconclusive, but there is somewhat more evidence of politicians being better at avoiding projection than being more likely to exhibit it. Indeed, sometimes politicians were found to project more than citizens (Granberg & Holmberg, 2002) and sometimes less (Lemert, 1986), but a recent meta-study by Kertzer (2020) suggests that they *are* better when it comes to public opinion perceptions (and other representational tasks). All in all, our Hypothesis 2 is that:

H2: There is less (baseline and erroneous) projection in the public opinion estimations of elected politicians than in those of ordinary citizens.

Specifying the Mechanism

Thus far, in line with the existing literature, we have focused on social projection as an *unconscious* process of inferring others' opinions from one's *own* opinion. It could be seen as an outspoken form of motivated reasoning (Kunda, 1990): People want to reach a specific conclusion (that public opinion supports their own views), and they therefore rely on just one piece of information—their own opinion—to make inferences about others. However, politicians may assume that voters share their views for slightly different reasons too. Although it will be impossible for us to empirically disentangle these alternative mechanisms, they deserve a brief discussion.

For one, it is possible that politicians, rather than relying on their own opinion to estimate public opinion, engage in an actual information search, but that this search is skewed (e.g., they mostly meet like-minded citizens). This could imply that they overestimate support for their own opinion, not because they extrapolate their own opinion but because their information is biased (for a similar argument, see Nir, 2011).

A second explanation is that politicians assume support for their views among voters, not because of an unconscious psychological process but because of conscious, rational calculation. Especially when politicians reflect on party electorate opinion, one important source of knowledge is citizens' voting behavior (Kingdon, 1989). Citizens are assumed to vote for the party that represents their political viewpoints best. From political science research we know, of course, that voters do not always "vote correctly" and that they do not necessarily share every single issue position of the party (Alvarez et al., 2014; Lau & Redlawsk, 1997). Still, in the absence of issue-specific information, it makes sense for politicians to assume that voters share the political views of the party for whom they vote. An implication is that politicians may (partly) *consciously* extrapolate their own views to the voters of their own party and maybe even to the general public or district (especially politicians from big, succesful parties).

Finally, there is literature on expressive responding saying that misperceptions by survey respondents are not a reflection of what they truly believe, but that they intentionally provide misinformation to show support for their political side (Berinsky, 2018; Schaffner & Luks, 2018). While some studies say the prevalence of expressive responding (or cheerleading) is limited, others find more support for it.

Note that these slightly different mechanisms do not invalidate any of our expectations. For example, even if "projected estimations" were a matter of rational calculation, it is to be expected that there is more projection in politicians' party-electorate estimations than in their general public opinion or district estimations. And expressive responding is probably less an issue in politicians' answers than in citizens' answers, confirming the hypothesis that politicians project less than citizens. Nevertheless, awareness of the various possible mechanisms is relevant for interpreting our results.

Data and Methods

To assess how projection features in public opinion perceptions on a given issue, we need to know three things: (1) what politicians think about the public's level of support on that issue; (2) where the public actually stands on the issue; and (3) what is the politicians' own opinion on the

issue—that is, what they might project. We obtained these measures through survey interviews with politicians and online surveys with citizens.

We conducted face-to-face survey interviews with politicians in four countries: Belgium, Canada, Germany, and Switzerland. Belgium's two main regions, Flanders and Wallonia, are treated as separate political systems in the analysis (for more information, see Appendix S1 in the online supporting information). The countries are diverse in terms of their electoral systems, fostering different electoral relationships between politicians and the public (Belgium has a proportional system, Canada a first-past-the-post system, Germany an in-between case with different systems at different levels, and Switzerland is a special case with its regular citizen referendums)—allowing for a strong robustness test.

All interviews were done between March 2018 and September 2019. Politicians completed a questionnaire on a computer brought by the interviewer who was present in the room, so we are sure that politicians themselves answered the questions and not their staffers. The interviewer did not observe the answers to lessen politicians' feeling of being monitored. Our questions elicit estimations of public opinion and as such do not readily lend themselves to social desirability effects.

In all countries, we targeted national members of parliament (MPs). In Belgium, Canada, and Switzerland—which are federal systems—we also recruited regional, provincial, and cantonal MPs respectively. And, in Belgium we interviewed party leaders and ministers (who are not automatically MPs). In total, we conducted 866 survey interviews, with a response rate of 45%. Although response rates vary considerably between the countries, most studies with politicians report lower response rates (see, e.g., Bailer, 2014; Deschouwer & Depauw, 2014). In each country, the participants are quite representative for the full population of politicians on gender, age, and seniority. For the full information on response rates and representativeness, see Appendix S1 in the online supporting information.

We presented politicians with eight (or in Switzerland, nine) concrete policy proposals relevant to their country, such as "Canada should increase the number of immigrants it admits each year" or "Income and wealth should be redistributed in favor of poorer people." We asked politicians to give their own opinion on each of the proposals and to estimate popular support among two different groups. Politicians in Belgium, Canada, and Germany were asked to assess support among the *general public* and among their *own party electorate*. Politicians in Switzerland assessed *party electorate opinion* and, additionally, *district opinion* (but not general public opinion). We are aware that the design is somewhat imbalanced because we have district opinion estimations in only one country (Switzerland), which is not the country where the representational focus on the district is largest: Canada with its majoritarian system fosters the representative-district linkage, and in Germany the constituency is deemed an important focus (Dudzińska et al., 2014). We still think it is informative to present the full evidence but to acknowledge that our analysis of district opinion estimations is least generalizable due to limited country cases.

Concretely, politicians made an estimation in two steps: They first estimated the share (in percentage points) of undecided citizens and then, among those with an opinion, the share (in percentage points) that agree with the proposal. It is the latter estimation that is used for the analysis. Question wordings were as follows:

> Were we to present the policy proposal to a representative sample of [e.g., Flemish] citizens, what would be your expectation with regard to their answers? What percentage of [e.g., Flemish] citizens do you think is undecided (neutral or no opinion) 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 do *have an opinion rather agrees or totally agrees with this policy proposal?*

Answers were given on a 0–100% slider. For the (highly similar) question wordings of party electorate and district estimations, see Appendix S2 in the online supporting information.

Since the political context and the current debates in each country vary, we did not use the exact same policy issues in every country, but we designed a procedure to establish equivalency among policy proposals. The procedure was aimed at having diverse proposals: They systematically vary in their complexity, relevance, salience, issue, the public opinion distribution, and the differences between party electorates. Appendix S3 in the online supporting information details the selection procedure and presents the full list of proposals.

The data from the elite survey allow us to test whether politicians' own opinions affect their estimations. To test whether this leads to *inaccurate* perceptions, we need an additional benchmark: real voter opinion. In each country, we conducted an online citizen survey at about the same time when fielding the politician survey. We subcontracted survey companies to collect data from at least 1,000 (and typically more) respondents in each country. For company details and sample sizes, we refer to Appendix S4 in the online supporting information. The data were collected to be representative for age, gender, and education and possible country-specific indicators, such as language and region in Canada. In Switzerland, we used a probability sample of citizens; in the other countries, we used demographic quotas to achieve a representative sample. Citizens were presented with the same eight (or nine) policy proposals and asked about their opinion. The data are used to calculate the actual percentage of support for each policy proposal among the general public (in Belgium, Canada, and Germany), the electoral districts (in Switzerland), and the different party electorates (in all countries). We weight the data by age, gender, education, and previous party vote, but only for general and district opinion, as we do not know how these factors are distributed within party electorates.[1] For more information about the weighting procedure, see Appendix S4 in the online supporting information. Although our citizen samples were large, there are a few small parties and districts for which we surveyed few respondents and cannot calculate reliable estimates. Politicians from these parties/districts are excluded from the analysis. Concretely, we analyze 3,863 general public opinion estimations, 6,660 party-electorate estimations, and 2,796 district opinion estimations. A full overview of the N of the study is in Appendix S5 in the online supporting information.

Just like politicians, citizens were furthermore asked to estimate general public opinion support for each proposal.[2] This allows us to compare politicians with citizens.

Baseline Projection

We first examine the baseline projection effect among politicians. To what extent are politicians' estimations of public opinion influenced by their own opinion? We use multilevel models with the estimation of public opinion (as percentage agreement) as the dependent variable and the own opinion of a politician (from totally disagree to totally agree) as the independent variable. Descriptive statistics of all variables can be found in Appendix S6 in the online supporting

[1]The implications of not weighting for party electorates seem negligible. The substantive effect sizes (reported below) are a lot bigger than the effect weights would have.

[2]The interview set-up differed between politicians (face-to-face meeting) and citizens (impersonal online survey). We discuss the implications in Appendix S4 in the online supporting information.

information. Random effects at the politician level are included to account for the interdependency of the eight (nine in Switzerland) estimations made by a politician. Depending on the type of estimation, we additionally include fixed effects for issues (for general public opinion estimations), party-issue combinations (for party-electorate estimations), or district-issue combinations (for district estimations), so that differences in real public opinion are fully controlled for. The regression results are shown in Appendix S7 in the online supporting information; Figure 1 summarizes the predicted values.

The upward slopes show that politicians' own opinion is associated with their estimations of all three types of public opinion. The own opinion is most strongly predictive of party-electorate estimations, as visualized by the steeper line for this estimation. Each step on the agreement scale (e.g., from "totally disagree" to "rather disagree") implies an increase in the politician's estimation of about 6 percentage points. So, a politician who totally agrees with a proposal typically estimates electorate support for the proposal to be 24 percentage points higher than a politician who totally disagrees with the proposal. For estimations of the general public opinion, the association is only half as strong—about 3 percentage points per step on the scale—but still substantive. The same is true for district opinion estimations in Switzerland (a little more than 2 percentage points per step). These results suggest that, as expected in Hypothesis 1, there is more baseline projection in the estimations of the own electorate than in the estimations of general and district opinion. A model based on stacked data that includes interaction effects suggests that differences between estimations for different groups are significant (see Appendix S7 in the online supporting information). Country-by-country models show that the pattern is robust (Figure 2; for the full models, see Appendix S7).

Moving on to the comparison between politicians and citizens, we find that there is somewhat less baseline projection in politicians' estimations than in citizens' estimations (H2).

This is visualized by the steeper slope of the citizen line in Figure 3. Whereas the estimation of a totally disagreeing politician differed, on average, 24 percentage points from that of a totally

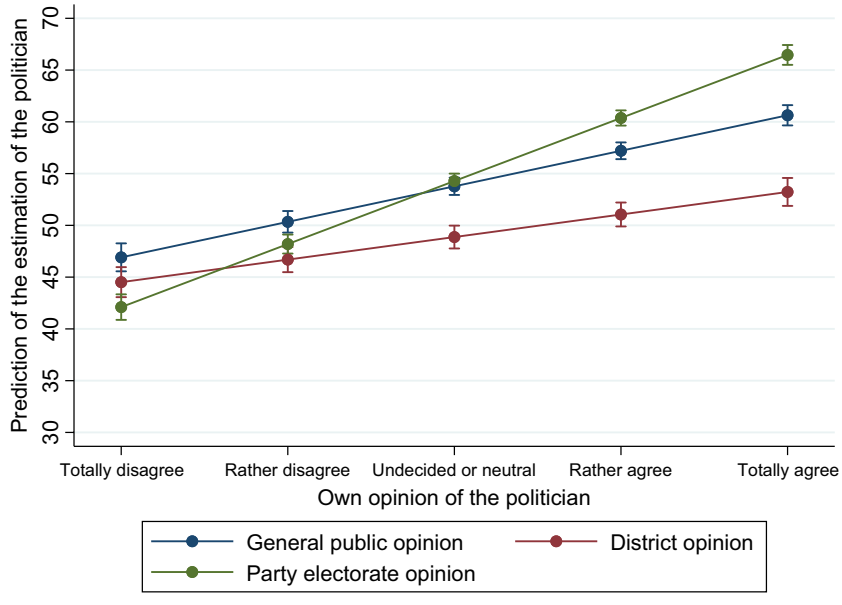

Figure 1. Predicted values of public opinion estimation (in % agreement) for different values of the own opinion.

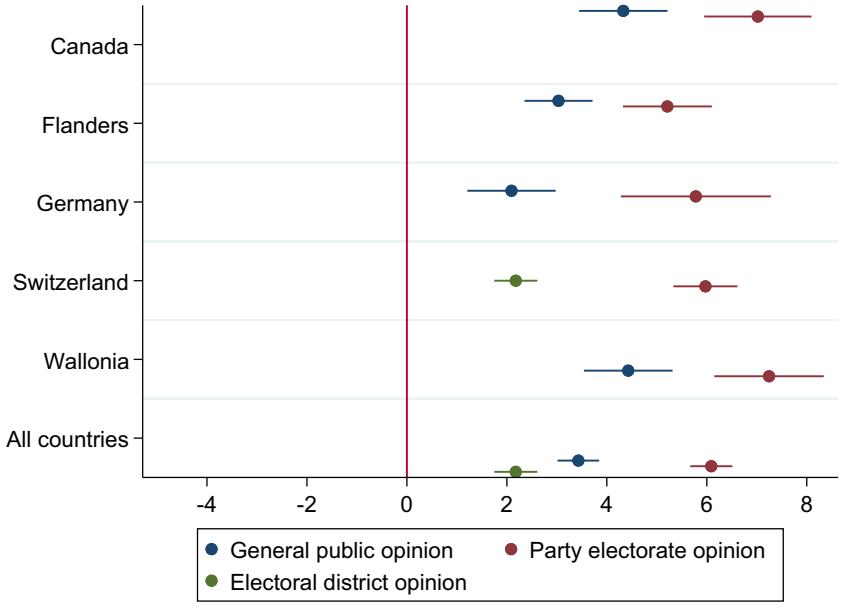

Figure 2. Coefficients of effect of own opinion on public opinion estimation per country (from separate multilevel linear regressions).

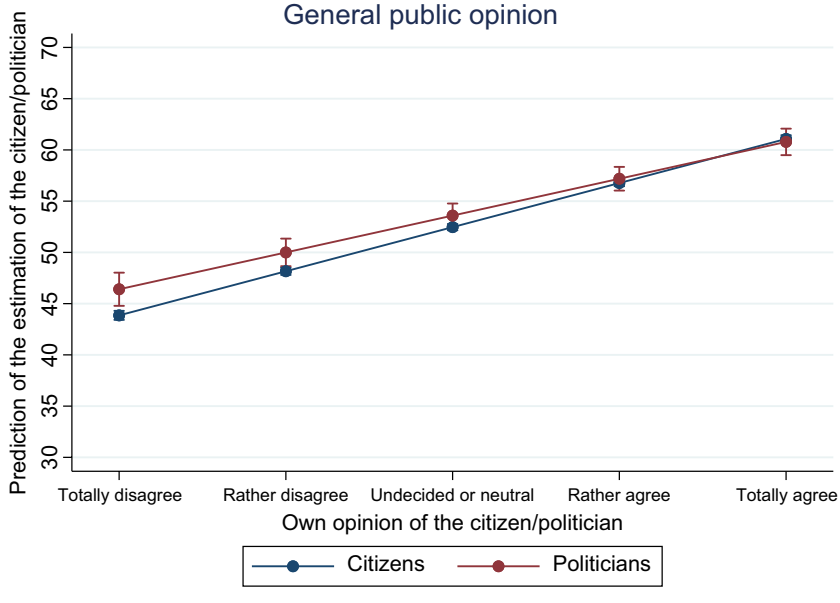

Figure 3. Comparison between politicians and citizens.

agreeing politician, this difference mounts to 27 percentage points for citizens. The full models (in Appendix S7 in the online supporting information) show that the effect is significant, but that its strength differs by country. It is only significant in Flanders and Germany. In Canada

and Wallonia, the effect is also negative but insignificant: There seems to be as much baseline projection among politicians as among citizens.

Erroneous Projection

Examining erroneous projection requires changing our analysis strategy: We need to involve the actual position of voters in the analysis. First, we follow previous work and assess under what conditions politicians place the majority with regard to an issue on the wrong side (e.g., Esaiasson & Holmberg, 1996; Pereira, 2020). Majority misplacement is a crude measure, but it matches the majoritarian logic in democratic politics where responsive politicians are expected to push policies in the direction of what the majority of voters prefers. The projection hypothesis is that incorrect majority placements should occur more often when politicians hold opinions that are incongruent with voters, than when there is congruence. Hence, in the analyses that follow, *opinion incongruence* is the key independent variable and *majority error* is the dependent variable.

Majority error is a dummy variable that gets a value of 1 when the politician misplaces the majority, for instance estimating popular support at 60% while it actually is below 50%. An estimation of 50% support[3] is always categorized as accurate, because we prefer to be too tolerant (rather than too strict) when "accusing" politicians of projection: A 50% estimation is not a majority *mis*placement in the literal sense of the word. Opinion incongruence is a dummy variable that gets a value of 1 when the opinion of the politician opposes that of the majority of voters. As politicians who are undecided on an issue[4] can, presumably, to some extent agree with arguments in favor *and* against the proposal, they are always categorized as congruent. Importantly, our data show a good deal of opinion incongruence even with the own electorate—and thus there is ground for erroneous projection (see Appendix S10 in the online supporting information).

We run models predicting majority error for all three types of opinion with opinion incongruence as the key independent variable; the models have random effects at the politician level and fixed effects at the level of the policy proposal and, depending on the precise model, at the party/district level. Moreover, we control for *preference imbalance* (see also Pereira, 2020). This measure captures the absolute difference between the share of citizens who agree with a proposal and the share of citizens who disagree. If the distribution among the public is 50%–50%, for example, preference imbalance is 0. If the distribution is 90%–10%, then preference imbalance is 80. The lower the imbalance, the more difficult it should be for politicians to get the majority right. So, we expect it to have a negative effect on majority error.

The full results are reported in Appendix S8 in the online supporting information. Figure 4 shows the predicted probabilities. The graph confirms the expectation: Incongruence strongly contributes to having erroneous beliefs of what the public wants. And projection is most outspoken for party-electorate estimations. Overall, in 26% of cases, an MP estimates the partisan majority inaccurately (see descriptive statistics in Appendix S6) but the chance of a majority misplacement is clearly associated with opinion incongruence: It more than *triples*, from 14% to 48%. For estimations of general public opinion, the chance of a majority misplacement *doubles* from 19% in the case of opinion congruence to 39% in the case of incongruence. The difference is still significant but smallest for district opinion (33% to 48%). All in all, we find again what we anticipated in Hypothesis 1.

[3]Estimations of 50% occur most frequently in general public opinion estimations (8.5% of all estimations), followed by district opinion (6.5%) and party electorate opinion (4.7%). Removing these cases from the analysis does not substantively affect any of the results.

[4]The "undecided" option was rarely chosen (in 1.6% of the estimations only).

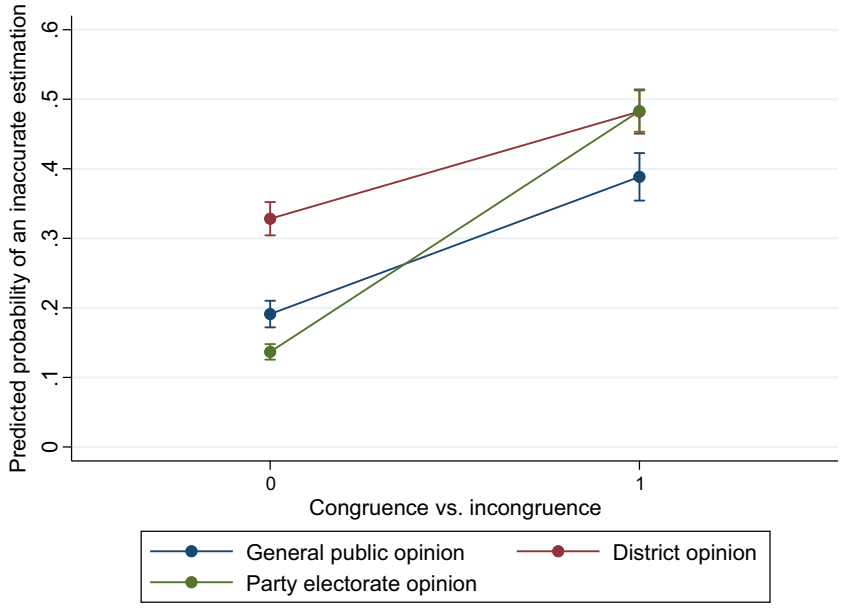

Figure 4. Predicted probability of majority error (no/yes) by (in)congruence.

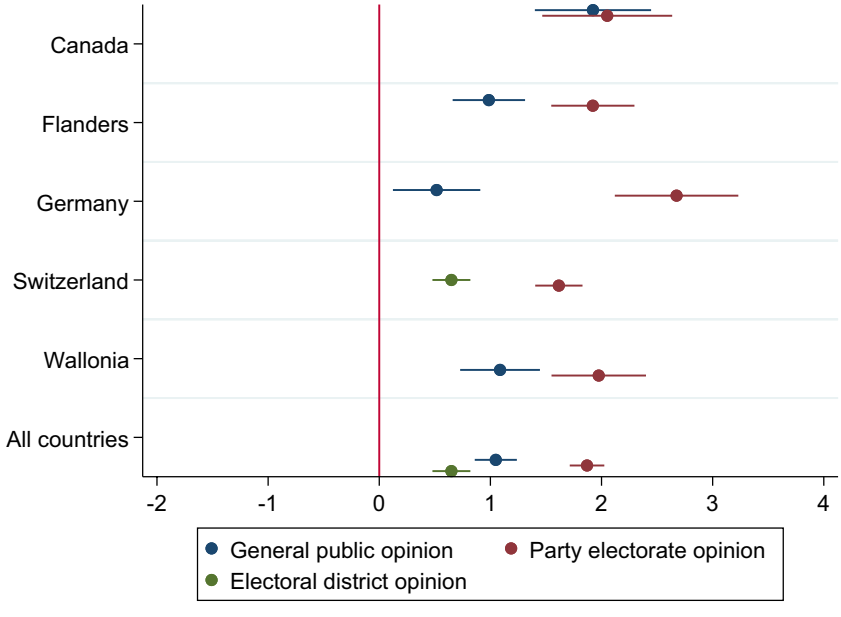

Figure 5. Coefficients of effect of opinion incongruence on majority error per country (separate multilevel logistic regressions).

As a robustness test, Figure 5 shows the coefficients of country-by-country models (reported in Appendix S8 in the online supporting information). The pattern is confirmed in the separate countries. Only Canada is an exception, with erroneous projection not being smaller for general

public opinion estimations than for party-electorate estimations. We are unsure why Canadian MPs seemingly project so strongly onto the general public. Does a majoritarian system foster more erroneous projection, in general? Is there something idiosyncratic about the specific policy statements we selected there? We cannot be sure, but what we retain from our analysis is that—notwithstanding this peculiarity—the erroneous projection effect is clear and robust.

Majority error being a crude measure, we go one step further and test whether incongruence leads politicians also to make *larger* errors in their estimations. After all, a majority misplacement can in some instances be less erroneous (e.g., estimation of 48% when public support is 51%) than a correct majority placement (e.g., estimation of 48% when public support is only 20%). To that end, we take the absolute difference between a politician's estimation and the real support among voters as the dependent variable. The analysis, reported in Appendix S8 in the online supporting information, shows that incongruence effectively leads to larger errors for general (5.5 percentage points more error), district (4 percentage points), and party electorate (11 percentage points) estimations. Note that this dependent variable does not have directionality in it—we do not know whether the error is on the side where the politician's own opinion is—so this analysis would not be a sufficient test of projection by itself. Nevertheless, this finding is an interesting complement.

Finally, to compare the level of erroneous projection in politicians' and citizens' general public opinion estimations, we use a stacked dataset and run a logistic multilevel model estimating majority error—similar to what was reported in Figure 4. The independent variable of interest is the interaction effect between opinion incongruence and being a politician (vs. a citizen) respectively. The full models are in Appendix S9 in the online supporting information. We observe that the interaction effect between incongruence and being a politician—in a stacked model—is positive but statistically insignificant ($b = .03$; $SE = .09$; $p = .739$). The finding masks country variation, however. In Germany, where we found there to be less baseline projection among politicians than among citizens, we see that politicians also do better in terms of avoiding erroneous projection (interaction effect is negative and significant), which is in line with Hypothesis 2. In Flanders, however we found less baseline projection in politicians' estimations, but this apparently does not lead to less erroneous projection. In Wallonia, there is no difference whatsoever between politicians and citizens (not in baseline, nor in erroneous projection). And in Canada, where we found no baseline differences, erroneous projection appears to happen *more* among politicians than citizens (interaction effect is positive and significant)—the exact opposite of what we expected in Hypothesis 2.

In short, in three out of four countries under investigation, Hypothesis 2 must be rejected: Politicians erroneously project their own opinion onto their estimations as much as citizens (in Flanders and Wallonia) or even more (in Canada). Germany is the exception where politicians are, in line with Hypothesis 2, less prone to baseline and erroneous projection. Pinpointing the exact cause of this difference is impossible here; it would at minimum require data from more country cases. The takeaway from this analysis is, with some caution, that politicians overall do not seem better at avoiding erroneous projection than citizens.

The (Unintended) Benefits of Projection

Are the consequences of projection unequivocally negative? This is a delicate issue, which becomes clear when we analyze the data from another angle. Following previous work, we compare the accuracy of projected estimations with that of nonprojected estimations (Belchior, 2014; Clausen et al., 1983). The descriptive evidence is in Table 2.

The evidence is presented in the same way as the fictional example in the theory section (Table 1). We show to what extent projected and nonprojected estimations are accurate. In

Table 2. Number of Projected Estimations, by Opinion Incongruence

General Public Opinion Estimations

	Projected Estimation	Nonprojected Estimation	Total
Opinion *congruence* between politician and voters	*1752*	**578**	2330 (67%)
Opinion *incongruence* between politician and voters	**546**	*609*	1155 (33%)
Total	2298 (66%) 24% inaccurate estimations	1187 (34%) 49% inaccurate estimations	3485

Party-electorate estimations

	Projected Estimation	Nonprojected Estimation	Total
Opinion *congruence* between politician and voters	*3940*	**691**	4631 (74%)
Opinion *incongruence* between politician and voters	**996**	*617*	1613 (26%)
Total	4936 (79%) 20% inaccurate estimations	1308 (21%) 53% inaccurate estimations	6244

District Opinion Estimations

	Projected Estimation	Nonprojected Estimation	Total
Opinion *congruence* between politician and voters	*991*	**554**	1545 (60%)
Opinion *incongruence* between politician and voters	**543**	*497*	1040 (40%)
Total	1534 (59%) 35% inaccurate estimations	1051 (41%) 53% inaccurate estimations	2585

Note: Accurate estimations are in italics. Inaccurate estimations are bolded. These tables do not contain the cases where politicians are undecided about a policy proposal, where they estimate voter support to be at 50%, or where voter support is exactly at 50%. The proportions of error reported here do not exactly match the numbers reported in Figure 3: They are descriptive statistics rather than predicted probabilities from multilevel models, and the *N* is lower (see previous note).

situations of opinion congruence, projected estimations are accurate while nonprojected estimations are erroneous. The opposite is true in situations of incongruence. As an example of how to interpret the results, we discuss the middle table (about politicians' party-electorate estimations), but the interpretation is identical for the other two voter groups.

The table foremost reflects what we already found in our analyses above: (1) that there is more congruence than incongruence (e.g., 26% incongruence between politicians and their electorate); (2) that projected estimations are more common than nonprojected estimations (e.g., 79% projected estimations of the party electorate); (3) that, as a consequence of this,

opinion incongruence with voters leads to higher rates of error (62% majority misplacements [996 out of 1,613]) than opinion congruence (15% majority misplacements [691 out of 4,631]).

However, the table also shows that projected estimations *overall* produce more correct majority placements than nonprojected estimations do (for party-electorate estimations: only 20% error, compared to 53% for nonprojected estimations). The reason is that politicians are more often congruent than not with voters.

Conclusion

This article scrutinized social projection in politicians' perceptions of public opinion. First, and reconciling different approaches, we showed that projection is a double-edged sword. Whenever politicians are incongruent with the public, their electorate, or district, projection induces erroneous views of what voters prefer. However, when politicians' opinions are congruent with voters, projection fosters public opinion perceptions that are accurate—and this is often the case in reality. Second, we theorized and demonstrated that there is more projection in politicians' perceptions of their own electorate than in their perceptions of district voters or the general public. Our third finding is that politicians are—at least in three out of the four countries studied here—not any better at avoiding erroneous projection than are ordinary citizens. In this conclusion, we reflect on the implications of each of the three findings before discussing the study's main limitations.

Although projection may have not only negative but also (unintended) positive consequences, we agree with extant work that it is important to try and combat projection. After all, it means that politicians fail to recognize disagreement with voters; they think there is more harmony between themselves and their voters than there is in reality (see also Esaiasson & Holmberg, 1996). This is a problem because it can lead to irrational stability. Students of spatial modeling showed that parties do adapt to changing public opinion, but their policy responsiveness is limited (e.g., Adams, 2012). Projection may explain why this is the case: Disagreement with voters may simply not be perceived by politicians (and thus parties). Such a failure to recognize incongruence could fuel popular dissatisfaction with politics. It is unclear what the best strategy is to combat projection: As Pereira (2020) showed, warning politicians of projection reduced the amount of projection in their estimations yet did not make them any more accurate in the end because they started assuming dissimilarity when there actually was congruence. In line with what Holmberg (1999) suggested, we think the better strategy is to have "*more communication and less distance between elected representatives and voters*."

Work on political representation originally posited that there are two ways in which responsive representation comes about (Miller & Stokes, 1963), and that in an ideal scenario perceptual accuracy is not important. Indeed, ideally, voters elect the "right" representatives who share their policy views. Those representatives can simply follow their own preferences and responsive policies will follow suit. Only when this does not work out is it necessary that representatives form accurate perceptions of voter preferences so that they can still be responsive. We know, however, that it unrealistic for voters to always "vote correctly" or even find a perfectly like-minded party in the first place (Lau & Redlawsk, 1997). So, perceptual accuracy *is* important. And, ironically, the problem with projection is that politicians fail to see the incongruence with voters (Clausen, 1977, p. 362). Hence, the "initial sin" of incorrect voting reverberates through the system because politicians assume that voters share their views even if they do not. The responsibility of responsive representation is placed entirely

on the shoulders of citizens—who should vote "correctly" in order to have representatives with congruent views *and* with correct public opinion perceptions—but this is an unrealistic expectation.

That projection is most present in politicians' *party-electorate estimations* has important implications, because the party electorate is politicians' primary representational focus in most of the countries studied here. This means that the party-electorate estimations likely weigh most on politicians' actual policy decisions. So, baseline and erroneous projection are largest where they are likely most consequential, fueling representational deficiencies.

The lack of a difference between elected politicians and ordinary citizens (in three out of four countries) is surprising given the electoral incentives that politicians face to form accurate public opinion perceptions, and given the professional environment they are in. This is consequential since representative institutions and routines do not seem to protect representatives from making common judgment errors, a role that these institutions are often assumed to fill.

Exploring the individual and party-level moderators of projection is beyond the scope of this article but presents a natural extension of the analysis presented here and a promising avenue for future research in other contexts in light of our results. Various factors may affect to what extent a politician is more likely to project: electoral safety, seniority, a politician's role perceptions, personality traits, information sources, and party size, to name a few. Additionally, it seems promising to explore the role of issue characteristics such as salience. Erroneous projection seems less likely for salient issues (because politicians and voters are typically more congruent on these issues), but if it happens, the consequences are obviously problematic.

There are two final concerns we address here. First, as we pointed out in the theoretical section, projection is not the only possible mechanism causing politicians to assume that voters share their views. Projection probably is a main driver of our results, however: Research in psychology time and again showed that projecting is inherent in human thinking (Robbins & Krueger, 2005). Nevertheless, other mechanisms (e.g., a skewed information environment) may play a role too—and our design is not well-placed to determine the relative importance of each of these potential sources of error.

A second and final concern regards the issue of causality. In this article, we argued that the positive relationship between politicians' policy preferences and their public opinion perceptions is a manifestation of projection: Politicians' own opinions affect their perceptions. A critic could argue that the association can also be driven by "adaptation": politicians who update their own opinion in response to their perception of voter preferences. Miller and Stokes (1963) early on suggested that politicians may solve the cognitive dissonance between their own views and their perception of voters, not by adapting these perceptions but by adapting their own positions (see also Sevenans, 2021). We do not contest that opinion adaptation can occur, but we do not believe it can be the dominant explanation of what we observe here, for two reasons. First, politicians mostly have strong and stable political views. There is literature showing that party position taking is affected by voter opinion (e.g., Adams, 2012; Adams et al., 2004), but this literature seldom suggests that party responsiveness represents genuine opinion change. Evidence points towards responsiveness being temporal and strategic and conditioned by prospects of electoral gains (e.g., Abou-Chadi & Orlowski, 2016). Second, it is particularly unlikely that the relationship between politicians' own opinion and their *mis*perceptions of public opinion (i.e., what we labeled "erroneous projection") would be driven by adaptation. If not projection, what would cause politicians to have (and keep having) a wrong idea of public opinion, and how would this wrong idea keep

on steering their own opinion? In situations where projection matters most—that is, when it leads to misperceptions of public opinion—the likelihood is the lowest that we are actually observing adaptation instead of projection. Our cross-sectional data do not allow us to prove this point, but we hope that future work can use longitudinal or experimental designs to disentangle further the intricate relationship between projection and adaptation.

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Supporting Information

Additional supporting information may be found in the online version of this article at the publisher's web site:

Appendix S1. Elite Survey: Response Rates and Representativeness of the Data

Table S1.1. Population of Targeted Politicians, Sample, and Response Rates

Table S1.2. Representativity of MPs Who Cooperated Compared with the MPs Population for Gender, Age and Political Experience

Appendix S2. Question Wording

Appendix S3. Selection of Policy Proposals

Table S3.1. Policy Proposals Per Country

Appendix S4. Population Survey: Response Rates, Representativeness and Weights