Letter

Do Politicians Outside the United States Also Think Voters Are More Conservative than They Really Are?

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*I**n an influential recent study, Broockman and Skovron (2018) found that American politicians consistently overestimate the conservativeness of their constituents on a host of issues. Whether this conservative bias in politicians' perceptions of public opinion is a uniquely American phenomenon is an open question with broad implications for the quality and nature of democratic representation. We investigate it in four democracies: Belgium, Canada, Germany, and Switzerland. Despite these countries having political systems that differ greatly, we document a strong and persistent conservative bias held by a majority of the 866 representatives interviewed. Our findings highlight the conservative bias in elites' perception of public opinion as a widespread regularity and point toward a pressing need for further research on its sources and impacts.*

INTRODUCTION

Recently, Broockman and Skovron ([2018](#)) documented a large and consistent conservative bias among US politicians in their perceptions of public opinion. Elected representatives overestimate the share of citizens holding conservative views. Their findings mark an important contribution to the long-standing research agenda on politicians' perceptual accuracy and its impact on the quality of democratic representation (Converse and Pierce [1986](#); Hedlund and Friesema [1972](#); Miller and Stokes [1963](#); Uslaner and Weber [1979](#); Walgrave et al. [2023](#)).

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Yet, we do not know whether the conservative bias is unique to the American context. We address it by studying four countries—Belgium, Canada, Germany, and Switzerland—that substantially differ from the US. We combine a survey of 866 politicians with representative surveys of the general population, and uncover a strong and persistent conservative bias among a large majority of politicians in the four countries and across a variety of issues. The only issue domain on which the conservative bias is not consistently found is immigration, where we observe a mix of conservative (Belgium, Switzerland) and liberal (Canada, Germany) misperceptions.

EXISTING WORK

Broockman and Skovron ([2013](#); [2018](#)) show that American politicians hold a persistent conservative bias in their perception of public opinion on a host of economic and social-cultural policy issues (see also Hertel-Fernandez , Mildenberger, and Stokes [2019](#), for similar findings with staffers). The authors suggest that the found conservative bias might be due to a skewed "information environment" whereby some segments of the public (i.e., conservative citizens) are more actively conveying their preferences to politicians.

That US politicians consistently get the "public mood" wrong (Stimson [1991] [2018](#)) has direct implications for democratic representation. Politicians' perceptions of public opinion impact their ability to perform their roles (Butler and Nickerson [2011](#); Lax and Phillips [2012](#); Mansbridge [2003](#); Stimson, Mackuen, and Erikson

TABLE 1. Population of Targeted Politicians, Sample, and Response Rate (Full POLPOP Survey)

		Population	Sample	Response rate (%)	Timing of interviews
Canada	National MPS	334	50	15.0	March – Sep 2019
	Regional MPs Ontario	124	30	24.2	
	TOTAL Canada	458	80	17.3	
Flanders	National MPs	98	77	77.0	March – July 2018
	Regional MPs	135	102	76.7	
	TOTAL Flanders	233	179	76.8	
Germany	National MPs	511	79	15.5	Sep 2018 – Feb 2019
	TOTAL Germany	511	79	15.5	
Switzerland	National MPs	236	151	64.0	Aug – Oct 2018
	Regional MPs Berne & Geneva	259	217	83.8	
	TOTAL Switzerland	495	368	74.3	
Wallonia	National MPs	65	43	62.3	March – July 2018
	Regional MPs	149	117	79.6	
	TOTAL Wallonia	214	160	74.8	
	GRAND TOTAL	1,911	866	45.3	

Note: see Tables A1.1, A1.2 and A1.3 in Supplementary material for more on the representativeness of the sample.

1995), their in-office behavior, and their policy responsiveness (Converse and Pierce 1986; Esaiasson and Wlezien 2017; Miller and Stokes 1963).

It is therefore crucial to examine whether it exists also in other countries. Outside the US, politicians might not be exposed to a skewed information environment in which conservative views have gained prominence via partisan media like Fox News (Clinton and Enamorado 2014), or with highly-mobilized conservative movements (Blee and Creasap 2010; Fang 2013). Yet, there are other factors—like the success of radical right parties (Rooduijn 2015) or the erosion of social-democratic parties (Abou-Chadi and Wagner 2020)—that could also be predictive of politicians' perception of public opinion moving to the right.

DATA

Our study tests the presence of a bias in politicians' perceptions of public opinion. It is based on data from the POLPOP survey of MPs (see the Appendix for more details) in Belgium (where we distinguish between the separate party systems of Flanders and Wallonia), Canada, Germany, and Switzerland.[1] All four countries differ significantly from the US, and also from each other. They have fragmented party systems, with six parties in the Canadian and German Parliaments, 12 in Switzerland and 13 in Belgium. The electoral systems vary as well: single-member-district in Canada, a mixed-member system in Germany, list PR in Belgium, and panachage list PR in Switzerland. Belgium and Switzerland are emblematic examples of "consensus democracies," whereas Canada is a typical, majoritarian Westminster system (Lijphart 1999). Party system evolutions have also been very different. When our survey was fielded, Germany had been dominated by the

conservative CDU-CSU (Christian Democratic Union) for 13 years. In Switzerland and Flanders, there had been a gradual rise of radical-right parties (i.e., Swiss People Party and Vlaams Belang). By contrast, in 2015, Canada experienced a shift from a Conservative to a Liberal Party majority, while Wallonia remained dominated for decades by the Socialist Party. Finally, the ideological orientations of the national governments in these countries at the time of the survey also vary, with grand coalitions in Germany and Switzerland, a liberal cabinet in Canada, and a right-wing coalition in Belgium.

In total, within the POLPOP survey, we conducted 866 face-to-face interviews with members of national and regional parliaments in the four countries (see Table 1).

Following Broockman and Skovron's design (2018), each politician was presented with a set of concrete policy proposals relevant to their country, such as "*(Country) should increase the number of immigrants it admits each year.*" The statements selected were diversified in the policy domain covered and as whether agreement was in a liberal or a conservative direction (see Table A2.1 in the Supplementary Material). We categorized the statements into four categories relevant to the two main dimensions of political debate—economic and social/cultural (Kriesi et al. 2008; see the Supplementary Material, section 2). On the economic dimension, we selected statements related to *redistribution and workers' rights*, and to *pension/retirement policies*. On the social/cultural dimension, we selected statements related to *immigration* and to *social-cultural topics* like euthanasia and child adoption by same-sex couples. For each policy statement, politicians in Belgium, Canada, and Germany were asked to assess support among the *general public* and among their *own party electorate*.[2] Politicians in Switzerland rated party electorate opinion, and additionally *district opinion*[3] (but not

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[1] Research documentation and data that support the findings of this study are openly available at the American Political Science Review Dataverse (Pilet et al. 2023).

[2] Own party electorate is defined as the those who have voted for the politician's party in the previous national and regional elections.
[3] District opinion is the public opinion of all voters residing of the electoral district of the politician.

general public opinion). Our design differs slightly from Broockman and Skovron, as they only asked politicians to estimate public opinion in their electoral districts. Replicating this choice in our countries would have been problematic. In Germany, some politicians are elected through nationwide lists, and in Belgium parties slate lists of members in large, multi-member districts. Therefore, we opted for modes of representation relevant to all politicians surveyed. Earlier research (Dudzińska et al. 2014) shows that two important targets of representation for politicians in the countries we cover are the national electorate, and their own party electorate (with the exception of Switzerland, where cantonal/district party systems are more relevant than the national one). Eliciting estimations about public opinion at those two levels was therefore conceptually meaningful for the politicians interviewed. This difference in survey design should be kept in mind when analyzing our data.

In each country, we also conducted parallel general population surveys (see Supplementary Material, section 3), which we use to calculate the actual percentage of support for each policy statement among the general public (in Belgium, Canada, and Germany), the electoral district (in Switzerland), and the different party electorates (in all countries).[4] This design allows for evaluating the presence of a conservative bias in politicians' assessment of three different sorts of public opinion (national, electoral district, and party), whereas existing work in the US has focused exclusively on the assessment of *district* opinion.[5]

We use these estimates to test for the existence of an ideological bias in politicians' perception in each country and on each of our four issue domains of interest. We use two different indicators capturing its magnitude and scope: (1) the average gap (in percentage points) between politicians' estimation of the share of the public that agrees with the policy, and the actual share of the public that does so, and (2) the share of politicians in each country who overestimate the conservativeness of voters.

RESULTS

Figure 1 reports the average gap between politicians' perception of general public opinion and citizens'

actual opinion (circles), and between their estimation of their party's electorate opinion and the observed opinion within that electorate (triangles) for each issue domain and each country. Both measures reveal a substantial and largely consistent conservative bias in politicians' perceptions—politicians perceive both the overall public and their party's electorate to hold more right-leaning opinions on most policy issues.

The most pronounced conservative bias is found on policies concerning pension/retirement. In all cases except Wallonia, we also observe a conservative bias on the second set of economic issues (related to redistribution, taxation, or workers' rights), with the bias being especially large in Canada and Germany. On the social/cultural dimension, we observe that Canadian and Swiss politicians hold a conservative bias.

Immigration stands out as the only issue domain on which we do not observe a consistent conservative bias. It is found in Flanders, Switzerland, and Wallonia, while there is a large *liberal* bias in politicians' perception of public opinion regarding immigration in Canada and Germany.

The findings on *electorate* opinion are by and large similar but where they differ, politicians appear to project conservativeness on their partisans to a slightly lesser degree than on the general population. However, these differences are mostly not statistically significant.

We test the consistency of the conservative bias by estimating the results separately for politicians belonging to left- and right-wing parties in each country (see Figure 2).[6] On most issues, the conservative bias is found in politicians across the political spectrum. Contrary to the US, we do not observe a consistently stronger conservative bias among right-wing politicians.[7]

Figure 3 reports, for each country, the distribution of politicians in terms of inaccuracy of their estimation of public opinion, averaged across all of the statements. Politicians on the right of the dotted line hold (on average) a conservative bias; those on the left hold a liberal bias. A large majority of politicians show a consistent overestimation of the conservativeness of public opinion in their country (645 politicians, representing 81% of our sample). This proportion varies by country but is always over 60%, ranging from 64% (Wallonia) and 67% (Germany) to 86%, 91%, and 92% of all politicians in Switzerland, Flanders, and Canada.

In sum, our results show a persistent conservative bias among politicians, in each of the countries, across

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[4] In computing overall support/opposition to statements, we exclude those who did not have an opinion, the share of which ranged from 3 pp to 14 pp, depending on the country and issue at hand. Politicians were also instructed to provide their estimates only with respect to those citizens who *do* hold an opinion on the issue. Data is weighted 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 (see the Supplementary Material, section 3). Although our citizen samples are large, there are a few small parties and districts for which we cannot calculate reliable estimates. Politicians from these parties/districts are excluded from the analysis.

[5] This design builds upon the recent work by Walgrave et al. (2023). Yet, this article expands their approach. First, it looks at the direction of politicians' misperception of public opinion and not only at its magnitude. Second, it also examines systematically how misperceptions might differ across parties and across policy issues.

[6] Parties were categorized as left-wing or right-wing parties based upon their score on the left–right scale (0–10) in CSES module 4. For Belgium (not in CSES module 4), we used scores from the Chapel Hill Expert Survey 2019. Findings are similar when we use a three-category (left, center, right) party ideology breakdown (see Supplementary Material, section 5).

[7] In the Supplementary Material (section 7), we report results from a different analysis in which we differentiate parties based on their ideological leaning on specific issue domains, and evaluate whether politicians from parties with more conservative or more liberal positions on a given issue exhibit different levels of directional bias. In this analysis too, we find no consistent differences.

FIGURE 1. Conservative Bias, by Policy Issue and Type of Opinion Estimated
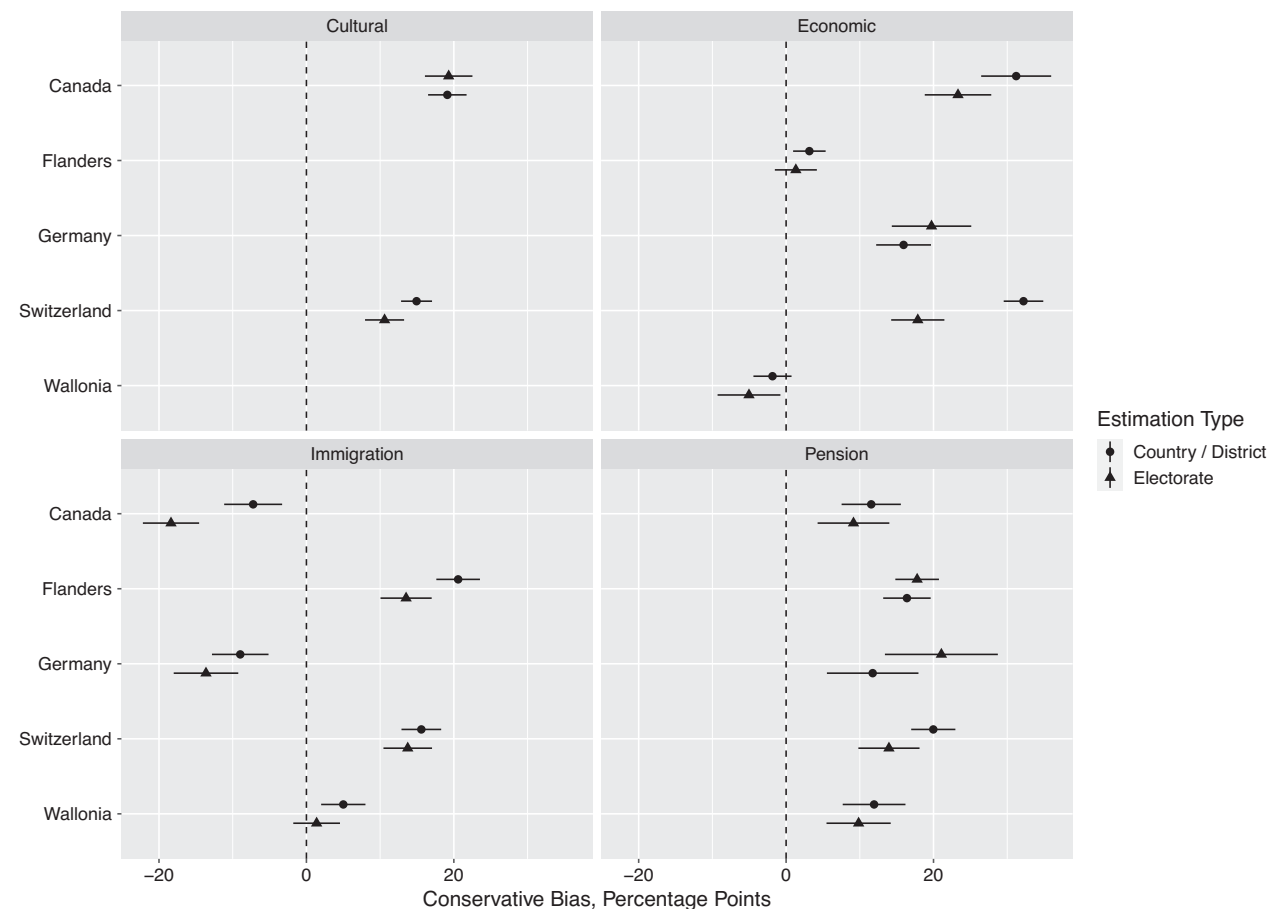
Note: Figure 1 presents the mean gap in politicians' perception of country/district public opinion (circles) and of party electorate opinion (triangles), by country (y-axis) and policy issue (panels). Bars represent 95% confidence intervals of the estimates. Estimates are mean values for all politicians and statements for a given issue/country. Detailed information for Figure 1 can be found in the table in Supplementary Material, section 4.

different issue domains, in estimations of both general public opinion and electorate opinion, and irrespective of the politicians' party ideology. Yet, next to this general pattern, we also observe an inconsistent pattern regarding politicians' perceptions of public preferences on immigration: in Belgium and Switzerland politicians exhibit a conservative misestimation, in Germany and Canada, misperception of public opinion has a *liberal* bias—underestimating the public's conservatism.

POTENTIAL SOURCES OF THE CONSERVATIVE BIAS

Broockman and Skovron (2018) suggest that the conservative bias could be driven by conservative citizens being more politically active, especially in contacting their representatives, potentially skewing politicians' information environment. They provide evidence on this by survey data showing that Republican voters report having contacted their representatives more often than Democratic voters.

We conduct a similar, albeit more fine-grained test: in each country, we asked citizens about their position on each policy statement and about their participatory behavior. We can directly test whether citizens holding a conservative opinion *on a specific policy statement* are more politically active.[8] Figure 4 plots the mean share of citizens holding conservative and liberal views on our statements who have contacted a politician over the last 12 months.[9]

Figure 4 mostly does not show consistently significant differences in activism levels between those who

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[8] Self-reported measures of activism are notoriously skewed towards over-reporting compared to actual data on political activism (like records of donations). We opt for this approach here to maintain comparability with Broockman and Skovron's analysis.

[9] Note that we only examine the political activism of citizens with a clear liberal (0–3) or conservative (7–10) position on the policy statement. Centrist citizens (4–6) as well as citizens answering that they do not have an opinion are not included as we assume they would either not be active on the issue or that their position would not represent a meaningful signal in favor or against a position.

FIGURE 2.   Conservative Bias, by Policy Issue and Respondents' Party Ideology
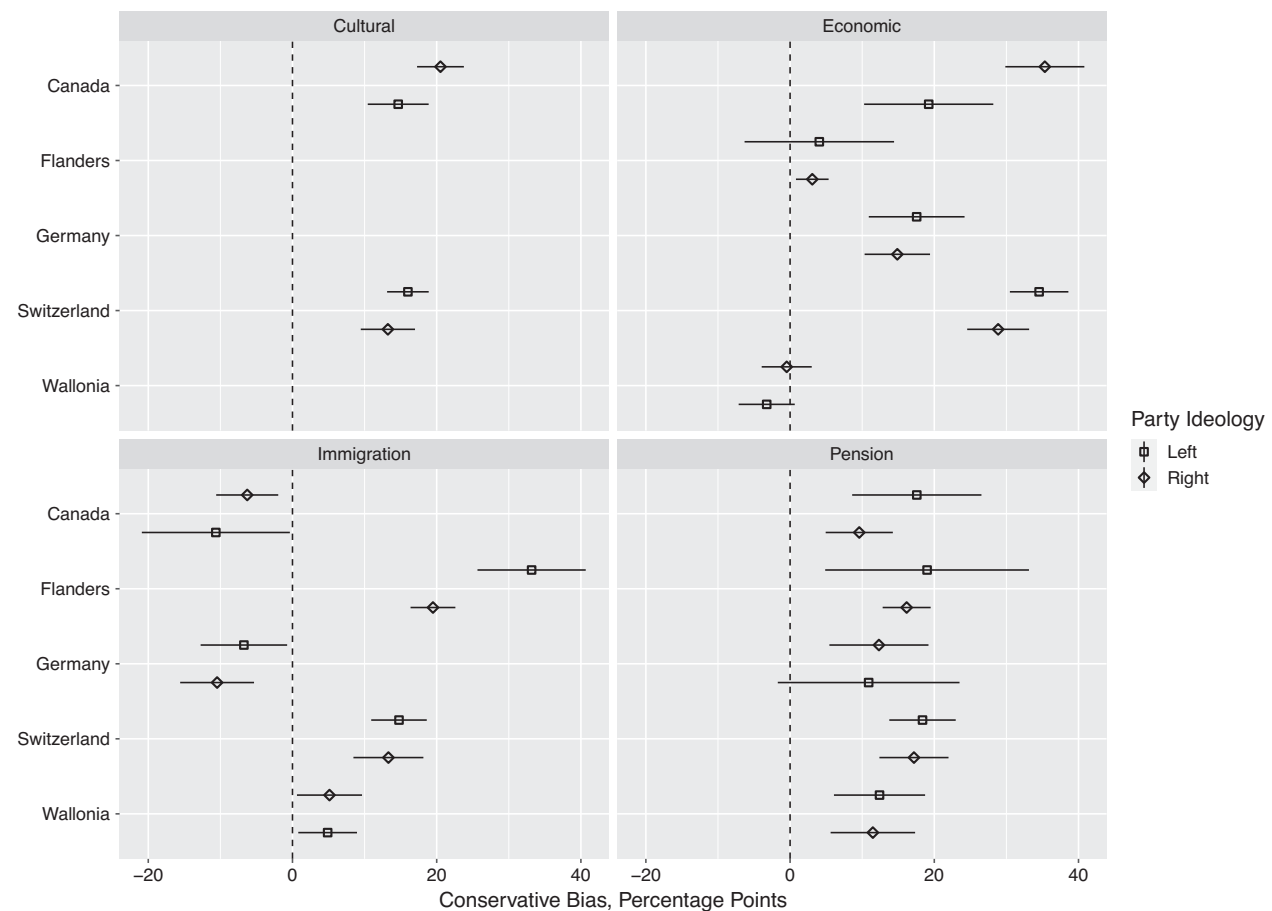
Note: Figure 2 presents the mean country/district level conservative bias, by country (y-axis) and policy issue (panels) for left-wing (squares) and right-wing (diamonds) politicians. Bars represent 95% confidence intervals of the estimates. Estimates are mean values for all politicians and statements for a given issue/country. Detailed information for Figure 2 can be found in the table in Supplementary Material, section 4.

hold conservative and liberal positions, except on pensions.[10] Overall, the difference in political activism between conservatives and liberals does not seem to consistently explain the conservative bias in public opinion perception of non-American politicians. It might have some explanatory purchase in some cases (e.g., on pensions) but this does not appear to be the case in other domains. This suggests that although we observe a similar conservative bias in the countries studied here, further analysis is required to confirm whether Broockman and Skovron's participation conjecture holds outside of the US.

More broadly, our findings should motivate research on other potential sources of the conservative bias in politicians' perception of public opinion. While we do not observe that conservative citizens are more politically active overall, other processes could still result in politicians operating in a skewed information

environment. Conservative citizens might not be more active overall, but when they are, their actions might be more radical or their expression more extreme, and therefore more memorable for politicians (see Jasko et al. 2022; Webber et al. 2020). Conservative citizens might also be disproportionally active on specific (potentially more salient or emotionally charged) issues, which could lead politicians to erroneously deduce that the public is conservative on other issues as well. Politicians also pay increasing attention to social media, which, at least in the US, tends to be dominated by conservative views (Schradie 2019). Finally, politicians might also receive disproportionally right-skewed information from business interest groups (Hertel-Fernandez , Mildenberger, and Stokes 2019; Eichenberger, Varone, and Helfer 2022).

Explanations for the conservative bias should also be examined beyond the information environment. Recent research has shown that politicians tend to pay more attention to the policy preferences of more affluent and educated citizens (Pereira 2021). As income is correlated with more conservative (economic)

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[10] Additional tests on political activism available in the Supplementary Material, section 6.

FIGURE 3. Distribution of Politicians' Conservative Bias, by Country
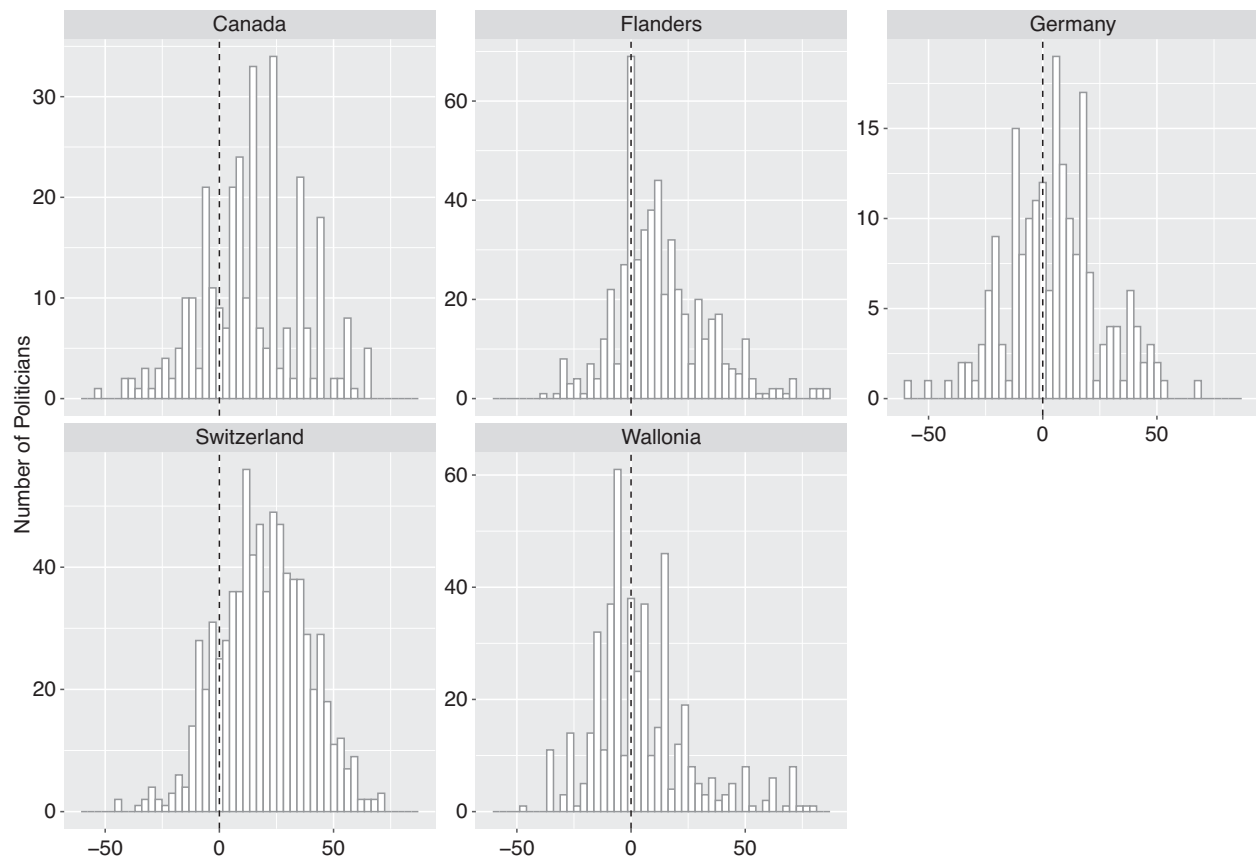

Note: X axis values represent mean public opinion estimation gap, in percentage points. Positive values indicate a conservative bias. Bar heights are the cumulative number of politicians per value.

positions, this might partly explain the conservative bias in public opinion estimation. Furthermore, politicians themselves are likely not fully representative of the public in their policy preferences. If they tend to be by and large more conservative, they might be overestimating conservativeness by projecting their own opinion on the public. However, current research on policy congruence finds that politicians are slightly more right-wing than citizens on economic issues (Rosset and Stecker 2019; Thomassen 2012), but more liberal on issues such as immigration (Freeman, Hansen, and Leal 2013; Morales, Pilet, and Ruedin 2015) (see the Supplementary Material, section 8). The observed conservatism bias might also be associated with what social psychologists call "pluralistic ignorance" (i.e., misperceptions of others' opinions; Katz, Allport, and Jenness 1931) and their underlying mechanisms, namely false uniqueness and false consensus. These mechanisms are directly linked to political orientation (Rabinowitz et al. 2016; Stern, West, and Schmitt 2014; Stern et al. 2014): liberals tend to exaggerate the uniqueness of their own opinion (false uniqueness); conservatives perceive their opinions as more common than they are (false consensus). Hence, both could explain the conservative bias found among politicians. Finally, future

comparative research might also examine how institutions, and especially electoral institutions, might affect how politicians perceive public opinion. Differences in electoral rules, electoral constituencies, and party-centeredness might incentivize different efforts by politicians when seeking information about voters' preferences, and they might also change the clarity of electoral results as public opinion signals. All of these potential factors warrant further exploration in future research that falls beyond the scope of this letter.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the conservative bias in politicians' perception of public opinion documented in the US (Broockman and Skovron 2018) extends to elected representatives in other Western democracies with widely different political systems (Belgium, Canada, Germany, and Switzerland). We observe it on a wide variety of policy issues, among both left- and right-wing politicians, and equally for politicians' assessment of their country's national public opinion, district constituents (in Switzerland), and own party's electorate. There are remarkably few cases where the

FIGURE 4. Citizens Contact with Politicians
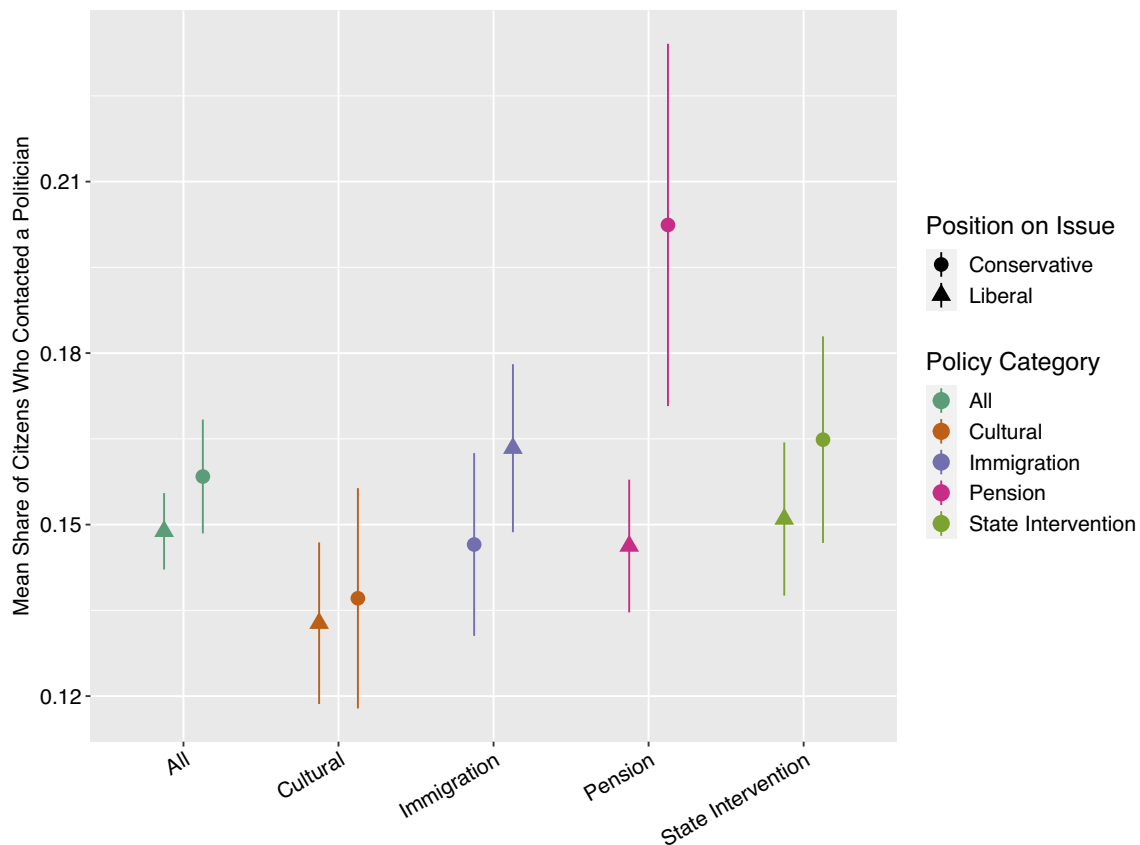
Note: Figure 4 presents the mean share of citizens who contacted a politician in the past 12 months (y-axis) for citizens holding a conservative (circles) and a liberal (triangles) position, by policy domain (colour). Detailed information for Figure 4 can be found in the table in Supplementary Material, section 7.

conservative bias is absent—notably, in the policy domain of immigration for politicians in Canada and Germany.

Such biases in elite perception of what the people want may have important implications for policy responsiveness. If politicians' ideas of what the public thinks are systematically biased toward one ideological side, then the political representation chain is weakened. Public satisfaction with democracy, which depends on the polities' ability to produce desired policies, is likely to suffer as a result.

Our findings call for further research on the conservative bias in additional countries with differing institutional environments, especially in less established democracies, and on a wider set of policy issues. Perhaps most importantly, they stress the need to further study the root causes of the conservative bias in politicians' public opinion perceptions.

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL

To view supplementary material for this article, please visit http://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055423000527.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research documentation and data that support the findings of this study are openly available at the American Political Science Review Dataverse: https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/YUFLFF.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research.

ETHICAL STANDARDS

The authors declare the human subjects research in this article was conducted in compliance with all relevant laws and regulations in place in the countries where the interviews of politicians were conducted. For European universities involved, compliance with regulations was verified by Data Protection Officers (in line with the European Union General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). In addition, data collection, analysis, and storage procedures were verified by the relevant ethics board for each country under study. In Belgium, it obtained ethical approval from the Ethische Advies-commisse Sociale en Humane Wetenschappen of the University of Antwerp (Flanders, Belgium) on February 10, 2017. In Canada, it obtained ethical approval from the University of Toronto's Social Sciences, Humanities & Education REB on November 27, 2018. In Switzerland, it obtained ethical approval from the Ethics Commission of the Geneva School of Social Sciences (University of Geneva) on April 16, 2018. In Germany, the Ethics Committee (IRB) of the University of Konstanz judged that approval by the IRB or any regulatory body was not required for this project (but note that the university more generally enforces the proper adherence to ethics guidelines).

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