Hierarchy position & personality predict politicians' choice of information sources

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abstract

Political leaders need to stay informed about their constituents' needs and the pros and cons of any course of action. Reviewing information from a variety of sources would be expected to result in decisions that best serve those constituents. In a study involving 269 Belgian politicians, we examined whether the information sources they used differed according to individuals' position in the political hierarchy or their personality. We found that both factors could predict a politician's consultation of certain sources over others. Notably, elite political leaders (those with the most power and status) turned significantly more to sources produced by politically neutral groups (such as civil services or scientific institutions) than did politicians known as "backbenchers," who have less clout. We document several such patterns and argue that these tendencies are problematic. Political parties and government entities interested in good governance should provide training to teach politicians and their staffs to explore varied perspectives.

How politicians inform themselves about what is going on in society and within their communities can affect how well they govern. After all, they rely on such information to identify and understand society's demands and to assess proposed policy solutions, alternatives, and the potential consequences of any given course of action. To keep abreast of constituents' needs and make effective policy, government officials would ideally draw information regularly from a variety of sources representing different segments of society. For instance, political leaders must learn about the needs and preferences not only of the majority of their constituents but also of the minorities, who might have a harder time making their opinions heard. These subgroups can include specific interest groups from particular economic sectors (such as small business owners) and advocates for particular causes (such as people campaigning to protect the environment or end animal testing), as well as demographic groups with specific concerns (such as citizens who are older or who have disabilities). Representatives need to take into account the perspectives of a wide range of constituents to fully consider the potential drawbacks of new legislative initiatives, budgets, and governmental policies.

Gathering information from diverse sources is important regardless of whether a society is highly heterogeneous or relatively homogenous. Political institutions, like the Parliament in our country—Belgium—are generally designed to reflect society and to optimally translate demands from different groups into political priorities and, eventually, policies. Relatively homogenous societies with only a limited number of political and social divisions tend to generate political systems in which one party forms a government majority, generally in alternation with one other political party. Meanwhile, divided societies with a large number of political cleavages, like our own, tend to adopt a proportional electoral system, which allows for a greater number of political parties to be elected to Parliament, reflecting a greater diversity of representation in the political system.[1]

In either case, politicians, as a collective body, need to be exposed to a wide variety of sources of political information if the perspectives from all relevant segments of society are to reach the highest political spheres.

Conversely, one would expect poor governance from politicians who do not cast a wide net when seeking information. Past research has shown that people's selective use of media can create significant problems in organized societies. For example, in the United States, research has documented that conservative and liberal politicians hold distinct preferences for certain news networks over others, turning to channels that echo their own party's positions. These tendencies likely contribute to further political polarization in news audiences broadly.[2] In addition, media selectivity can reinforce biases and existing beliefs.[3,4] People may seek out channels and content that fit their worldview and personal identity, supporting the ideas they already hold rather than exposing them to new concepts and perspectives. It follows, then, that having a preference for specific information sources could be problematic in political leaders because it would reduce their likelihood of seeking out the full spectrum of perspectives and sources necessary for well-considered decisions.

In an exploratory study, we set out to determine whether we could identify the characteristics of politicians who would turn to specific sources of information over others to keep abreast of topics relevant to their work. More specifically, we hypothesized that the information sources politicians consult would differ as a function of a person's position in their party's political hierarchy and their personality traits. Past research had suggested that these two factors might correlate with how politicians seek out and use information. Knowing that policy decision-making is susceptible to certain biases, we reasoned that identification of such associations would indicate a need for interventions aimed at broadening the information-seeking practices of political leaders and thereby improving the likelihood of having a fair and representative government.

Past Research Into the Role of Hierarchy & Personality in Information Gathering

Hierarchy

Some politicians have greater clout, recognition, and responsibility than others. We call these high-profile politicians *elite* and their counterparts, with less authority and media attention, *backbenchers*. Elite politicians are those in positions of greatest power, making executive decisions and determining actual policies: ministers, secretaries of state, party chairmen, and the like. In turn, an example of a Belgian backbencher would be one of the lesser-known members of Parliament who have no official position within the party hierarchy. In some cases, elites and backbenchers may hold the same title, although the individuals have markedly different standing in their party. Consider, for example, this pair of Republican senators from the United States: Mitch McConnell, who is an elite—a leader within his party and in the U.S. Senate—and the less-well-known Mike Crapo, who is, comparatively, a backbencher.

Although all the politicians in our study operated at the highest levels of governance in Belgium (that is, at the national, regional, and community levels), we considered individuals in the following roles, both current and past, to be elite politicians: ministers, state secretaries, party leaders, leaders of parliamentary groups, and speakers. All other participants in our study were classified as backbenchers, having comparatively less power within the Belgian national, regional, or community government. (In Belgium, officials in regional and community governments are considered to be at the same hierarchical level of governance and are roughly equivalent to state-level lawmakers in the United States.)

Past research suggests that elites and backbenchers may differ in their use of political information in specific contexts. Politicians generally face an overabundance of information, but elite politicians are particularly overloaded.[5] Not only is more information relevant for what they do, but elite politicians also receive more

"one would expect poor governance from politicians who do not cast a wide net when seeking information"

materials from people eager to sway their opinions. Consequently, elite politicians need to be highly selective when it comes to information, using strategies such as outsourcing information selection to their aides and applying rules of thumb when sifting through incoming information to choose what to attend to.[5]

One particular study illustrates the importance of context in how politicians consult information sources. In research published in 2019, Åse Garten Galtrud and Katriina Byström made the case that, generally speaking, elites must pay attention to diverse information sources to keep updated on broad social issues.[6] However, given the overload of information they face, elite politicians become highly selective when preparing for debates and political responses. At such times, they turn to materials coming from like-minded entities, such as authors with cultural, social, and conceptual frameworks similar to their own point of view. In our research, we investigated a slightly different context from that explored by Galtrud and Byström, turning our attention to what sources politicians consult to keep informed about the political topics most important to them.

Personality

Previous research involving the general public suggests that personality can affect one's information preferences and decision-making.[7,8] Further, certain personality traits predispose individuals to seek political information, in particular, in different ways.[9] For example, people who are found by personality tests to be highly extraverted, agreeable, or open to experience are more likely than people who score low on those traits to learn about politics

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from television, internet, and newspaper news coverage. In addition, people who are highly extravert and agreeable are more likely to watch national news coverage of politics, and people who are agreeable, open to experience, and conscientious are more likely to follow politics on local news sources.[9] In our study, we explored whether these findings also apply to political leaders.

Method

Belgium is a federal country, meaning that in addition to having a federal, or national, level of government, it includes several subnational entities that overlap geographically but have different *competences*, or areas of authority. Specifically, Belgium includes the Flemish, Brussels-Capital, and Walloon Regions and the French and German Communities. (This system is somewhat analogous to the federal government of the United States of America, which brings together 50 states.) For our research, we contacted all politicians from these different levels of governance. Out of the 413 politicians we contacted, 269 agreed to participate and provided data for the present study. We had a representative sample covering 66% of the population of politicians at the highest levels of government, both in Parliament and in Belgium's executive body, which is made up of ministers and state secretaries. (See Table S1 in the Supplemental Material for more information.)

We began by asking our participants a combination of open-ended and multiple-choice questions as part of a broader investigation into political representation and politicians' use of information. For instance, we asked open-ended questions about specific events that had occurred that week, how the interviewee

was informed about these incidents, and what they did with that information. For the purposes of the present study, though, we included questions related to the information sources politicians turned to for their work.

Once rapport and trust had been established, we had participants fill out an elaborate survey consisting of both multiple-choice and open-ended questions. Many items on this survey were conditional, meaning the specific questions asked would depend on the participant's previous responses. Among other questions, this survey asked each politician to write out the three issues that were most important to them. Then participants had to indicate, from a list of options, which three sources of information they used most often to inform themselves about these three political issues. (Respondents chose among 12 possible options, which are presented in Table 1.) This approach allowed us to examine politicians' use of information sources with respect to their work, as opposed to information sources consulted in leisure time or other

Table 1. Information sources & the frequency of their use by politicians

Response option	Frequency
Media sources	
Social media	20
Mass media	103
Political sources	
My party	118
Politicians from my own party	13
Politicians from other parties	0
Neutral sources	
Federal bureaucrats	29
Parliamentary services	24
Scientific institutions	84
Other sources	
Individual citizens	36
Industry associations	112
Personal contacts	164
Interest groups	86

Note. Participants (*N* = 269) indicated which of the listed information sources they consulted in their work, choosing up to three options. We later grouped the sources into four categories: *media,* produced by journalists; *political,* from a political party; *neutral,* from nonpartisan or politically neutral institutions; and *other,* from entities that do not fit into the other three categories. *Frequency* refers to how many times participants selected the given information source.

contexts. For an in-depth description of our survey methodology, see Walgrave and Joly.[10]

After participants completed the survey, we administered a brief personality measure, specifically, the Ten-Item Personality Inventory (TIPI).[11] The TIPI is a 10-item scale measuring what psychologists call the *Big Five personality traits*: Extraversion, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, Neuroticism, and Openness to Experience. We selected the TIPI over other personality inventories for its brevity, because politicians can be difficult to reach and often have limited availability. Given that our methodology involved asking participants a number of other questions, the abbreviated approach was appropriate for our purposes. One trade-off to this approach is that the TIPI does not offer as much information as do longer, more detailed assessments that include not only personality traits but also facets of those traits (that is, fine-grained details, such as an agreeable person's trusting nature and degree of altruism or a conscientious individual's level of self-discipline and orderliness). Still, past work has shown the TIPI is useful for measuring the global Big Five personality dimensions.[11]

Once we gathered information from all participants, we attempted to classify the sources that politicians consulted into three broad categories based on the authors of the information in each case. *Media sources*, including traditional media and social media, denotes information that comes from journalists. *Political sources* applies to information that comes from a politician's own political party or fellow politicians, whether within or outside of the party. *Neutral sources* refers to information created by people in institutions that strive for political neutrality, such as scientific institutions and parliamentary services. We included civil servants as neutral sources because, in Belgium, these federal bureaucrats operate within the nonpolitical administration and are expected to communicate objective and complete information to members of Parliament. When an information source did not fit into one of these three categories, we classified it as *other.* For example, information coming from interest groups is not inherently tied to a political party, the media, or a politically neutral institution.

We then looked for any associations between the three primary information source categories and a politician's hierarchical position; political party; personality traits; national, regional, or community level; gender; or years of experience.[9] (For an extended discussion of our analytical methods and statistical modeling, see the Supplemental Material.)

Results

We found that many variables, such as political party, gender, and national versus regional position, were not strongly linked to our participants' choice of source material. As Table 2 shows, however, several characteristics, indicated by bold type in the table, were significantly predictive of a politician's use of specific source types. For example, people who scored high on Agreeableness or Extraversion on the TIPI were most likely to consult neutral sources and significantly less likely than low scorers to consult political sources. Politicians high in Openness to Experience were significantly less likely than those low in Openness to Experience to consult media sources.

Regarding position in the political hierarchy, elite politicians rely more on neutral sources than backbenchers do. More specifically, we found that elite politicians are 2.65 times more likely to select a source from the neutral source category as one of their three preferred sources than are backbenchers, the strongest predictive link in our analysis. Meanwhile, elites and backbenchers did not differ in the degree to which they consulted media or political sources.

In a follow-up analysis, we looked further at what we had gleaned about specific information sources in all four categories. As Table 3 reveals, we found that the more agreeable or extraverted politicians were, the less likely they were to use their own political party as a source of information, a finding that could explain their overall high degree of avoidance of political sources revealed in our previous analysis. In

Table 2. Relationship between politicians' characteristics & their use of information source categories

Characteristic	Media		Political		Neutral	
	Coef	*SE*	*Coef*	*SE*	*Coef*	*SE*
Personality traits						
Extraversion	.08	.22	**−.53***	**.22**	**.49***	**.23**
Agreeableness	−.13	.18	**−.47***	**.17**	**.34***	**.17**
Conscientiousness	.04	.20	.04	.16	−.10	.17
Neuroticism	−.01	.23	−.32	.19	.17	.20
Openness to Experience	**−.51***	**.23**	−.10	.18	.14	.19
National (0) versus regional (1)	.13	.29	−.47	.28	.35	.29
Elite	−.15	.36	.14	.35	**.97***	**.36**
Gender	.14	.29	.05	.29	.13	.30
Experience	**.04***	**.02**	−.03	.02	−.03	.02

Note. Coef = coefficient; *SE*= standard error. The data were analyzed using multilevel ordinal regression analysis. A positive coefficient indicates that the more a politician possesses a specific characteristic, the more likely the politician is to use a particular information source category. A negative value indicates that the more a politician possesses a given characteristic, the less likely the politician is to use a particular information source category. (For instance, our analysis suggests that the more extraverted a politician is, the less likely the politician is to turn to political information sources and the more likely the politician is to turn to neutral information sources.) Statistically significant findings are in bold. In the elite row, a positive value indicates that the information source category is more likely to be used by politicians in an elite position, whereas a negative value denotes that the information source category is more likely to be used by politicians in a backbencher position. In the gender row, a positive value denotes that the information source category is more likely to be used by male politicians; a negative value would have indicated that the information source category was more likely to be used by female politicians. The results indicate that personality traits, position in the political hierarchy, and years of experience increase the likelihood that a politician uses certain information source categories. The most predictive factor identified was elite status: The analysis revealed that elite politicians, significantly more often than backbenchers, turn to information from neutral sources, as opposed to sources from the media or the politician's own political party.
*p < .05.

addition, highly extraverted politicians are very likely to consult information coming from scientific institutions, such as policy-relevant research reports published by academics. Meanwhile, highly agreeable politicians rely greatly on information from parliamentary services, such as the regular press briefings issued by Belgium's Parliament. In addition, politicians who were highly open to experience were also significantly less likely to rely on traditional media than politicians low in this trait. These highly open politicians made some use of social media, but less so than other politicians—and they were highly likely to consult industry associations and interest groups when compared with politicians who were not as open to experience. Finally, we found that political elites were 3.49 times more likely than backbenchers to rely on information disseminated by scientific institutions as one of their three preferred sources of information.

Discussion

Our findings show that the information sources politicians consult can differ according to the individual politician's position in the political hierarchy and personality. Although the findings do not allow for causal interpretations, nor does our sample generalize to all political systems, our results show that such systematic differences are present in Belgium and suggest that they are likely to exist in other countries with similar kinds of government.

The study also points to a particularly striking difference related to hierarchy: Elite politicians in Belgium consult information coming from scientific institutions more often than backbenchers do. Several explanations could be at play. For example, given their greater involvement in political decision-making and the attention they receive for this work, the elite politicians may seek out information from politically neutral sources to prevent other politicians and members of the media or public from attacking the validity of their assertions. Backbenchers, however, are comparatively less preoccupied with policymaking and may instead focus more on addressing the interests of specific constituents or segments of

Table 3. Coefficients of the relationships between politicians' characteristics & their use of specific information sources

Characteristic	Mass media	Social media	My party	Politicians from own party	Scientific institutions	Parliamentary services	Industry associations	Federal bureaucrats	Citizens	Personal contacts	Interest groups
Personality traits											
Extraversion	−.02	.40	**−.51***	−.22	**.49***	.37	−.25	.06	−.16	.04	−.21
Agreeableness	−.02	−.53	**−.44***	−.65	.23	**.58***	.17	.18	.17	−.21	.09
Conscientiousness	.09	−.23	−.04	.40	.08	−.28	−.12	.25	−.17	.11	.04
Neuroticism	.01	−.14	−.26	−.50	.16	.06	**.74***	−.25	−.48	.08	−.26
Openness to Experience	**−.40***	−.66	−.14	.10	.04	.29	**.61***	−.43	−.10	-.08	**.40***
National (0) versus regional (1)	.07	.41	−.52	.29	.39	.03	.55	**−2.51***	−.21	.07	.11
Elite	−.34	.29	.22	−1.15	**1.25***	−.66	−.27	.35	−1.19	.00	−.14
Gender	.18	−.34	.10	−.41	−.10	.68	**.97***	−1.05	−.61	−.22	−.27
Experience	.04	.04	−.04	−.00	−.02	−.06	−.00	.01	.02	−.00	.01

Note. The data were analyzed using binomial regression analysis. A positive coefficient indicates a positive relationship between the two variables (in other words, possessing more of one variable increases the likelihood of scoring higher on the other as well). Statistically significant values are in bold. The results show that personality traits (except for Conscientiousness), position in the political hierarchy, national versus regional position, and gender predict a politician's use of specific information sources. Among the most predictive factors identified was elite status: The analysis revealed that elite politicians seek out politically relevant information from scientific institutions significantly more often than backbenchers do.

*p < .05.

their own party. As a result, the backbenchers may be less wary of using sources that critics might call "partisan." Moreover, elite politicians, as compared with backbenchers, may have more experience with and direct access to information coming from neutral institutions. For instance, elites may be better connected to officials and administrators at scientific institutions that can provide them with the latest analyses relevant to their policy work. Backbenchers, lacking these connections, would be more reliant on media sources and information from within their party.

Regarding personality, and in line with past findings from other researchers, we find that Extraversion, Agreeableness, and Openness to Experience are predictors of the information sources politicians consult.[9] In particular, politicians high in Extraversion and Agreeableness draw less on information from their own party and attend more often to information from neutral sources in comparison with people low in these personality traits. In the case of Agreeableness, the consumption of information from neutral sources might be driven by the fact that this information leaves less room for debate and conflict. In the case of Extraversion, people high in this trait are known to be attracted to political

information in general and to information that facilitates involvement in policymaking specifically[9]—inclinations that might explain their increased attention to neutral sources. Finally, we found that politicians high in Openness to Experience consult traditional media less often than others do and instead turn to industry associations and interest groups for information. This finding may relate to the fact that people who are open to new experiences are typically more willing to seek out and engage with information that contradicts their own worldview; this explanation seems reasonable if these politicians are absorbing information from industry and interest groups not already aligned with their own political leanings.

As a set, our findings go beyond the existing research on politicians' overall preferences for information sources[12] by showing that particular characteristics can make politicians more or less likely to consult specific sources when becoming informed about topics that are important to their work. We argue that our findings are cause for concern. As we noted in the introduction to this article, a diversity of inputs is essential if a government is to fully reflect society's many viewpoints. Leaders should therefore demonstrate no strong preferences

for specific sources over others and instead embrace a variety of information sources across the political, neutral, and media categories we have described. Even well-intentioned efforts to primarily consult politically neutral information sources, for example, could prove problematic. These sources may not offer sufficient insights into the critical viewpoints held by varied constituents, for example, which means politicians would need to consult other sources—from the media, fellow politicians, industry groups, and others—to learn more about the diverse perspectives that exist on a given issue.

We further argue that politicians who exhibit a predictable preference for a particular information source are vulnerable to biases in decision-making. Admittedly, one limitation to our study is that we did not specifically investigate the context of information used in decision-making. Rather, we asked politicians to point to the sources they consult when trying to keep informed about the most important issues in their work. Past research suggests that politicians may use different information when making policy decisions as opposed to simply keeping informed on certain issues.[12] Nonetheless, there is reason to believe that the systematic preferences that we observed could reflect and give rise to biases in decision-making.

We base this conclusion in part on poliheuristic theory, which holds that policy decision-making is done by first reducing the number of options at hand (by removing choices that pose an unacceptable political risk, such as a course of action that would impose extraordinarily high economic costs) and then evaluating the remaining choices more carefully to identify which one offers the maximum payoff and utility in a given situation (for instance, selecting a broad foreign policy approach that will dramatically increase a nation's diplomatic standing).[13] Poliheuristic theory claims that policy decision-making is often a messy process that is susceptible to biases because it involves subpar and incomplete information, resulting in suboptimal decisions. Two biases are particularly relevant.

Availability bias pertains to the tendency to rely on information that spontaneously comes to mind when engaging in decision-making.[14] Typically, the swiftness with which information comes to mind is affected by how emotionally charged and recent the information is. Given that we found groups of politicians leaning principally on one source type over others, we suspect they would be susceptible to the availability bias, leaving them with only a subset of all the relevant information at their disposal and therefore more likely to make biased, inferior decisions.[14]

Confirmation bias refers to people's tendency to reinforce or confirm their existing beliefs, such as by selectively searching for information that validates their prior ideas and by neglecting information counter to those views. In this case, too, our findings suggest a source of bias: Disregarding some information sources at the expense of other sources results in selective exposure to and selection of information, which makes it easier to look for confirming information and screen out contradictory information. For example, Valdis Krebs has shown that readers of politically liberal books bought other liberal books, and readers of politically conservative books bought other conservative books, with very few crossovers in buying habits.[15] Past studies demonstrate that this bias is often at play specifically among politicians, who tend to systematically downplay the relevance of information that does not align with their preexisting attitudes while highlighting information that supports their preexisting attitudes.[16] Like availability bias, confirmation bias can result in suboptimal decision-making.[17]

The obvious way for politicians to compensate for these biases would be to pay attention to varied sources of information without systematically excluding specific sources. Of course, many politicians will not be interested in reducing their biases. But steps can be taken to assist individual politicians, political parties, and government entities who want to improve the quality of their leadership. We propose that training could help. (See the sidebar Policy Recommendations.) Much as political parties

and parliaments hold media training to help politicians learn how to communicate with the press, these same entities could design educational workshops, led by experts, to improve politicians' approaches to selecting and learning from diverse sources of information.

To be effective, an intervention would need to focus on helping politicians become aware of the rules of thumb and biases they typically apply. In addition, because past work suggests that workshops that simply educate individuals on their own biases are not necessarily enough to change behavior,[17] we suggest training politicians alongside their staff. Such team training would increase the likelihood that participants' individual biases would be corrected at the group level. For example, a political party could enlist trainers with a background in psychology to not only help a politician and the politician's aides learn about heuristics and biases and how to identify blind spots but also discuss steps that can help counteract these biases. Spurred by this training, a group might agree to involve more than one team member in researching a given topic or create a checklist that requires seeking out at least two types of information sources when reading up on any given policy. Such concrete, process-oriented steps could help ensure that politicians are widely read and informed on the diverse needs and perspectives of the people they serve.

We do not recommend explicitly targeting politicians for training based on their position in the political hierarchy or their personality traits. As noted, individual-level interventions targeting bias are rarely effective, which is why we propose working at the group level, as with both a politician and the politician's aides. The specific position or personality of an individual politician is therefore not important to the intervention design; the training instead needs to engage a team or working group and, as such, will involve varied personalities and roles. Further, several factors make an intervention based on personality traits particularly inappropriate. First, the effects in this study, while significant, are not large enough to warrant differential treatment based on an individual's score on a given trait. Second, each person is characterized by a unique combination of scores on the five personality traits that we studied. To develop an intervention based on personality, one would need to administer a personality test to each participant and then develop a custom intervention specific to their profile, which would not be feasible.

"Our findings suggest that many political leaders do not seek knowledge from a range of sources"

Conclusion

Our findings suggest that many political leaders do not seek knowledge from a range of sources but instead turn to specific purveyors of information in ways that are predictable, given the politician's personality and position in the political hierarchy. This preference for certain sources may contribute to biased policy decision-making. We argue, therefore, that parliaments or other governing bodies and political parties should develop training programs for politicians and their aides to counter these tendencies. It may be neither feasible nor effective to target training to individual politicians, but having programs for groups that work together could be beneficial to all. Such interventions could help politicians or parties that prioritize good governance, teaching them strategies that can broaden information-seeking behavior to ultimately improve political decision-making.

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supplemental material

- https://behavioralpolicy.org/publications/

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