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Simon Hug[1] | Frédéric Varone[1] | Luzia Helfer[2] | Stefaan Walgrave[3] | Karolin Soontjens[3] | Lior Sheffer[4]

[1]Département de Science Politique et Relations Internationales, University of Geneva, Geneva, Switzerland

[2]Independent Researcher, Berne, Switzerland

[3]University of Antwerpen, Antwerpen, Belgium

[4]The School of Political Science, Government and International Affairs, University of Tel Aviv, Tel Aviv, Israel

Correspondence
Simon Hug, Département de Science Politique et Relations Internationales, Université de Genève, 40, Bd du Pont d'Arve, 1211 Genève, Switzerland.
Email: simon.hug@unige.ch

Abstract

Political representation can be described as a process brought about via an electoral and a perceptual path. Drawing on original survey data on the perceptual accuracy of elected representatives in Belgium, Canada and Switzerland, this study explores whether and how the two paths are connected. It shows, first, that representatives who more accurately perceive voters' opinion are more likely to be re-elected, suggesting that perceptual accuracy impacts the electoral path to representation. Second, representatives who are electorally safe hold less accurate perceptions of voters' policy preferences, meaning that the electoral path impacts the perceptual path. In all, the study provides evidence for the role of politicians' perceptual accuracy in their electoral career: voters sanction those representatives who are not sufficiently acquainted with their preferences, and representatives who fear to be voted out of office put more effort in getting acquainted with what voters want.

KEYWORDS

democratic theory, elections, public opinion, quantitative methods, representation and electoral systems, voting behavior

1 | INTRODUCTION

As Miller and Stokes (1963) point out in their defining work on substantive representation, all other things being equal, more accurate public opinion perceptions among representatives generate more responsive policies (see also Converse & Pierce, 1986). Accurately perceiving voters' positions on specific policy issues is indeed an important condition for elected politicians' democratic responsiveness to public opinion (Stimson et al., 1995, p. 548) and, eventually, for policy congruence between public preferences and public policies (Esaiasson & Wlezien, 2017, p. 702; Lax & Phillips, 2012, p. 148; Soroka & Wlezien, 2010). Elected representatives should not only be willing to follow the policy preferences of voters (irrespective of whether they personally agree with them), they should also be *able* to do so, and a precondition for that is that they

accurately identify what voters want. This means that, in a liberal version of representation, policy responsiveness is not only borne out by voters selecting representatives with whom they share their policy preferences—see the work on issue voting (e.g. a recent lit review by Weldon and McNeney [2019]) or 'correct' voting (e.g., Lau et al., 2014) that argues that voters tend to select politicians or parties that share their opinion. The perceptual path, in contrast, implies that voters select representatives who hold accurate perceptions of what voters want, and who subsequently operate according to these perceived preferences when in office (Achen, 1978; Mansbridge, 2003; Miller & Stokes, 1963; Pitkin, 1967). In short, all other things being equal, when elected representatives hold more accurate perceptions of what the people want, they should be more likely to act in line with public opinion. Empirical evidence from field experiments in the US indicates that

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state representatives who received information about public opinion (i.e. district-specific survey results) are indeed more responsive to their constituents than representatives who do not have this piece of information and, thus, have a lower perceptual accuracy of public opinion (Butler & Nickerson, 2011).

Despite the centrality of perceptual accuracy to accounts of representation, our knowledge about it is still relatively limited. Until recently, only few empirical studies attempted to evaluate whether politicians hold accurate perceptions of what voters want (Belchior, 2014; Clausen, 1977; Clausen et al., 1983; Converse & Pierce, 1986; Hedlund & Friesema, 1972; Holmberg, 1999). In recent years, however, the topic has received renewed interest (see, Broockman & Skovron, 2018; Kalla & Porter, 2021; Walgrave et al., 2022, 2023). These studies uncover several important empirical regularities. First, in the US and in several European countries, perceptual accuracy diverges among political parties, with right-wing representatives being on average less accurate than their left-wing counterparts (Belchior, 2014). Furthermore, politicians across the political spectrum share a 'conservative bias' in their public opinion perceptions—they erroneously think that the voters–whether the general population, the district constituents, or their party supporters–hold more conservative policy positions than they actually do (Broockman & Skovron, 2018; Pilet et al., 2024). Finally, while perceptual inaccuracy appears to be the rule for most politicians, they exhibit a more accurate grasp of public opinion on issues that their party owns (Varone & Helfer, 2022).

We go beyond this line of work, which analyzed perceptual accuracy as such, and extend it to explore the relationship between perceptual accuracy and politicians' electoral performance. Because of its supposedly central role in the representation process, we study electoral causes and consequences of perceptual accuracy. Concretely, we expect that, insofar as perceptual accuracy matters for representation, voters should reward politicians for it by selecting those who are better at evaluating public opinion. In turn, politicians should expect to be sanctioned for holding inaccurate perceptions (and possibly act on them). The anticipated accountability should make politicians, especially those who are electorally unsafe, more willing to try hard to get an accurate image of what the public wants. This innovative study examines, in three non-US countries with electoral systems allowing voters considerable leeway in supporting individual candidates, whether and how the perceptual path (i.e., accuracy of politicians) relates to the electoral path (i.e., re-election). It looks both at how perceptual accuracy at time t is related to electoral performance at $t+1$ and at how electoral safety (determined by electoral performance in $t-1$) correlates with perceptual accuracy at time t. Both relationships are important from a democratic point of view.

First, we explore whether perceptual accuracy matters for reelection: is perceptual accuracy a quality for which politicians are rewarded on election day? We do so by investigating whether the accuracy of politicians' public opinion perceptions at a given point in time is predictive of their subsequent chances of being re-elected. The complementary second question we investigate is whether being more electorally successful is related to correctly assessing public opinion: is the past electoral performance of politicians associated with their subsequent perceptual accuracy? This would mean that politicians who are electorally unsafe (e.g., were elected with a smaller margin of votes) may be incentivized and motivated to invest more time and resources in following public opinion and, consequently, hold more accurate public opinion perceptions. We thus argue that adequate substantive representation is served by the electoral path reinforcing the perceptual path. We examine whether elections make the more perceptually accurate politicians remain incumbent and whether those who are afraid of losing their position become more accurate.

We examine these ideas drawing on an original survey of sitting representatives fielded in Belgium, Canada and Switzerland in 2018, in which we estimate their perceptual accuracy on a host of salient policy issues. We go one step further than previous studies based on this data by combining representatives' perceptual accuracy with external data on these representatives' electoral safety (based on their performance in the election preceding the survey) and their electoral fortunes in the elections following the survey. We find evidence that perceptual accuracy is indeed related to higher re-election chances (those who have a better sense of voter preferences are more likely to stay in parliament), even though this relationship is estimated with some uncertainty. In addition, we find that politicians in unsafe seats hold more accurate perceptions of voter preferences. Empirical evidence thus points to a double mechanism where the electoral process in itself, and the anticipation of elections by politicians, both seem to lead to more perceptually accurate politicians in office.

2 | THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 | How perceptual accuracy relates to re-election prospects

Our expectation is that, all else being equal, voters would be more likely to select politicians possessing more accurate knowledge of voter preferences compared to those whose perceptual accuracy is lower. To be clear: we do not think it is very likely that voters are able to directly observe whether politicians hold accurate perceptions of their preferences. Yet, voters can

observe and evaluate the *consequences* of higher perceptual accuracy, being the politicians' legislative behavior and/or their communication activities.

The logic underpinning our first hypothesis is straightforward: citizens prefer politicians who act as *delegates*—that is: politicians who are responsive and translate people's preferences into policies as directly as possible (Dassonneville et al., 2020; Werner, 2018). One precondition for politicians seeking to act as delegates in their parliamentary work and to be responsive to public opinion is that they *know* where the public stands on the issues they want to act on. Having an inaccurate perception of public opinion should therefore result in low-quality responsiveness of legislative behavior (Butler & Nickerson, 2011), which voters may eventually observe and reject (Soroka & Wlezien, 2010). Indeed, an extensive literature on issue voting has showed that voters increasingly tend to vote with specific policy issues in mind, and, hence, tend to reward politicians that act according to their policy preferences and punish those who do not (Carmines & Stimson, 1980; Weldon & McNeney, 2019).Hence, our expectation is that, all else being equal, voters would be more likely to select politicians possessing more accurate knowledge of voter preferences and, accordingly, those adopting responsive legislative decisions and taking congruent positions in their communications, compared to those whose perceptual accuracy is lower.

Of course, voters probably have a hard time assessing whether actual policies, let alone the legislative actions of single politicians, really match their policy preferences (Achen & Bartels, 2017; Soontjens, 2021b). But perceptual accuracy not only has a bearing on representatives' policy actions but also on their communication and the explanations they put forward when they go against the people's preferences. In her early and foundational contribution, Pitkin (1967, pp. 209–210) already highlighted the importance of politicians' explanation: "The representative must act in such a way that there is no conflict, or if it occurs an explanation is called for. He must not be found persistently at odds with the wishes of the represented without good reason in terms of their interest, without a good explanation of why their wishes are not in accord with their interest." (see also Thomassen & Schmitt, 1999, p. 187). Thus, even when politicians deliberately decide not to be responsive to the voters, they still need an accurate perception of their policy preferences in order to explain and justify why they took a diverging policy position, or to persuade their audience (Canes-Wrone, 2010). Therefore, even *trustee*-like politicians—politicians who do not aim to follow-up on people immediate preferences—have an interest in knowing what the people want (Walgrave et al., 2023). It allows them to avoid blame and come up with better explanations for their actions, or even to try to conceal their policy actions in case they went against popular preferences.

In sum, politicians behave rationally and are driven first and foremost by re-election goals, and they anticipate negative electoral sanctions for crossing voter preferences and positive rewards for acting in line with them (Mansbridge, 2003; Mayhew, 1974; Stimson et al., 1995). Therefore, as strategic political actors, they are expected to rely heavily on their knowledge of public opinion when passing popular policies and claiming credit (as delegates; e.g. Butler & Nickerson, 2011), when concealing or obfuscating unpopular actions and/or their responsibility for them, and when crafting explanations for their doings more generally (as trustees). In that process, high perceptual accuracy gives some actors a strategic advantage over others. After all, voters pick up on these signals, albeit probably indirectly, and this, we argue, increases the chance that the highly accurate will be re-elected. Thus, our first hypothesis reads as follows: *The higher a representative's perceptual accuracy, the more likely it is that she will be re-elected at the next election* (H1).

Of course, the inherent quality of representatives may put into question the direct link that we establish between perceptual accuracy, responsive legislative behavior resp. explanation for non-congruent decisions, and re-election. Incumbent politicians may simply be re-elected because of better cognitive skills (e.g. that allow them to avoid social projection and false consensus bias), a larger resource endowment (e.g. to process information on public opinion), more experience as legislators (e.g. to frame explanations for unpopular decisions), etc. At the same time, several of these personal attributes could also contribute to a higher perceptual accuracy. Thus, our model specification and empirical tests will control whether perceptual accuracy is part of the representative's quality (as postulated here) or whether other inherent characteristic of good representatives are linked to perceptual accuracy and re-election.

2.2 | How electoral safety relates to perceptual accuracy

The second question this study seeks to answer is whether the electoral standing of politicians is connected to their perceptual accuracy. Our argument is that politicians, knowing that their re-election is contingent upon the approval of voters and that approval can be obtained by furthering citizens' desires or by adequately explaining why these desires cannot be followed (Esaiasson et al., 2013; Mansbridge, 2003), have strategic reasons to be accurately informed about citizens' preferences.

Of course, some politicians will face more competition on election day than others and are therefore less certain about their re-election. The logical reaction to electoral uncertainty for politicians would be to look

for information on citizens' preferences, and, in a next step, to act upon this information in a responsive way, either in their legislative behavior or in their communication (Mayhew, 1974; Miler, 2007). Therefore, we believe that the politicians who are insecure about their future re-election realize that perceptual accuracy matters for their electoral success and, consequently, try to improve their understanding of voters' preferences. After all, vulnerable politicians risk most by *not* knowing voters' preferences (Stimson et al., 1995). By contrast, legislators elected by comfortable margins, who are in safe, non-competitive seats, do not have to maximize their re-election efforts, and can spend their resources pursuing other objectives instead of trying to get a good grasp of voters' preferences (Heitshusen et al., 2005). In sum, the prospect of an uncertain re-election should encourage representatives to be more responsive to their voters and, thus, to monitor voters' policy preferences more closely (Arnold, 1992; Fenno, 1978; Kingdon, 1973; Mayhew, 1974). Maestas' (2003) findings underline this point illustrating that legislators in competitive districts spend more time monitoring public opinion than those in non-competitive districts (see also Soontjens & Walgrave, 2023 who find that politicians who *feel* insecure about their re-election spend more time collecting public opinion information).

In turn, devoting more time and resources to knowing what voters want should, all other things being equal, lead to better estimations of people's preferences. Engaging in more intense interactions with voters—listening to party voters and delivering constituency service, for instance, or attending to public opinion polls etc.—should lead to a better grasp of the public preferences. Research scrutinizing politicians' knowledge of public opinion indeed suggests that politicians running in competitive elections have more accurate public opinion knowledge (see Broockman & Skovron, 2018).

In sum, we expect that electorally unsafe incumbents display a higher perceptual accuracy than incumbents who face less competition, feel less vulnerable and, therefore, make less of an effort to accurately gauge the policy preferences of the electorate. Hence, we expect that: *The lower a representative's electoral safety at the previous election, the more likely it is that she has a high perceptual accuracy* (H2).

2.3 | Accountability beliefs as moderator

Finally, we also postulate that the mechanism underlying our second hypothesis is stronger if politicians believe that voters are able to closely monitor their parliamentary activities and, furthermore, to sanction—at the ballot box—their unresponsiveness or absence of justification. In other words, the so-called 'accountability beliefs' of politicians may have a moderating effect.

Soontjens (2021a) conceptualizes accountability beliefs as the subjective representatives' perceptions of how voters will react in the next election (Arnold, 1992; Miller & Stokes, 1963; see also Fumarola, 2021; Mansbridge, 2009). These consist of awareness beliefs (i.e., Do politicians think their behavior and positions are known to voters?); outcome beliefs (i.e., Do they think voters are able to evaluate the outcomes of their political actions?); and, finally, voting beliefs (i.e., Do they think voters will hold them accountable for what they do and say on election day?).

Political scientists have argued that politicians with high accountability beliefs feel more constrained by voter preferences in their actions than those who do not anticipate electoral accountability (Kingdon, 1967, p. 137; see also Anderson & Harbridge, 2014; Ferejohn, 1999; Mayhew, 1974; Miller & Stokes, 1963). Also, these representatives are more likely to adopt risk-averse behavior (Arnold, 2004; Sheffer et al., 2018). In a similar vein, psychologists have recurrently shown that, when decision-makers feel obliged to justify their judgments and actions (i.e., when they have high accountability beliefs), "*they want to avoid appearing foolish in front of the audience. They prepare themselves in engaging in an effortful and self-critical search for reasons to justify their actions*" (Lerner & Tetlock, 1999, p. 263). Accordingly, politicians with high accountability beliefs may retrieve and process more information about voters' preferences and pay attention to more diverse and effort-demanding cues. High accountability beliefs may alter fundamental cognitive processes and could translate into higher politicians' perceptual accuracy of the electorate's opinion. In addition, research in Belgium and the US has shown that representatives with high accountability beliefs put more effort into getting acquainted with public opinion (Soontjens & Walgrave, 2023).

In sum, feelings of being held accountable trigger accuracy goals and cognitive processes that reduce information processing bias and induce representatives to search for public opinion information. Hence, if the representative is uncertain about her re-election and, at the same time, strongly believes that voters monitor her closely, then she will probably invest even more time and resources to precisely know what her party voters want compared to when the representative does *not* believe that voters might hold her accountable for her actions. Therefore, we hypothesize that *the higher the representative's accountability beliefs, the higher the impact of a low electoral safety on a high perceptual accuracy* (H3).

Yet, we believe it is relevant for another reason as well. Both observational and experimental work (Achen & Bartels, 2017; Huber et al., 2012) casts doubt about citizens' competence to effectively control and sanction representatives (as postulated in H1), documenting several biases in their retrospective

assessment of political performance. Citizens' awareness of politicians' behavior is generally rather scant, and one could even claim citizens are fairly ignorant about the (sometimes unresponsive) actions of political actors (Alvarez & Gronke, 1996; Campbell et al., 1960; Soontjens, 2021b). But the absence of *actual* voter control need not be too problematic, as long as elected representatives *believe* that citizens might potentially hold them to account, i.e., have high accountability beliefs. If re-election minded politicians anticipate retribution or reward at the ballot, citizens may indirectly 'keep in check' these politicians, also in between elections (Mayhew, 1974).

In summary, our two-step theoretical framework including the three hypotheses is shown in Figure 1. At its center is the possible influence of politicians' perceptual accuracy on their re-election prospects (H1). But a politician's behavior and accuracy are also likely to be influenced by her expected chances of re-election (H2) and her accountability beliefs (H3). If both mechanisms were confirmed, this would show that accountability works as expected: people select the representatives they like (those with the most accurate perceptions of what they want and, consequently, those who exhibit a higher chance of devising congruent policies or, at least, coming up with congruent explanations); and if politicians feel that they risk losing their office, they behave more like people want them to behave. It bears noting that testing H1 requires controlling for seat safety from H2. In fact, one could say that the effect of seat safety on re-election may (partially) be mediated by perceptual accuracy. We take this path into account in our analyses.

3 | DATA & METHODS

To test our hypotheses, we combine information collected in a three-country survey assessing politicians' perceptual accuracy on a large number of policy statements, with the results of the elections held immediately before and after its fielding (in 2018, see Varone & Helfer, 2022; Walgrave et al., 2023).[1] We do this in Belgium, Canada, and Switzerland.

The three Western countries we study show important variations in terms of their political systems. Canada is a majoritarian system, while Switzerland is a proportional system with relatively weak parties,

and Belgium is a proportional system with strong parties. The latter two countries do have an electoral system giving voters the chance to affect the election of individual candidates irrespective of their list position since they have a system of preference voting in place. It is also worth noting that there are no coalition governments in Canada, while in Belgium it is always the case, and Switzerland has its own unique system of stable government coalition. In our sample of representatives, we include members of the national Parliaments: the lower chambers from Belgium, Canada and Switzerland, plus the representatives of the upper chamber in the latter. Finding consistent empirical results across these three different political systems will thus speak to the external validity of our study.[2]

Miller and Stokes' original study, and many of the following representation studies, took place in the U.S. or in similar first-past-the-post majoritarian systems with relatively weak parties. They looked at how elected representatives perceive *constituency* opinion, namely all the people living in the district where they were elected. We believe the dual path logic coined by Miller and Stokes applies to other systems as well. In all political systems, politicians are incentivized to learn about what voters want and to act accordingly, and in all systems electoral incentives play a role. For instance, in a recent study, Walgrave et al. (2022) showed that Belgian politicians—in a system with very strong parties—go to great lengths to assess public opinion and try very hard to get their individual perceptions right because they believe this is a precondition for their responsiveness and, ultimately, for their individual electoral success. Yet, the dual path applies in a slightly different guise to countries with different systems. In countries where parties play a larger role and in countries with larger districts it makes more sense to look at how representatives interpret their *party electorate* opinion, implying both a shift from district to national opinion and from the general public to party voters (see also Brack et al., 2012). We acknowledge that Canada has small districts and that Switzerland has rather weak parties, but we argue that looking at party electorate opinion at the national level is the best way to incorporate the three countries in a comparative design.[3]

To measure politicians' public opinion perceptions, we conducted face-to-face interviews with representatives during which they filled in a survey. on a tablet or a laptop computer. The cooperation rate is exceptionally high for Belgium (75%) and Switzerland (64%) and lower for Canada (15%), where it was more challenging to gain face-to-face access to Canadian representatives given that their constituencies are spread across the (large) country. Importantly, the participating politicians in all three countries are largely representative of the full population of national politicians on gender, age, partisanship and seniority (see the online Appendix for more information on the elite surveys).
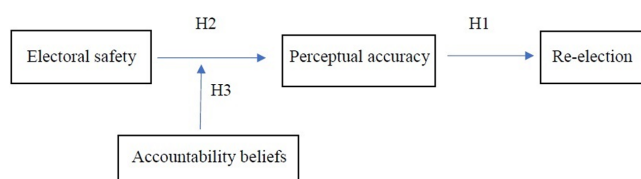

FIGURE 1 Theoretical framework.

Right before the politicians' surveys were conducted, a representative general population survey was conducted in each country (based on a representative probability sample in Switzerland and on-line panels in Belgium and Canada). Its goal was to gauge citizens' *actual* opinion on the exact same policy statements politicians were asked about, based on which we estimate politicians' perceptual accuracy (see next section). Respondents had to indicate the party they supported in the most recent general elections (held several years ago, e.g., 2014 in Belgium and 2015 in Canada and Switzerland) or their party preference if elections were held at the time of the survey. We considered 40 party voters per policy proposal per party as threshold to establish the opinion of the party voters at the national level.

3.1 | Key variables

3.1.1 | Perceptual accuracy

We combine information from the two surveys mentioned above to gauge whether and to what extent politicians hold accurate perceptions of the opinions of their party electorate. In the survey among politicians, we asked them to estimate the opinion of their party electorate on eight or nine topical policy statements on a wide range of issues in each country (e.g., "The retirement age may not exceed 67 years" in Belgium, "Canada should increase the number of immigrants it admits each year" or "Switzerland needs to buy new fighter jets"). The policy proposals varied for each country and were selected based on the same strict criteria to ensure *equivalence* (see the online Appendix for the full list) but are not identical.[4] Importantly, the policy statements differ with respect to their levels of saliency (Hedlund & Friesema, 1972) and distribution of public opinion (Clausen et al., 1983), since these two dimensions have been found to relate to politicians' perceptual accuracy. Equally, they differ to the extent to which they divide politicians among and within parties.

In a second survey fielded in parallel, we assessed the *actual* opinion of representatives' party electorate on the exact same policy statements taking into account only respondents with a clear preference. By combining the information from the politicians' estimation of their party electorate's opinion with the information on the actual opinion of their party electorate, we can create a measure of perceptual accuracy per politician for each policy statement (more information on the exact survey procedure can be found in the online Appendix).

As our main dependent variable, namely re-election, is however MP-specific we generate a measure of perceptual accuracy by relying on an item

response theory (IRT) model, which is based on a more flexible measurement model than those employed elsewhere (e.g., Walgrave et al., 2023). For this, we use as basic items whether a politician's estimate for a particular statement at least falls on the same side of the 50% dividing line as their party electorate, i.e., that the majority among the electorate of a politician corresponds to the majority as estimated by the politician. To allow for comparable scales, first among Swiss politicians having responded to different batches of statements, and second to allow for comparisons across countries, we need, however, a bridging variable.

As a bridging variable, we use the responses to an estimation question that was asked across all countries: politicians' perceptions of the development of income inequality over the last 20 years ("*According to your opinion, how have the differences in income between rich and poor households in [country] changed in the past twenty years? Today the income differences are…*" with a 5-point Likert scale: smaller, rather smaller, about the same, rather larger, larger and a "don't know" option). To gauge the correctness of their answer, we use the LIS panel information comparing the level of 90/10 and 20/80 income inequality in the 20 years before data collection (i.e., since 1998) or as closely as possible as a benchmark. These independent data show that income inequality slightly increased in Belgium and Switzerland in the past years and remained fairly stable in Canada (see Table 4 in the online Appendix). Applying this to representatives' estimations means that for the Canadian politicians we coded as correct answer all those that did not indicate a strong increase or decrease in inequality, while for the other politicians decreases or strong increases were considered as wrong answers.

Taken together, we apply the classic IRT model relying on the politicians' correct guesses of the majority opinion of their party electorate[5] and use as bridging variable the responses to the question on inequality as discussed above. The probability (π_{ij}) of a correct answer (y_{ij}) by representative i on statement j is, following Jackman (2009, p. 455):

$$\pi_{ij} = Pr\left(y_{ij} \mid \theta_i, a_j, b_j\right) \quad (2)$$

$$= F\left(\theta_i a_j - b_j\right) \quad (3)$$

where θ_i is in our context the latent measure of perceptual accuracy, a_j the item discrimination of issue j and b_j the item difficulty of issue j. F being a cumulative density function either of a normal or logistic type. For identification purposes, θ_i is usually assumed to be normally distributed with $\mu_\theta = 0$ and $\sigma^2 = 1$ and in addition, we constrained, by an appropriate prior, the value of aj for the bridging statement to be positive.

We estimated this model jointly for representatives' responses from all three countries together and also separately with JAGS (Plummer, 2010). We used four MCMC chains and assessed convergence by Gelman and Rubin's (1992) scale reduction R.[6]

3.1.2 | Re-election

First, our interest lies in whether politicians in our sample were re-elected in the elections following the survey among politicians. In all three countries, general elections were held in 2019, one to two years after the data collection. We create a dummy variable for politicians running in these elections that has the value of 1 if a candidate was re-elected and 0 if they did not. We run robustness checks (where possible) comparing politicians who ran for the elections and those who did not run again, for example because they took a minister post or retired between our data collection and the next elections or because they were not selected to run again by their party (leadership).[7]

3.1.3 | Electoral safety

While there have been numerous recent advances in measures of electoral safety, most of these rely on the closeness of election results at the party level (e.g., Blais & Lago, 2009; Cox et al., 2020; Folke, 2014; Grofman & Selb, 2009; Selb, 2009). Much less work has been done to assess the seat safety of individual politicians, except for politicians elected in plurality elections. In those plurality systems, the vote margin (possibly divided by the number of votes cast) is a natural way to assess the relative seat safety. When it comes to majority elections with two rounds or proportional representation systems, assessing the safety of a particular seat becomes more challenging. To address this challenge, we follow the proposal by Lüchinger et al. (2024), who developed a measure for open-list PR systems (D'Hondt and Hare as practiced in Switzerland and Honduras). It considers the safety of a seat both with respect to possible challenges from members of the same party, and with respect to challenges from other parties (or even alliances among parties).[8] As the two coincide in simple plurality elections, their proposal can be considered a generalization of the traditional measure used for plurality elections, namely the vote margin.

Thus, in this study, we draw on Lüchinger et al.'s (2024) information on vote margins of the 2019 elections for politicians from the Swiss lower house and use the traditional vote margin as measure for seat safety for the Canadian politicians, as these are elected in plurality elections. We extend this approach to cover also politicians elected according to another preferential electoral system as practiced in elections to the lower house in Belgium and different variants of majoritarian elections as practiced in the elections to the upper house in Switzerland.[9]

In Belgium (see the detailed explanations in De Winter [2006], André et al. [2012], Bräuninger et al. [2012], Bouhon [2017]) voters can either cast a ballot for a particular party without indicating any preferences (which endorses the list positions of the various candidates) or vote for as many candidates on the list of a specific party as they prefer. Based on these votes, seats are allocated to the parties in the running. This implies that each seat obtained by any party is vulnerable to a loss of votes (such that this particular seat would be obtained by another party). In addition, however, seat safety also depends on possible challenges from candidates from the list of the same party. As in the Belgian electoral system, the candidate at the top of the list obtains in addition to her preference votes half as many votes as there were party votes in the electoral district, she gets the first seat, provided that no other candidate on the same list obtains more preference votes than this total. If the top candidate wins a seat, but to win it does not need all party votes, the remainder of the party votes are transferred to the candidate on list position two. Again, if the party has been allocated at least two seats and no other candidate on the list obtained more preference votes, the second placed candidate wins a seat. This continues up to the last seat to be allocated. This also implies that the individual seat safety inside a list is the difference between the number of preference votes of the candidate who lost to the last person winning a seat and the number of votes (including, if applicable, half the party votes) a particular successful candidate obtained. The overall seat safety (expressed in terms of votes) corresponds to the lower number between vote margin between parties and vote margin on the list.

We proceed similarly for majoritarian elections to the Swiss upper house.[10] As there are no rules for participation in the second round, we start with the vote margin in the second round if such a round occurs. In cases where candidates won in the first round or ran without challengers in the second round, the margins from the first round were used.

Finally, while these generalized vote margins generate seat safety measures on an identical scale for each election, the issue arises, especially if seat safety is to be compared across elections (either in time or space) whether a standardization should be adopted. Largely following Cox et al. (2020), we divide the various vote margins by the number of votes cast in the election. Consequently, our measure of seat safety ranges from 0 to 1 and corresponds to the share of the votes a candidate, or his/her party, could lose while still keeping their seat.

3.1.4 | Accountability beliefs

We focus on politicians' beliefs about whether their electorate holds them accountable at the ballot or not with the following question (in the survey mentioned above) on a scale going from 0 (not at all) to 10 (totally): "Think about all people who consider voting for your party. To what extent does this knowledge influence these potential voters' decisions at the ballot?" where knowledge refers to the voters' awareness of politicians' parliamentary work, their position on issues and the outcomes of their political work (see Soontjens, 2021a for more information on this measure).

3.2 | Control variables

Several other variables may influence perceptual accuracy and/or re-election chances and are therefore included in all our models. First, we control for representatives' legislative role perception as trustees or delegates (Pitkin, 1967). On the one hand, for politicians who see themselves as delegates in their political work, we expect a stronger link between election outcomes and their perceptual accuracy, especially when it comes to the second hypothesis. On the other hand, classical studies mapping differences in politicians' perceptual accuracy show that delegates hold less accurate perceptions of public opinion (Clausen et al., 1983; Hedlund & Friesema, 1972). Therefore, we control for politicians' role conception in our models. To measure this, politicians were asked in the survey to indicate their position on a scale from 0 (follow citizens' preferences exactly—*delegate* role) to 10 (follow their own convictions while pursuing the interest of citizens—*trustee* role).

Next to this key variable, we control for the groups in society a politician aims to represent. We expect that politicians who place emphasis on representing their party voters (in contrast to, for instance, the public at large or certain social groups) will put more effort into knowing their supporters' policy opinions. This is in line with Deschouwer and Depauw (2014) who claim that political representation remains basically partisan. Consequently, it is relevant to consider representational focus as a control variable. Politicians were asked to rank several groups (their party voters, their constituents, all people in the country and a specific group of citizens) according to how much they want to represent each of these groups. The variable "represent voters of party" captures the importance they attribute to representing their voters.

Also at the politician level, we control for leadership position (e.g., party or caucus leader, speaker, ministerial position) because those in high-level positions might have more access to information (such as

opinion polls) and, as a result, a better understanding of public opinion.

At the party level, we control for the left–right ideological position of the parties, as right-leaning politicians have been found to be less accurate in their perception of public opinion (Belchior, 2014; Broockman & Skovron, 2018). We use the scores of the 2014 Chapel Hill expert survey (Polk et al., 2017) to account for parties' left–right leaning. For Canada, data were used from Pétry et al. (2012). Another possible confounding factor is the party's electoral performance. Therefore, we control for the electoral fortune of each party in the previous election. If politicians' perceptual accuracy is evenly spread over parties, then the link between winning or losing re-election is obscured by the party electoral fortune. We include for each party percentage gains, respectively losses at the previous election.

Finally, we accessed public information of the respective country's parliamentary services or politicians' websites to gain information on age, gender, whether they had a university degree, and their parliamentary experience (the years since they had been first elected to parliament). These variables will also be included as controls. Descriptive statistics of all variables can be found in Table 5 in the online Appendix.

4 | FINDINGS

We depict our results from estimating a probit regression model explaining re-election in Figure 2 with a coefficient plot.[11] The underlying results (based on 140 observations) are reported in Table 6 in the online Appendix (following the recommendations of the American Statistical Association, see Wasserstein & Lazar, 2016; Wasserstein et al., 2019). Note that we report in the main text results based on all representatives for which we have all the relevant information. In the online Appendix we report, however, also results for politicians from each country separately. These results suggest that the findings from the combined analyses are mostly reflective of Belgian and Swiss representatives, and less so of Canadian representatives. As we discuss in the online Appendix, this is likely due to issues with the measures of perceptual accuracy for the politicians from the Canadian sample and the small numbers of Canadian representatives who participated in the survey.

Regarding our first hypothesis, we find evidence that politicians who have a better understanding of public opinion, have more chances of re-election than their colleagues with low perceptual accuracy. Due to the small sample size, this effect is estimated with considerable uncertainty. At the same time, and not unexpectedly, the re-election probabilities (at $t+1$) are also significantly higher if a politician's seat is safer (at $t-1$).
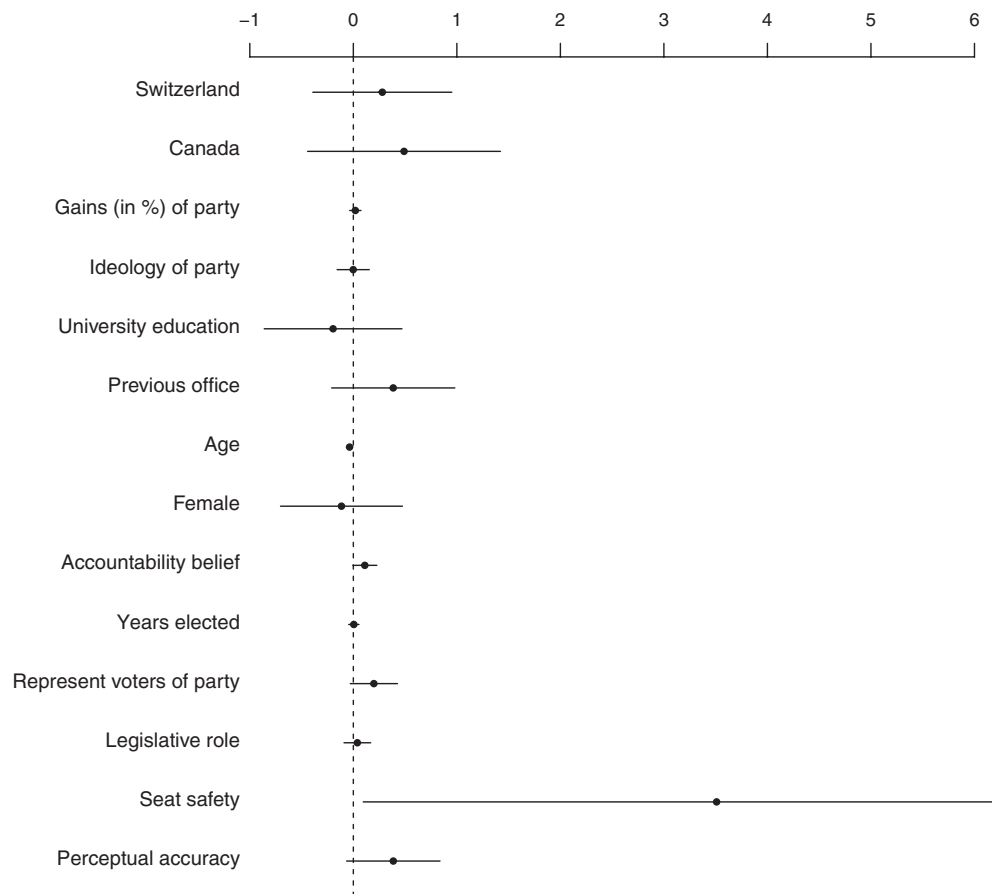
**FIGURE 2** Explaining re-election (H1): Coefficient plot (point estimates 95% confidence intervals).

In Figure 3 we depict the substantive effects based on average predicted probabilities (i.e., by holding all variables at their sample values and calculating predictions based on 1000 sampled coefficients while varying the main explanatory variables over their full range; Gelman et al., 2020, p. 248ff). The two panels show the positive relationships of the two main variables that should predict re-election chances. The upper panel shows that, as hypothesized (H1), representatives with higher perceptual accuracy are more likely to be re-elected. More specifically, the least accurate representatives have an average predicted probability of re-election equal to 0.52 while for the most accurate politicians this probability approaches 0.82 for a difference of 0.29 [−0.03, 0.60] (95% confidence interval).[12] This finding even holds when controlling for a representative's seat safety at the preceding election, which has, as the lower panel shows, the expected positive effect on re-election (the maximum effect being equal to 0.33 [0.02, 0.44] (95% confidence interval)).

Second, we test whether seat safety is negatively related to perceptual accuracy, as hypothesized in the second hypothesis. The coefficient plot in Figure 4 depicts the results of a linear regression allowing for a test of this hypothesis. The full results are in Table 7 in the online Appendix. The coefficient plot suggests that seat safety does indeed negatively correlate with perceptual accuracy. This also transpires in Figure 5 depicting the substantive effect. Going from the least electorally safe incumbent to the safest one is associated with a decline of approximately half a standard deviation in the measure of perceptual accuracy. With increasing seat safety representatives appear to become less and less accurate in their perception of voters' preferences, though this effect is estimated with considerable uncertainty.[13] The size of this effect is all the more notable, as for politicians having already attained the status of incumbent before the election preceding the survey among politicians, their previous perceptual accuracy will have affected their election result (i.e., their seat safety). Given this, our estimate is likely to be biased downward.

Among the control variables, one notes that politicians from parties with a more rightist ideology hold less accurate perceptions, as do male politicians. Tenure length is associated with higher perceptual accuracy, while having held higher offices in the party, parliament or government, slightly reduces perceptual accuracy.[14]

Finally, we turn to an assessment of our third hypothesis, which postulates that the effect of seat safety on perceptual accuracy is moderated by the politician's beliefs about electoral accountability. In Figure 6 we
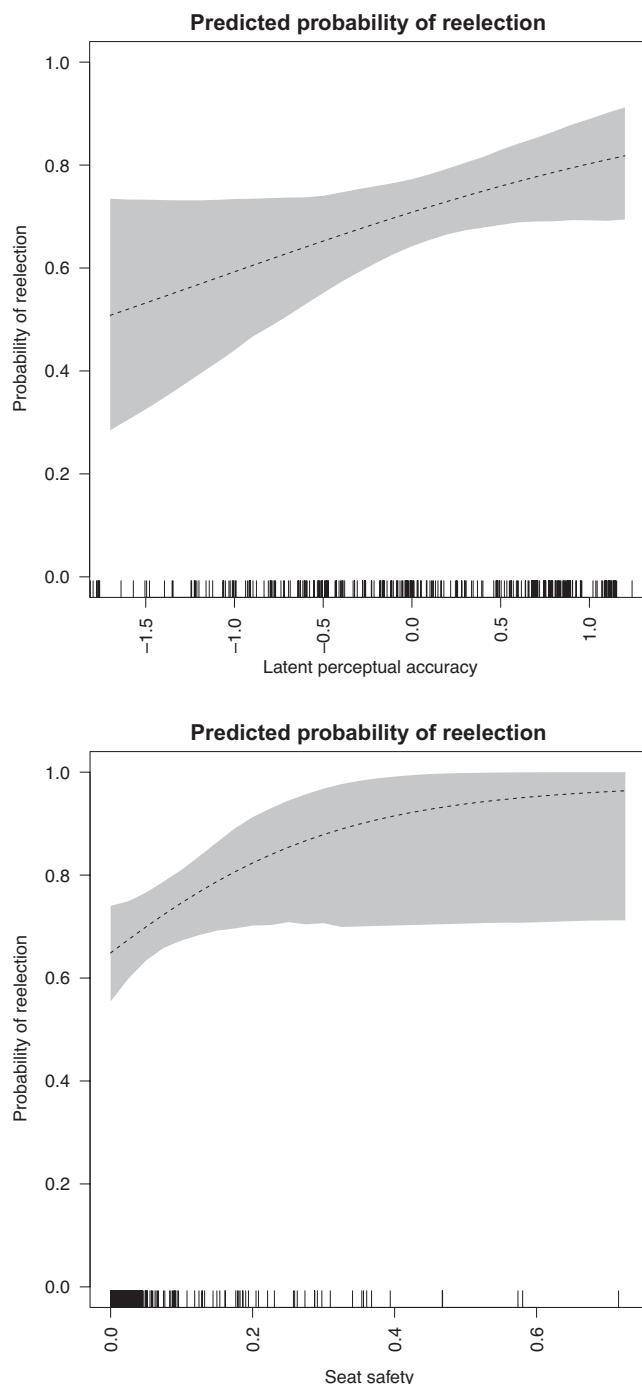
FIGURE 3 Average predicted probabilities of re-election (H1) (point predictions with 95% confidence intervals).

depict the results of our model assessing whether accountability beliefs have a moderating effect (by interacting the centered variables) on the relationship between seat safety and perceptual accuracy with the help of a coefficient plot.[15] The coefficient for the interaction is slightly negative but practically zero. Thus, contrary to the third hypothesis, we find no evidence that the effect of a representative's seat safety on her perceptual accuracy is moderated by her accountability beliefs.

This absence of the expected moderating effect of accountability beliefs also appears clearly in Figure 7 in which we depict the marginal effects of seat safety. While with larger values for the accountability belief the marginal effect becomes slightly less negative, the uncertainty linked to these estimates is considerable.

One explanation why accountability beliefs do not moderate the relationship between electoral safety and perceptual accuracy could be that politicians only care about being held accountable by a specific subset of voters—e.g. party members, geographical constituents, advantaged socio-economic groups, gender-based groups, and so on—and our measure of accountability beliefs doesn't directly capture it, leading to the null finding on H3. If we had more accurate measures of accountability beliefs regarding the specific constituency each politician looks to, we might have uncovered a relationship. Beyond that, it could also be the case that electoral safety drives perceptual accuracy for reasons other than accountability—simply because all politicians, even if they don't hold strong accountability beliefs—are still risk averse in face of elections, and so would be motivated to improve their understanding of public opinion as a sort of insurance strategy even if they are very electorally safe.

5 | CONCLUSION

Referring to the seminal diamond model coined by Miller and Stokes (1963), this study set out to examine how politicians' perceptual accuracy interacts with the electoral process. Our aim was to establish whether higher perceptual accuracy among sitting politicians is associated with a higher likelihood of them being re-elected in the following election, and whether politicians' electoral safety–based on their performance in the preceding election–is predictive of their in-office perceptual accuracy. We combined information from a unique three-country dataset with, on the one hand, information on politicians' perceptions of their electorate's opinion on a range of specific policy statements and information about voters' real preferences with, on the other hand, information on these incumbents' electoral performance at previous and subsequent elections.

We find evidence that the electoral process leads to the selection of perceptually accurate politicians. More perceptually accurate incumbents have a higher chance of being re-elected at the *next* elections, and incumbents who performed badly at the *previous* elections tend to be more perceptually accurate. Both of those effects are, however, given the small sample sizes, estimated with some uncertainty. Rephrased according to Miller and Stokes' (1963) model, we find evidence both for the correlation between the perceptual and electoral paths to political representation. Needless to say, however, that we have to take this result with a
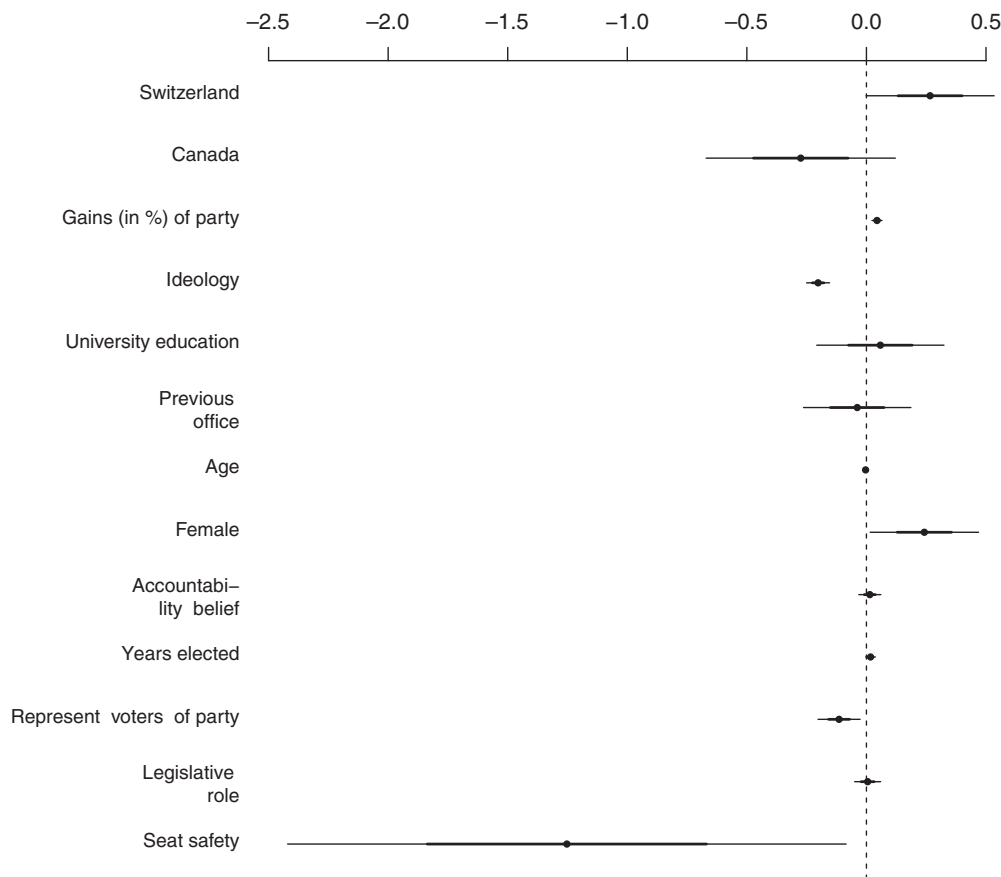
FIGURE 4 Explaining perceptual accuracy (H2): Coefficient plot (point estimates with 95% confidence intervals).
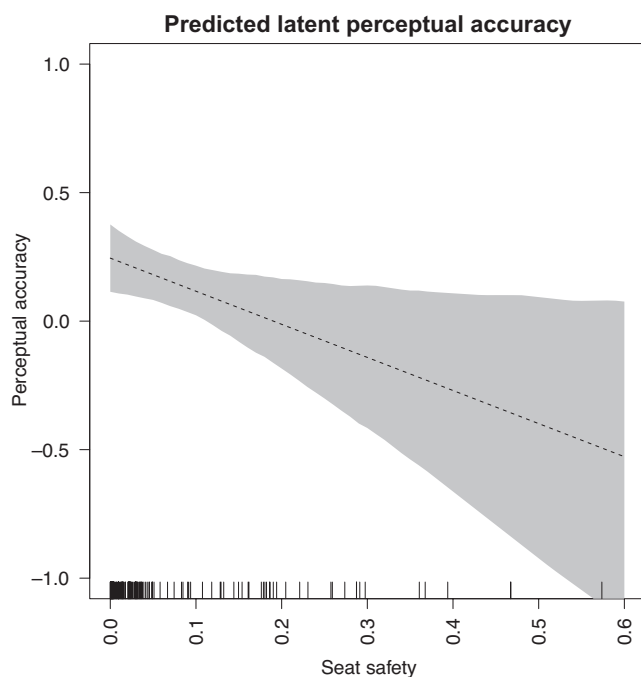

FIGURE 5 Average predicted perceptual accuracy (H2) (point predictions with 95% confidence intervals).

grain of salt, as the strength of the relationship between electoral safety and perceptual accuracy is likely to be underestimated. More specifically, as an incumbent at time $t+1$ might already have been incumbent at $t-1$, her re-election at that time already captures some of her better perceptual accuracy from the previous period. Finally, and against our theoretical expectations, accountability beliefs do not seem to moderate the impact of electoral safety on perceptual accuracy.

While not the main focus of this study, our analysis also confirms previous scholarship in that politicians from right-wing parties display a lower level of perceptual accuracy than their left-leaning counterparts. Other findings disconfirm previous expectations, though. Despite their frequent use as an explanatory variable in models of politicians' behavior, neither legislative role (delegate versus trustee) nor the focus of representation (party voters versus other constituencies) influence representatives' perceptual accuracy. We even observed a small negative relationship between perceptual accuracy and the politicians' willingness to represent their party voters' preferences (see Figure 4).

Finding that the electoral process leads to the selection of perceptually accurate politicians, this work
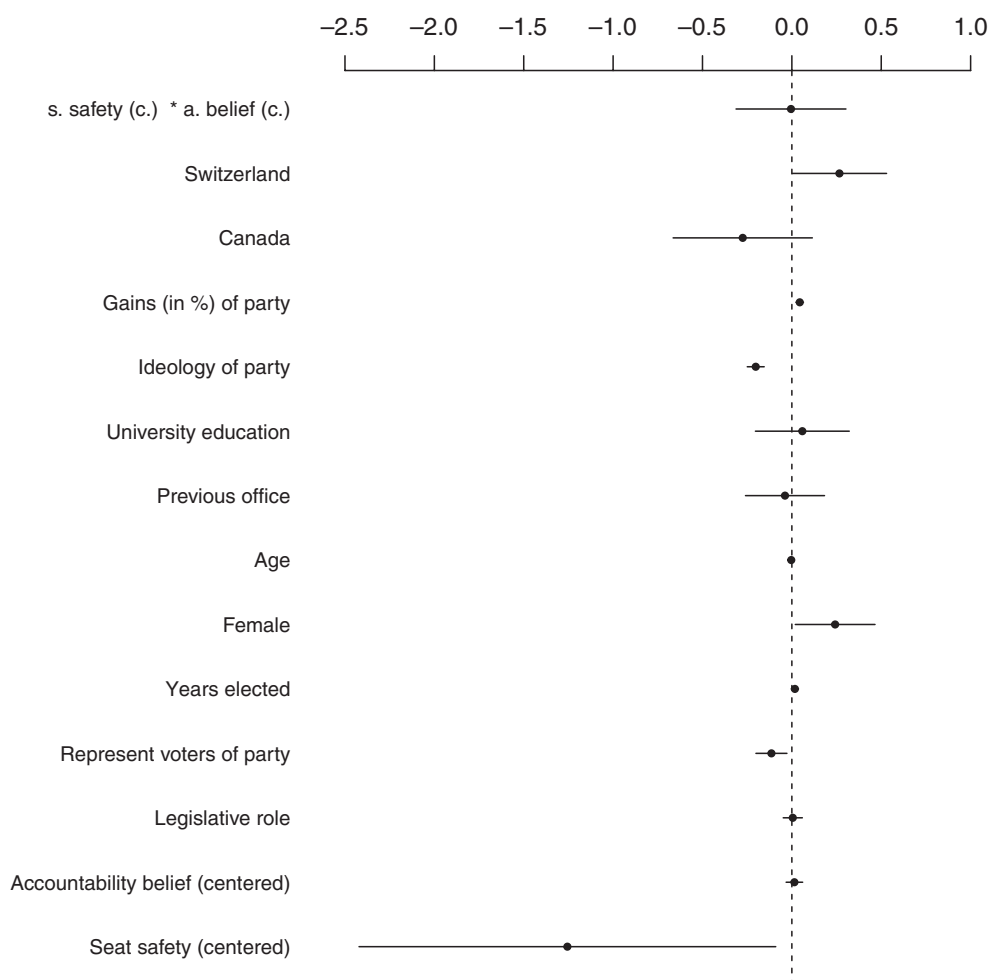
FIGURE 6 Explaining perceptual accuracy with moderating accountability beliefs (H3): Coefficient plot (point estimates with 95% confidence intervals).

clearly matters for our understanding of substantive representation. Voters are more likely to vote into office those politicians who have a higher perceptual accuracy, and once they are likely to be voted out of office, politicians become more accurate too. Therefore, one could argue that the system seems to work: it does select the more accurate, presumably 'better' politicians, and it also makes them more accurate and, probably, more responsive once in office. However, as we also find electorally safe incumbents being on average less accurate, the question arises to what equilibrium the system moves. Whether voters actually pay attention to policy information and vote based on it, politicians certainly seem to act as if that is the case, investing more time in improving the accuracy of their public opinion perceptions when their electoral standing is poorer. This study also shows that perceptual accuracy might be associated with actual subsequent electoral success, which may serve as an additional counterweight to arguments regarding the irrelevance of voters' policy positions on how they evaluate politicians and parties.

To establish more clearly how the system adjusts (thermostatically; see Soroka & Wlezien, 2010),

upcoming studies should run longitudinal analyses with several elections. Furthermore, the timing of the most recent election could be used in future work that evaluates the relationship between perceptual accuracy and re-election at other levels of government where there is considerable variance in electoral timing, such as the regional or local level.

While we obtained these results on the basis of observational data, we are quite confident that they demonstrate a true effect of perceptual accuracy on re-election and a similar effect of seat safety on perceptual accuracy. For both relationships, we find that they are not sensitive to plausible confounders (see online Appendix, Section 3). This is also the case for plausible other mechanisms that might be behind our findings. Thus, as in the three countries we study political parties select their candidates, one might argue that these selectorates simply choose candidates with better perceptual accuracy. An analysis of this "selection process" suggests, however, that perceptual accuracy, contrary to age and seniority, is hardly a factor that affects reselection (see Table 8 in the online Appendix). Similarly, the argument that
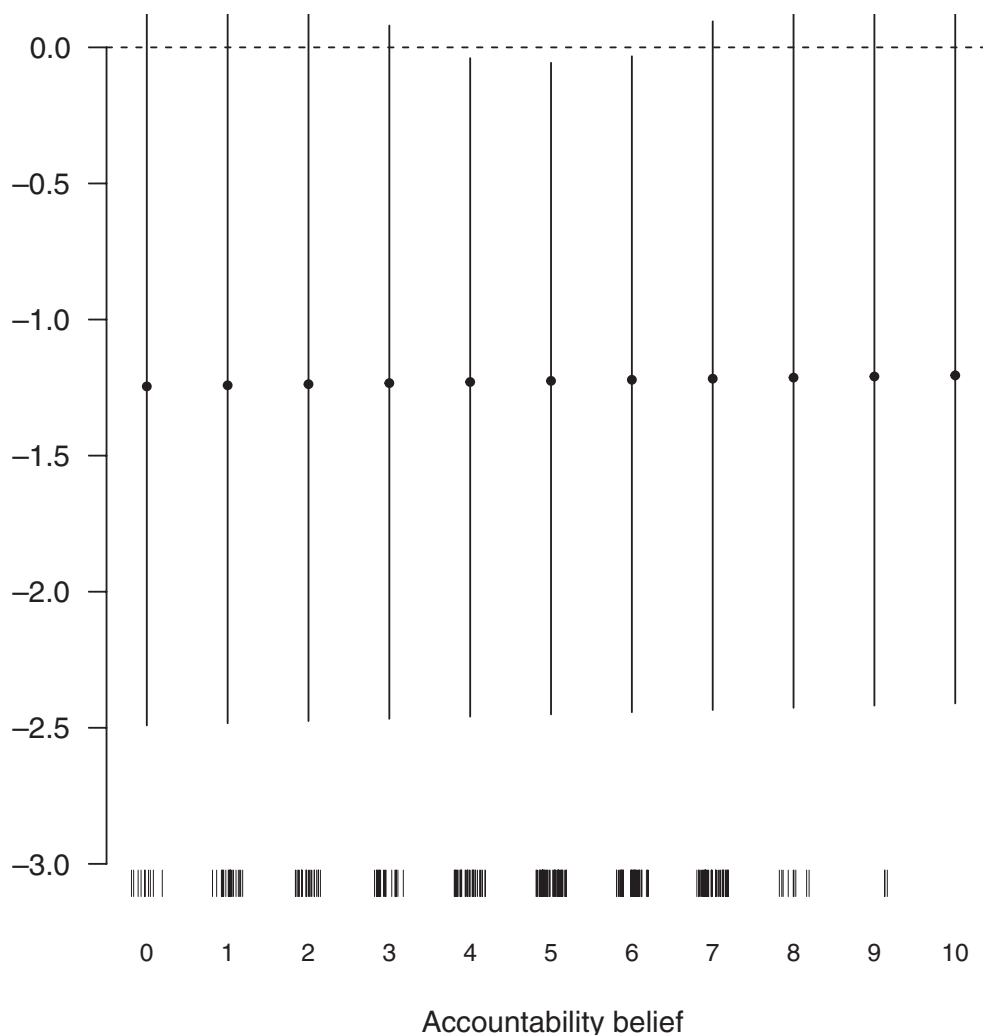
FIGURE 7 Marginal effect of seat safety as a function of accountability beliefs (point estimates with 95% confidence intervals).

the quality of incumbents is actually what drives our results begs the question whether perceptual accuracy is part of this quality (which is what we study) or whether other inherent aspects of good incumbents are linked to perceptual accuracy and re-election. Even then, however, our sensitivity analyses suggest that such a confounder would have to have properties that are quite unlikely to lead us to question our findings.

Second, upcoming studies should assess systematically whether our results hold if we consider politicians' perceptions of the *general* population (see robustness checks conducted for Switzerland and district opinion—but not for Belgium and Canada (for which we have information on national level preferences), since data on general population by district is missing there—in the online Appendix). Indeed, elected representatives and political parties not only compete to keep their traditional voters but need also to gain new ones (De Sio & Weber, 2014). Consequently, politicians should be incentivized to estimate accurately the policy preferences of all constituents in their corresponding

electoral district. Especially in majoritarian electoral systems (e.g., Canada), representatives should attract electoral support beyond their party's boundary to get elected.

Third, our study compares incumbent politicians who get re-elected vs who don't. It examines which politicians remain in the game after elections and not who—as new *candidate*—enters in the first place. It addresses thus a more innovative question and deliver a larger contribution than another candidates' study. Also, it is not sure whether the drivers that make candidates get elected are the same than those that keep incumbent politicians in place. However, the theory we base our analysis on should also extend to losers of elections but in a mirrored way, in that candidates who just barely lost should have higher perceptual accuracy than those who were never in serious contention. This is both a motivation argument but also has to do with the fact that when a candidate is on a hopeless campaign she/he might derive more value from expressive campaigning that has more to do with pushing her/his agenda than gaining votes.

Fourth, this study *presumes* that perceptual accuracy translates into policy responsiveness and congruent action. One crucial question for future work to tackle, then, is whether accurate perceptions of voter preferences result in politicians *being* responsive to these voters' preferences in their parliamentary work. After all, voters do not perceive perceptual accuracy, but likely perceive (and reward) the resulting congruent policy actions and more congruent communications. This should be spelled out in subsequent work.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

ORCID

Simon Hug 🄳 https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7741-2201
Frédéric Varone 🄳 https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5620-3291
Luzia Helfer 🄳 https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9572-0320
Stefaan Walgrave 🄳 https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1814-1015
Karolin Soontjens 🄳 https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4615-510X
Lior Sheffer 🄳 https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4049-7299

ENDNOTES

[1] The description of the data below draws on similar presentations as in Varone and Helfer (2022) and Walgrave et al. (2023). They used these data to address different research questions.

[2] As the electoral system used to elect Swiss representatives varies not only across chambers but also within chambers, using both sets of observations introduces additional variation speaking to the validity of our findings.

[3] This even more so as collecting representative data on constituency preferences in each of the three countries (and especially Canada) would be prohibitively expensive. Some additional analysis using data on national preferences (respectively cantonal preferences in Switzerland) yielded similar, though weaker results (see online Appendix).

[4] To our knowledge no comparative surveys of elected representatives employ identical questions on policy preferences.

[5] As a robustness check, next to the party electorate at the national level we also considered the correct estimates of the majorities among all citizens in electoral districts (Switzerland), respectively among citizens of the whole country (Belgium and Canada) and found similar, though slightly weaker effects for the main variables used in this study (Table 16 in the online Appendix).

[6] In the online Appendix we offer a much more detailed discussion of the proposed measurement models and their properties. In addition, as the dichotomization of the manifest variables for the IRT model eliminates (possibly informative) information, we also derived an extension of the IRT-model to combine the distance between the representatives' estimates and the true population share in favor of a policy as beta distribution with the ordinal information for the bridging variable. The results based on this measure of perceptual accuracy are presented in the online Appendix and lead substantively to the same inferences.

[7] For this we estimated a selection and an outcome (re-election) equation either separately, or by relying on a Heckman-style selection model for binary outcome variables. As we do not have very good arguments for an exclusion restriction, we rely on Sartori's (2003) estimator that fixes the correlation coefficient at unity (positive or negative). The corresponding initial results reported in Table 7 suggest only minor differences with respect to the results reported in the main text.

[8] Strictly speaking Lüchinger et al. (2024) are interested in getting a "closeness" measure for the election outcome to use it in analyses relying on regression discontinuities to assess effects due to winning a seat in parliament.

[9] For the seat safety of members of the lower house we rely on the calculations carried out and explained in Lüchinger et al. (2024). We greatly appreciate their sharing of their data with us.

[10] Two cantons elect their two senators according to proportional representation and for these we proceed as for the lower house following Lüchinger et al. (2024).

[11] All causal inferences (even those based on experimental data and on sophisticated identification strategies) rely on (untestable) assumptions (see, e.g., Gelman et al., 2020, pp. 339–454; Heckman & Smith, 1995, p. 102), and so does ours. As we use observational data, an important assumption is that no confounder(s) omitted from our respective specifications biases our results. While we cannot test this assumption, we can access in sensitivity analyses, what characteristics such confounders would have to annihilate our results. In the online Appendix (Section 4) we carry out such an analysis drawing on the approach proposed by Cinelli and Hazlett (2020), which demonstrate that no plausible confounders could make our results go away.

[12] When eliminating outliers from the estimation, namely the two observations with the largest Cook's distances, the average predicted difference increases to 0.35 [0.01 0.66].

[13] It is important to note here that estimating this effect without bias is difficult. More specifically, as perceptual accuracy increases re-election, it is likely that perceptual accuracy was already considerable before a politician became an incumbent. This is likely to bias toward 0 the effect of seat safety on perceptual accuracy. We also note that eliminating the observations with the largest Cook's distances fails to affect our results.

[14] As our theoretical model (see Figure 1) and empirical results suggest that perceptual accuracy is a mediator in the relationship between seat safety and reelection, we also carried out a formal mediation analysis (reported in the online Appendix). The results suggest that seat safety only marginally (and negatively) affects reelection through its effect on perceptual accuracy, while a strong direct (or through other mediators than perceptual accuracy) effect persists. This result also relates to Kalla and Porter's (2021) experimental finding that US politicians only reluctantly consult information on public opinion. They conclude (1799) by writing that"[t]hough we have shown that it is difficult to improve the accuracy of legislators' perceptions of constituent preferences, that does not mean it is impossible."

[15] We refrained from using this specification for the mediation analysis as we find very little evidence for a moderating effect. This is confirmed by a formal test based on Imai et al. (2010) which suggests that there is no evidence for a different mediated effect at the minimum compared to the maximum of the accountability belief. Interestingly enough, slightly more evidence appears for a moderated direct effect on reelection.

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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