



# *Politicians' Reading of Public Opinion*

## Inaccuracy, bias and consequences

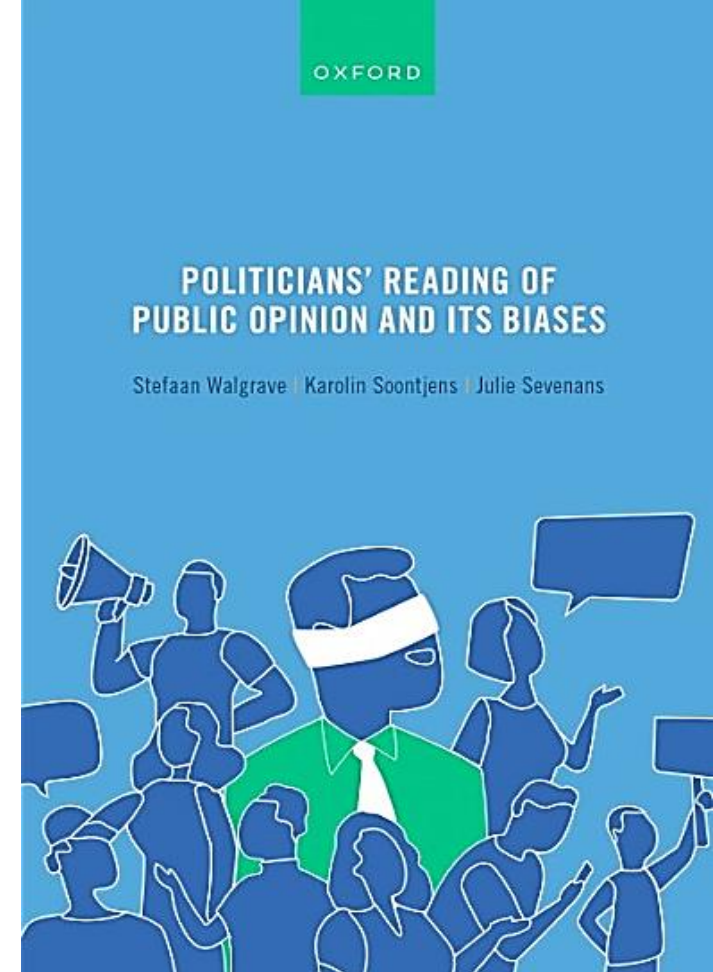
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POLIS – Leuven

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# Take home

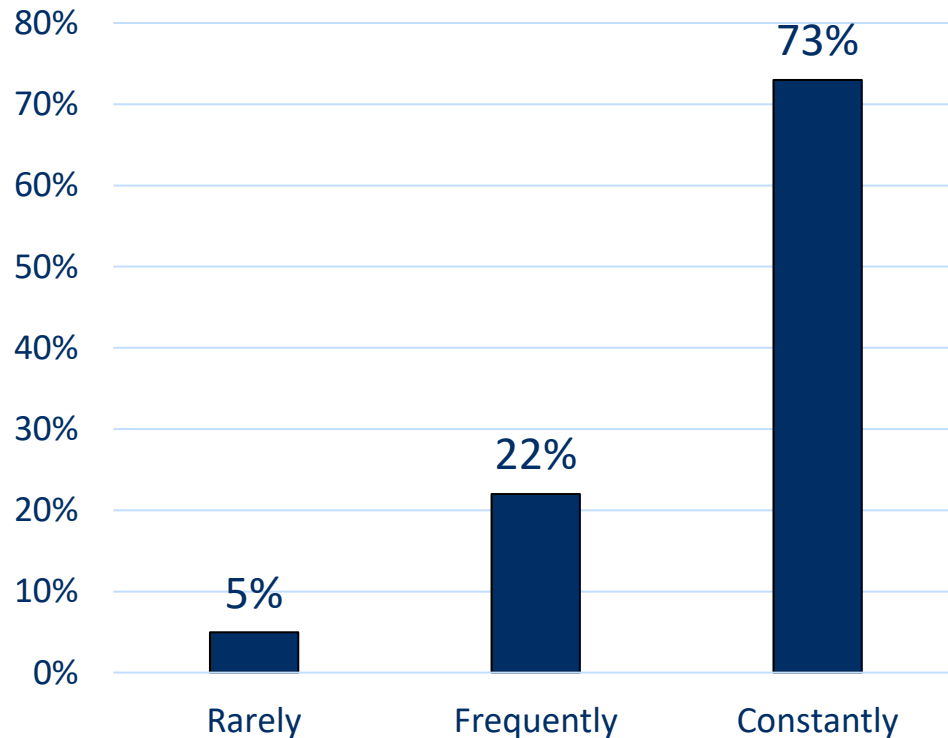
- A. Politicians care about public opinion
- B. But their public opinion perceptions are inaccurate
- C. And, even worse: they are biased
- D. This has consequences for policy-making



**Flanders  
+ Wallonia, Germany, Canada,  
Netherlands, and Switzerland**

# A. Politicians care about public opinion

“Is estimating public opinion something that you often do?”



*“It is an automatic reflex, a constant voice in your head”*

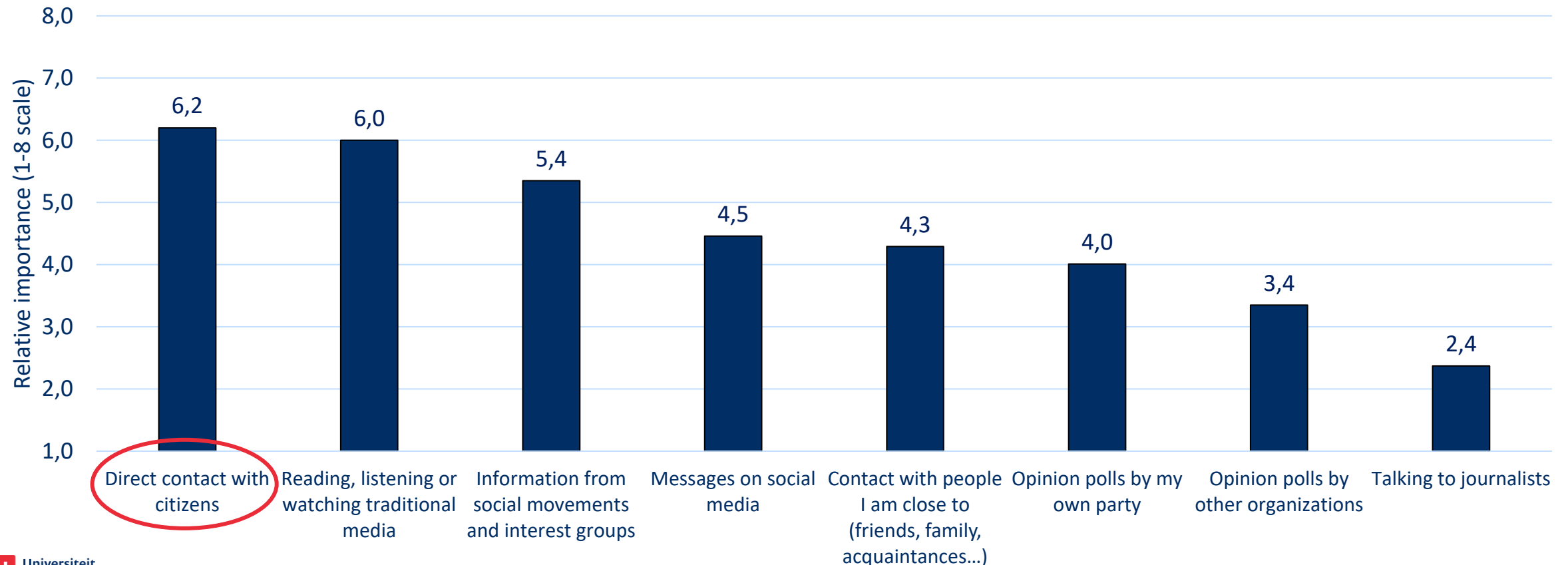
*“It plays a role in every proposal I make, not only in the back but also in the front of my head”*

*“Your radar must turn constantly. A politician whose radar is broken, is a sitting duck”*

*“We take public opinion into account much more than the public thinks”*

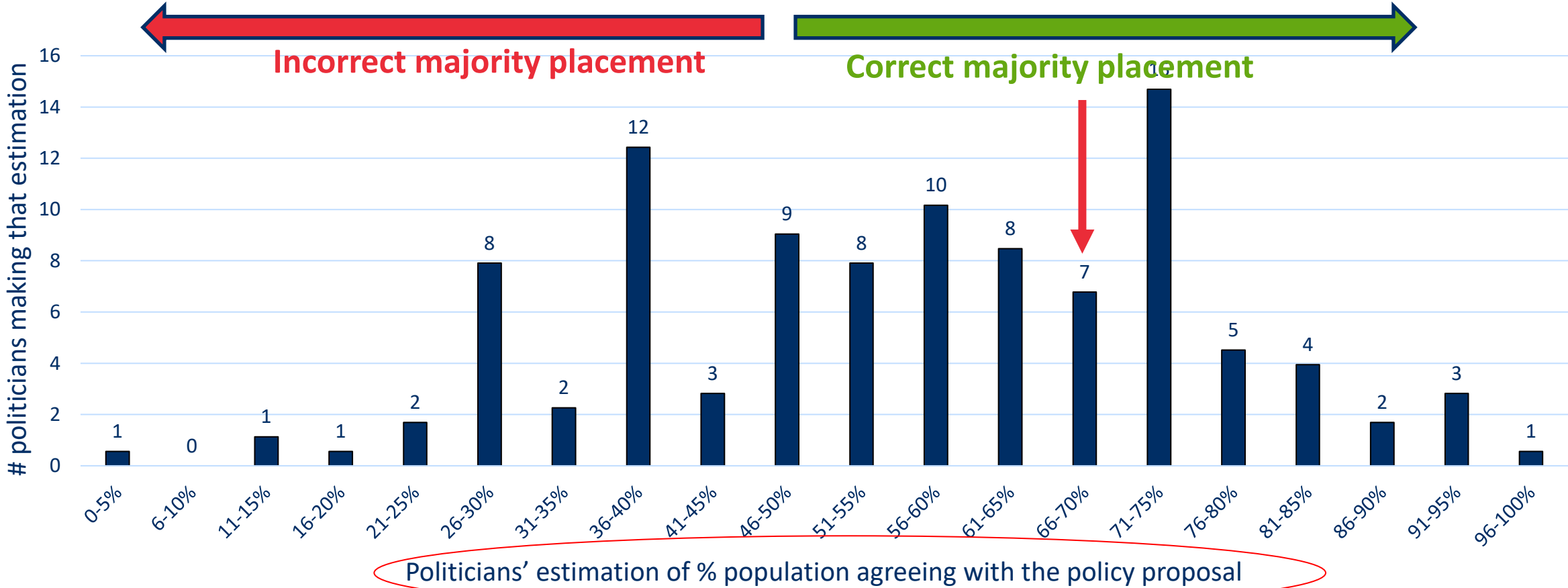
# Politicians care about public opinion (2)

“Can you rank these sources based on their usefulness in informing you about what the general public wants?”



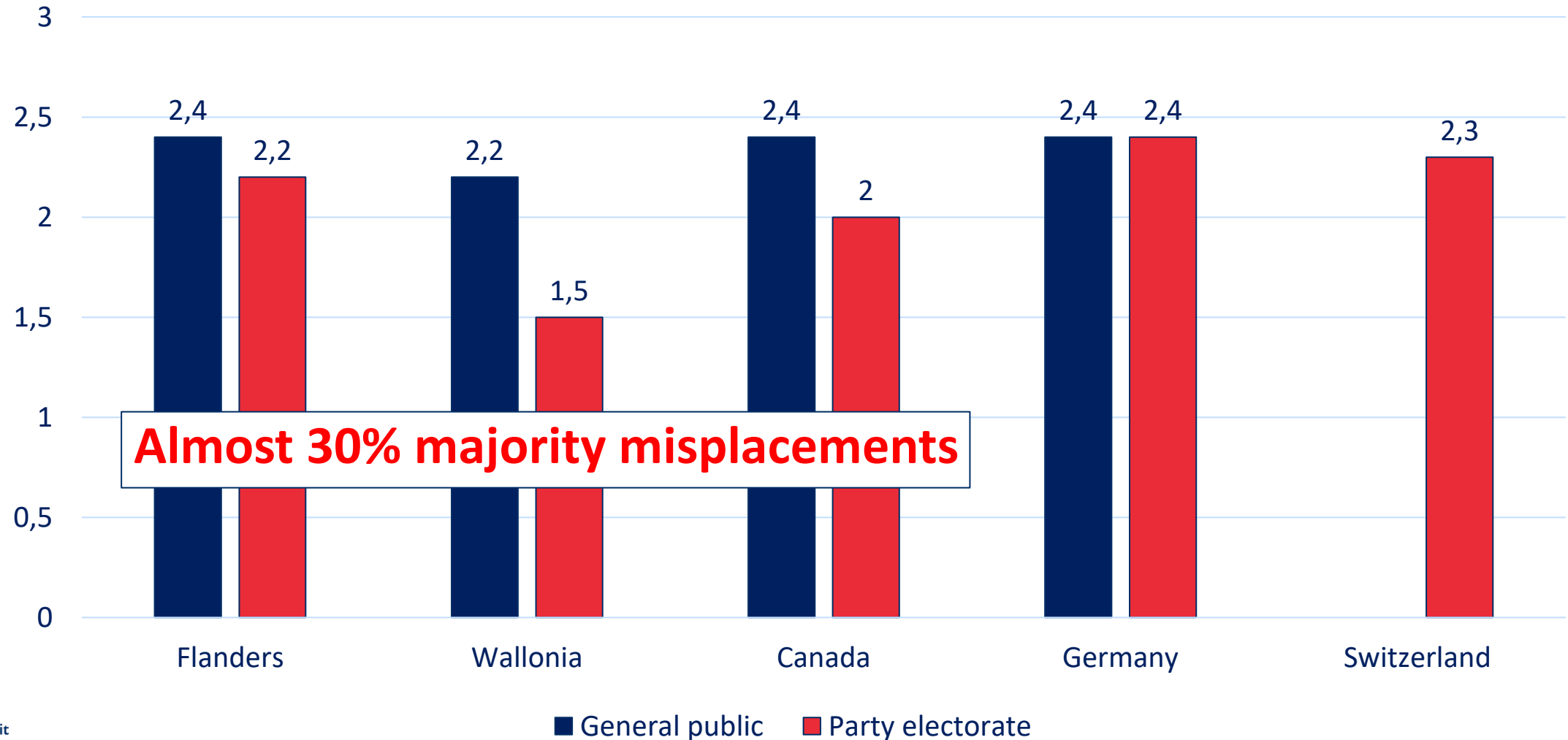
# B. Politicians' perceptions of public opinion are inaccurate

“The most polluting cars should be banned from inner cities” (69% of citizens agrees)



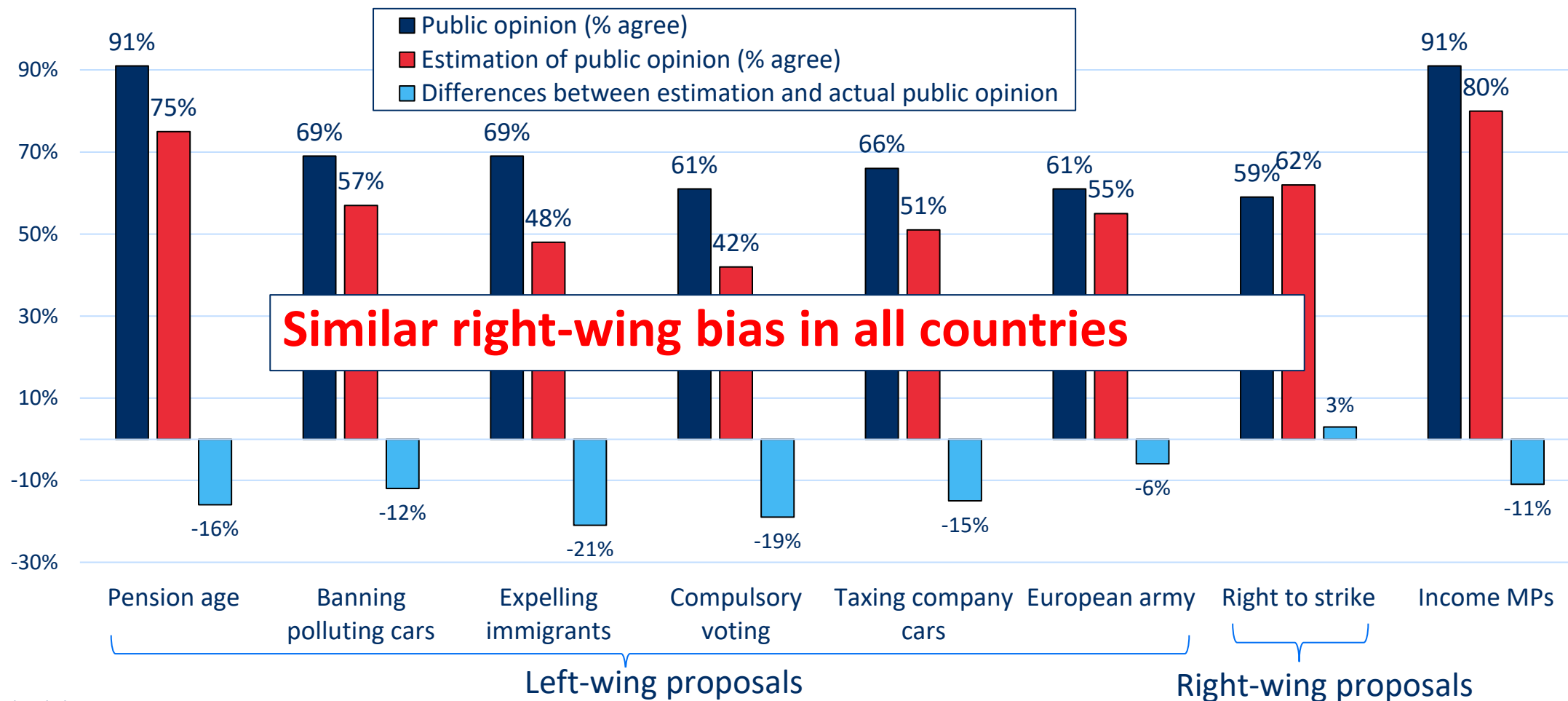
# Politicians' perceptions of public opinion are inaccurate (2)

## Number of majority misplacements (on 8 proposals)

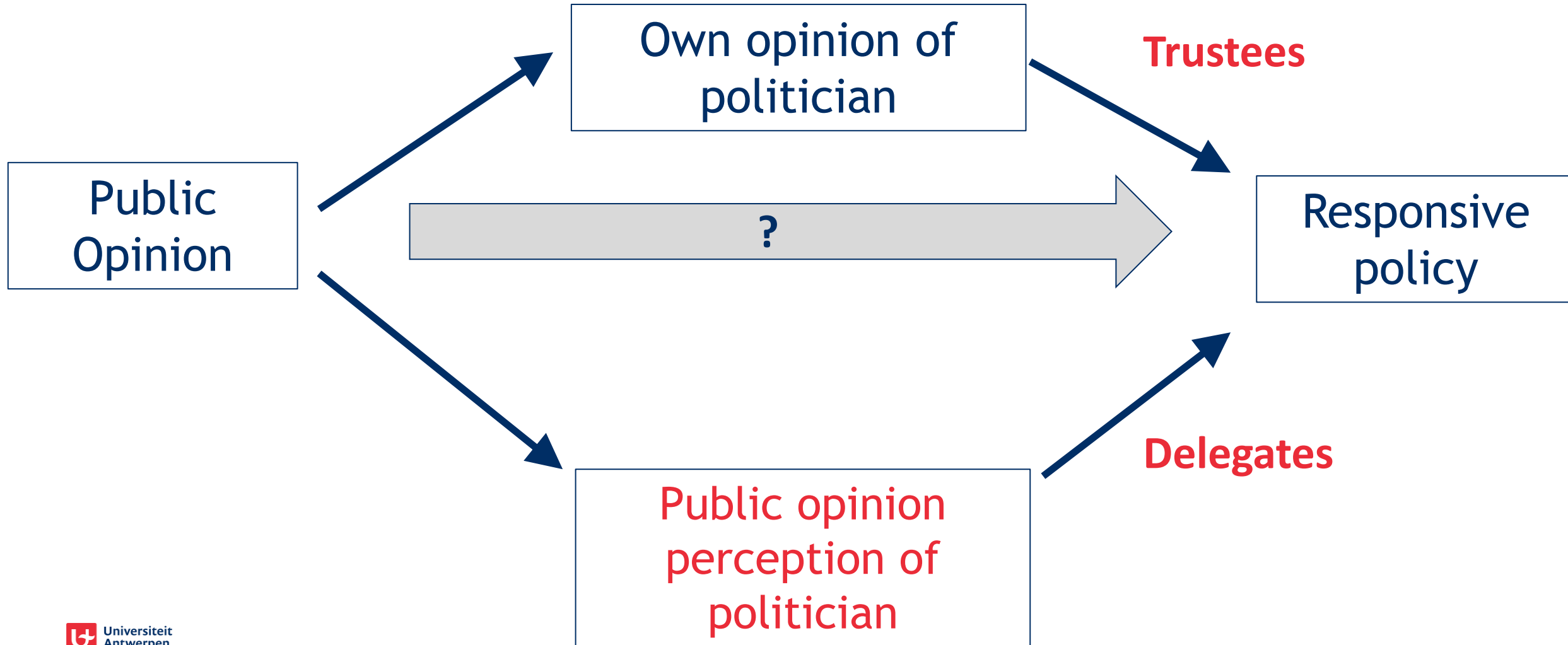


# C. Politicians' perception of public opinion is biased

## Right-wing bias in perceptions



## D. Consequences of public opinion estimations





# Consequences of public opinion estimations (2)

- **Politicians follow their perceptions in their policy actions**

*“If you go public with a proposal that has no popular support, you do not achieve anything. Your proposal gets rejected and, on top of that, you have made some people angry. It’s much better, then, to try to reach your goal via another path by launching another proposal. This is what all politicians do. Those who deny it, are lying”*

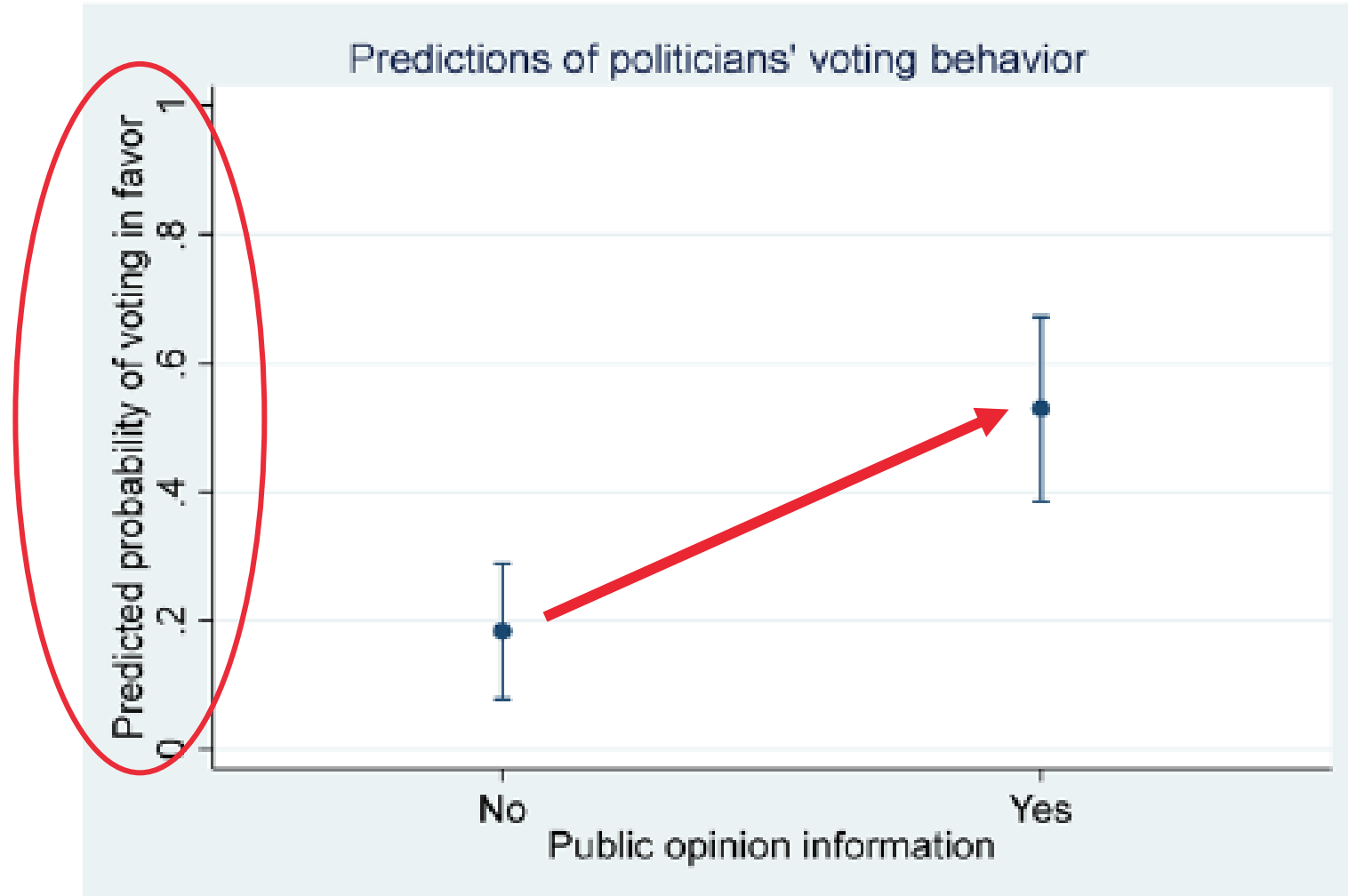
- **And they follow it in their communication (self-censorship)**

*“Being conscientious of what the public thinks is important for the tone you use, the words you choose, the atmosphere you’re trying to establish when you talk”*

# Consequences of public opinion estimations (3)

Politicians respond to public opinion information in their actions

Experimental proof



# Lessons for urban mobility

- Urban mobility is controversial (especially banning cars)
    - Vocal groups target policy makers (hot minorities?)
    - Protest is visible and affects image of public opinion
    - Do the powerful protest?
  - Hence: inaccurate perceptions are likely
  - Biased (conservative) perceptions are likely as well
- Maybe perceptions explain why necessary measures (that everyone knows are needed) are often not taken?

# What to do?

- Measure public opinion professionally: position *and* intensity
  - Position and intensity are disconnected
  - Not take your own opinion or perception of public opinion for granted
- Public opinion can be changed (and it is heterogeneous)
  - Especially opinion intensity is variable
  - Knowledge is precondition for effective action
  - Act as a trustee? Try to *lead* public opinion
- **Can sustainable mobility measures pay off electorally in the longer term?**



**Thank you for your attention!**