

The People Think What I Think: False Consensus and Unelected Elite Misperception of Public Opinion

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ABSTRACT

Political elites must know and rely faithfully on the public will to be democratically responsive. Recent work on elite perceptions of public opinion shows that reelection-motivated politicians systematically misperceive the opinions of their constituents to be more conservative than they are. We extend this work to a larger and broader set of unelected political elites such as lobbyists, civil servants, journalists, and the like, and report alternative empirical findings. These unelected elites hold similarly inaccurate perceptions about public opinion, though not in a single ideological direction. We find this elite population exhibits egocentrism bias, rather than partisan confirmation bias, as their perceptions about others' opinions systematically correspond to their own policy preferences. Thus we document a remarkably consistent false consensus effect among unelected political elites, which holds across subsamples by party, occupation, professional relevance of party affiliation, and trust in party-aligned information sources.

Verification Materials: The data and materials required to verify the computational reproducibility of the results, procedures, and analyses in this article are available on the American Journal of Political Science Dataverse within the Harvard Dataverse Network, at: <https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataset.xhtml?persistentId=doi:10.7910/DVN/3VFVS7>.

Theories of democratic responsiveness rely on the notion that political elites reasonably know, react to, and constrain their behavior to be consistent with public opinion. Responsiveness has been canonically understood as belief congruence in the dyadic relationship between elected officials and their constituents (Miller and Stokes 1963; Achen 1978). Despite constituents' preferences for substantively congruent policy representation (Costa 2020), evidence consistently reveals substantial incongruities between public preferences and public policy (Hacker and Pierson 2010; Enns and Wlezien 2011; Lax and Phillips 2012). Contemporary accounts of this “democratic deficit” contend that wealthy (Gilens and Page 2014; Miler 2018; Witko et al. 2021), partisan (Lax et al. 2019; Clinton 2006), and well organized interests (Baumgartner et al. 2009; Schlozman et al. 2012; McKay 2022) are over-represented and disproportionately influential in American politics.

Recent work has begun to investigate elite misperceptions of public opinion as a possible driver of observed incongruities between public opinion and policy outcomes. For example, elected representatives are more ideologically extreme and maintain a systematically distorted understanding of constituents' policy preferences (Bafumi and Herron 2010; Hall 2015). Broockman and Skovron (2018) and Hertel-Fernandez et al. (2019) find that lawmakers and reelection-motivated senior congressional staff have systematically biased perceptions of constituents' opinions in the conservative direction, which limits their ability to be responsive to actual public preferences. These misperceptions raise serious questions for democratic accountability, since the electoral connection ought to induce elected representatives to first know constituent interests and demands so they may in turn be responsive to them.

DEMOCRATIC RESPONSIVENESS WITHOUT THE ELECTORAL CONNECTION

However, the overwhelming majority of political elites and public servants do not hold elected positions in government. Indeed, the sociological origins of elite theory rest on the idea that political power is conditioned on social status, regardless of their elected role inside the state or formal occupational positions outside it (Mills 1956; Domhoff 1967; Schattschneider 1975; Skocpol 1992). Despite their influence, most political elites are not themselves formally constrained by reelection (Besley 2006; Hafner-Burton and Victor 2013; Costa 2017; Walgrave and Joly 2018; Rodríguez-Teruel 2018; Vis and

Stolwijk 2021; Kertzer and Renshon 2022).

Thus, the full population of influential political elites includes many unelected government officials, media pundits, party strategists, policy advocates, and others. These unelected elites do not have the same subnational geographic constituencies or local economic interest and social identity-based subconstituencies to serve as frames of reference as do elected elites. Moreover, while partisan differences in misperceptions of political facts among the general public are well documented (Bartels 2002; Jerit and Barabas 2012; Bullock and Huber 2015; Flynn et al. 2017), the perceptions of public opinion among this influential set of unelected elites remains heretofore unexamined.

These unelected political elites are important to democratic responsiveness in their own right because they influence the policy agenda, craft and implement policy, promote and critique policy decisions and official enforcement actions, and frame the rhetoric that reelection-motivated politicians use to justify the policy positions they take (Schattschneider 1975; Dahl 1961; Mayhew 1974). Moreover, many unelected elites offer credible information or trusted signals about the potential preferences and intensities of attentive publics for given issues (Arnold 1990). Indeed party aligned elites, rather than voters, are central in defining core issue priorities of parties (Fagan 2021). And in practice the distinction may not always be clear. Both elected and unelected political elites frequently move between professional roles in and out of government, all while retaining their status as political elites regardless of their private sector employer (Blanes i Vidal and Fons-Rosen 2012; LaPira and Thomas 2017; McCrain 2018; Shepherd and You 2019). Therefore there is sufficient reason to explore if, and how, unelected elites rely on distinct cognitive biases that may prejudice their perceptions about public opinion. At minimum, their misperceptions are democratically consequential, even if not electorally motivated.

There are several theoretical and empirical reasons to believe that unelected elites should be attentive to public opinion despite the seeming lack of incentives that would otherwise be induced by the electoral connection. First, even elites working in non-elective political institutions with a so-called democratic deficit are often constrained by public opinion. For instance, unelected judges and justices who may naively be considered the least likely to consult public opinion are actually reticent to counteract it. Judges maintain their credibility by anticipating or responding to public

opinion because they fear that other elites may not implement their decisions (McGuire and Stimson 2005). Similarly, regulators are required to consult public preferences through notice and comment and other consultation procedures that engage public stakeholders in policymaking. They react with some deference to public and stakeholder opinion because advancing unpopular regulations may incur costly oversight or litigation (Carpenter et al. 2020). Those who professionally engage courts and bureaucracies should likewise be expected to care or know what the public thinks about critical issues.

Second, all else equal, unelected elites should have greater levels of political knowledge and sophistication compared to the typical, relatively unsophisticated citizen (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1997). Their identity as political elites is conditioned on advanced education and professional specializations that demand a greater understanding of government, politics, and public affairs than may reasonably be expected of the average voter. Even absent an immediate electoral motivation to keep close tabs on public opinion in general, their occupational socialization should prepare them for a greater understanding of salient issues, including facts about public preferences.

Finally, by virtue of their professional positions, unelected elites frequently interact with elected leaders who must be attentive to public opinion. Accurately understanding the public opinion pressures and context faced by their elected counterparts may help unelected elites be better at their jobs. If unelected elites seek to strategically engage, influence, monitor, and publicly promote, critique, or report on elected elites, they should be motivated to have a reasonably accurate understanding of the public opinion constraints on their elected counterparts. Empirically, we know think tank scholars, lobbyists, and policy advocates try to manipulate political discourse and public opinion, or at least the appearance of public opinion about salient issues (Kollman 1998; Kalla and Broockman 2022). Additionally, journalists, political parties, campaign consultants, and others regularly produce and report on public opinion themselves. All else equal, unelected elites are likely to at least be exposed to public opinion facts more than the average person even though they do not stand for election themselves.

Given institutional constraints, political sophistication, and attentiveness to salient issues, we can expect some level of public opinion accuracy, though we have no empirically informed prior expectations of what they may be. So, we ask several questions about elite perceptions in addition to simply descriptively exploring the magnitude and variation of misperception generally. Do elites' views of the

public derive from partisan blinders, or from highly specialized engagement with niche issue publics or organized interests? Are elites who rely more on balkanized party networks more or less accurate than those whose professional norms demand partisan passivity and political objectivity? Are elites so insulated from what the public actually thinks that they substitute some other source of knowledge to fill the void? That is, we can learn a lot about perceptions of public opinion in general when the elite population has heterogeneous frames of reference that are not necessarily rooted in belief congruence.

For instance, ostensibly non-partisan journalists (Wallace 2019) and overtly partisan lobbyists (Victor and Koger 2016) are both unelected elites. They both work in roles where partisan conflict, rhetoric, and strategy are important to their jobs. But there is little reason to expect the partisan information context to inform their understanding of public opinion as it may elected politicians, whose reelection immediately and directly depends on it. More specifically, it is unclear whether the previously documented conservative misperception bias among elected politicians holds for this broader population of unelected political elites (Broockman and Skovron 2018; Hertel-Fernandez et al. 2019). Rather, we investigate whether these elites' own attitudes about policies bias their perceptions of public opinion.

For our project, we define unelected political elites as (1) those public servants who hold authoritative roles in government that contribute to policy agenda setting, formulation, implementation, and oversight; and, (2) those outside government whose occupations motivate them to engage, influence, collaborate, monitor, report on, or otherwise routinely interact with those inside government as a significant part of their job. This political elite population includes thousands of unelected bureaucrats, party activists, judges, media pundits, campaign consultants, lobbyists, think tankers, commissioned military officers, lawyers, scientists, and business and nongovernmental organization leaders. Of course, not all lawyers and business leaders are political elites; they qualify as political elites only if those roles demand routine engagement with government, public policy, and political activities that they would not otherwise engage outside their job.¹

We find that this broader population of unelected elites indeed inaccurately perceives policy

¹See Supplemental Information A.2, page 4, for details on our sampling frame of unelected elites, including positions like corporate government affairs personnel.

opinions by roughly 14 percentage points on average. However, these misperceptions diverge from the truth in the direction of their own policy preferences, rather than being biased systematically in the conservative direction. These findings are remarkably consistent across subsets of elites, holding true for both parties, across different occupations that are more or less partisan in nature, for elites who exclusively trust party-aligned information sources or not, and regardless of issue valence.

THE COGNITIVE BASES OF ELITE MISPERCEPTIONS

We explore two plausible explanations for elite misperceptions. Both of these explanations are rooted in variations of the availability heuristic (Tversky and Kahneman 1974), but offer different perspectives on the source of the cognitive shortcut. One alternative is confirmation bias in the assessment of others' beliefs (Lord et al. 1979; Kunda 1990; Taber and Lodge 2006; Hart et al. 2009; Flynn et al. 2017). Under well established conditions of ideological polarization (McCarty et al. 2016) and partisan homophily (Levendusky 2009; Huber and Malhotra 2017), the opinions and beliefs of issue subconstituencies and elite colleagues should be the most cognitively consistent facsimiles of aggregate public opinion available to unelected elites (Miler 2010; Pereira 2021). Under this confirmation bias view, the partisan echo chambers that elites occupy act as the frame of reference for their perceptions of public opinion in general (Jasny et al. 2015). If true, then these elite misperceptions reflect partisan consensus on a variety of salient issues.

Alternatively, political elites may be subject to egocentrism bias, in which individuals attribute their own attitudes to that of others, leading to a “false consensus effect” (Ross et al. 1977; Marks and Miller 1987; Krueger and Clement 1994; Gilovich 1990). Kruger (2008) argues that egocentrism is a rational response because people intrinsically know more about themselves than they do about others. And, we know that the false consensus effect occurs under a variety of conditions and cultural contexts (Mullen 1985; Choi and Cha 2019; Nisbett and Norenzayan 2001). Some public opinion research has tested the consequences of egocentrism on mass opinion formation and voting behavior (Shamir and Shamir 1997; Ahler 2014; Posten and Mussweiler 2019; Vandeweerd 2021). Likewise, political media scholarship has explored egocentrism in social media engagement (Wojcieszak 2008; Wojcieszak and Price 2009; Wojcieszak 2011). However, very little of this work has been applied to elite populations.

Mildenberger and Tingley (2019) offer a notable exception to the lack of empirical work on elite egocentrism. The authors show that even well informed political and intellectual elites have second-order beliefs about others' attitudes about global warming and climate policy. These second-order beliefs are anchored to their own views, which leads them to drastically underestimate climate positions in the general population. Our study generalizes this concept to issues that vary in specificity and salience and with a conceptually broader set of political elites.

In the context of our study, the egocentrism bias version of the availability heuristic means unelected elites use their own preferences — not those of co-partisan elites — as a proxy for the public at large. Instead of confirming their own beliefs vis-à-vis co-partisan sources (Mason 2018; Vandeweerdt 2021), unelected elites presume the general public agrees with them on critical issues. If this is the case, elites do not parrot the opinions of others, but believe that “the people think what I think.” They falsely believe that their own opinions are closer to popular consensus than they truly are.

The distinction between the two variations on the availability heuristic — confirmation bias versus egocentrism bias — is subtle, but important. Relying on the cognitive availability of constituent opinion suggests that political elites are at least responsive to some relevant groups of citizens (Butler and Nickerson 2011; Butler and Dynes 2016), even if limited to those with shared in-group identities (Butler and Broockman 2011; Broockman 2014). Normatively the problem is that those groups are highly selective of the economically advantaged. But if elites could become more accessible to a larger, more diverse, and more representative set of subconstituencies, then their judgments about public preferences may regress to the mean and reflect actual aggregate opinion in true pluralist fashion. Democratic responsiveness may be judged by the scope and representativeness of those subconstituencies.

However, if elites believe their own preferences are *already* representative of the public, then there is no incentive to correct the misperception. Unelected elites who perceive a false consensus believe they are empathically responsive to the public at large, when in fact they're only sympathetic to themselves.

DATA & ANALYSIS

We report results from the 2020 Survey of Political Elites and Public Servants (SPEPS) and a companion survey of likely voters. We fielded the original SPEPS survey among a sample of political elites and

public servants identified from the *Leadership Connect* database from November 19, 2020 to January 11, 2021.² We gathered data from 3,743 respondents, for an overall response rate of 5.0 percent, and margin of error is ± 2.0 percentage points. The *Leadership Connect* sampling frame includes some biographical information for all political elite contacts, which we exploit to post-stratify and weight all responses by gender, number of different jobs held, and professional tenure. For the analyses presented here, we exclude 273 elected state or local political elites to focus exclusively on unelected elites. We also exclude 334 congressional staffers who work directly for elected officials who may be expected to behave as if they are similarly motivated by reelection.³

From December 16 to December 17, 2020, the national think tank Data for Progress conducted a companion survey of 1,098 likely voters using a PureSpectrum sample of compensated respondents (See Andersen and Lau (2018)). The sample was weighted to be representative of likely voters by age, gender, education, race, and voting history. The panel of likely voters had a margin of error of ± 3.0 percentage points. The survey vendor dropped speeders and attention check failures from the sample.

Respondents in both surveys were asked whether they supported or opposed a battery of policy proposals, as well as their party identification using the standard ANES party identification battery. Respondents' opinion on each policy prompt was assessed with a five category Likert-type support/oppose response scale. The order of items were randomized. Likely voters were asked all 10 policy items; political elites were presented with a random set of 5 items to minimize survey instrument length. The

²Formerly printed as the *Congressional Yellowbook*, the *Federal Yellowbook*, the *News Media Yellowbook*, and others, *Leadership Connect* is the online commercial directory of professionals in Congress, the executive, courts, state governments and legislatures, politics, media, nonprofits, and law and lobbying that superceded legacy print directories. The legacy directories are compiled into one database, separated as occupational communities. They are regularly curated to be the most comprehensive list of professionals in these fields. The directory fits well with our underlying construct of political elites. More information may be found at <https://www.leadershipconnect.io/products/>. For further details, see Supplemental Information A.2, page 4, for sampling construction and respondent descriptives, A.5, page 9, for post-stratification weights, and A.6, page 10, for survey instrument details.

³Details of the inclusion criteria for this analysis are included in Supplemental Information, A.2 pages 4-5. Results are substantively the same when congressional staffers are included.

set of policy prompts are shown in Figure 1(a) and available in Supplemental InformationD, page 18.

Critically, we also ask elites, “What percentage of the public do you think supports the following policies?” for the five corresponding items. Items were randomized, and respondents were presented with sliders ranging from 0 to 100 for each corresponding policy item. These two question blocks were separated by several unrelated question batteries to avoid contamination (Wilcox and Wlezien 1993).

We measure an individual elite’s misperception of public opinion on a policy as the difference between the percentage of the public they estimated supported a policy and the percent of respondents in the public opinion survey that answered that they “somewhat” or “strongly” supported that policy.⁴ We note that public opinion surveys are an imperfect mechanism for capturing the *true* policy opinions of the public. However, given the ubiquity of polling in contemporary american politics, we believe it is reasonable to assume that when we question elites about the public’s support for policies, this calls to mind public responses to opinion surveys.

ELITE MISPERCEPTION OF PUBLIC OPINION

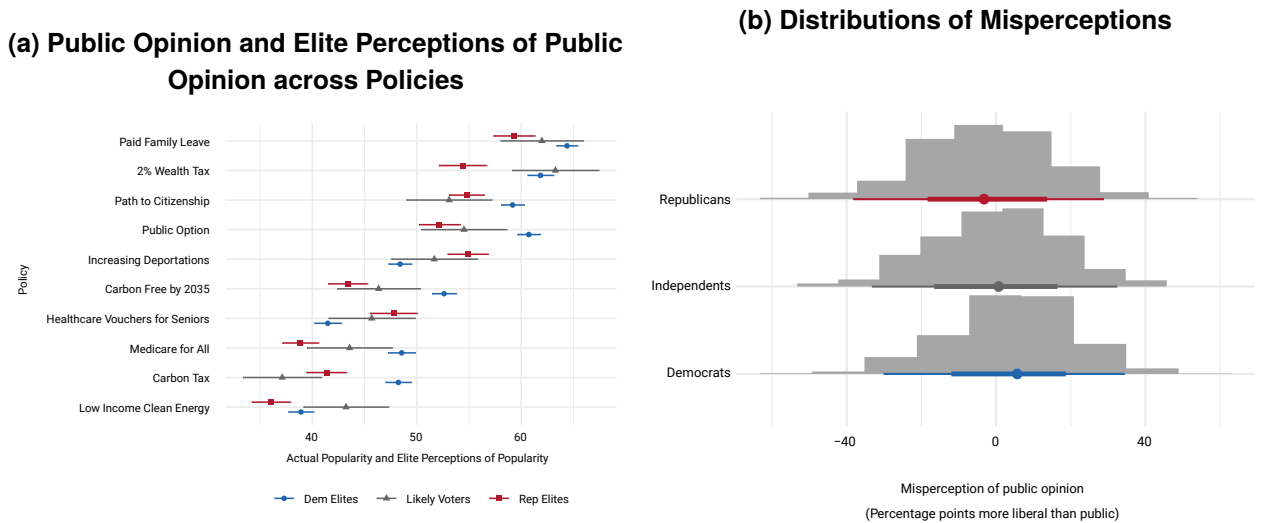
Figure 1(a) presents our survey-based estimates of actual public opinion in grey from the Data for Progress likely voter survey, as well as political elites’ estimates of public opinion separated by party from our SPEPS instrument. Figure 1(b) shows the distributions of elites misperceptions by party.⁵ We display the numerical averages of public opinion, as well as elite perceptions of public opinion, and the average misperception by party in Table 1.

In general, elite perception does not appear to systematically differ from public opinion in a single, consistent ideological direction. For example, both Democrats and Republicans underestimate the popularity of ensuring that forty percent of all new clean energy infrastructure development spending goes to low-income communities; both tend to overestimate the popularity of placing a tax on carbon

⁴Subsequent results are substantively identical when we use an alternative measurement where respondents on the public survey that “neither support nor oppose” are dropped from the denominator in calculating public support. See Supplemental Information D, Table 7, page 17.

⁵Policies with conservative valence (healthcare vouchers and increasing deportations) are reverse coded so that positive values in Fig 1(b) always indicate over estimating liberal opinion.

FIGURE 1. Unelected Elite Misperceptions of Public Opinion



Note: Panel (a) reports estimates of public opinion and elite perceptions of public opinion across 10 policies. Estimates of public opinion are the survey-weighted bootstrapped share of respondents in the Data for Progress panel reporting that they strongly or somewhat support each policy item. Aggregate elite estimates of public opinion are the bootstrapped means of respondents’ estimates of the share of the public that supports the policy on a 0-100 point percentage scale. Items are ordered by the median of likely voter and elite responses. Panel (b) reports the distribution of elite misperceptions by party.

emissions. Republican elites underestimate the popularity of a wealth tax, while Democratic elites estimate it relatively accurately. Republicans accurately assess the popularity of a path to citizenship for undocumented immigrants currently in the US, while Democratic elites over-estimate its popularity. On other policies, like Medicare for All, offering seniors healthcare vouchers, or increasing deportations of those in the US illegally, elites tend to estimate public opinion to be more in line with their partisan priorities. Unlike elected political elites, there is little evidence that unelected elites consistently bias their perceptions in the conservative direction.

Misperceptions are roughly normally distributed, with Democrats slightly over estimating and Republicans slightly under estimating support for liberal positions on average. There is substantial variance in how accurately elites estimate public opinion, with a standard deviation in the value of misperceptions of 17.0 percentage points. The average magnitude of misperception is 13.7 percentage points. We calculate this average magnitude of misperception by taking the mean of the absolute values of the difference between elites’ estimates of public opinion and the share of public respondents who support a policy.

TABLE 1. Actual Public Opinion and Elite Perceptions of Public Opinion

Policy	Actual Public Opinion	Democratic Elites' Perceptions	Republican Elites' Perceptions	Democratic Misperception	Republican Misperception
Carbon Tax	37.12 (1.91)	48.24 (0.63)	41.36 (0.97)	11.12 (1.55)	4.24 (1.66)
Low Income Clean Energy	43.22 (2.07)	38.92 (0.61)	36.04 (0.94)	-4.3 (1.58)	-7.18 (1.7)
Carbon Free by 2035	46.35 (2.02)	52.62 (0.59)	43.4 (0.95)	6.27 (1.51)	-2.95 (1.74)
Medicare for All	43.57 (2.08)	48.55 (0.66)	38.85 (0.87)	4.98 (1.68)	-4.71 (1.62)
Public Option	54.52 (2.08)	60.73 (0.55)	52.17 (1)	6.2 (1.56)	-2.35 (1.72)
Path to Citizenship	53.1 (2.07)	59.17 (0.56)	54.78 (0.84)	6.07 (1.58)	1.68 (1.64)
Paid Family Leave	61.98 (2.01)	64.39 (0.51)	59.32 (1.01)	2.41 (1.53)	-2.66 (1.67)
2% Wealth Tax	63.27 (2.11)	61.84 (0.63)	54.39 (1.16)	-1.43 (1.5)	-8.88 (1.79)
Increasing Deportations	51.68 (2.1)	48.4 (0.56)	54.88 (0.98)	-3.27 (1.55)	3.2 (1.78)
Healthcare Vouchers for Seniors	45.69 (2.11)	41.48 (0.65)	47.78 (1.14)	-4.21 (1.64)	2.09 (1.77)

Note: Cells include means, with standard deviations in parentheses. Average misperception by party may not sum due to rounding.

A General Elite False Consensus Effect

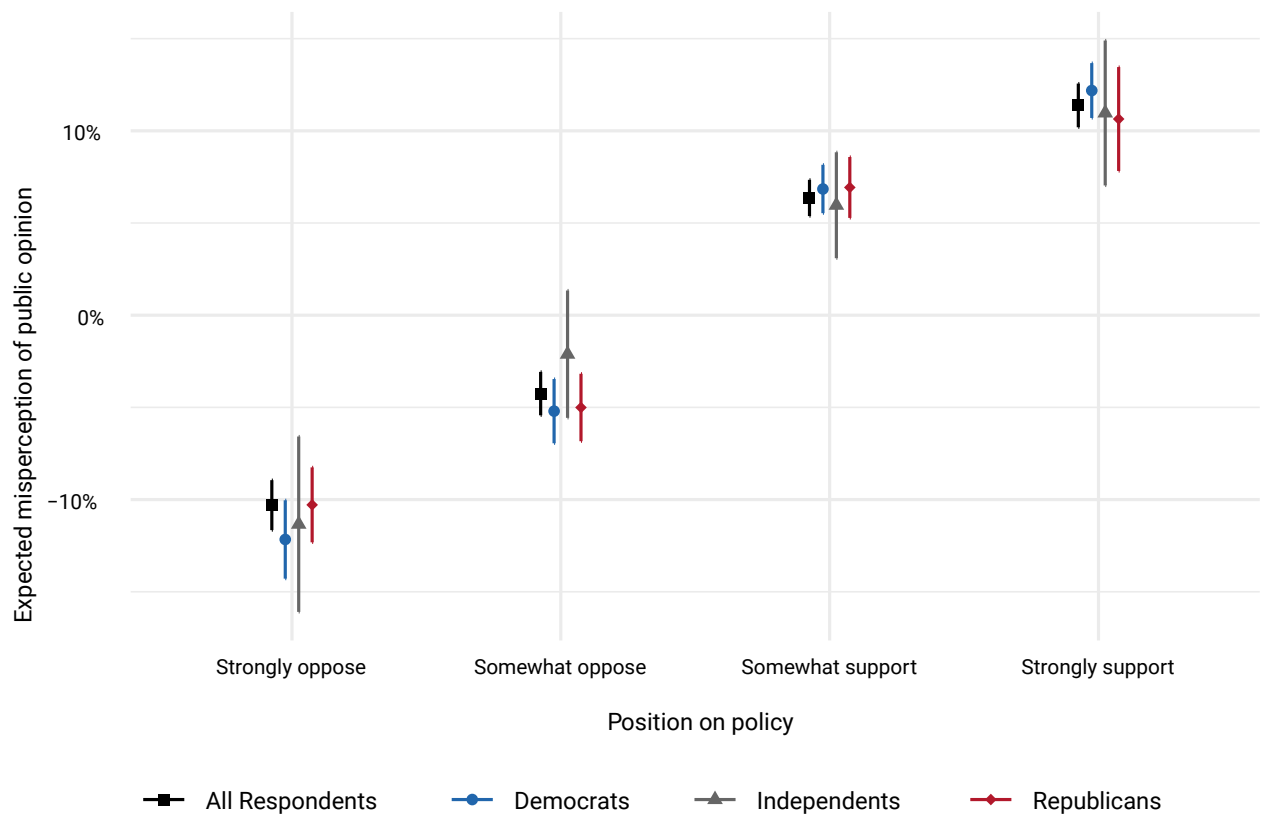
What, then, explains the heterogeneity of unelected elites' perceptions of public opinion? We construct a measure of misperception by taking the difference between the SPEPS respondents' estimate of public opinion and the share of likely voters who strongly or somewhat support a given policy alternative. This misperception variable allows us to systematically investigate how elites' own public policy priorities bias their estimates of public opinion. We exploit within-respondent variation across policies to estimate the association between elites' opinions and how popular they believe those policies are with the general public. We estimate a series of two-way fixed effects (TWFE) models of the following functional form:

$$Y_{ip} = \beta_1 \text{StrongOpp}_p + \beta_2 \text{SomewhatOpp}_p + \beta_3 \text{SomewhatSupp}_p + \beta_4 \text{StrongSupp}_p + \alpha_i + \gamma_p + \epsilon_{ip}$$

Where Y_{ip} is respondent i 's misperception of public support for policy p , β_{1-4} are the coefficients corresponding to dummy variables for the respondents' reported level of support for policy p , with

“neither support nor oppose” as the reference category. In this specification α_i is a respondent fixed effect that captures any policy invariant attributes of the respondent, and γ_p is a policy issue fixed effect which absorbs policy-specific respondent invariant factors such as overall popularity or policy area effects. And the ϵ_{ip} term is idiosyncratic error at the respondent-policy level. This TWFE specification estimates within-respondent and within-policy variation to compare elite perceptions to actual public opinion.

FIGURE 2. Political Elites’ False Consensus of Public Opinion



Note: Coefficient estimates from TWFE model of elite misperception of public opinion, estimated for all respondents, as well as partisan subsets. Error bars represent 95 percent confidence intervals. Identical models were run on partisan subsets of respondents.

We find that political elites’ misperceptions of public opinion depend on their own level of support for a given proposal. Figure 2 reveals strong and statistically distinguishable differences in the direction and magnitude of misperceptions across all levels of support and opposition. On average, elites who strongly support a policy believe that it is between 10 and 12 percentage points more popular with the general public than it actually is. Those who strongly oppose a policy believe it is between 10

and 12 percentage points less popular. Those who somewhat oppose or somewhat support a policy also misjudge public opinion in the direction of their own opinion, albeit to a lesser degree than elites with stronger preferences. That this is true not only in our full sample, but among partisan subsamples, suggests there is not a monotone ideological bias in any one direction, but rather egocentric heterogeneity within parties. We further test the robustness of this result by re-estimating this main model and partisan subsets without respondent level fixed effects, and find substantively identical results in all cases (see Supplemental Information D, Table 9, page 17). Subsequent analyses of the direction and magnitude of these fixed effects reveals that conditioning on support and issue, respondents tend to slightly over-estimate the public support for policies regardless of party (see Supplemental Information D, Figure 1, page 18).

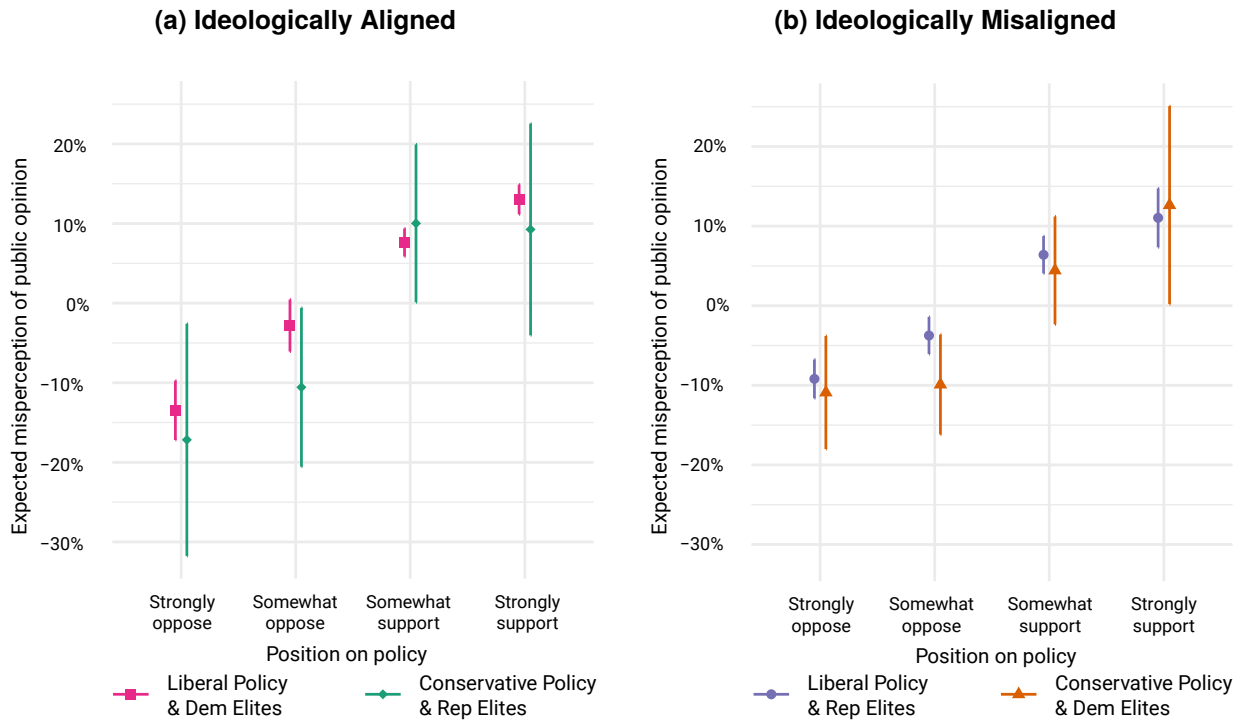
Note that the policy fixed effects absorb idiosyncratic policy-level variation like policy popularity or salience. When estimated on partisan subsets of respondents, these models appropriately account for party specific policy level idiosyncratic sources of error such as how popular these policies are within elites' co-partisan publics. So, the evidence suggests elites are not artificially anchoring their estimates of general public opinion on known or expected co-partisan attitudes.

Elite False Consensus by Policy Valence

We consider whether the false consensus we observe depends on whether individual policy items align with what we can reasonably expect partisan policy valence to be. Perhaps misperceptions of public opinion are driven by whether Republicans are insufficiently aware of voter attitudes on liberal policies, and vice versa. We test this possibility by estimating the same model with partisan subsamples of only conservative policies like increasing deportations and only liberal policies like the wealth tax.

This step yields four party/valence conditions: Republicans (Democrats) aligned with conservative (liberal) policies and Republicans (Democrats) misaligned with liberal (conservative) policies. Recall that elite respondents were randomly assigned only five of the possible ten items to estimate what the public believes. We report full results in this figure. Naturally, estimates of uncertainty are larger because we subgroup by party identification and we subset by policy items. This is especially true for Republican respondents responding to conservative policies, as we have fewer Republican respondents

FIGURE 3. False Consensus by Policy Valence and Elite Partisanship



Note: TWFE estimates for subsets of respondents based on policy valence and party. Panel (a) reports estimates of in subsets with ideologically aligned respondents and policies. Panel (b) reports estimates of in subsets with ideologically misaligned respondents and policies. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

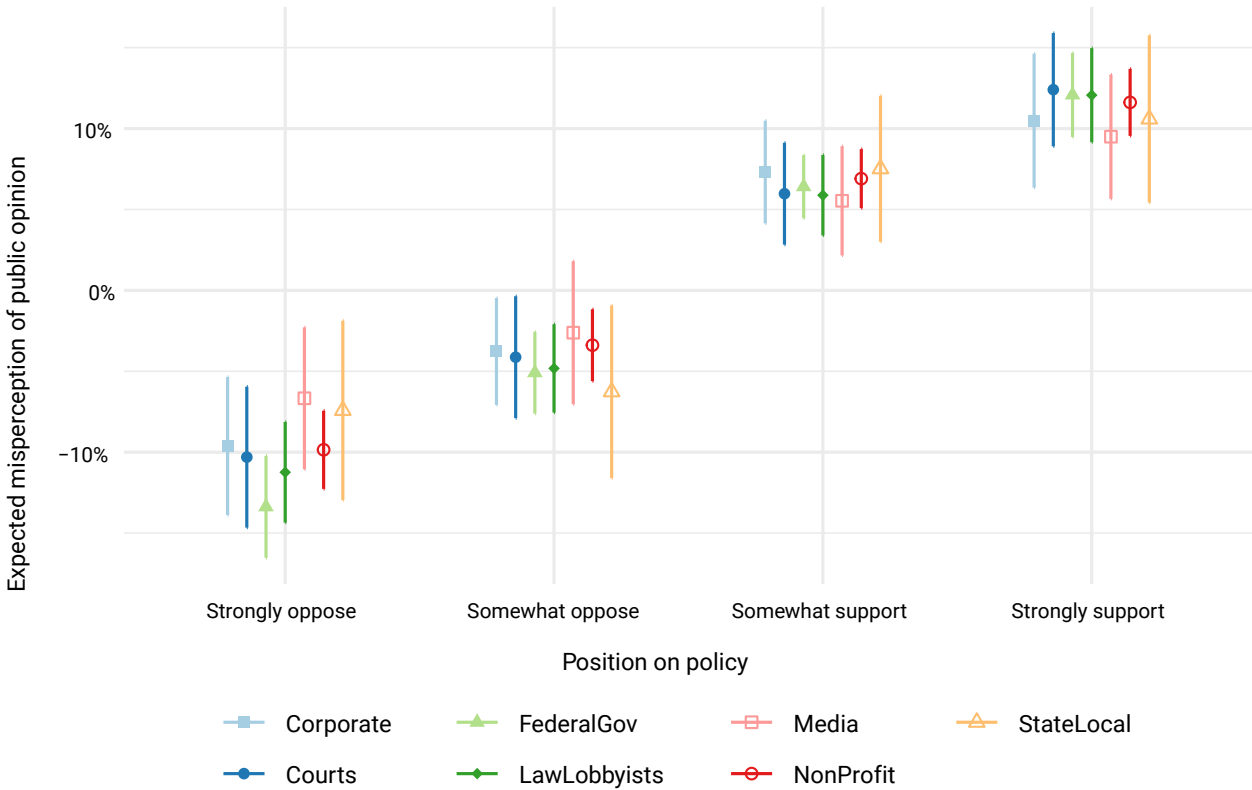
and asked about fewer conservative policies (printed in green in Figure 3).

Figure 3 displays TWFE estimates for subsets of respondents based on policy valence and party. These results are consistent with the main tests in Figure 2 when estimated under all four conditions of partisan alignment or misalignment. This evidence refutes the idea that partisan elites are simply out of touch with voters from the other party or for issues ostensibly owned by the other side. They are equally inaccurate regardless of issue ownership or perceived ideological alignment.

Elite False Consensus by Occupation

To further generalize, we re-estimate the TWFE model again on subsets corresponding to the different occupation “communities” in the *Leadership Connect* contact list (e.g. lawyers and lobbyists, non-profit leadership, corporate leaders, federal government appointees and regulators, political media, state and local government officials, etc.). This analysis tests the counterfactual that some occupations may be more informed about the public’s views than others, all else equal. That is, generalist journalists and

FIGURE 4. Political Elites’ Misperceptions, by Professional Community



Note: Coefficient estimates from TWFE model of elite misperception of public opinion, on subsets of respondents by professional community. Error bars represent 95 percent confidence intervals. Identical models were run on subsets of respondents in different professional communities.

lawyers may stay more attuned to salient issues regardless of the substantive specificity in their beat or their area specialty than highly specialized federal bureaucrats who work at an agency with a statutorily limited topical jurisdiction. Alternatively, we can reasonably attribute inaccuracy to egocentrism across the board if we observe similar misperceptions across occupations.

Figure 4 shows that the relationship between elites’ own opinions on policy issues and their estimates of public opinion is remarkably consistent across occupational domains. We observe the same substantive results among these subsets as we do in Figure 2. Note the results are not as robust as those in the full analysis, but are generally consistent. When correcting for multiple comparisons, the perceptions of public opinion among elites in some subsamples that “somewhat oppose” a policy are not distinguishable from those who “neither support nor oppose” a given policy. However, strong opposition to a policy remains lower than the reference category at standard levels of statistical

significance, which is consistent with full sample results that misperceptions are not unidirectional across various professional communities.⁶

ELITE MISPERCEPTION AND PARTISANSHIP

We conduct two additional analyses to investigate the two variants of the availability heuristic to explain these misperceptions. We leverage several observations of elites' own partisanship to test the consistency of the false consensus effect. First, if political elites overestimate public support for their own preferences because they are socialized to professionally identify as partisan, then the magnitude of partisan bias should vary depending on occupational norms. And second, if they selectively expose themselves only to co-partisan information environments, the weaker the egocentrism bias should be. If our main results hold based on political elites' occupational party relevance and information consumption behavior, then we can reasonably infer that elite misperceptions are driven more by the egocentrism bias than confirmation bias.⁷

Occupation-Based Party Relevance

We compare misperceptions between subsets of elites who perceive their own partisanship as being more or less relevant to their jobs. For instance, we can reasonably expect civil servants subject to Hatch Act political activity restrictions to perceive their personal partisan identity to be unimportant to their work. Alternatively, lobbyists — who are more likely than not to have previously worked for partisan politicians (LaPira and Thomas 2017; McCrain 2018) and who overtly identify as strong partisans in their publicly disclosed professional identities (Victor and Koger 2016) — can be expected to rely on their party affiliation as important for their work. This logic likely extends to other occupations, so we

⁶See Supplemental Information D, Table 6, page 16, for details regarding false discovery corrected p-values.

⁷An additional test could simply be party strength, or if egocentrism bias is consistent between strong, weak, and lean partisans. We find substantively identical results sub-setting on strength of party identification using a folded version of the standard 7-point party ID self report question (See Supporting Information for this robustness check.).

designed a measure of how this concept varies across different subpopulations of political elites.

If partisan confirmation bias underlies the inaccurate estimates we observe, then how relevant party identification is to their occupation should condition misperceptions. That is, elites' whose partisan identity is more closely linked to their professional identity should be more vulnerable to partisan echo-chamber effects. If echo-chambers influence political elites' perceptions of public opinion, then we should observe larger misperceptions among those whose professional roles depend more heavily on their party identity. Alternatively, if elites with less of a professional attachment to their subjective party identity or who follow explicit professional norms of nonpartisanship are equally likely to misperceive public opinion, then those misperceptions are probably driven more by egocentrism than a reliance on co-partisan opinion.

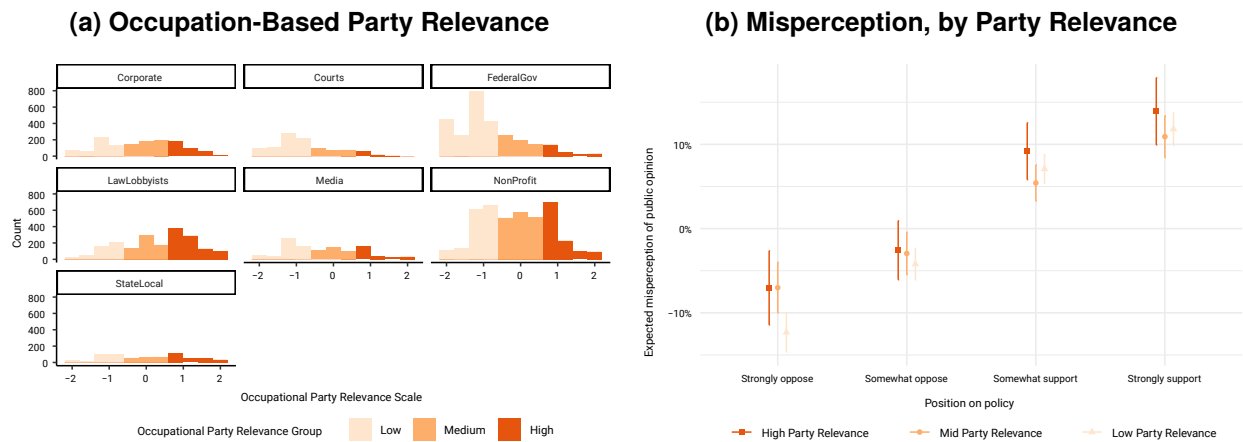
To test this distinction we develop a three-item "occupation party relevance" scale to reflect not just self-reported party strength, but rather how central respondents' party identification is to their professional identity. We asked respondents to rate the following statements on a five-point Likert-type scale with agree/disagree anchors: (1) "My being [a Democrat/a Republican/an Independent] is a significant part of my day to day work," (2) "My work colleagues are aware which presidential candidate I voted for this year," and (3) "The norms of my profession are that my partisan affiliation is irrelevant to my work." From these questions we construct a summative scale, and then classify respondents into terciles. We label each as "low party relevance," "mid party relevance," and "high party relevance."

Figure 5a shows the distribution of occupational partisan relevance across groups by professional communities identified by *Leadership Connect*.⁸ As our hypothetical examples of relatively nonpartisan civil servants and partisan lobbyists suggests, the Federal Government professional community is much more likely to report "low party relevance" than lobbyists, who are more likely categorized into the "high party relevance" category.

Figure 5b reports our estimates of the previous TWFE specification separately for low, medium, and high occupational partisan relevance. As with previous subset analyses, estimates are statistically indistinguishable across party relevance groups. We observe the same sort of false consensus effect

⁸See Supplemental Information A.2, pages 4–6, for detailed descriptions of the inclusion criteria for the professional communities listed.

FIGURE 5. Elites' Occupation-based Party Relevance and Public Opinion Misperceptions



Note: Panel (a) shows the distribution of party relevance for each professional community. Panel (b) presents coefficient estimates from our standard TWFE model of elite misperception of public opinion, subset on level of party relevance. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

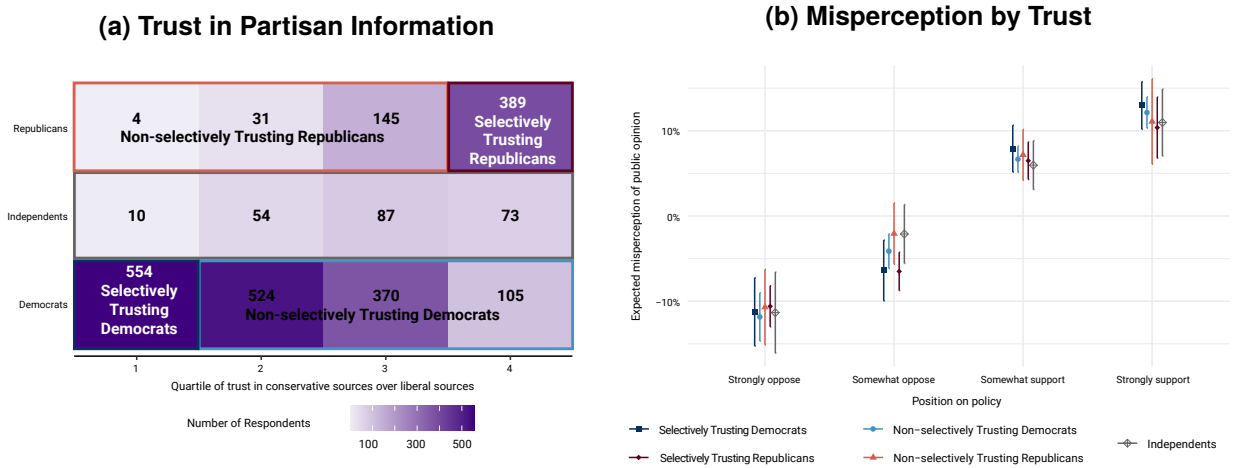
among elites whose party affiliation is central to their professional identity as those whose partisanship is irrelevant. Those political elites whose jobs rely the least on partisan echo-chambers are just as likely to inaccurately perceive public opinion as those whose party identity is central to their profession.

Source Credibility-Based Partisan Trust

Next, we measure how much elites trust conservative information sources over liberal sources with an information source question battery. Respondents rate a series of real-world policy information producers that are widely seen as credible information sources on a five category trustworthiness Likert-type scale. To measure respondent trust in conservative information sources, we calculate the average numerically transformed (0 = very untrustworthy; 4 = very trustworthy) rating of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, the American Enterprise Institute, and the Heritage Foundation. We repeat this process for AFL-CIO, the Brookings Institution, and the Center for American Progress to represent credible liberal information sources.

We then take the difference between trust in conservative sources minus trust in liberal sources and classify them by quartile, as shown in Figure 6a. Democratic (Republican) elites in the lowest (highest) quartile are classified as “selectively trusting” Democrats (Republicans), while Democrats

FIGURE 6. Elites' Trust in Partisan Information Sources and Public Opinion Misperceptions



Note: Panel (a) shows a heatmap of differential trust in partisan information by party identification. We use this to classify respondents as either selectively trusting or non-selectively trusting co-partisan information. Panel (b) presents coefficient estimates from our standard TWFE model of elite misperception of public opinion, subset on the selective trust categories shown in panel (a). Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

(Republicans) in the other three quartiles we call “non-selectively trusting” Democrats (Republicans). Categorizing selectivity at the 25th and 75th percentiles for Democrats and Republicans, respectively, offers the strongest test of the echo-chamber hypothesis given the nature of our survey data.

In Figure 6b we report estimates from our previous TWFE specification on subsets of selectively versus non-selectively trusting elites. Results are statistically indistinguishable from each other across trust subsets, and in line with all previous findings. This test shows that political elites’ false consensus bias is equally true for those who near-exclusively trust party-aligned sources and for those who trust information from in-party and out-party sources roughly the same. These results suggest elites don’t simply parrot ideas they hear in the echo chamber when considering public preferences. They genuinely, and falsely, believe others think what they think regardless of where they are inclined to seek out information.

Ultimately, elites who are strong partisans, who professionally identify with their party in their work, and who only trust ideologically aligned partisan information sources are just as inaccurate as those whose party affiliation matters very little. Therefore, we tentatively infer that the remarkably consistent misperception across subpopulations of professional political elites points to egocentrism bias as the culprit.

IMPLICATIONS

The results we present naturally lead to several critical questions that different empirical strategies may be better equipped to answer. First, do political elites improve their perception accuracy in response to corrections? There is an ongoing debate in the political communication literature about whether corrections work, have no effect, or backfire among average citizens (see, *inter alia*, Kuklinski et al. (2000); Nyhan and Reifler (2010); Nyhan (2021)). In the context of survey response, it may be that the elites we study rely on availability heuristics because additional information is missing. Instead, in the real world they may be willing to question their own perceptions when they are provided with credible facts or meaningful signals of uncertainty. And, in the context of a survey instrument, the only reference respondents have is the question posed to them. Future work may seek to exploit the variation between elected and unelected elites or between mass and elite political actors to test whether sophisticates are more or less responsive to corrections or other interventions. Further research could offer insight into how the give and take of deliberative processes—the availability of new facts or compelling counterarguments, or even clarifying questions about question meaning on a survey instrument—affect opinion perceptions and political behavior among elected elites, unelected elites, and non-elites.

Second, do political elites' misperceptions have consequences for their policy behavior or attitudes? We recognize that we merely assume that the misperceptions we document here accurately reflect actual opinion and, consequently, affect how elites interpret and act on public opinion. The perceptions expressed by elite survey respondents themselves may be inaccurate given idiosyncratic interpretations of questions, as with all survey instruments. And our survey design does not observe subsequent policy activity. It is conceivable that perception accuracy influences policy priorities, preference intensity, or other policy process-relevant behavior that elites engage in routinely, but it remains unclear how so and to what extent. Further investigation, including qualitative research that uncovers the nature of elite misperceptions, may reveal if elites' misperceptions follow through to behaviors like strategic advocacy, coalition building, and policy implementation and if misperceptions are stable over time.

Finally, does political elites' domain-specific knowledge and expertise mitigate against misperception? Our analysis compares misperception across different occupational fields, but the perceptions we measure are about general facts that span multiple substantive domains. Unlike elected officials who

typically have very broad areas of authority, most unelected elites are specialists with substantively narrow professional orientations. That is, can a health care policy expert accurately know public opinion on Medicare for All, but not on path to citizenship or carbon taxes?⁹ We document the existence of false consensus in a general topic context, but remain curious if it holds within highly specialized policy communities, or if some specialized communities are more or less in tune with public preferences over the issues in their domain. Moreover, it is reasonable to expect that substantive experts hold more accurate perceptions within their respective domains, but revert to egocentrism or other available heuristics for issues outside their wheelhouse. Additional research may uncover greater—or interesting variation in—levels of domain-specific accuracy.

CONCLUSION

Scholars have long known that relatively uninformed and disengaged voters rely on cognitive heuristics to make choices, which may be more or less correct (Lau and Redlawsk 1997). At the same time, scholars have largely assumed that sophisticated political elites have the public affairs expertise and professional political acumen to routinely make informed, reasonable decisions. Political elites ought to just know better than relying on shortcuts. That is not true when it comes to assessing public opinion on a variety of timely and salient issues.

In general, elites' estimate of the public's policy opinions diverge from the truth by 20 to 25 percentage points depending on whether they strongly support or strongly oppose a given policy. Our tests of competing explanations for these misperceptions are robust and consistent: unelected political elites demonstrate a false consensus effect in their estimates of public opinion. Simply, elites believe that the policies they support are more popular among the general public than they actually are, and that the policies they oppose are less popular than they actually are. This relationship is true regardless of the elite's party identification, professional specialization, or information environment. And, our

⁹Mildenberger and Tingley (2019) rely on a highly specialized sample of intellectual and political elites, but do not ask their perceptions of issues outside their specialization. The ideal empirical approach would be a hybrid strategy to sample both specialists and non-specialists, and ask perceptions of issues both within and outside their domains of expertise.

results do not appear to be an artifact of co-partisan anchoring in elites' estimation process. In addition to its consistency across sub-populations, the substantive magnitude of the false consensus effect we observe is remarkably large.

While prior work has demonstrated a consistent conservative bias in estimates of public opinion among re-election motivated political elites (Broockman and Skovron 2018; Hertel-Fernandez et al. 2019), we find that egocentrism characterizes unelected elites regardless of party. These alternative results present a fruitful avenue for further exploration. One possibility may simply be that the elected elites and senior congressional staff in previous surveys are simply more conservative themselves. Another more likely possibility is that politicians motivated by reelection may rely mostly on information from sources they frequently interact with rather than using their own preferences as a proxy for constituent opinion. For instance, Miler (2010) shows that congressional staffers systematically recall subconstituencies like donors and activists as most representative of constituent preferences, even though they are preference outliers. And, Furnas et al. (2022) find that staffers rate petitioners who use ideologically aligned legislative subsidy information as particularly representative of constituents. Therefore we suspect that legislators and legislative staff regularly interact with subconstituency sources like donors and lobbyists that tend to skew conservative (Crosson et al. 2020). Elected politicians and staffers may then unwittingly project lobbyists' conservative views on to their constituents.

In contrast, the unelected political elites we study here may be less likely to have the kind of routine, systematic contact with highly engaged issue subconstituencies that election-motivated legislators do. Just as Mildenerger and Tingley (2019) demonstrate with climate denialism among intellectual elites and environmental policy experts, our research reveals egocentrism to be consistent across liberal and conservative issues of varying salience in a broader elite population. These unelected elites may rely more heavily on the accessibility of their own preferences when estimating public opinion, as conservative lobbyists' preferences are not as easily available. In the end, unelected elites have only the face in the mirror on which to base their perceptions of others.

Insofar as we count on public opinion and public pressure to constrain elite behavior and to improve substantive representation in and out of government, our results suggest that even the most tenuous accountability mechanisms are substantially *less* binding when elites incorrectly assume the public

agrees with them. Elites who misperceive public opinion may advocate or pursue the policies that they themselves favor, regardless of how unpopular they might be. Public opinion cannot act as a countervailing force against economically self-interested elites if they falsely believe the people think what they think.

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