

Do Politicians and Citizens Have Different Theories of Elections and Voting?

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Theoretical debates about elections and voting behaviour – retrospective versus prospective voting, identity versus policy voting, and so on – animate a great deal of research in political science and democratic theory. In this paper, we investigate what politicians and citizens think about these theoretical debates. These theories of elections and voting – theories held not by political scientists but by politicians and ordinary citizens – are important because they shape how individuals understand and act in politics and because alignment or misalignment in theoretical beliefs between politicians and citizens may have important consequences for political representation, democratic satisfaction, and the distinctive characteristics of political elites. Using data from in-person surveys with almost 1,000 elected politicians and online surveys of more than 24,000 citizens in eleven countries, we show that politicians and citizens systematically differ from one another, with politicians more likely to be so-called "democratic realists" and citizens more likely to be "democratic optimists." These patterns are remarkably consistent across political systems. We conclude with a discussion of the consequences of this theoretical misalignment for political representation and democratic satisfaction in advanced democracies.

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“The Labor Party is not going to profit from having these proven unsuccessful people around who are frightened of their own shadow and won’t get out of bed in the morning unless they’ve had a focus group report to tell them which side of bed to get out.”

— Paul Keating, 2007

“I could stand in the middle of Fifth Avenue and shoot somebody, and I wouldn’t lose any voters.”

— Donald Trump, 2016

1 Introduction

Do voters select parties who will implement their desired policies, or are they largely concerned with seeing their political team win and the other team lose? When voters support a party, do they focus on the character and competence of the party leader, or are they primarily interested in the party’s policy promises? Are voters *prospective*, oriented to the future, or are they *retrospective* and oriented to the past? These questions are central to political science research on elections and voting behaviour. The theories that political scientists have developed to answer them are among the most well-known and widely debated in political science.

Elected politicians figure prominently in these theories: their policy commitments, career aspirations, and campaign tactics are central to many political science accounts of how elections work. Yet politicians also have their *own* beliefs about elections and voting. Sit with a politician as the room empties after a town hall meeting, or accompany a politician as they walk from door to door on the campaign trail, and you will soon discern the outlines of *their* theories of why citizens vote, how voters make their choices, and the forces that shape citizens’ political beliefs. When a politician complains that their party is too obsessed with focus groups, or brags that they could shoot a person in the street without electoral consequence, these comments tell us something not only about the politician’s personality and values, but also offer clues about their working

theories of elections and voting behaviour.

These working theories of elections and voting have largely gone unnoticed by political scientists, but there is good reason to expect that they matter a great deal for politics. Political science research on “theories” of politics among non-specialists, while limited, has consistently found that these theories are strongly related to policy attitudes and political behaviour among both citizens and political elites (Kertzer and McGraw, 2012; Sheffer, Loewen and Lucas, 2023; Kingdon, 1967; Rad and Ginges, 2019). These findings mirror broader interdisciplinary research on the consequences of “implicit” or “lay” theories, such as theories of mind or theories of biological kinds, for human behaviour and beliefs (Gelman and Legare, 2011). Implicit theories create “psychological worlds” (Dweck, 2012, 39) that shape individuals’ expectations about how others will act, how they explain those actions, and how they themselves behave.

Exploring these lay theories of elections and voting is especially valuable when politicians’ theories can be directly compared to those of their constituents. It is one thing to understand how politicians or citizens think about elections and voting, but what if politicians and citizens also have very *different* theories of the causal forces that shape voting behaviour and the consequences of politicians’ actions for election outcomes? This misalignment between politicians and citizens could have consequences of its own for elite-mass interaction and citizens’ democratic satisfaction. Independently of their individual behavioural consequences, in other words, mass-elite *differences* in theories of elections and voting are an especially important priority for research.

Here, we use data from face-to-face structured interviews with nearly 1,000 elected politicians in eleven countries, along with surveys of 12,500 citizens, to provide a first-ever comparative analysis of politicians’ and citizens’ theories of elections and voting behaviour. We find that our respondents hold widely varying beliefs on central theoretical debates in political science – debates about retrospective versus prospective voting, policy-driven versus leader-driven electoral selection, voter knowledge versus ignorance, and more. We also find that politicians’ theories differ dramatically from those of the citizens they represent: in nearly every country we study, we find that politicians are

more likely than citizens to see voters as leader-oriented rather than policy-oriented, retrospective rather than prospective, egocentric rather than sociotropic, single-issue and short-term focused, and “blind” in their retrospection. To clarify these differences, we estimate the latent theoretical types that lay beneath politicians’ and citizens’ responses to our questions, confirming that nearly three-quarters of politicians resemble “democratic realists” in their theories (Achen and Bartels, 2016), whereas citizens are much more evenly divided between “democratic realists” and “democratic optimists.” We conclude by discussing the implications of our findings for theories of political representation and political elites, and discuss priorities for future work to extend comparative research on implicit theories of elections and voting.

2 Implicit Theories and their Consequences

Theories of elections and voting behaviour are general accounts of election outcomes and the voting behaviour that produces them. Theoretical beliefs can be distinguished from other beliefs in that they are conceptual, explanatory, and predictive (Gopnik and Meltzoff, 1998; Gelman and Legare, 2011). Theories are *conceptual* in the sense that they provide concepts with which to organize the world into meaningful categories; these concepts (e.g. “retrospective voting”, “partisanship”) help their users organize, describe, and explain empirical phenomena. Theories are *explanatory* in that they provide plausible causal accounts of events and outcomes; explanatory statements like, “the President lost because citizens were upset about the economy” imply underlying theories of voting behaviour. Finally, theories are *predictive* in that they enable individuals to develop expectations about the consequences of their actions; statements like, “there is no way the party machine will allow him to become the Presidential nominee” are predictions grounded in implicit theories.

To make this more concrete, an example may be helpful. In *spatial voting theory*, each voter is typically assumed to hold a bundle of policy preferences that can be meaningfully summarized in some low-dimensional latent space (often characterized as a left-right

spectrum); this bundle is called an “ideal point.” Political candidates and/or parties compete with one another by proposing their own bundles of policy promises; voters consider these promises and select the party or candidate whose proposed ideal point is closest to their own in latent space (Downs, 1957; Jessee, 2016). This theory provides a set of concepts (ideal points, spatial proximity) with which its users can provide explanations of electoral outcomes (“Party A had become too extreme, allowing Party B to build a new coalition of centrist and left-of-centre voters”) and make related predictions about the future.

A starkly contrasting theory of elections and voting is Christopher Achen and Larry Bartels’s (2016) *democratic realism*. Synthesizing decades of political science research, together with their own original analysis, Achen and Bartels argue that voters are decidedly incapable of making choices based on calculations of spatial proximity. Instead, most voters make choices based on some combination of longstanding group identities and vague, short-term assessments of their well-being. Democratic realism not only provides theoretical concepts of its own (e.g. “blind retrospection”), but also offers very different explanations and predictions than those that arise from other theories.

As Achen and Bartels note, democratic realism has normative implications for democratic theory more broadly, because “democratic realists” are likely to concentrate their attention on the character and quality of group-based mobilization in politics, rather than traditional efforts to provide voters with tools to make “rational” choices based on their government’s performance in office or their personal policy commitments (Disch, 2021). These normative consequences are one important reason why politicians’ and citizens’ theories have the potential to shape politics in important ways – particularly if politicians and citizens adhere to *different* theories – with the potential to exacerbate phenomena such as trust in democratic institutions, satisfaction with democracy, and partisan and affective polarization. We return to these potential consequences later in the paper.

The questions that animate competing theories of elections and voting – Are voters knowledgeable or ignorant? Do they focus on the past or the future in their decisions?

Do they focus on the short-term or the long-term? – are precisely the theoretical debates that we engage. In measuring these theoretical positions among politicians and voters, our work builds on an interdisciplinary tradition of research on “lay” or “implicit” theories and their consequences. Research in philosophy, anthropology, and especially psychology has explored how implicit theories of mind, theories of biology, theories of physics, and other theories shape the way ordinary individuals understand the phenomena they encounter in their lives (Gopnik and Meltzoff, 1998; Gelman and Legare, 2011). In one particularly well-developed area of research, for example, Carol Dweck and her colleagues have measured “entity” versus “incremental” theories of human intelligence among children and adults (that is, implicit theories about the extent to which people can enhance their personal abilities or develop new traits), and find that these theories predict countless important outcomes in child development, career success, and inter-group attitudes (Dweck, 2012).

In political science, research on “lay” theory is very much in its infancy. Joshua Kertzer and Kathleen McGraw have measured implicit theories of “folk realism” in the United States (Kertzer and McGraw, 2012), and others have explored how citizens’ implicit theories of national identity and place-based belonging shape their policy attitudes and ideological beliefs (Borwein, Lucas and Anderson, 2023; Rad and Ginges, 2018). Among political elites, early research by John Kingdon (1967) explored politicians’ “implicit theories” of voting behaviour and how these theories change as a consequence of electoral victory or defeat; this work has recently been extended in large-scale comparative research (Soontjens, 2022). Other recent studies have assessed politicians’ evaluations of why their parties’ election campaigns succeed or fail (Ekengren and Oscarsson, 2013; Strömbäck, Grandien and Falasca, 2013; Esaiasson and Holmberg, 2017) or studied the presence of “democratic realist” beliefs among municipal politicians (Lucas, Sheffer and Loewen, 2022). Recent research has also begun to explore the consequences of politicians’ implicit theories, such as the effect of politicians’ theories of voters’ time horizons for their thinking about inter-temporal policy trade-offs (Sheffer, Loewen and Lucas, 2023) and the influence of politicians’ theories of accountability for their responsiveness to public

opinion (Soontjens and Sevenans, 2022).

This research reinforces the value of systematic studies of politicians' and citizens' implicit theories of elections and voting. We see an even more pressing need for research that *compares* politicians' and citizens' theories. Such work – thus far completely absent – has the potential to help us understand not only how individual citizens or politicians act in the world, but also to contribute to critical questions about elite-mass interaction and elite political behaviour in contemporary democracies.

First, theoretical alignment or misalignment between politicians and citizens has important implications for interaction and mutual understanding between citizens and elites. Together with decades of research on substantive and policy representation (Miller and Stokes, 1963; Soroka and Wlezien, 2009), political scientists have more recently explored ways in which politicians might be expected to represent their constituents, including personality traits (Dynes, Hassell and Miles, 2022; Hanania, 2017; Schumacher and Zettler, 2019), how politicians reason and solve problems (Sheffer et al., 2018), and their values and norms, such as altruism and cooperation (Enemark et al., 2016; LeVeck et al., 2014). Research that examines the relationships between represented and representative must take account of the different types of activities that constitute the job of the representative and consider how both citizens and representatives prioritise these. Discrepancies between the two sets of preferences may damage the legitimacy of the system (Vivyan, Wagner and Tarlov, 2014). Advancing our understanding of these voter preferences is important because it allows us to better evaluate whether legislators' effort allocation decisions correspond to the wishes of their constituents (Grant and Rudolph, 2004; Griffin and Flavin, 2011). A lack of such correspondence could lead to voter dissatisfaction not just with individual representatives, but also with the political system more broadly (Bowler and Karp, 2004). If politicians do not share the theoretical beliefs of the citizens who elect them, then we need to explain the causes and implications of this misalignment (Mansbridge, 2003), along with its consequences for representation.

This alignment or misalignment may also be linked with citizens' trust or satisfaction with their representatives. When citizens say things like, "politicians think we're stupid"

or “politicians think we’re not paying attention to what they do,” we often interpret these statements as indicators of citizens’ dissatisfaction with their elected representatives. But what if politicians *are* more likely than citizens to think that voters are uninformed and ignorant? What if they *are* more likely than citizens to think that voters pay no attention to politicians’ actions in office? These theoretical differences between politicians and citizens, if they exist, would reveal an important and overlooked individual-level predictor of citizens’ dissatisfaction with their representatives – one whose resolution would require very different solutions than other sources of dissatisfaction, such as ideological misalignment or poor performance in office.

Alongside its implications for political representation, comparing politicians’ and citizens’ theoretical beliefs contributes to an ongoing and highly consequential debate about whether politicians are good at their jobs – that is, whether politicians possess or develop particular expertise that allows them to operate successfully in their roles (whether for their own interests or the interests of their citizens). Politicians have been found to perform quite poorly on some tasks that we might expect to be central to their expertise, such as estimating public opinion (Broockman and Skovron, 2018; Walgrave et al., 2022), are indistinguishable from ordinary citizens on other tasks (Kertzer et al., N.d.), and perform better than citizens on some specific tasks, such as bargaining and strategic reasoning (Sheffer et al., 2023). One obvious area in which politicians should be especially competent is in their understanding of how elections and voting work – what motivates voters, how they make choices, what appeals to voters, and so on. Assessing this expectation requires that we first measure politicians’ theoretical beliefs about voters and compare these theories to those of the citizens they represent. If politicians do differ from citizens, we can then assess if this is the result of selection processes (e.g. those with political ambition already tend to possess particular beliefs about voting behaviour) or a result of learning and experience that is gained in a political career. These differences would also motivate research on the citizens who most and least resemble active politicians in their theories, to examine if these citizens are more likely to show interest in politics, run for office, or constitute a more visible group of citizens to whom politicians may respond

more directly. If instead politicians do not differ from citizens in their theories, this would reinforce the view that political elites do not develop or possess particular forms of knowledge or expertise, a finding with both empirical and normative implications for theories of “delegate” versus “trustee” representation.

3 Measuring Implicit Theories of Elections and Voting Behaviour

To measure politicians’ and citizens’ theoretical beliefs about elections and voting, we developed eight novel questions, each capturing an enduring theoretical debate in political science. To select these debates, we focused on four criteria. First, we chose to focus on *elections and voting behaviour* because we expect all politicians to have theoretical beliefs in this area, in contrast to other theoretical debates in political science (such as theories of the policy process or theories of executive-bureaucratic relations) in which politicians may have had less opportunity to develop theories. Second, within elections and voting behaviour, we sought to focus on highly important and enduring theoretical debates – debates that appear regularly in handbooks, textbooks, and synthetic scholarly work about elections and voting. Third, because our work is comparative and exploratory, we sought to cover a broad *variety* of theoretical debates on elections and voting, rather than focusing on repeated measures of a smaller number of theoretical debates. Finally, we focus on debates about *individual* voting behaviour, rather than macro theories of system-level responsiveness or representation, such as theories of thermostatic responsiveness, issue evolution, or policy mood (Soroka and Wlezien, 2009; Stimson, Mackuen and Erikson, 1995; Stimson, 2004). While these macro debates are important, and political elites may well have theoretical beliefs about them, we begin by focusing our attention on a group about whom politicians are likely to have invested a great deal of thought: individual voters.

Based on these criteria, we selected eight major theoretical debates to include in our interviews with politicians and citizens. The first of these debates is *policy* versus *iden-*

tity voting. As we noted earlier, political scientists in the spatial voting tradition argue that voters rely on their policy preferences to select their preferred candidates (Downs, 1957; Jessee, 2012). More generally, many theories of policy responsiveness assume that citizens’ policy preferences influence government policy in part through an electoral selection mechanism (Ansolabehere, Snyder and Stewart, 2001; Caughey and Wang, 2019; Soroka and Wlezien, 2009). However, an equally longstanding tradition rejects the notion that citizens even *have* coherent bundles of policy preferences with which to make their voting decisions (Converse, 2006; Kinder and Kalmoe, 2017), arguing that these choices are instead driven by citizens’ longstanding group identities – especially partisanship (Achen and Bartels, 2016; Mason, 2018). This remains an area of spirited debate; recently, policy-oriented theorists have responded to “intoxicated partisanship” theory (Fowler, 2020) with empirical evidence that, in the rare cases when partisan identities and policy preferences conflict, citizens’ policy preferences tend to be more important than their group identities (Costa, 2021; Schonfeld and Winter-Levy, 2021).

The second theoretical debate we selected concerns voters’ *short-term* versus *long-term* orientations. Inter-temporal choices are at the heart of policy-making, and it is commonly argued that policies tend to be biased towards the short-term, in part because representatives have electoral incentives to cater to a short-sighted, impatient public (Jacobs, 2016; Weaver, 1986; Ashworth, 2012*a*). Research in psychology and economics emphasizes people’s tendency to be myopic in their preferences; citizens tend to be short-sighted and focused on the near rather than far future (Streich and Levy, 2007; Urminsky and Zauberman, 2015). However, empirical studies that corroborate this idea of myopic citizens in the context of elections and voting is more scattered in its conclusions (Achen and Bartels, 2016). Healy and Malhotra do find that voters, in the context of policies dealing with natural disasters, support immediate relief aid rather than future disaster prevention, which suggests that voters tend to be averse to short-run costs that are connected to long-term responsible policy-making (Healy and Malhotra, 2009). Jacobs and Matthews (2012, 2017) come to a more nuanced conclusion; they too show that voters are myopic in that they strongly favor secure short-term policy benefits, but emphasize that

this does not imply that voters are fundamentally short-sighted. Voters are not impatient, they argue, but they do focus more on the short-term simply because they are uncertain about the future. In the context of climate policies — where the inter-temporal dilemma is particularly present — Rinscheid and colleagues also find that people’s aversions of long-term policies are overstated (Rinscheid, Pianta and Weber, 2020). The character of voters’ short-term or long-term orientations remains a vivid scholarly debate.

Third, we ask if our respondents see voters as *knowledgeable* or *ignorant* – a theoretical debate so central to theories of democracy that it can be traced at least as far back as Plato’s *Republic*. Like Socrates in the *Republic*, modern elite theorists argue that only a minority of competent political elites are truly able to govern (E.g. Schumpeter, 1962; Bachrach, 1967; Held, 1987), insisting that citizens are not sufficiently qualified to decide directly on key policy issues (Budge, 1996; Sartori, 1987). Beyond this longstanding normative debate, empirical scholarship has debated the degree of citizens’ policy-specific knowledge (Gilens, 2001), general political knowledge (Delli Karpini and Keeter, 1996; Mondak, 1995), or political sophistication (Luskin, 1987). While there is a broad consensus that political knowledge is associated with positive outcomes such as civic participation, correct voting (Lau and Redlawsk, 1997; Lupia, 2006) or political activism (Verba, Schlozman and Brady, 1995), the *level* of knowledge that citizens bring to their voting choices remains a subject of active debate (Achen and Bartels, 2016; Fowler, 2020).

Fourth, we measure theories of *single-issue* versus *multiple-issue* voting. Since Converse (2006) first proposed the idea of “issue publics” – groups of voters who pay especially close attention to single issues and who vote on the basis of parties’ stances on those issues – political scientists have debated whether such voters actually exist. As we already noted, many political scientists have suggested that voters’ policy beliefs are simply too weak and unstable to genuinely shape their choices (Achen and Bartels, 2016; Cohen, 2003; Kinder and Kalmoe, 2017), and even those who *do* believe policy attitudes are important for voting tend to assume that *bundles* of issue positions, rather than single issues, are most important (Fowler et al., 2023; Jessee, 2012). Even so, a new analysis by Ryan and Ehlinger (2023) used a novel open-ended survey question structure, combined

with “bespoke” conjoint experiments, to show that a substantial fraction of the American public *do* belong to issue publics and that their positions on these specific issues play an important role in their voting decisions. This new approach is likely to provoke considerable new research – and debate – about the presence or absence of genuine single-issue voters.

Fifth, we explore an active theoretical debate between those who see voters as motivated by *political leaders* versus those who see voters as focused on *policy issues*. Some recent studies follow classic research in spatial voting in suggesting that political parties focus on specific policy ideas to gain electoral advantages (De Sio and Weber, 2014) and that parties can increase their attractiveness to the electorate by means of their positioning on policy dimensions (Adams and Merrill, 2009; Serra, 2010). However, the role of leadership competence in vote choice is a longstanding focus in electoral research (Petrocik, 1996; Green and Jennings, 2017; Lanz, 2020; Green and Jennings, 2017; Sorek, Haglin and Geva, 2018), including work on both presidential candidates (Brown et al., 1988; Miller, Wattenberg and Malanchuk, 1986) and party leaders (Garzia, 2011; Valgarðsson et al., 2021). These studies have recently been extended to voter support for political leaders who violate democratic principles (Albertus and Grossman, 2021; Carey et al., 2022; Frederiksen, 2022) and public support for technocratic expertise (Bertsou and Caramani, 2022; Caramani, 2017; Lavezzolo, Ramiro and Fernandez-Vazquez, 2022), but also the impact of competence on voting preferences (Green and Jennings, 2017; Sorek, Haglin and Geva, 2018). Although recent studies suggest that the importance of leaders’ competence for vote choice has increased in recent years, the relative influence of leadership qualities and policy commitments for vote choice remains a subject of active debate.

Our sixth debate is *retrospective* versus *prospective* voting. Classical theories of democratic representation view voters as future-oriented individuals who are driven largely by policy expectations. As we noted earlier, these theories assume that voters choose the candidate or party they perceive as most likely to implement their preferred policies in the next term (Downs, 1957). Under this mandate model of representation, which is also

called promissory representation (Mansbridge, 2003), voters scan parties’ promises and decide for whom to vote based on the match between their own policy preferences and the policies that candidates and parties offer (Naurin and Thomson, 2020). In contrast, voting based on already implemented policies is considered retrospective. A distinguished theoretical literature argues that voters’ decision making is based largely on evaluations of representatives’ past behavior; this retrospective model suggests that voters reward or punish elected representatives based on how well they have performed in the previous term (Ferejohn, 1986; Fiorina, 1981). While a great deal of evidence indicates that citizens consider information on past government performance when making their electoral choices (Healy and Malhotra, 2013), prospective theory continues to receive considerable attention in political science (Fowler et al., 2023; Jessee, 2012).

Seventh, we measure *egocentric* versus *sociotropic* theory. An important question about citizens’ assessment of their incumbents’ performance is whether voters are egocentric in their evaluations – so-called “pocketbook” voting – or sociotropic, assessing the overall state of the national economy or other broad features (Healy, Persson and Snowberg, 2017; Lewis-Beck and Lockerbie, 1989; Lockerbie, 2006). Early rational choice models (Downs, 1957) implied that voters would be egocentric, focusing on personal well-being, considerable research has found that many voters instead respond to the state of the national economy and the incumbent government’s performance on the national economy (Kinder and Kiewiet, 1979, 1981; Clarke et al., 2004). Others have reinforced this view with a more general argument that voters look beyond their own situation when casting their vote, acting with “sociotropic” rather than “egocentric” retrospection (MacKuen, 1983; Fiorina, 1978). Still, recent research has questioned this sociotropic consensus (Healy, Persson and Snowberg, 2017), and it is also possible that retrospective voters evaluate the state of the nation *and* their own well-being – a distinction that is methodologically challenging to disentangle (Feldman, 1982).

Finally, we explore the theoretical debate about citizens’ competence to assess their elected representatives’ performance. In classical retrospective voting theory, citizens hold their elected representatives accountable for their actions by considering indicators

of their well-being (whether egocentric or sociotropic) during the full course of a government’s time in office (Key, 1966; Fiorina, 1981). This “clear-eyed” retrospection – holding governments accountable for what they *can* control, but ignoring changes over which governments have no control – incentivizes politicians to anticipate their constituents’ preferences and communicate the reasons for their actions to citizens (Mansbridge, 2003). However, retrospective voting can secure this representational connection only if voters’ assessments are genuinely linked to politicians’ performance in office, and a prominent tradition of political science research has argued that voters’ assessments are in fact based on considerations that have nothing to do with politicians’ actions, such as the outcome of college football games (Healy and Malhotra, 2009), local shark attacks (Achen and Bartels, 2016), and extremely short-term economic fluctuations (Achen and Bartels, 2016). A flurry of new studies has responded to this “blind retrospection” argument with studies that question the role of irrelevant events in voters’ assessments (Fowler and Montagnes, 2015; Fowler and Hall, 2018) or show that seemingly “irrelevant” events may in fact provide voters with valuable information about a government’s performance (Ashworth, 2012b; Ashworth, Bueno De Mesquita and Friedenber, 2018).

Having selected these theoretical debates, we developed questions that clearly describe each debate while being accessible to non-professionals and easing respondents’ cognitive burden by following a consistent overall question structure. We provide the full wording for each of our questions in Table ???. In each case, we identify two sides of the debate and ask respondents to position themselves within the debate on a 0-10 scale, with each pole appropriately labelled. We then field-tested all questions in surveys of local politicians in Canada, the United States, and Belgium. In each case, question response patterns and open-ended follow-up questions confirmed that the politicians in our pilot surveys understood the questions, felt comfortable placing themselves within the theoretical debates, and even, in many cases, enjoyed the opportunity to express their views.¹

¹In one pilot study of Canadian local politicians, we included “don’t know” options for all questions and found that only a very small proportion (less than 1% for most questions) selected the option, indicating good question comprehension. Our United States pilot study included an opportunity for open-ended feedback on the questions; responses did not reveal any comprehension problems. Our final pilot study with Belgian local politicians revealed no issues with extending the questions to a non-majoritarian electoral setting. As in the United States pilot, the Belgian survey included an open field for feedback

Table 1: Overview of Question Wording and Short Labels

Theoretical Debate	Short Name	Question Wording
Policy-based vs. identity-based voting	Policy v. Identity	Some say that voters make their decisions based on their policy preferences. Others say that voters' choices have much more to do with their deeply held partisan or other group identities. (0 = Policy; 10 = Identity)
Voters' short-term vs. long-term orientations	Short-term v. Long-term	Some say that voters are impatient and think about the short term when they vote. Others say that voters focus on the long term. (0 = Short term; 10 = Long term)
Voters' knowledge vs. ignorance	Knowledge v. Ignorance	Some say that when citizens vote they are by and large knowledgeable about political issues, while others say they generally know very little. (0 = Knowledge; 10 = Ignorant)
Single-issue vs. multiple-issue voting	Single-Issue v. Many-Issue	Some say that voters make voting decisions based on one or two policy issues they care strongly about. Others say voters decide based on a wide range of policy issues. (0 = Single issue; 10 = Many issue)
Voters' focus on leadership qualities vs. policy commitments	Policy Ideas v. Leaders	Some say that voters care more about the ideas parties stand for than about the party leader's character and competence. Others say that voters care about the leader's qualities more than the party's platform. (0 = Ideas, 10=Leader)
Prospective vs. Retrospective Voting	Future v. Past	Some say that voters make decisions based on candidates' policy commitments and promises for the next term. Others say that voters base their decisions on rewarding or punishing their elected representatives for how well they have performed in the previous term. (0 = Future, 10 = Past)
Sociotropic vs. egocentric / pocketbook voting	Sociotropic v. Egocentric	Some say that voters judge governments on whether they've improved everyone's lives. Others say that voters judge governments on whether they've improved their own personal lives. (0 = Everyone; 10 = Personal)
"Blind" vs. "clear-eyed" retrospective voting	Unfair v. Fair	Some say that voters often blame or reward politicians for events that are totally outside the politician's control. Others say that voters are good at knowing which events politicians are and are not responsible for. (0 = Unfair, 10 = fair)

Two additional features of these questions are worth emphasising. First, the order of the questions in the table carries no implied ranking – we consider all eight questions equally important, and the order of the presentation of the eight items was randomized for both politicians and citizens. Second, our setup – with distinct questions for each theoretical debate – allows for but does not require that respondents’ positions on the theoretical debates are strongly related to one another. Among political scientists, we know that some combinations of theoretical positions are more common, and even perhaps more logically coherent, than others. However, research on implicit theories outside political science has demonstrated that lay theories are much more flexible than those developed by scientific professionals (Rad and Ginges, 2018; Gelman and Legare, 2011), and our pilot studies indicated that respondents might combine their theoretical positions in a wide variety of ways. Our questions allow for many possible theoretical positions not only in terms of the respondent’s answer to each theoretical item but also in terms of their positions across the eight distinct debates.

4 Data: Theories of Elections and Voting in Eleven Countries

We examine politicians’ and citizens’ theories of elections and voting behaviour in eleven countries: Australia, Belgium (Flanders), Canada, Czechia, Denmark, Germany, Israel, the Netherlands, Portugal, Sweden, and Switzerland. In each country, our questions were part of larger elite and citizen surveys fielded in the framework of the POLPOP project.²

and responses indicated no apparent problems with the questions.

²POLPOP is an international collaboration examining elected politicians’ opinions, perceptions and evaluations in thirteen countries. The project is led by Stefaan Walgrave (University of Antwerp) and supported by an ERC Advanced Grant (POLEVPOP, ID:101018105). In Australia, the project is led by Patrick Dumont (Australian National University), in Belgium (Flanders) by Stefaan Walgrave (University of Antwerp), in Francophone Belgium by Jean-Benoit Pilet and Nathalie Brack (Université Libre de Bruxelles), in Canada by Peter Loewen (University of Toronto) and Jack Lucas (University of Calgary), in the Czech Republic by Ondrej Cisar (Charles University Prague), in Denmark by Anne Rasmussen (University of Copenhagen), in Germany by Christian Breunig (University of Konstanz) and Stefanie Bailer (University of Basel), in Israel by Lior Sheffer (Tel Aviv University) and Eran Amsalem (Hebrew University Jerusalem), in Luxembourg by Javier Olivera (Luxembourg Institute of Socio-Economic Research), in the Netherlands by Rens Vliegenthart (Wageningen University), and Marc Van de Wardt (Free University of Amsterdam), in Norway by Yvette Peters (University of Bergen), in Portugal by

While these countries are similar in being established western democracies, they are quite diverse in terms of electoral systems, including majoritarian as well as proportional systems, large and small district sizes, strong and weak party systems, hybrid systems, and so on. These systemic differences necessarily influence why and how citizens in those systems cast their votes. At a more individual level, these eleven countries are also diverse in terms of politicians' lived experiences: the role of political parties in politicians' careers widely varies, and so do the lengths of their careers, the amount of turnover expected at each election, the size and characteristics of the constituencies they represent, the amount of staff support they receive, the media and how they cover politics and politicians, and so on. In the present paper, we focus primarily on describing and comparing politicians' and citizens' theories, with the institutional and other differences allowing us to check whether these differences hold across electoral contexts.

To study politicians' theories of elections and voting, we draw on extensive face-to-face surveys collected from 982 elected politicians between March 2022 and March 2023 (see Table 2). While response rates vary substantially across countries, the total number of completed surveys is exceptionally high for surveys among national politicians (see Bailer 2014). Moreover, our sample of participating politicians is broadly representative of the full population in terms of gender, seniority, and ideological position (for more information on the representativity, see Appendix 9.1). In most countries, all national members of parliament were the target population, and in federal countries like Belgium and Canada, provincial or state parliamentarians were also asked to participate. In Israel, Sweden, and Australia, an election was called during the fieldwork period, and our target population thus included politicians who did not get re-elected as well as re-elected or newly elected MPs. Politicians were asked to participate by local researchers, first via email and then, if contact details were publicly available, also via telephone.

Miguel Pereira (University of Southern California) and Jorge Fernandes (University of Lisbon), in Sweden by Mikael Persson (University of Gothenburg), and in Switzerland by Frédéric Varone (University of Geneva) and Pirmin Bundi (University of Lausanne). Three country teams (in Francophone Belgium, Norway, and Luxembourg) did not include all eight questions tapping into voting theories in their survey. Note, moreover, that each country team obtained approval from their respective Research Ethics Boards to conduct the politician surveys. Ethics approval for the centralized population surveys was obtained at the University of Antwerp, Belgium in February 2022 (approval number: SHW_22_032).

Table 2: Data Collection: Fieldwork Periods and Response Rates

	Politician Survey		Population Survey	
	Fieldwork	N (Resp. %)	Fieldwork	N
Australia	11-22 - 03-23	58 (26%)	02-22 - 02-22	2067
Belgium (Flanders)	02-22 - 08-22	215 (94%)	02-22 - 02-22	2258
Canada	10-22 - 02-23	87 (11.5%)	02-22 - 02-22	2366
Czechia	04-22 - 10-22	64 (60%)	02-22 - 02-22	2271
Denmark	02-22 - 08-22	48 (27%)	02-22 - 02-22	2343
Germany	05-22 - 03-23	177 (24%)	02-22 - 02-22	2279
Israel	05-22 - 01-23	55 (46%)	02-22 - 05-22	2067
Netherlands	05-22 - 09-22	38 (25%)	02-22 - 02-22	1979
Portugal	07-22 - 02-23	70 (30%)	02-22 - 02-22	2264
Sweden	10-22 - 02-23	67(19%)	02-22 - 02-22	2337
Switzerland	05-22 - 12-22	103 (43%)	02-22 - 02-22	2258
Total		982		24489

Participating politicians completed a thirty-minute survey, programmed in Qualtrics, on a laptop or tablet in the presence of a member of the POLPOP research team – mostly in person but also, in some cases, via Zoom. This face-to-face researcher presence is important in two respects: politicians could ask (practical) clarifications to the researcher when filling in the survey and, most importantly, we are sure that politicians themselves and not their staffers completed the questionnaire. As we discussed in the previous section, politicians were asked to indicate on an eleven-point scale how they think voters behave for eight distinct theoretical debates. To avoid question order effects, the order of these statements was randomized.

We asked the same questions of citizens in each of our case countries. General population surveys were fielded online in March 2022. In collaboration with Dynata, around 2000 citizens of voting age were targeted in each country from existing online panels, with recruitment quotas for age and gender (crossed), and education level.³ To adjust

³For more information on Dynata’s panels and fieldwork approach, see <https://www.dynata.com>

for remaining imbalances, we computed post-estimation raking weights using age, gender, education, and party choice in the most recent national election.⁴ In the online survey, citizens were shown the same eight statements on elections and voting behaviour and were asked to indicate their position on each eleven-point scale. The phrasing for these questions was identical to the politician survey, and here, too, the item order was randomized.

5 Theoretical Beliefs among Politicians and Citizens

We begin with figure 1, which summarizes the distribution of responses to our eight theory questions among citizens (in green) and politicians (in purple), with pooled responses in Panel A and country-specific results in Panel B. Several important results are immediately visible. First, and most obviously, citizen and politician responses on all of the theory questions *vary* – for all eight questions, responses range widely across the available response options. The theoretical debates we have measured are indeed *debates*, with a substantial proportion of respondents on each side of every question.

A second important finding in figure 1 is the similarity of the citizen and politician distributions across countries. In general, both the politician and citizen distributions look quite similar within each question as we scan from top to bottom in each column. This visual pattern is strongly confirmed in statistical tests; in the supplementary material, we show that in just two cases (of twenty-two) is more than 10% of the variation in theoretical positions explained by cross-country rather than within-country variance.⁵ Strikingly, despite considerable institutional and political-cultural variation across our case countries, the distribution of theoretical beliefs among both politicians and citizens is very similar across countries.

This cross-national similarity contrasts starkly with the third and most important finding in figure 1: clear differences on most questions between the politician and citizen

⁴We cap weights at 5; in uncapped weights, fewer than 1.5% of respondents receive weights above 5.

⁵The two exceptions are policy ideas vs. leaders among politicians, for which 25% of the variance is explained by cross-country variation, and policy vs. identity, for which 14% of the variance is explained by cross-country variation, again among politicians. In a pooled model containing both politicians and citizens, cross-country variation explains a maximum of 6% of variance.

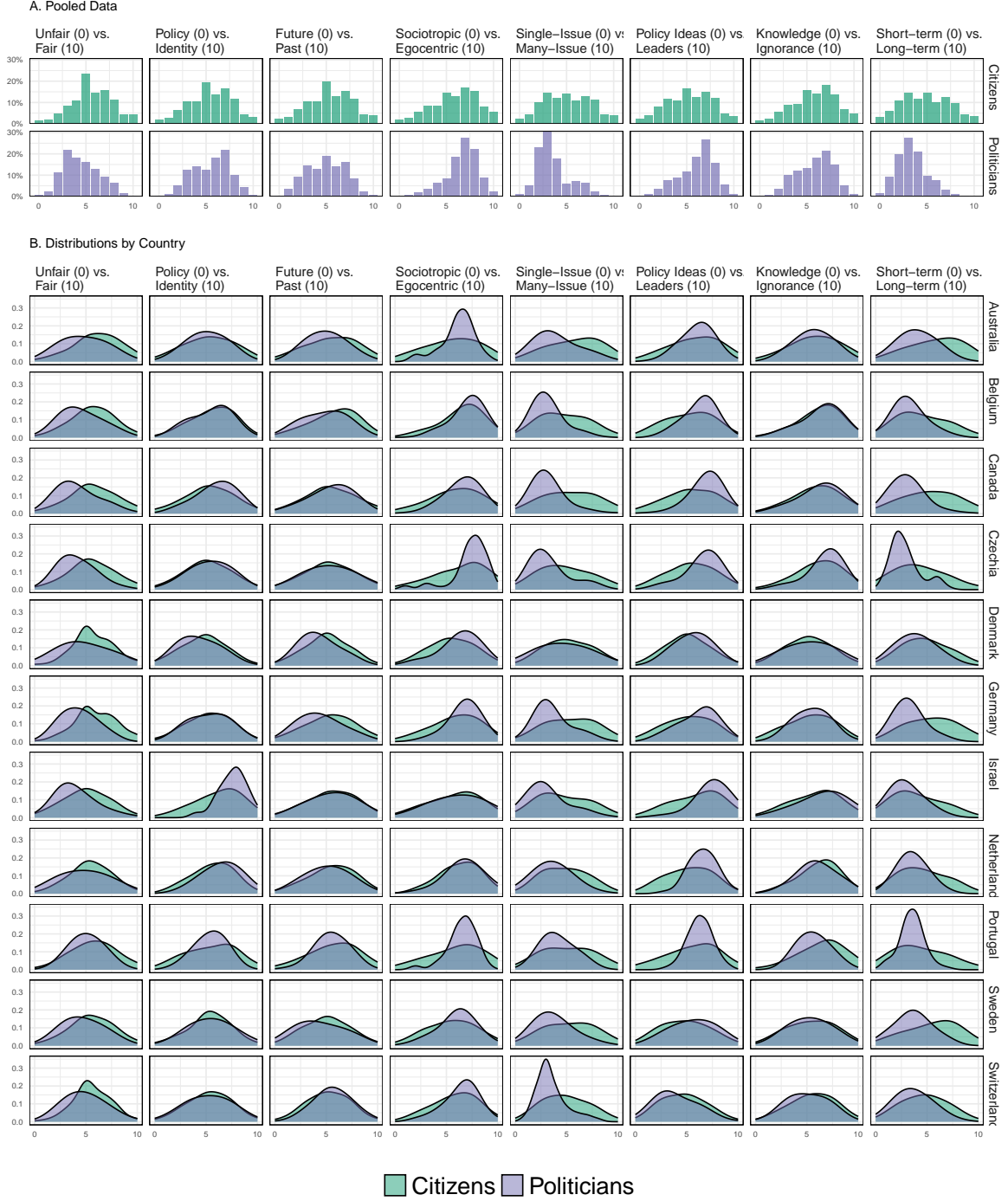


Figure 1: Theory Questions: Distribution of Politician and Citizen Responses. Summary of the distribution of citizen responses (in green) and politician responses (in purple) to eight questions about elections and voting behaviour. Pooled responses in Panel A and country-specific responses in Panel B. Columns are distinct questions (see Table 1 for full wording), and rows in Panel B are countries. Response options range from 0-10 for each question.

distributions. In the first column (unfair vs. fair blame), for example, the politicians' distribution is shifted leftward and the citizens' distribution is shifted rightward in all

countries, suggesting that politicians tend to be more likely than citizens to see voters as “blind” rather than “clear-eyed” when making retrospective judgments about government performance. Similarly, in the far-right column (short-term vs. long-term focus), politicians once again skew left and citizens skew right. In this case, it appears that politicians are more likely than citizens to think voters focus on short-term rather than long-term considerations.

To formalize this comparison, figure 2 summarizes estimates of expected differences between politicians and citizens on each question. In the top panel, each coefficient is drawn from a separate OLS model, regressing survey responses for each item on a politician/citizen indicator variable along with country fixed effects. Statistically significant and positive values indicate that politicians tend to have higher average values than citizens on a question; gray coefficients indicate that there is no statistically significant difference, on average, between politicians and citizens; statistically significant and negative values indicate that politicians tend to have lower average values than citizens. In the figure’s remaining panels, we provide country-specific coefficients. Full tables for these models are available in the supplementary material.

The coefficients in figure 2 confirm that there are substantively large differences between citizens’ and politicians’ theories of elections and voting – differences that are generally consistent across countries. In the top panel, the first two coefficients reveal that politicians are more likely than citizens to think of voters as leader-focused rather than ideas-focused and to think of voters as egocentric rather than sociotropic. In both cases, the differences are substantively important, approaching an expected within-country difference of one point on a 0-10 scale. The smaller panels illustrate that these findings are consistent in direction in ten of eleven countries for leadership vs. ideas and in all eleven countries for sociotropic vs. egocentric voting.⁶

The next two coefficients in the top panel are not statistically significant. Politicians

⁶Two peculiarities of the Swiss political system might explain its distinctiveness in the first theory question: first, a weak party system at the national level (with strong local/cantonal chapters) and low-profile party leaders (with the notable exception of the populist Swiss People Party); second, frequent popular votes (due to direct democracy, i.e. popular initiative and referendum) which make "votations (on specific policy issues)" probably much more important than "elections". Note that this also helps to explain the Swiss findings on the knowledge vs ignorance dimension.

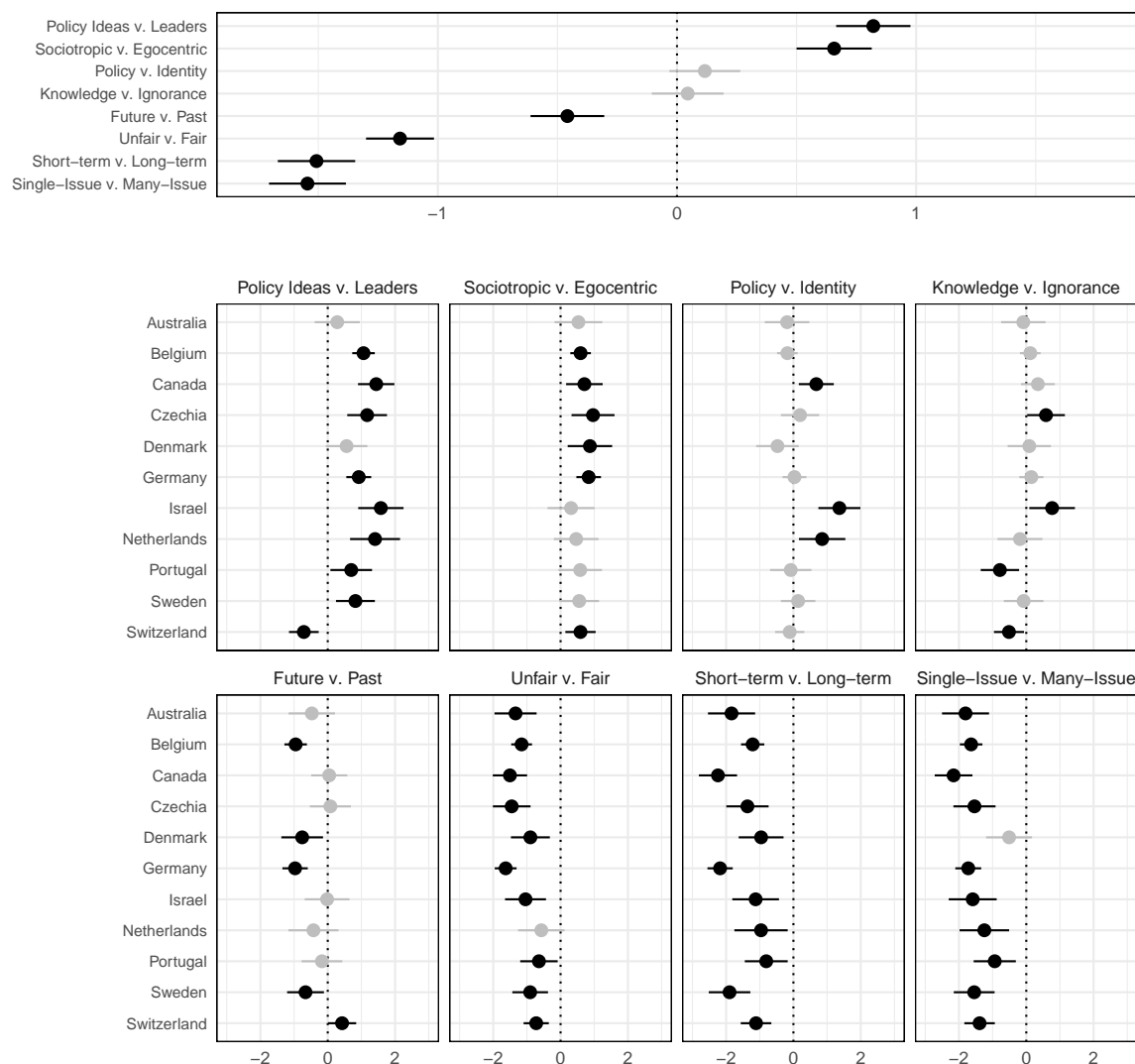


Figure 2: **Differences between Politicians and Citizens.** Summary of average difference between politicians and citizens for each item: black coefficients are statistically significant ($p < 0.05$), gray coefficients are not. Top panel provides overall differences from models that include country fixed effects. Bottom panels provide country-specific differences, by question. Top panel reveals substantial differences between politicians and citizens on many questions; bottom panels confirm that these differences tend to be consistent across countries. Full model tables available in supplementary material.

are no more likely than citizens to think of voters as identity-oriented rather than policy-oriented, nor are politicians more likely than citizens to think of voters as ignorant rather than knowledgeable. In both cases, the country-by-country breakdowns in the bottom panels indicate that these pooled null findings are not merely the result of country-level variation that is “canceled out” in a pooled model: the policy vs. identity relationship is null in eight of eleven countries and the knowledge vs. ignorance relationship is null

in seven of eleven countries. These null findings are theoretically interesting because they suggest that politicians do not simply take what we might think of as more “cynical” theoretical positions than citizens across the board. The null findings also help to confirm that citizens are not more inclined than politicians to merely provide socially desirable responses: if the citizen responses were more contaminated by social desirability, we would expect this to be especially visible in the “knowledge vs. ignorance” question.⁷ To be sure, plenty of politicians and citizens believe that voters are not especially knowledgeable in their voting decisions, but this position is no stronger, on average, among politicians than citizens. It is equally striking, in an environment of strong elite polarization and debates about “identity politics” in many democracies, that politicians are no more likely than citizens to think of voters as motivated primarily by group identities rather than policy commitments.

The remaining coefficients in the top panel of figure 2 are the questions for which politicians tend to select lower values than citizens. For prospective and retrospective voting, the difference is relatively modest (about 0.5 points on the ten-point scale), with politicians having a slightly higher overall tendency to hold prospective theories. Notice, however, that this difference is statistically significant in just four countries. The three remaining questions are much stronger and more consistent: politicians are substantially more likely than citizens to think that voters unfairly blame elected representatives for events that are outside the government’s control; more likely to think of voters as short-term rather than long-term in their focus; and more likely to think voters focus on single issues rather than many issues when voting. In all three cases, these differences are substantively large – well over one point on the 0-10 scale – and, as the country-specific breakdowns reveal, remarkably consistent in direction and significance across countries.

Overall, then, we find that politicians differ quite profoundly from citizens in their theoretical beliefs about elections and voting behaviour. These politician-citizen differences

⁷In general, we see little reason for citizens to be more susceptible than politicians to social desirability bias in these responses: while citizens may be tempted to select socially desirable responses because the questions are about their fellow citizens, politicians may be equally tempted to select socially desirable responses because the questions are about the individuals *who elected them to office*. In any case, the distributions in figure 1 confirm that both politicians and citizens are quite willing to express theoretical beliefs that reflect poorly on voters.

are much more consistent in direction, statistical significance, and magnitude than the cross-national differences. While theoretical beliefs vary widely among both politicians and citizens – in all eight cases, the theoretical debates we have identified are indeed *debates*, with many citizens and politicians on both sides of each debate – we see remarkably similar general tendencies across countries, despite substantial differences in electoral institutions, party systems, and political cultures.

6 From Beliefs to Theories: Theoretical Types among Politicians and Citizens

At a glance, the differences between politicians and citizens in figures 1 and 2 appear to hang together in coherent bundles: politicians tend to be more likely than citizens to think of voters as *leader-oriented*, *egocentric*, *retrospective* but *blind* in that retrospection, and oriented toward *short-term* and *single-issue* considerations. Borrowing from Achen and Bartels, we might say that politicians appear to incline more strongly toward “democratic realism,” while citizens incline toward what we might call a “democratic optimist” theory of elections and voting behaviour. In other words, the differences between politicians and citizens may be differences not only in beliefs about specific theoretical debates, but may also cohere into more differences in deeper and more general theories of voting behaviour.

To explore this possibility, we used a latent class analysis (LCA) model to organize politicians and citizens into more general latent classes on the basis of their responses to each of the eight theory questions (Linzer and Lewis, 2011). Our goal in this analysis was to inductively identify the latent “theories” of elections and voting beneath the individual theory items. We thus began by simplifying each question into three categories: a position on one side of each theoretical debate (e.g. sociotropic voting), a position in the exact centre of the 0-10 response scale, and a position on the other side of the theoretical debate (e.g. egocentric voting). We then used these simplified theoretical positions in a latent class analysis, fitting solutions ranging from two to twenty classes and recording class membership values and fit statistics for each solution. We provide additional detail on

our class selection criteria and fit statistics, as well as robustness tests using alternative coding approaches and class solutions, in the supplementary material.

Our analysis indicated that a four-class solution struck an attractive balance between substantive interpretability and statistical fit. We summarize this four-class solution in figure 3. In the top panels, we report the proportion of citizens (left) and politicians (right) who belong to each of the four classes. In the remaining panels, we provide the full distribution of responses to each question, organized by class membership. These distributions allow us to interpret the results of the latent class analysis and help to justify the labels we have applied to each of the four classes.

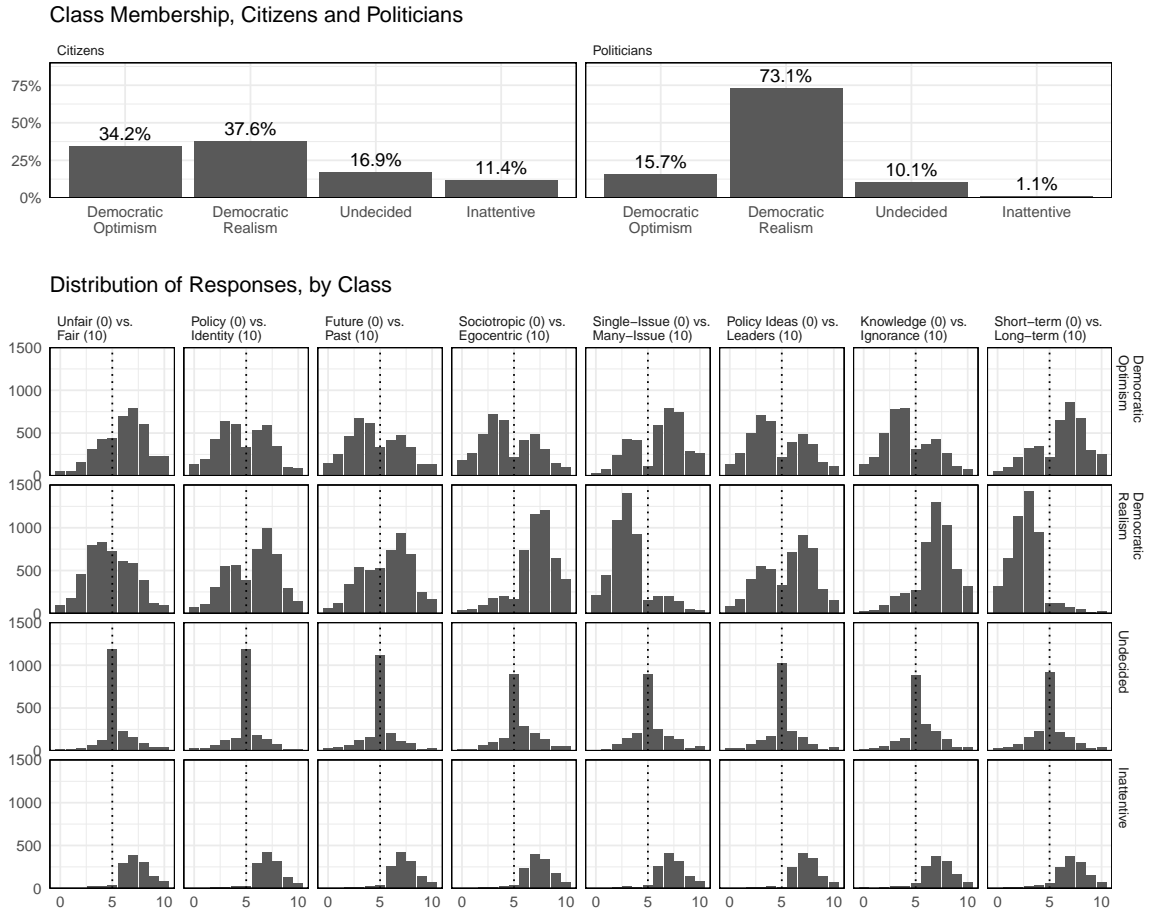


Figure 3: **Politician and Citizen Membership in Four Latent Theory Types.** Summary of Latent Class Analysis describing politicians’ and citizens’ membership in four latent theory types. Top panel summarizes percentage of citizens (left) and politicians (right) belonging to each class. To aid in interpretation, bottom panels summarize the distribution of responses to each theory question among members of each latent class. Politicians are concentrated in the “democratic realist” class, while citizens are more divided among “democratic realists” and “democratic optimists”.

To interpret the distributions in the bottom of figure 3, notice the general tendency in responses across the first row: based on the visible peaks in the distributions, these respondents tend to think of voters as fair in their retrospective assessments, policy-oriented, prospective, sociotropic, multiple-issue-focused, interested in policy rather than political leaders, knowledgeable, and oriented to the long-term. These respondents are *democratic optimists*, expressing a confident view of voters as policy-oriented, knowledgeable, prospective decision-makers. More than a third of our citizen respondents belong to this category, while far fewer politicians – just 15% – belong to this latent class.

The second latent class contrasts starkly with the first: individuals in this category tend to see voters as unfair in their blame, identity-oriented, retrospective, egocentric, single-issue-focused, leader-driven, ignorant, and short-termist. Like Achen and Bartels themselves, these respondents are “democratic realists” who see voters as blindly retrospective, group-oriented, and generally ignorant about politics. Citizens are similarly distributed across the democratic optimist and democratic realist groups – about a third belong to each class. Politicians, in contrast, are *much* more likely to be democratic realists than democratic optimists - nearly three quarters of the politicians in our sample (73%) are democratic realists.

The two remaining classes in the LCA, while interesting, are of less substantive importance. The third class captures respondents who tend to choose the middle value or very moderate values across the theory questions. While these respondents do have views on some questions, they are clearly uncertain in their theoretical beliefs, and we therefore describe them as the “undecided” theorists. This group is small, but by no means insignificant, among both citizens (17%) and politicians (10%).

Finally, a small but discernible fraction of citizens appear to choose higher values (between 6-10) across all eight issue items (11% of citizens, extremely few politicians). These respondents may be especially susceptible to acquiescence bias, choosing the second theoretical position in each question, but the most likely explanation is that these respondents are simply inattentive and move through the questions too quickly.⁸ We thus

⁸Timing data confirms this interpretation; respondents in this group spent statistically significantly less time answering the questions than every other group ($p < 0.01$).

label this group “Inattentives”. Notably, almost no politicians fall into this third class.

Taken together, the findings in figure 3 indicate that politicians and citizens have starkly different theories of elections and voting behaviour. While citizens are quite evenly divided in their theories between democratic optimists and democratic realists (with the final third falling into the undecided or acquiescence camps), politicians are overwhelmingly democratic realist in their orientation. These differences are substantively large and statistically significant in every country in our study.⁹

7 Discussion

What should we make of these results? Above all, we want to underscore the substantial distance between politicians and citizens uncovered in our findings. Politicians and citizens diverge in their theoretical beliefs on six of the eight theoretical debates we examine, divergences that are remarkably consistent across countries. Moreover, politicians and citizens also sort into very different latent theoretical classes, with the vast majority of politicians in all of our countries adhering to democratic realism. A larger proportion of citizens are also undecided or exhibit acquiescence relative to politicians. In short, politicians are overwhelmingly democratic realists, while only a minority of citizens share the same theoretical beliefs about voting and elections.

These theoretical differences reflect starkly divergent views of how politics works. For the vast majority of politicians, elections are a contest in which the voters who are responsible for their fates are unreasonable, short-sighted, single-minded, and driven by personalism rather than policy. The proportion of citizens who agree with this assessment is less than half that of politicians – and, at present, it is unclear how many citizens realize that politicians look at them through a very different theoretical lens. We do know that citizens are more likely to see their fellow citizens as more competent, issue-focused, and future-oriented than do the politicians who represent them.

What are the implications of what appears to be a global cohort of elected representa-

⁹Multinomial logit and latent class regression models (Linzer and Lewis, 2011) confirm that politicians are significantly more likely than citizens to be democratic realists overall and in each case country. These models are available in the supplementary material.

tives, across very diverse institutional and partisan contexts, who ascribe to a democratic realist theory of elections and voting? Perhaps politicians are simply “reading the room” correctly and their responses reflect an earnest and accurate assessment of contemporary voting behaviour. But these debates are not firmly settled among political scientists themselves, and politicians are notoriously inaccurate in their assessments of what citizens think and want (Broockman and Skovron, 2018; Pilet et al., 2023; Walgrave et al., 2022). Some of these errors in judgment and perception are the result of politicians’ projection of their own opinions onto the public (Sevenans et al., 2021). This creates opportunities for politicians’ theoretical beliefs to become a self-fulfilling prophecy: politicians who believe that voters are short-sighted and retrospective, for instance, will be inclined to pursue excessive pre-election spending, exacerbating the patterns documented in research on electoral business cycles (Nordhaus, 1975; Alesina, 1987; Alesina and Roubini, 1992; Rogoff, 1987) and signaling to citizens that elections are “about” short-term policy or material rewards. In other words, politicians’ *theories* of voters may be inadvertently helping to create the electorate that the politicians imagine.

A consistent theoretical gap between politicians and citizens may have additional system-wide implications. In past research, variation in citizens’ (dis)satisfaction with democracy tends to be explained in terms of institutional capacity, electoral system structure, and election outcomes, among other factors (Anderson and Guillory, 1997; Blais and Gélinau, 2007; Singh and Mayne, 2023). But if politicians and citizens are misaligned in their theories of elections and voting – and, more specifically, if politicians hold a much less optimistic view of voters and their capacities than do citizens – then this, too, could produce the discontent that citizens express toward their democratic regimes. Citizens who expect a “democratic optimism” politics but who constantly observe “democratic realism” politics might understandably conclude that democratic systems are out of step with their preferences and needs. As we note below, this possibility is an important avenue for future research.

Beyond these general differences between politicians and citizens, many of the particulars are also notable. For instance, while politicians across our eleven countries tend to

believe that voters place more emphasis on the qualities of party leaders than on those parties' principles, politicians do *not* differ from citizens in their views about voters' orientation to identity versus policy. This reflects a political elite that deviates from citizens in their theories primarily in the weight it gives to personalistic considerations. Politicians may be motivated to adopt this view because it makes their personal "brands" more consequential for their own success or their party's fortunes (and for some politicians, such as those elected in single-member districts, this may be a natural conclusion). For others, however, it may be an expression of a (potentially misguided) belief that voters have a strong attachment to leaders, a phenomenon that is closely associated with the weakening of party systems (Rahat and Kenig, 2018) and has more recently been argued to be a facilitating factor in processes of democratic backsliding (Matovski, 2021; Rachman, 2022). If politicians see voters as strongly leader-centric – even more so than do citizens themselves – they may find it more difficult to stand up to leaders who take norm-violating or undemocratic action in power and may more generally believe that their own political survival is strongly tied to their leader's success.

Politicians also differ strongly from citizens in their beliefs about the prevalence of single-issue voters. Some politicians may be motivated to adopt this belief if they are themselves focused on a single major priority as legislators, or if their party is a distinct issue-owner. Whatever the individual motivations, politicians with strongly single-issue theories of voting may be more inclined to develop (or perhaps more cautious about resisting) single-issue and niche parties, including radical right populist parties in Western democracy, who have gained electorally from focusing on the single issue of immigration (Danieli et al., 2022; Dennison, 2020; Mudde, 1999). More broadly, instances of "imagined demand", whether for single-issue focus, personalism, short-term policy, or other cases in which politicians' theories differ strongly from citizens', are important factors to consider when evaluating representation gaps, elite political behaviour, and concrete policy outcomes in future research.

8 Conclusion

This paper has provided what is, to our knowledge, the first-ever comparative analysis of politicians’ and citizens’ theoretical beliefs about elections and voting behaviour. Drawing on data from face-to-face structured interviews with nearly one thousand politicians and surveys of 24,000 citizens in eleven countries, we found that politicians and citizens vary widely in their theoretical beliefs on eight foundational debates in political science: retrospective versus prospective voting, blind versus clear-eyed retrospection, egocentric versus sociotropic retrospection, policy versus identity voting, leader-centric versus policy-centric voting, single-issue versus multiple-issue voting, short-term versus long-term orientations, and uninformed versus informed voters. We found that politicians look very different from the citizens they represent, with theories of elections and voting that are much more likely to be “democratic realist” in character. These differences are remarkably consistent across eleven countries with widely varying electoral systems, party systems, and political career patterns.

While we found that politicians are more likely than citizens to cluster into a “democratic realist” theoretical perspective, the results in figure 1 also demonstrate that politicians are quite variable in their theoretical beliefs. Future research should explore this variation in more detail, seeking to understand the ways in which politicians’ individual characteristics (their ideological positions, their personality types, socio-demographic backgrounds, leadership positions) and career experiences (the parties into which they were recruited, the length of their careers, their electoral history) relate to their theoretical beliefs about voters. Related work could explore how these theories develop throughout a politician’s career, along with the kinds of experiences (e.g. electoral victory, electoral defeat, prominent elections in other jurisdictions) that shape this development.

Future studies should also explore the implications of politicians’ theories for their behaviour as representatives. Evidence from past research, while limited, suggests that politicians’ theoretical beliefs *are* importantly related to how they think about public policy (Sheffer, Loewen and Lucas, 2023). This work could be extended to studies of politicians’ communication strategies, campaign tactics, policy prioritization, risk-taking

behaviour, or campaign spending. Much of this work could be observational, connecting politicians' survey responses to observed behaviour. However, implicit theories could be induced in experimental settings; researchers in other disciplines have found that implicit theories can be experimentally induced even in instances when individuals hold strong beliefs; these experimental approaches would be valuable for measuring the consequences of implicit theories for prediction and other behavioural tasks (Dweck, 2012).

We also see opportunities to deepen our understanding of *citizens'* implicit theories of elections and voting. Like politicians, understanding the sources of variation in citizens' responses would be valuable, as well as the stability of citizens' theoretical beliefs, especially in the context of desirable or undesirable election outcomes. Comparing “ego-centric” and “sociotropic” theories of voting among citizens – that is, how citizens' beliefs about voting behaviour change when thinking not about citizens in general, our focus here, but instead on their *own* behaviour as voters – would also provide valuable clues about how citizens perceive a more ideal voter (their self-perception) as opposed to a typical voter (their other-perception).

Above all, however, we see a pressing need for research that explores the consequences of the theoretical misalignment we have uncovered between politicians and citizens. Experimental studies could helpfully map the boundaries of these consequences by providing citizens with information about aligned and misaligned political representatives and then measuring the consequences of alignment or misalignment for voting preferences, democratic satisfaction, trust in government, and other important outcomes. Such studies would also help to clarify the theoretical beliefs about voters that citizens would *like* their politicians to hold. Observational studies could extend research on policy congruence to “theory congruence,” exploring district-level or party-level theoretical alignment between politicians and citizens and its consequences for substantive representation, campaign and communication strategies that are meaningful and informative to voters, and other important processes of elite-mass interaction.

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9 Supplementary Material

9.1 Representativity of the data

Note: Our team is currently finalizing details for these tables; this material will be filled in later.

9.2 Variance in Theoretical Beliefs: Additional Analysis

To assess within-country and across-country variance, we fit null multilevel models for each theory question – that is, multilevel models containing only varying country-level intercepts – and calculate Intraclass Correlation Coefficients for each item: $\frac{\sigma_j^2}{\sigma_j^2 + \sigma_i^2}$, where σ_j^2 is between-group variance and σ_i^2 is within-group variance.

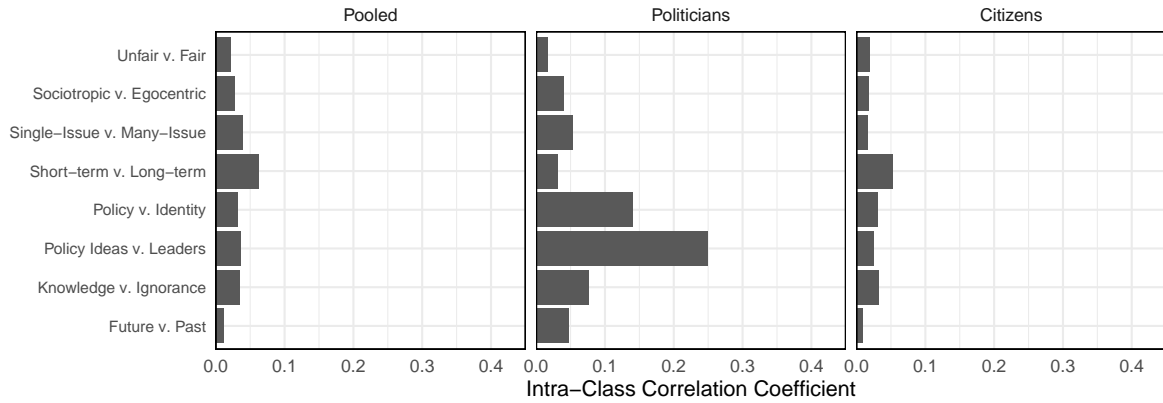


Figure 4: **Intra-Class Correlation Coefficients.**

Figure 4 summarises these analyses. ICC values are well below 0.1 in all but two cases: policy versus identity among politicians, and policy ideas versus leaders among politicians.

9.3 Citizen-Politician Differences: Full Models

Table 3 provides full results (plotted in figure 2 in main text). All models are OLS.

Table 3: Citizen-Politician Comparison: Pooled Data

	Unfair v. Fair	Policy v. Identity	Future v. Past	Sociotropic v. Egocentric	Single-Issue v. Many-Issue	Policy Ideas v. Leaders	Knowledge v. Ignorance	Short-term v. Long-term
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
Politician	-0.458*** (0.079)	0.045 (0.077)	0.821*** (0.079)	0.116 (0.076)	-1.508*** (0.083)	-1.545*** (0.082)	0.657*** (0.080)	-1.158*** (0.072)
Belgium	0.246*** (0.095)	0.471*** (0.093)	-0.490*** (0.097)	0.323*** (0.092)	-1.275*** (0.100)	-1.027*** (0.100)	0.882*** (0.098)	-0.433*** (0.088)
Canada	-0.027 (0.097)	0.156* (0.095)	-0.275*** (0.098)	0.065 (0.093)	-0.587*** (0.102)	-0.504*** (0.102)	0.308*** (0.100)	-0.449*** (0.089)
Czechia	-0.150 (0.098)	0.425*** (0.096)	-0.344*** (0.099)	-0.138 (0.095)	-1.543*** (0.103)	-0.940*** (0.103)	0.726*** (0.101)	-0.554*** (0.091)
Denmark	-0.420*** (0.098)	-0.633*** (0.095)	-0.704*** (0.099)	-0.550*** (0.094)	-0.927*** (0.103)	-0.544*** (0.102)	-0.130 (0.100)	-0.394*** (0.090)
Germany	-0.154 (0.096)	-0.447*** (0.094)	-0.581*** (0.097)	-0.042 (0.093)	-0.473*** (0.101)	-0.440*** (0.101)	0.346*** (0.099)	-0.225** (0.089)
Israel	0.093 (0.094)	0.014 (0.092)	0.185* (0.095)	0.964*** (0.090)	-1.746*** (0.099)	-1.100*** (0.098)	0.139 (0.096)	-1.037*** (0.086)
Netherlands	0.065 (0.101)	0.395*** (0.099)	-0.566*** (0.103)	0.375*** (0.097)	-1.240*** (0.107)	-0.924*** (0.106)	0.658*** (0.104)	-0.634*** (0.093)
Portugal	0.240** (0.098)	0.604*** (0.096)	-0.193* (0.099)	0.197** (0.094)	-1.443*** (0.103)	-0.666*** (0.103)	0.335*** (0.101)	-0.333*** (0.090)
Sweden	-0.450*** (0.097)	-0.395*** (0.095)	-0.961*** (0.099)	0.048 (0.094)	-0.290*** (0.102)	-0.513*** (0.102)	-0.123 (0.100)	-0.500*** (0.090)
Switzerland	-0.185* (0.097)	-0.267*** (0.095)	-1.232*** (0.098)	0.028 (0.093)	-1.008*** (0.102)	-0.886*** (0.102)	0.259*** (0.099)	-0.465*** (0.089)
Constant	5.472*** (0.071)	5.785*** (0.069)	5.765*** (0.072)	5.283*** (0.068)	5.822*** (0.074)	5.791*** (0.074)	5.593*** (0.072)	6.084*** (0.065)
Observations	12,985	13,000	12,992	12,992	12,996	12,995	12,984	13,001
Adjusted R ²	0.011	0.030	0.034	0.027	0.067	0.042	0.024	0.031

Note:

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

9.4 Latent Class Analysis: Additional Detail

As is standard in many Latent Class Analyses (Weller, Bowen and Faubert, 2020), our LCA began by recoding all theory questions into three theoretically salient basic types: a position on one side of the debate, a position in the exact centre of the debate, and a position on the other side of the debate. We then estimate latent classes using the poLCA package (Linzer and Lewis, 2011) in R (for “polytomous latent class analysis”) for latent class solutions ranging from two to twenty classes, estimating each model with five different starting values to obtain global rather than local optimum solutions (Linzer and Lewis, 2011) and recording fit statistics for each latent class solution.

Methodologists recommend using multiple fit statistics to make decisions about the latent class solution to selection (Weller, Bowen and Faubert, 2020). We visualize three fit statistics in figure 5. To select an appropriate number of classes, researchers typically look for visible “elbows” in the fit statistics – points at which the marginal increase in fit begins to level off. Figure 3 reveals a distinct elbow for the four-class solution in all three fit statistics.

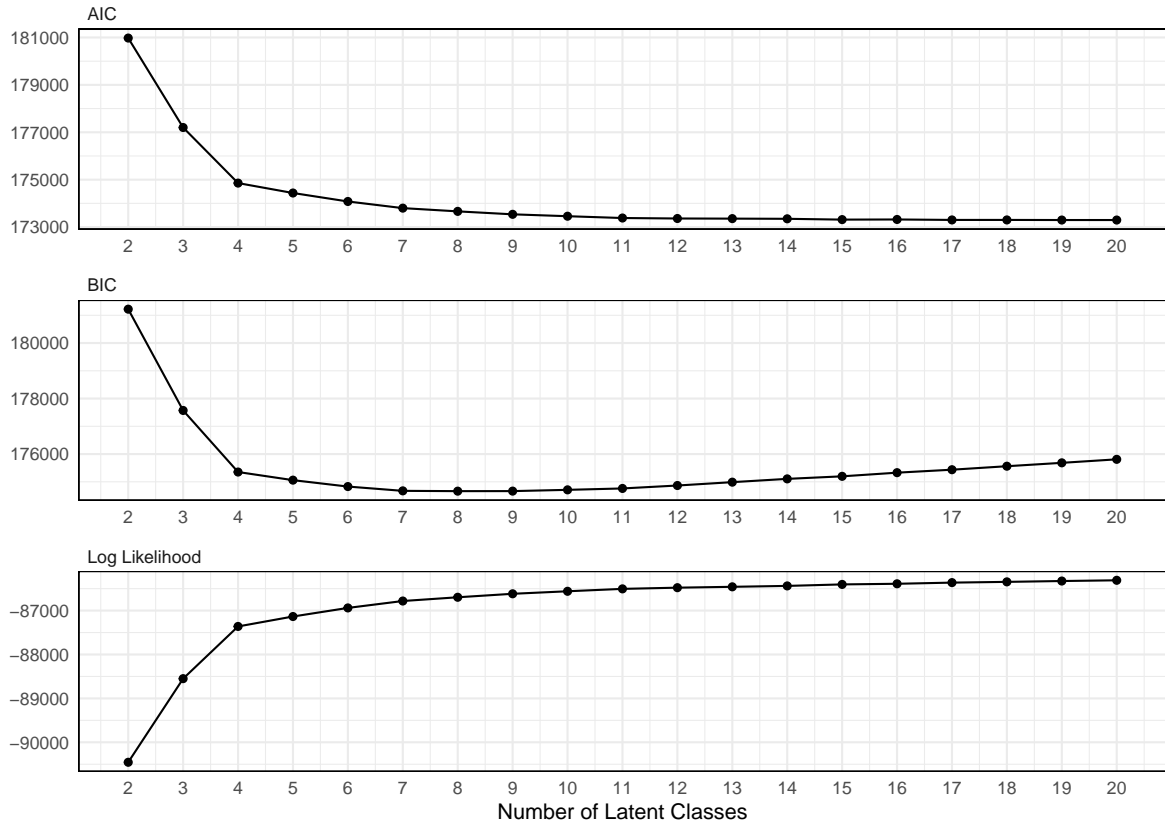


Figure 5: Latent Class Analysis Fit Statistics.

Some methodologists recommend using BIC as a criteria for selecting a class solution (Nylund, Asparouhov and Muthén, 2007). In our case, an eight-class solution minimizes BIC. Figure 6 visualizes this solution and demonstrates that, while necessarily more complex than the four-class solution, this alternative solution reinforces our interpretation in the main text. Notice that the most common class for politicians is class four, characterized by strong “democratic realist” views, and that politicians are much more likely than citizens to belong to this class. A strong “democratic optimism” class – class six – is fairly

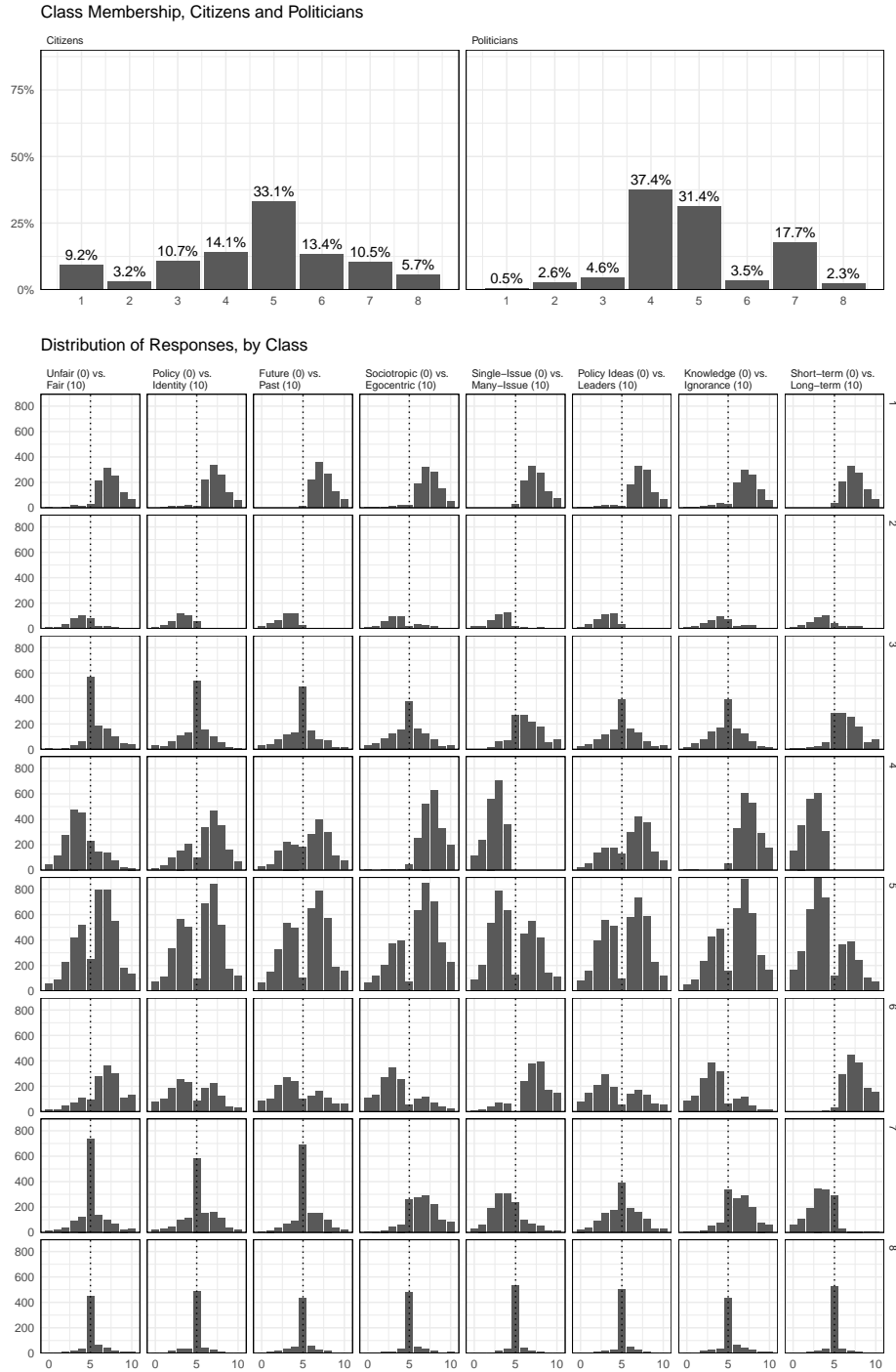


Figure 6: **Eight-Class LCA Solution.**

common among citizens (13.4%) but very uncommon among politicians (3.5%). Politicians and citizens are equally likely to belong to class five, a class with “realist” positions on most but not all issues, and politicians are more likely than citizens to belong to an “undecided weak realist” class (class 7). The remaining classes capture idiosyncratic responses (classes one and two) or undecided respondents (classes three and eight). Overall, then, these findings reinforce our interpretation while adding little additional theoretical substance, supporting the value of the four-class solution. Following recommendations in

the methodological literature, we rely on a combination of statistical fit and theoretical interpretability to select the four-class solution (Nylund, Asparouhov and Muthén, 2007).

Our main-text latent class analysis recodes each response into three simple types: one side, middle position, and the other side. This isolates the most theoretically important differences in our responses and makes the LCA solution as straightforward as possible to interpret. However, some may consider this too extreme: perhaps we want to distinguish between those who *strong* and *weak* positions on each theoretical debate. We believe that the three-category coding is most theoretically appropriate, because we are interested in understanding latent clustering for respondents’ *beliefs* on each theory item, rather than clustering based on the strength of those beliefs. Nevertheless, to test the robustness of our findings, we carried out four-class LCA using an alternative coding that distinguishes the strength of each respondent’s response.¹⁰ We report the results of this analysis in figure 7.



Figure 7: Summary of LCA with Recoded Theory Items.

Given the additional information contained in this second LCA model, we would not expect the results to be identical. Broadly speaking, however, the results reinforce our findings in the main text. Class one captures what we might call “weak realist” positions and class two captures “strong realist” positions; politicians are more likely than citizens

¹⁰The coding was 0:2 = strong view on one side, 3:4 = weak view on one side, 5 = middle position, 6:7 = weak view on the other side, and 8:10 = strong view on the other side.

to belong to both of these classes, and especially to the “strong realist” class. Class three are “democratic optimists”, with citizens much more likely than politicians to belong to this class. Class four are “undecideds” with a small minority of both citizens and politicians falling into this class. In general, then, we find that our interpretation of the differences between politicians and citizens are robust to this alternative (and in our view less theoretically defensible) coding of our variables.

An even more extreme alternative to this recoding procedure could be to preserve the entire distribution of responses in the recoded data. We believe this approach is clearly inferior to our preferred approach on theoretical grounds, because it places much more weight on the extremity of the positions that respondents adopt rather than their actual *positions* on one side or the other of the debate. Even more importantly, this approach fails to distinguish theoretically important differences (such as the difference between choosing four and five on the scale) from less theoretically important differences (such as the difference between choosing three and four on the scale).

Nevertheless, it may be valuable to demonstrate that our results are broadly consistent even when we employ this less theoretically satisfactory clustering method. We fit a hierarchical cluster analysis (complete linkage) on our eight items and extract four classes from the resulting model. We visualize the results of this HCA approach in figure 8.

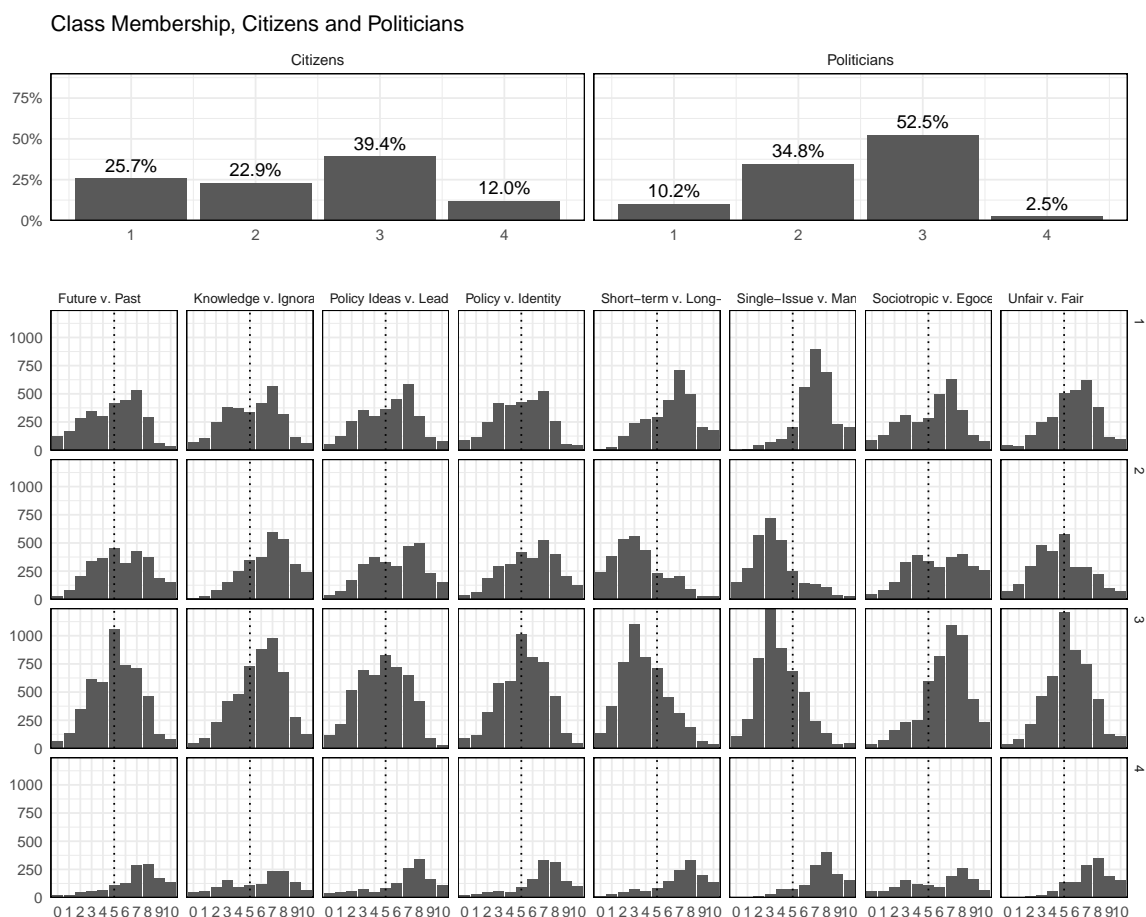


Figure 8: **Alternative Model: Hierarchical Class Analysis.**

Cluster one captures weakly folk-theoretic views (with the exception of knowledge vs. ignorance and policy ideas vs. leaders); citizens are much more likely than politicians

to belong to this cluster. Cluster two captures broadly “democratic realist” positions, and politicians are more likely than citizens to belong to this cluster. Cluster three is more modestly “democratic realist” positions; here, too, politicians are more common than citizens in this cluster. Cluster four captures respondents who tended to choose positive values for all items; as we note in the main text, these “inattentive” theorists are somewhat common among citizens and extremely uncommon among politicians. Thus the hierarchical cluster analysis recovers similar findings to the latent class analysis that we employ in the main text. We note, however, the important absence here of a theoretically important group: those who tend to select the middle value (the “undecided” group) across many questions.

9.5 Citizen-Politician Types: Additional Analysis

To confirm the visual differences in main text figure 3 between politicians and citizens, we fit multinomial logit models in which class belonging is predicted by a politician vs. citizen indicator along with country fixed effects. Because the most theoretically important difference is between democratic optimists and democratic realists, we set democratic optimism as the base category in this analysis. Our results, reported in Table 4, confirm that the differences are statistically significant.

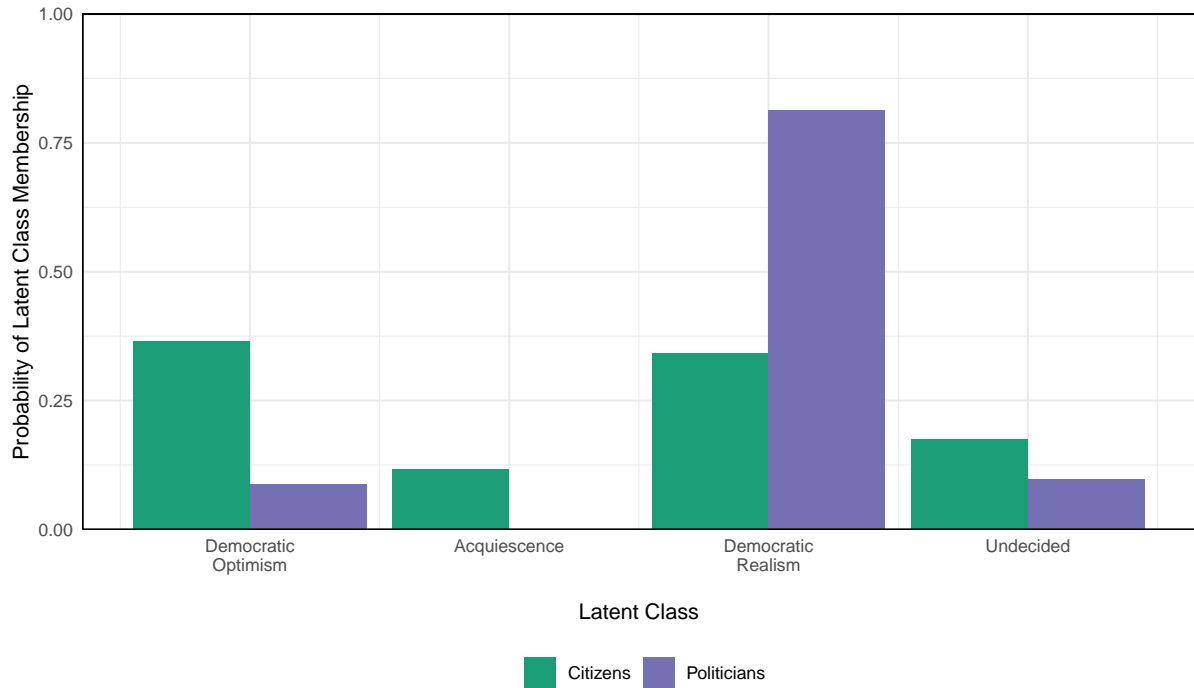


Figure 9: **Predicted Probabilities of Latent Class Membership, LCR Model.**

However, methodologists have demonstrated that this multi-step procedure produces biased estimates (Linzer and Lewis, 2011). We therefore fit a four-class Latent Class Regression model with the respondent type (Politician vs. Citizen) as a model covariate. Results confirm that politicians are significantly less likely than citizens to belong to the “democratic optimism” class ($p < 0.01$). We plot the predicted probabilities of latent class membership drawn from this model in figure 9, confirming substantial differences between citizens and politicians.

Table 4: Citizen-Politician Comparison (Base = Folk Theorist)

	Democratic Realist	Acquiescence	Undecided
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Politician	0.316*** (0.080)	-2.257*** (0.190)	-0.661*** (0.120)
Belgium	0.300** (0.134)	-0.371*** (0.108)	0.083 (0.137)
Canada	0.825*** (0.129)	-0.552*** (0.114)	0.135 (0.139)
Czechia	-0.230 (0.144)	-0.663*** (0.109)	0.241* (0.131)
Denmark	0.609*** (0.124)	-0.826*** (0.111)	-0.272* (0.139)
Germany	-0.039 (0.136)	-0.426*** (0.105)	-0.142 (0.137)
Israel	0.757*** (0.124)	-0.690*** (0.107)	-0.211 (0.137)
Netherlands	0.422*** (0.134)	-0.880*** (0.118)	-0.118 (0.142)
Portugal	0.468*** (0.130)	-0.619*** (0.109)	-0.291** (0.143)
Sweden	0.004 (0.139)	-0.441*** (0.107)	0.214 (0.132)
Switzerland	0.002 (0.134)	-1.001*** (0.114)	0.066 (0.131)
Constant	-1.115*** (0.104)	0.039 (0.075)	-0.991*** (0.102)
Akaike Inf. Crit.	30,869.720	30,869.720	30,869.720

Note:

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01