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Public officials' motivated reasoning and their interpretation of policy information

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ABSTRACT

Evidence based policy making is premised on the idea that policymakers use policy information in an accurate and unbiased way. However, the interpretation and application of policy information is a cognitive process open to misinterpretation and bias, especially in politically salient policy environments. In this generalization and extension replication, we conduct two randomized survey experiments to test the effects of motivated reasoning and political salience on public officials' ability to accurately interpret policy information. The results indicate limited support for motivated reasoning, and we find no evidence suggesting that political salience affects officials' accurate and unbiased interpretation of policy information.

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KEYWORDS Policy information; motivated reasoning; political salience; evidence based policy making; public officials; cognitive bias

Introduction

Governments and public organizations face pressure to use the best available information when making decisions about policies and programmes (Capano and Malandrino 2022; Head 2016; Jennings and Hall 2012). Evidence based policy making is based on the premise that the most adequate and accurate pieces of information are prioritized in decision making, and that policy effectiveness can be improved through the systematic incorporation of high-quality policy information (Bundi and Pattyn 2022; Hall and Jennings 2008; Hall and Van Ryzin 2019; Head 2016; Jennings and Hall 2012). However, the use of policy information is a cognitive process open to personal preferences, biases, and directional interpretations that can determine which pieces of evidence are used or ignored (Capano and Malandrino 2022).

Public officials, unelected bureaucrats employed in public organizations, play an important role in this selection and interpretation process. They monitor, assess, and control information, they help define policy problems, provide advice on

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specific policy issues, formulate policy proposals, and assess effectiveness and feasibility (Blom-Hansen, Baekgaard, and Serritzlew 2021; Meier and O'Toole 2006). Studies diverge on why public officials use policy information and on how they interpret, translate, and transfer this information into the policy process. Generally speaking, we can identify three approaches. Some studies apply a rationalist approach and examine the use and misuse of information from a resources perspective. These studies focus on the material resources of public organizations and the analytical capacities of public officials such as policy capacity and research skills (Howlett 2009; Newman, Cherney, and Head 2017; Pattyn and Brans 2015; Wu, Ramesh, and Howlett 2018), budgetary constraints (Cairney 2016; Oliver et al. 2014), and opportunities to apply the best available policy information (Bogenschneider and Corbett 2010; Sanderson 2002; Wallace, Nwosu, and Clarke 2012; Wu, Ramesh, and Howlett 2018). Other studies use a subjectivist approach and examine obstacles for evidence based policy making such as contested problem definitions (Capano and Malandrino 2022; Maddison 2012; Schlaufer, Stucki, and Sager 2018), cultural and linguistic differences between scientific and policy communities (Caplan 1979; Wehrens 2014), or political and ideological polarization (Cairney 2016; Juntti, Russel, and Turnpenny 2009; Parkhurst 2017; Perl, Howlett, and Ramesh 2018).

More recently, scholars apply a behavioural perspective to understand public officials' use of policy information. A recent research synthesis on information use in public administration and policy decision making found that 49 out of 162 studies adopted a behavioural public administration lens (Cantarelli, Belle, and Hall 2023). According to this behavioural perspective, public officials' interpretation and application of policy information are affected by bounded rationality, cognitive biases, and noise (Battaglio et al. 2019; Bellé, Cantarelli, and Belardinelli 2018; Belle, Cantarelli, and Wang 2024; Cairney 2016; James et al. 2020; Liu, Qin, and Zhang 2022). More specifically, studies using this behavioural approach argue that policy makers tend to pick and choose the policy information that substantiates their prior attitudes and beliefs through a process of motivated reasoning (Baekgaard and Serritzlew 2016; Baekgaard et al. 2019; Kunda 1990).

While the behavioural perspective is gaining traction in public administration research, we hardly know whether, when, and under which conditions motivated reasoning affects public officials' interpretation and application of policy information (Nelson, Lindsay, and Bozeman 2023). From a Weberian perspective, public officials can be considered professional information users who are experienced and skilled in the factual interpretation and use of policy information. Moreover, as part of their professional identity, public officials are expected to hold higher standards of fact and neutrality compared to politicians and ordinary citizens (Blom-Hansen, Baekgaard, and Serritzlew 2021; Christensen and Moynihan 2020; De Graaf 2011). However, the question of whether public officials are driven by accuracy goals and pursue objectively true information, or whether they are directionally driven by personal preferences, remains a subject of debate. Likewise, the impact of issue salience, a key attribute of the political context in which policy information is provided, on the process of motivated reasoning is not well-understood. These questions are central to the evidence based policy making movement, which is built on the assumption that public officials can accurately interpret and use policy information in the face of ideologically adverse or epistemically undesirable information (Capano and Malandrino 2022; Head 2016).

In this study, we conduct a generalization and extension replication (Tsang and Kwan 1999; Walker, James, and Brewer 2017) of Baekgaard and Serritzlew (2016) and Baekgaard et al. (2019). We test the effect of public officials' prior attitudes and beliefs on their assessment of factual policy information and examine whether increasing the political salience of policy information increases officials' accuracy goals and reduces the adverse effect of motivated reasoning on the interpretation of policy information. As such, we provide experimental evidence of public officials' use of policy information as a foundational premise for evidence based policy making. We formulate the following research question:

> What is the effect of public officials' prior beliefs on their interpretation of policy information and how does political salience affect this relation?

We examine this question using an online survey experiment. Survey experiments allow for a more valid examination of the effects of motivated reasoning while limiting the influence of social desirability bias by randomizing treatments instead of cross-sectionally measuring attitudes on evidence based policy making (Jilke and Van Ryzin 2017; Sniderman 2018). We use a validated experimental design based on Baekgaard and Serritzlew (2016) and Baekgaard et al. (2019) that allows us to compare public officials' ability to correctly interpret policy information between a treatment and a placebo group, in combination with a cross-sectional pre-treatment measure of public officials' prior beliefs. First, respondents are randomized across an experimental treatment (2×2) designed to measure their ability to identify the organization (public vs. private) providing the best performing policy arrangement. Second, respondents are rerandomized across an experimental treatment (2×3) designed to measure their ability to identify the organization providing the best performing policy arrangement while manipulating cues about the political salience of policy information.

The sampling population consists of all public officials with policy responsibilities employed by the Flemish government ($N = 1556$) in Belgium, with varying responsibilities ranging from team manager to policy expert, and situated in various policy fields, such as: education, budget, environment, health, work and mobility. Prior comparative research indicated that Flemish public officials are well-versed in evidence based policy making (Blom-Hansen, Baekgaard, and Serritzlew 2021). Given the strong emphasis of the Flemish government on evidence-based policy making, we anticipate that Flemish public officials are encouraged to prioritize accuracy goals (Aubin, Brans, and Fobé 2017; Maertens, Hondeghem, and Fobé 2021). We demonstrate that public officials are indeed well able to correctly interpret information. However, despite being professional information users, functionally equipped and technically skilled for the job, they are not immune to bias and motivated reasoning. At the same time, political salience does not appear to affect the unbiased interpretation of information.

In the next section, we discuss available motivated reasoning research in a public administration context on citizens, politicians, and public officials, and its implications for the use of policy information. This leads us to formulate two hypotheses that help us answer the research question. In section two, we present our research method in more detail. Finally, we present our findings, assess the hypotheses, and answer the research question is sections three and four.

Theory

Information is at the heart of modern politico-administrative systems (Baumgartner and Jones 2015; Blom-Hansen, Baekgaard, and Serritzlew 2016; Cantarelli, Belle, and Hall 2023). Policy makers, both politicians and public officials, operate in information-rich environments that help them spot, understand and tackle policy problems (Baekgaard, Blom-Hansen, and Serritzlew 2015). Whether information use helps improve the effectiveness and efficiency of policies depends in part on public officials' ability to accurately interpret and apply relevant policy information (Capano and Malandrino 2022; Christensen 2021; French 2019; Hall and Van Ryzin 2019; Nowlin 2021). However, even when public officials are functionally equipped and technically skilled to interpret policy information accurately, information use can still be hampered by their cognitive boundaries and biases. Simultaneously, they may discount undesirable information, potentially undermining the constructive utilization of information in the policy making process (Campbell 2002; Christensen and Moynihan 2020; Kahneman and Tversky 1979).

Decision making and motivated reasoning

The concept of motivated reasoning was first developed in the fields of psychology and economics as a way to understand how people acquire, process and respond to new information (Bolsen and Palm 2019). Motivated reasoning theory states that human reasoning is directional and motivated by either accuracy goals or directional goals (Druckman 2012; Kunda 1990; Taber and Lodge 2006). Accuracy goals motivate individuals to reach objectively true conclusions, regardless of the content or consequences of those conclusions. Public officials driven by accuracy goals tend to consider all relevant policy information and make an informed and impartial decision. Directional goals motivate individuals to reach specific and predetermined conclusions. Public officials driven by directional goals often employ interpretative strategies that may lead to confirmation bias (Battaglio et al. 2019; Belle, Cantarelli, and Wang 2024). New information will then be interpreted in a way that substantiates, upholds or confirms their prior attitudes and beliefs (Bolsen and Palm 2019). As such, motivated reasoning theory posits a tension between the desire to achieve objectively accurate and personally desirable conclusions (Baekgaard and Serritzlew 2016; Baekgaard et al. 2019). This in turn can lead to biased, subjective and suboptimal interpretation of information (James et al. 2020; Kahneman and Tversky 1979; Strassheim 2019).

However, the mechanisms underlying motivated reasoning are not fully understood. Some authors focus on the internal cognitive processes of the information interpreter (Bago, Rand, and Pennycook 2020; Kahan et al. 2017; Strömbäck et al. 2021; Tappin, Pennycook, and Rand 2020), while others call for more attention to the structural and organizational features of the information environment and architecture (Baekgaard et al. 2019; Cantarelli, Belle, and Hall 2023). For example, Baekgaard et al. (2019) argue that the political and administrative system in which information is gathered, analysed and used provides incentives for motivated reasoning, which stems from the political and ideological preferences of politicians, supervisors and public officials. Political salience, time pressure, and limited and contested resources might motivate public officials to rely more on prior attitudes and mental shortcuts (system 1 thinking) when interpreting information (Kahneman 2011). These characteristics help

explain why additional information or increased focus on information can increase the effects of prior attitudes on the interpretation of policy information among politicians instead of reducing it (Baekgaard et al. 2019; Christensen and Moynihan 2020).

While motivated reasoning research is gaining ground in the field of public administration, existing research primarily focuses on citizens and politicians (Aarøe et al. 2021; James and Van Ryzin 2017b; S. Jilke 2018; Petersen, Laumann, and Jakobsen 2019). Baekgaard and Serritzlew (2016) corroborated findings from earlier political science (Bolsen, Druckman, and Cook 2014; Leeper and Slothuus 2014; Redlawsk 2002) and psychology research (Hahn and Harris 2014; Kunda 1990) to demonstrate that citizens' prior attitudes and beliefs can systematically bias their interpretation of policy information. In the context of healthcare and education, prior preferences for service delivery by public organizations led Danish citizens to systematically assess their preferred organization (public or private) as performing better, regardless of what the actual performance information indicated. With their experiment Baekgaard and Serritzlew (2016) laid the groundwork for subsequent public administration research on the influence of sector preferences on citizens' interpretation of performance information.

Similarly, Van Den Bekerom, Van Der Voet, and Christensen (2021) examined the interaction between politically motivated reasoning and cognitive bias in citizens' performance appraisals and found that citizens with private service delivery preferences attach greater weight to negative performance information when assessing public organizations than when assessing private sector organizations. Similar patterns of politically or ideologically motivated reasoning exist when citizens interpret factual information on government agencies' policies and performance (James and Van Ryzin 2017a, 2017b), service satisfaction under changing political leadership (S. Jilke 2018), and economic conditions (Bisgaard 2015). Baekgaard et al. (2020) extended the original study by Baekgaard and Serritzlew (2016) with Danish and US citizens, and found that prior beliefs matter for how new policy information is processed and understood. Furthermore, Brogaard, Madsen, and Petersen (2023) found that Danish citizens, driven by their public sector preferences, overestimate the performance of public services providers in comparison with both non-profit and for-profit private counterparts. They further demonstrated that different types of service areas, i.e. nursing homes and refuse collection, are evaluated differently. Overall, within different national and policy contexts, politically motivated reasoning emerges as an explanation for citizens' tendency to overemphasize information that is congruent with their prior attitudes and beliefs.

Motivated reasoning is not limited to citizens (Baekgaard et al. 2019; Christensen and Moynihan 2020; Christensen et al. 2018; Lerusse and Walle 2022). Baekgaard et al. (2019) argue that politicians possess higher levels of political knowledge and hold stronger political beliefs than ordinary citizens, and can therefore be expected to be more susceptible to directional motivated reasoning. Interestingly, efforts to increase accuracy goals among politicians can backfire and lead to even stronger partisan motivated and directional reasoning (Baekgaard et al. 2019; Christensen and Moynihan 2020). For example, Christensen and Moynihan (2020) examine whether politicians' motivated reasoning decreases when asked to justify their interpretation of performance information. Contrary to their expectations, the use of a justification mechanism amplified politicians' motivated reasoning behaviour. They suggested that as professional partisans, justification mechanisms enable politicians to construct

arguments in favour of their pre-existing partisan beliefs, rather than motivating them to adopt a more balanced and nuanced view. These studies demonstrate that when it comes to motivated reasoning, politicians constitute a specific type of information interpreters and that the political environment is particularly salient to politicians' interpretation of information.

In contrast, evidence on partisan motivated reasoning among public officials is scarce (but see: Lerusse and Van de Walle 2022). Unlike ordinary citizens and politicians, public officials can be considered professional information users who are more experienced and skilled in the factual interpretation and use of information. Furthermore, they are expected to hold higher standards of fact and neutrality when dealing with information (Baekgaard et al. 2019; Blom-Hansen, Baekgaard, and Serritzlew 2021; Christensen and Moynihan 2020; De Graaf 2011). Interestingly, when comparing the use of motivated reasoning in preferences for local versus non-local service providers between local politicians and public officials, Lerusse and Van de Walle (2022) found no substantial difference in directional motivated reasoning, indicating that public officials are equally vulnerable to biased interpretation of information as politicians. However, Kahan et al. (2016) demonstrated that the professional judgement of lawyers and judges is less vulnerable to bias through motivated reasoning. They found that neither judges nor lawyers displayed statistically significant signs that their decisions were impacted by their political preferences. As such, legal training and experience can safeguard against motivated reasoning. Finally, Petersen, Laumann, and Jakobsen (2019) found that public high school teachers as frontline public officials, use motivated reasoning to process performance information. Overall, these studies lead us to expect that public officials, similar to both politicians and citizens, engage in motivated reasoning when interpreting new policy information. In order to test this expectation, we formulate the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1: The more new policy information presented to public officials is at odds with their prior beliefs, the more they tend to misinterpret this information.

Political salience and motivated reasoning

The political context in which policy officials operate can affect how policy information is used. While political salience is a key feature of this context, it is uncertain whether it serves as a catalyst of or as a guardrail against motivated reasoning in interpreting and applying information (Baekgaard et al. 2019; Bundi and Trein 2022; Capano and Malandrino 2022). Though political salience is a widely-used concept in political science and public administration, it lacks a clear definition (Dennison 2019; Epstein and Segal 2000; Wlezien 2005). Salience usually refers to the importance of an issue (Carelli and Pierre 2024). In general, a specific policy issue is deemed more salient if it is perceived to be more important depending on the 'weight individuals attach to political information' (Wlezien 2005, 557). Issues that are politically salient tend to garner more media coverage and attention from decision-makers (Baekgaard, Blom-Hansen, and Serritzlew 2015), rank higher on the political agenda, and consume more administrative time, energy and resources (Bundi and Trein 2022).

Previous studies demonstrated that the political salience of issues can lead citizens to form stronger opinions about these issues, which may lead to a more partisan-

biased, emotionally driven and error prone interpretation and application of policy information (James and Van Ryzin 2017b). Baekgaard et al. (2020) treated the salience of policy information to examine whether priming Danish and US citizens to think politically or to think about their need for a service would affect their motivated reasoning. Among US Democrats, evidence of partisan-motivated reasoning was found in both the neutral (no priming) and political priming conditions. However, in the experiment with Danish citizens on (public versus private) governance preferences, no such effects were discovered. Baekgaard, Herd, and Moynihan (2022) called for further research into the mechanisms underlying these processes.

Studies on public officials' use of evidence in the context of political and administrative time constraints and pressure, indicated that political salience can bias the interpretation and application of policy information (Allison and Zelikow 1999; Belle, Cantarelli, and Wang 2024; Braun and Gilardi 2006; Roberts and Wernstedt 2019). At the same time, Bundi and Trein (2022) found that political salience alone does not explain motivated reasoning in interpreting and applying policy information. They found that when policy information is both politically salient and technically complex, politicians incline towards accuracy goals when interpreting and applying policy information. Politicians are electorally incentivized to prioritize accuracy as a signal of competence to voters, even when the actual use of policy information is directional. This approach also allows for blame avoidance when policies lead to unintended negative outcomes. They revealed that in a multiparty and consensus-seeking setting, politicians 'prioritize problems over politics' (p. 299) when it comes to the use of policy information (Bundi and Trein 2022). Based on Kahan et al. (2016) examination of lawyers and judges, we can expect that public officials are also less vulnerable to motivated reasoning due to their professional training and experience. The perceived increased importance of policy information due to salience could motivate public officials to 'prioritize problems over politics' and interpret information with a focus on accuracy (Bundi and Trein 2022). Therefore, we expect that political salience reduces public officials use of motivated reasoning. To test this expectation, we formulate the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2: The higher the political salience of new policy information presented to public officials, the less likely their prior beliefs are to lead them to misinterpret this information.

Method

In this study, we conduct a generalization and extension replication (Tsang and Kwan 1999; Walker, James, and Brewer 2017) of Baekgaard and Serritzlew (2016) and Baekgaard et al. (2019) to test the effect of public officials' preferences and prior beliefs on their interpretation of policy information, and the moderating effect of the salience of the policy at hand. The main contributions of this generalization and extension replication can be articulated using the RNICE model by Pedersen and Stritch (2018). According to this model, the contributions of this replication consist of its 'Relevance', as the ability of public servants to accurately interpret performance information affects the success of evidence informed policy making, and its 'External validity', as it helps

establish the boundary conditions of motivated reasoning theory in a public sector context by examining public officials from the Flemish regional government.

We conduct two randomized survey experiments. Survey experiments 'involve [the] randomization of question wording, text, images or other information in a survey instrument that is administered to a sample, often representing a larger population' (Jilke and Van Ryzin 2017, 118). They allow for the fielding of randomized treatments to a large and diverse group of respondents, thereby optimizing the internal and external validity of inferences (Gaines, Kuklinski, and Quirk 2007; Hainmueller, Hangartner, and Yamamoto 2015). Furthermore, the relation between prior beliefs and policy information interpretation is difficult to assess using observational data, and may be correlated with public officials' cognitive skills and abilities (James, Jilke, and Van Ryzin 2017; Podsakoff and Podsakoff 2019). Finally, survey experiments are particularly suitable to determine the effects of beliefs and prior attitudes in politically sensitive contexts as they limit the risks of social desirability bias by randomizing the variables of interest across standardized cases (Aguinis and Bradley 2014; James, Jilke, and Van Ryzin 2017; Sniderman 2018). In experiment 1 we test whether public officials' preferences and prior beliefs bias their interpretation of policy information. In experiment 2 we test whether political salience affects public officials' interpretation of policy information.

Design experiment 1

For the design of experiment 1, we build on experimental research initiated by Kahan et al. (2017) and Baekgaard and Serritzlew (2016). Central to this design is the fact that individuals' preferences and prior beliefs cannot be induced through random assignment to treatment and control. To overcome this limitation, this design makes use of treatment and placebo groups, combined with a prior cross-sectional measure of individuals preferences and prior beliefs. By comparing how individuals' prior attitudes influence the interpretation of policy information between the treatment and placebo group, we can distinguish the true effect of prior attitudes on the interpretation of policy information from spurious effects and determine whether reasoning is directionally motivated (Baekgaard and Serritzlew 2016; Baekgaard et al. 2019).

In order to test whether motivated reasoning affects the way public officials interpret policy information, we require policy information where public officials have clear but diverging opinions about, that can trigger a value-related response, and that is sufficiently cognitively demanding. Building on prior research (Baekgaard and Serritzlew 2016; Christensen and Moynihan 2020) and after consultation with practitioners, we concluded that governance preferences, and more in particular the role private service providers play in public service delivery, is a suitable topic. It is high on the administrative agenda and is indeed something public officials have diverging opinions about. To make the interpretation of policy information sufficiently cognitively demanding to illicit thoughtful consideration, we use numeric policy information in which absolute outcomes need to be translated into relative outcomes in order to be meaningfully comparable (Baekgaard and Serritzlew 2016; Roberts and Wernstedt 2019).

To operationalize whether governance preferences determine whether public officials' prior attitudes affect their interpretation of policy information, we presented

respondents with a short vignette in which they are asked to write a policy advice about which one of two hypothetical policy arrangements (one executed by a public service provider and one by a private service provider) should be contracted to provide the service on a region-wide scale.

More in particular, the experimental task for participants consists of identifying which of two policy arrangements performs best in terms of user-satisfaction. The organization that provides the best performing policy arrangement is randomized (either the public or the private service provider) and mirrored in the placebo groups (either organization A or organization B). Because no sector cue was provided in the placebo group, we ensure that respondents' governance preferences cannot influence the interpretation of policy information in these vignettes. As such, the only difference between the treatment vignettes was the organization that performed best (either the public or the private, or A or B). The relative performance of the policy arrangements of the different providers is given in number of satisfied versus unsatisfied users, which was 83% for the organization providing the best performing policy arrangement and 75% for the organization providing the worst performing policy arrangement. This way, there was always one organization providing an objectively best performing policy arrangement. Furthermore, to ensure that our findings are not limited to one policy field, we further randomized respondents across two public services: road maintenance and elderly care. Both services fall within the competencies of the Flemish government and can be provided by either

Imagine the following situation. You have been asked by your manager to give advice on the evaluation of a new maintenance program for regional roads. Over the past twelve months, an experiment has taken place in which two different organizations have maintained a stretch of road. These organizations have both developed their own maintenance plan.

To decide which plan is to be implemented in the region, you are asked to select the best performing maintenance program based on road-user satisfaction. Information on road-user satisfaction with the two road maintenance plans can be found in the table below:

Vignette 1	Satisfied road users	Unsatisfied road users
Road maintenance plan private contractor	83	17
Road maintenance plan Roads and Traffic Agency	127	43

Vignette 2	Satisfied road users	Unsatisfied road users
Road maintenance plan private contractor	127	43
Road maintenance plan Roads and Traffic Agency	83	17

Vignette 3	Satisfied road users	Unsatisfied road users
Road maintenance plan organization A	83	17
Road maintenance plan organization B	127	43

Vignette 4	Satisfied road users	Unsatisfied road users
Road maintenance plan organization A	127	43
Road maintenance plan organization B	83	17

Based on this information, which of the two maintenance programs performs best?

- o Road maintenance plan private contractor / organization A
- o Road maintenance plan Roads and Traffic Agency / organization B

Figure 1. Example vignette experiment 1 (road maintenance case).

public or private sector providers. The experimental treatment was identical, producing a total of 8 vignettes. Each respondent was invited to assess one vignette (between-respondents design, $2(2 \times 2)$ assignment probability). An example of the (translated) vignettes is included in Figure 1.

Participants' governance preferences were measured as the equally weighted index of three items initially proposed by Baekgaard and Serritzlew (2016). These items are: (i) *Many public activities could be produced both better and cheaper by private providers*, (ii) *We should to a larger degree contract-out public service provision*, and (iii) *The public sector is best at providing public services*. Responses ranged from 1 *completely disagree* to 7 *completely agree*. We recoded the responses from the first two items so that the index variable indicated pro-public sector attitudes among respondents. The internal consistency of the items is strong (α =,767; $n = 3$). Furthermore, we assessed the quality of random assignment using balance tests on six covariates: participants' age, political preference, attachment to evidence based policymaking, gender, level of education, and policy domain.

Participants' age is measured based on their date of birth. Political preference is measured using the question *In politics people sometimes talk of the 'left' and 'right'. Where would you place yourself on this scale, where 1 means left and 7 means right?* (European Social Survey 2020). Attachment to evidence based policy making is measured using the question: *For most things in my work, I always use the best possible information, data and knowledge*. Gender is measured based on participants self-identification (1 = female, 2 = male, 3 = non-binary, 4 = prefer not to say). Educational attainment is measured using six ordinal categories ranging from 1 *no formal education* to 6 *at least a university degree (MA) including Ph.D*. Finally, public officials' policy domain includes the 10 functional domains of the Flemish government.[1]

The data was analysed using a logistic regression analysis in the software environment R (R Core Team 2020). The treatment and placebo groups allowed us to determine whether public officials interpret the information differently due to (the presence of) a public versus a private sector cue. To determine whether differences in interpretation are conditional on participants prior attitudes, we interact their governance preferences with the treatment dummy. If prior attitudes affected respondents' correct interpretation of the policy information, then respondents' governance preferences should influence the effect of treatment on respondents' ability to correctly identify the organization providing the best performing policy arrangement.

Design experiment 2

In experiment 2, we test whether political salience reduces public officials' motivated reasoning when interpreting policy information. The design of this experiment is similar to experiment 1 but differs in two important aspects. First, because we are no longer interested in testing the strength of motivated reasoning, we omit the placebo vignettes. Second, because we assess whether political salience affects the interpretation of policy information, we create variation in the level of political salience of the policy information under consideration. Experiment 2 was designed as a between-subjects 2×3 full factorial vignette experiment, in which the organization providing the best performing policy plan (private or public) and the level of political salience (low, medium, or high) were treated.

Similar to experiment 1, respondents were presented with a short vignette in which they were asked to write a policy advice about whether the public or private sector provider provided the best performing policy arrangement and should be contracted to provide the service for the entire region. Again, the experimental task consists of identifying which of the two organizations provides the best performing policy arrangement in terms of user-satisfaction. This time the case involved a hypothetical policy pilot in which a private and a public organization compete for a tender in building affordable and high-quality student housing.

In operationalizing political salience, we posit that higher levels of political salience introduce additional pressure, leading public officials to prioritize problem analysis over succumbing to political bias, thus prioritizing accuracy over directional goals (Bundi and Trein 2022). Political salience was treated at three levels. In the low political salience condition, respondents were told that there was limited political interest for the policy advice, and that the advice needed to be completed in the next 10 days. In the medium political salience condition, respondents were told that there was political interest for their policy advice and that the advice needed to be completed in 10 days. In the high political salience condition, respondents were told that there was strong political interest in the policy advice and that the advice needed to be completed in 10 days. An example of the experiment 2 vignettes is displayed in the APPENDIX.

Again, the data were analysed using a logistic regression analysis in the statistical software environment R (R Core Team 2020). We estimated the likelihood of public officials identifying the organization providing the best performing policy arrangement as the product of their governance preferences, the level of political salience (dummies with low political salience as reference category), and the interaction between respondents' governance preference and level of political salience.

Experiment flow

The experiment was conducted in four phases. First, respondents were invited to participate in the experiment, provided their informed consent, and answered survey questions about their governance preferences. Second, respondents were invited to participate in experiment 1 and were randomized across one of the eight treatment and placebo vignettes. Third, respondents were invited to participate in experiment 2 and were rerandomized across one of the six vignettes. Experiments 1 and 2 were designed and fielded orthogonally. Assignment to treatment in experiment 2 was independent of assignment to treatment or placebo in experiment 1. Fourth, respondents were asked to provide demographic and professional information aimed at assessing the success of randomization before they concluded their participation in the experiment. The flow of the experiment is presented graphically in Figure 2.

Sampling strategy

Participants were recruited among all public officials with policy responsibilities employed at the Flemish government. The Flemish government has a classic Napoleonic administrative tradition (Kuhlmann and Wollmann 2019; Pollitt and Bouckaert 2017) and can be perceived as a consensus-style knowledge regime with neo-corporatist traits (Pattyn et al. 2022; Strassheim and Kettunen 2014). The Flemish government has wide-ranging policy competences, including education, environment,

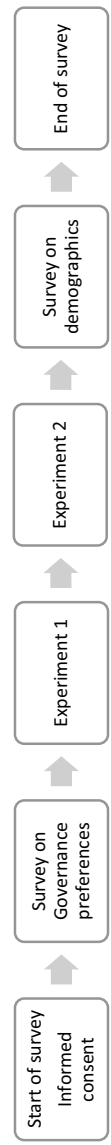


Figure 2. Flow of the survey experiment.

welfare and public health, work and income, and agriculture. The Flemish government is responsible for roughly 6.7 million inhabitants and is relatively politicized due to subsequent devolution reforms during the previous decades (Blom-Hansen, Baekgaard, and Serritzlew 2021). This politicization is reflected in well-equipped ministerial cabinets staffed with personal advisors (Brans & Aubin, 2017).

Nevertheless, as mentioned above, the Flemish government has a relatively strong orientation towards evidence based policy making (Aubin, Brans, and Fobé 2017; Blom-Hansen, Baekgaard, and Serritzlew 2021; Maertens, Hondeghem, and Fobé 2021; Pattyn et al. 2022). Our sampling frame was constructed based on the personnel register of the Flemish government and contained $n = 1556$ middle and top-management supervisors, policy workers, data-analysts, and policy staff officials. These officials are experienced in analysing and interpreting policy information and have the competence to apply policy information to new policy plans and proposals. The survey experiment was conducted online using the survey programme Qualtrics (2005). Invitations were sent to all members of the sampling frame. To optimize the response rate, we sent out up to two reminder emails to non-responders. The design of this experiment received ethical approval from the Social and Societal Ethics Committee of the KU Leuven (G-2022–5244) and is preregistered at the Open Science Foundation (https://osf.io/8ug39/?view_only=a3c33a03106f4adaa3a01390712c87a3).

Results

The survey experiment was fielded between June 13th and July 14th 2022. Out of $n = 1556$ public officials that were invited to participate in this survey experiment, $n = 438$ public officials submitted a completed survey and were included in the analysis. This constitutes a response rate of 28.2%. The sample contains the responses of $n = 225$ women and $n = 206$ men ($n = 7$ identified otherwise or preferred not to say), with a mean age of 49 years and predominantly university educated (92%). Participants are employed in all policy fields of the Flemish government, ranging from $n = 96$ active in the area of Environment to $n = 11$ who are working in the field of Finances and Budgeting.

Experiment 1 – pro-public sector attitudes and the interpretation of policy information

For the first experiment, respondents were randomized across four vignettes in two different policy cases (eight vignettes in total). To increase statistical power, we pooled responses to vignettes with the same treatment or placebo conditions. We found no statistically significant differences in individuals' responses to the treatment and placebo vignettes based on the content of the two cases. To test the success of randomization and to determine whether the subsamples per vignette were statistically comparable, we conducted six balance tests (Table 1). We found no statistically significant differences in the makeup of the subsamples regarding age, gender, education, political preferences, attitudes towards evidence based policy making, or policy domain. We can therefore conclude that randomization was successful in producing statistically comparable subsamples on these variables.

The subsamples per vignette range between $n = 111$ for treatment 1 (private organization provides the best policy arrangement) and $n = 110$ for treatment 2 (public

Table 1. Results balance tests experiment 1.

Variable	Treatment 1 Private	Treatment 2 Public	Placebo A	Placebo B	Balance test results
Age	48 (9.44)	49 (8.9)	49 (9.7)	49 (9.6)	F (3, 434) = .548, p = .649
Political preference	2.703 (1.382)	2.971 (1.325)	2.933 (1.324)	3.060 (1.238)	F (3.405) = 1.342, p = .260
Attachment to EBPM	5.600 (1.038)	5.550 (.905)	5.590 (.945)	5.470 (1.063)	F (3, 434) = .382, p = .766
Gender (women)	56	55	66	48	X^2 (6) = 10.301, p = .113
Education (> MA)	105	100	99	99	X^2 (12) = 11.41, p = .494
Policy field (Environment)	24	21	32	21	X^2 (27) = 23.563, p = .655

organization provides the best policy arrangement) to $n = 109$ for placebo 1 and $n = 108$ for placebo 2. Overall, respondents appear very capable of identifying the organization providing the best policy arrangement based on the presented measures of user-satisfaction. Misidentification rates for the placebo groups are about 11%. Misidentification rates for the two treatment groups diverge, with misspecification at 10.8% when the private organization provides the best policy plan and 5.5% when the public organization provides the best policy plan. Though these results appear to indicate that public officials are more able to correctly identify the organization providing the best policy arrangement when this organization is public than when this organization is private, the differences are not statistically significant (X^2 (3) = 2.902, $p = .407$). The descriptive results per vignette are displayed in Figure 3.

The results of experiment 1 are presented in Table 2. Models 1 to 4 indicate no significant effect of pro-public sector attitudes on the identification of the organization providing the best performing policy arrangement, irrespective of whether that organization is a private sector organization (model 1) or a public organization (model 2). We do find a negative effect of pro-public sector attitudes in the first placebo group (model 3). No significant effects are found in the second placebo group (model 4). At the same time, model 5 shows that pro-public sector attitudes negatively affect the identification of the private organization providing the best performing policy arrangement compared to the placebo group, which might indicate that public officials are negatively biased against private sector organizations when the private sector organization provides the best performing policy arrangement as compared to the placebo. Model 5 also shows that public officials are significantly less likely to identify the private sector organization as the best performing organization compared to a placebo. Finally, we find that public officials' ability to identify the private sector organization as

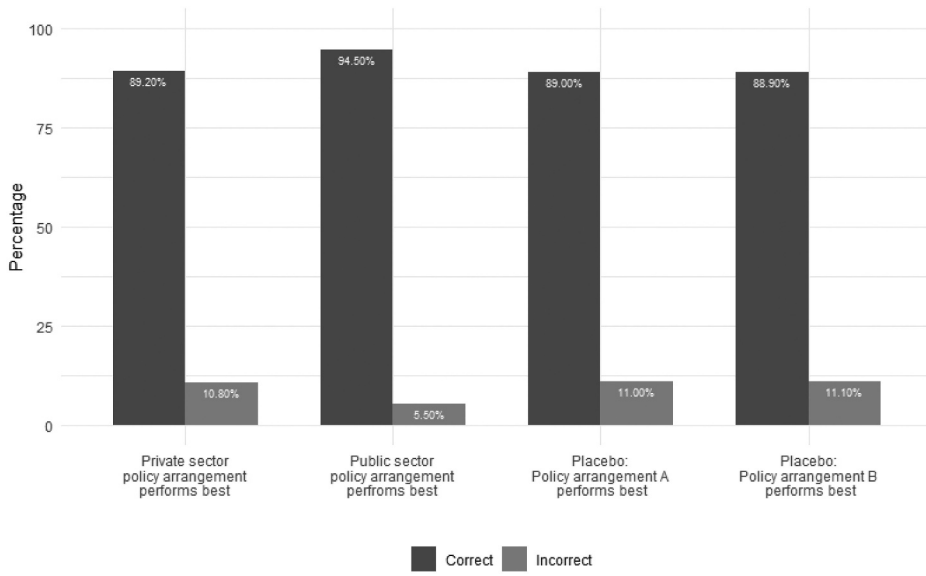


Figure 3. Descriptive results experiment 1; proportions of correct and misspecification of organization providing best performing policy plan per vignette.

Table 2. Results experiment 1.

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4		Model 5		Model 6	
	T1 (Priv)		T2 (Pub)		P1		P2		T1/P1 (Priv)		T2/P2 (Pub)	
Data	Est.	SE	Est.	SE	Est.	SE	Est.	SE	Est.	SE	Est.	SE
Intercept	–,194	1,323	–,260	1,700	6,95**	2,518	–,101	1,506	6,95**	2,518	–,101	1,506
ProPS	,436	,254	,589	,332	–,828*	,409	,410	,286	-,828*	,409	,41	,286
Treatment									–7,144*	2,844	–,159	2,271
ProPS* Treatment									1,263**	4,81	,18	,439
R2	038		062		069		027		053		058	
N	111		110		109		108		220		218	

Entries are logistic regression coefficients (logits); standard errors in parenthesis. $^{**}p < .01$, $^{*}p < .05$.

best performing organization is affected by their pro-public service attitudes. Public officials with higher levels of pro-public service attitudes are more likely to identify the private sector organization as providing the best policy arrangement as compared to the placebo organization than public officials with lower levels of pro-public sector attitudes. This might indicate that public officials with higher levels of pro-public service attitudes are better able to correctly identify the best performing organization when sector-information is provided. Interestingly, we find no similar effect when the organization providing the best policy arrangement is a public organization compared to a placebo (model 6).

Experiment 2 – issue salience and the effects of pro-public sector attitudes on the interpretation of policy information

In experiment 2, we test whether the political salience of a policy issue influences public officials' ability to correctly identify the best performing organization. For this experiment, respondents were randomized across six vignettes. To assess the success of randomization and determine whether the subsamples per vignette are statistically comparable, we again conducted six balance tests (results presented in Table 3). Again, we find no statistically significant differences in the makeup of the subsamples regarding age, gender, education, political preferences, attitudes towards evidence based policy making, or policy field.

The subsamples per vignette range from $n = 74$, $n = 73$ and $n = 72$ for the first three vignettes in which the private organization provides the best performing policy arrangement, and from $n = 72$, $n = 73$ and $n = 74$ for the final three vignettes in which the public organization provides the best performing policy arrangement. Overall, respondents remain very capable of identifying the organization providing the best policy arrangement, though the variation in the misidentification rate increases. Interestingly, the misidentification rate is highest in case of medium salience, though we find no statistically significant differences (X^2 (5) = 9.447, $p = .093$). These results are graphically displayed in Figure 4.

The results of experiment 2 are presented in Table 4. Overall, we find no statistically significant evidence that political salience affects the interpretation of policy information. Political salience does not appear to affect public officials' ability to correctly identify the organization providing the best policy arrangement. Also, the interactions between political salience and pro-public sector attitudes on the likelihood of correctly identifying the organization providing the best policy arrangement are not statistically significant. We conclude that issue salience does not affect public officials' ability to correctly identify the organization providing the best performing policy arrangement, nor does it affect any possible biasing effects of pro-public sector attitudes.

Discussion & Conclusion

For evidence based policy making to work, it is important that policy officials are able to correctly interpret, analyse, and use policy information. In this study, we tested whether public officials' interpretation of policy information is guided by accuracy goals, as evidence based policy making would require, or whether they are motivated by directional goals and show bias towards their pre-existing policy preferences. Furthermore, we tested whether the salience of policy issues affected

Table 3. Results balance tests experiment 2.

Variable	Priv_low	Priv_med	Priv_high	Pub_low	Pub_med	Pub_high	Balance test results
Age	48.8 (8.9)	50.8 (8.9)	50.2 (8.9)	47.9 (9.6)	49.3 (9.2)	47.4 (9.9)	F (5, 432) = 1.409, p = .22
Political preference	2.938 (1.110)	2.941 (1.314)	2.925 (1.340)	2.90 (1.524)	2.931 (1.367)	2.867 (1.257)	F (5, 432) = 031, p = 1
Attachment to EBPM	5.309 (.914)	5.244 (.977)	5.262 (.984)	5.287 (1.056)	5.256 (.940)	5.232 (.960)	F (5, 432) = .363, p = .874
Gender (Women)	33	39	32	32	44	45	X^2 (10) = 13.426, p = .201
Education (MA+)	69	66	69	66	66	67	X^2 (20) = 16.215, p = .703
Policy field (Environment)	19	19	13	16	12	19	X^2 (45) = 41.971, p = .601

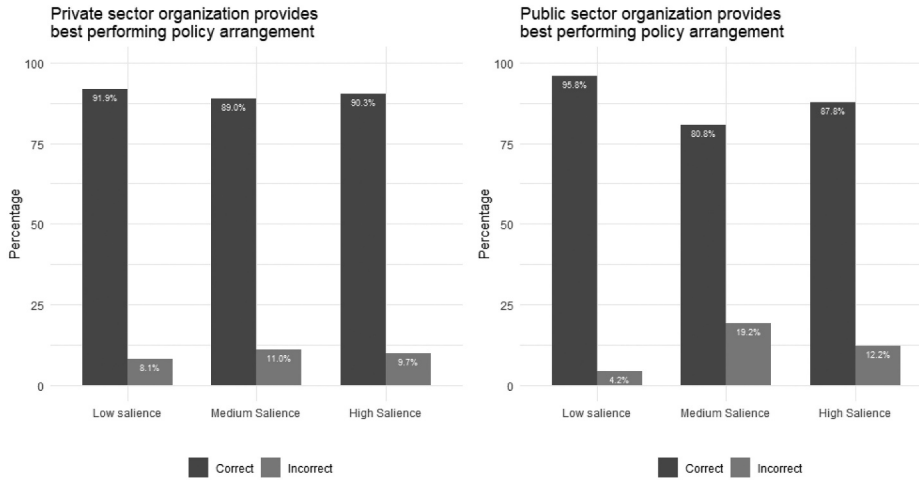


Figure 4. Descriptive results experiment 2; proportions of correct and misspecification of organization providing best performing policy plan per vignette.

the relationship between motivated reasoning and the interpretation of policy evidence. The results of this study show no conclusive statistically significant evidence that policy officials' interpretation of policy information is directionally motivated (H1 not supported). Furthermore, we find no statistically significant evidence that salience affects the relationship between motivated reasoning and the correct identification of the best performing policy arrangement (H2 not supported). Instead, our results suggest that public officials working for the Flemish administration are well able to identify the best performing policy arrangement, even if the arrangement is provided by an organization that does not align with their governance preferences. This might be indicative of a ceiling for the effects of motivated reasoning based on public/private sector organization cues when interpreting performance information.

Though our results do not confirm our theoretical expectations, they do raise two interesting questions. First, while we found no statistically significant evidence for sector-based motivated reasoning, policy officials were significantly less likely to identify the correct organization providing the best performing policy arrangement compared to a placebo group when that organization was a private sector organization. This echoes Lerusse and Van de Walle (2022) who found similar effects while studying public officials' goal re-prioritization when confronted with conflicting performance information. Combined, these results could indicate that policy officials are unconsciously warry of a crowding-out effect, fearing that public service delivery by private sector organizations could come at the expense of public service delivery by public sector organizations (see also: Petersen, Laumann, and Jakobsen 2019). Alternatively, these findings could suggest that these public officials hold the intrinsic belief that private sector organizations are less suited to provide public services.

Second, though we found no statistically significant evidence supporting that salience affects policy officials' ability to correctly identify the best performing policy arrangement, we do observe an interesting pattern in the data. Political salience can disincentivize public officials to provide directionally motivated interpretations of new

Table 4. Results experiment 2.

	Model 6 Private policy plan performing best		Model 7 Public policy plan performing best	
	Est.	SE	Est.	SE
Intercept	1,962	(2.263)	1.783	(1,962)
ProPS attitudes	,131	(,399)	,257	(,512)
Salience (Low)	Ref.		Ref.	
Salience (Medium)	−1.441	(2.884)	−.516	(3.177)
Salience (High	1.943	(3.328)	−4.217	(3.125)
Salience (Low) * ProPS attitudes	Ref.		Ref.	
Salience (Medium) * ProPS attitudes	.215	(.552)	−226	(.591)
Salience (High) * ProPS attitudes	−.376	(.574)	.622	(.608)
Wald X^2	.169 (p. > .05)		.146 (p. > .05)	
N	219		219	

Notes: Entries are logistic regression coefficients (logits); standard errors in parenthesis. $^{**}p < .01$, $^{*}p < .05$.

policy information when political pressure or time and resource constraints are high. Our results show the highest misidentification rate in case of medium salience and the lowest misidentification rate in cases of low or high salience. While admittedly puzzling, this could result from officials' uncertainty about the relative political implications of the information at hand. In case of low salience, the political implications of the interpretation of policy information are minimal. Under these circumstances public officials face minimal pressures or incentives to produce specific outcomes. In case of high salience, the political implications of the interpretation of policy information are greatest. Under these circumstances, public officials face most pressures and incentives to produce a specific or correct outcome. However, in cases of medium salience, public officials are least incentivized to come to a desired or correct outcome and therefore experience most uncertainty about how to interpret the policy information at hand and could therefore be most vulnerable to motivated reasoning.

The findings of this study should be interpreted in light of at least four limitations, which provide fruitful avenues for future research. First, the generalizability of the results is constrained by the fact that our experiment was conducted exclusively among policy officials from the Flemish government. While survey experiments are well suited for the study of causal mechanisms in particular populations (Hainmueller, Hopkins, and Yamamoto 2014), public officials at different levels of government or within alternative administrative traditions may employ distinct mechanisms for interpreting policy information. Replicating the experiment with samples from diverse geographical regions and policy regimes, as well as conducting comparative studies, could help to broaden our understanding of how public officials interpret policy information.

Second, our results are based on the survey responses of $n = 438$ policy officials. Though this sample size is sufficient to detect medium to large effect sizes with sufficient statistical power, it is possible that we have insufficient statistical power. For example, this is the case for models 4 and 7. Future replication studies could help determine the robustness of our results. Third, our operationalization and measurement of political salience, through vignettes with three hypothetical levels of political interest and consequent pressure (low, medium, high) may not be readily recognizable or relatable to the policy making environments of the respondents. Future research could help strengthen the validity of this treatment of political salience and help further explore the role of politics in motivated reasoning by public officials.

A final limitation is related to our operationalization of prior attitudes and the selection of our policy cases. We operationalized prior attitudes using governance preferences (preferences for public service delivery by public or private sector organizations). However, many public services are provided by a combination of public and private organizations, or by hybrid organizations (not fully public or private) (Osborne 2020; Schoute, Budding, and Gradus 2018; Warner and Hefetz 2008). This hybrid dimension is particularly applicable to the policy cases we chose as the contextual backdrop for the experiment. Policy officials' prior governance attitudes might have limited effects in eliciting goal directed interpretations. We call on researchers to replicate our study with different operationalizations of prior attitudes or in different cases to flush out these effects.

To conclude, our results show limited support for motivated reasoning and political salience, indicating that public officials prioritize accuracy goals over directionals goals. These insights advance both public administration theory and practice by

shedding light on the cognitive processes involved in policy information interpretation, particularly within politically charged environments.

Note

1. The policy domains included in this study are: (i) Chancellery Public Governance, Foreign Affairs and Justice, (ii) Finance and budget, (iii) Economy, Science and Innovation, (iv) Education and training, (v) Welfare, Public Health and Family, (vi) Culture, Youth, Sport and Media, (vii) Work and Social Economy, (viii) Agriculture and Fisheries, (ix) Mobility and Public Works, and (x) Environment (Flemish Government n.d.).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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