Expertise and Efficacy in Elite Political Decision Making

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Democracy assumes the delegation of decision making to politicians who then act as expert decision-makers (Strøm, 2000). Whereas citizens may be susceptible to biased or inefficient decision making (Kahneman et al., 1991), representative democratic government assumes – or is based on the hope, at least – that politicians, due to more experience, time and information, and/or due to the threat of electoral sanction, will make better decisions. Are elected politicians in fact expert decision-makers? When faced with complex decisions, do they behave differently from non-politicians? Here we report results from decision-making experiments with national-level politicians in three developed countries - Belgium, Canada, and Israel. We show that these elites exhibit a similar preference for risky decisions as normal citizens. We further show that politicians are similarly susceptible to anomalous decision making as a result of framing. Such tendencies in politicians are not attenuated by either increasing the political consequence of a decision, or by experience with democratic decision making. These results have important implications for our understanding of delegated decision making in representative democracy.

Elected politicians operate in a unique environment. Their decisions are often highly consequential and public. Their ability to control the outcome of major events and the electoral consequences of this ability – what we label political efficacy – is often high. Despite the importance of understanding political decision making, however, we lack systematic, experimental knowledge about how politicians make decisions, and whether they differ from non-politicians.

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Evidence on the shortcomings of human decision making abounds (Kahneman et al., 1991). We have less systematic evidence for elites specifically, however; and almost no directly comparable evidence on both politicians and non-politicians forced to make decisions on identical items. We have also been unable to examine the impact of electoral pressure versus expertise. We have not been able to decouple being a politician from the state of being 'in politics' – that is, to differentiate the behavioural effect of political expertise (relative to non-politicians), if such an effect exists, from the effect of being in a politically efficacious situation (which would affect both politicians and non-politicians when placed in such an environment). In short, we do not know how, why, or even if elected officials make decisions differently.

A lack of evidence has meant that most studies on political elites avoid the issue altogether, and instead assume (often implicitly) that political elites employ the same decision-making heuristics and are equally subject to the same biases as the mass public (McDermott et al., 2008; Levy, 1997; Mercer, 2005). At the same time, accumulating evidence from non-political domains on elite expertise, and on its behavioural effects (such as economists, business executives, chess players, psychologists and others (see Hafner-Burton et al., 2013; Druckman and McDermott, 2008)), suggests that the way in which elites make decisions can differ markedly and systematically from non-elites. Politicians may employ different heuristics and cognitive shortcuts when making politically consequential decisions; they may be more – or less – susceptible to reasoning biases such as overconfidence and time discounting; they may respond differently to different frames; and their risk-seeking behaviour may have a different average base rate compared to non-politicians (Jervis, 1992; Boettcher, 2004; Mercer, 2005; Schreiber, 2007; Hafner-Burton et al., 2011). All of these hypotheses remain empirically unexplored and theoretically underdeveloped.

We are particularly interested here in Prospect Theory, as first proposed by Kahneman and Tversky (Kahneman and Tversky, 1979; Tversky and Kahneman, 1981). Prospect theory has been central in the social sciences, with theoretical implementations and empiric tests in economics, psychology, business administration and other disciplines. Those studying politics have shown less interest (see Mercer, 2005; McDermott et al., 2008 for an extensive discussion). As a result, the existing scholarship on framing and prospect theory in politics has thus far been concentrated mostly in public opinion and voting studies, where the use of framing in political communication to affect public opinion is of major interest (Quattrone and Tversky, 1988; Nelson and Oxley, 1999; Druckman, 2001; Chong and Druckman, 2007). One exception is case study work on the effects of framing on risk-taking in the context of international relations decision making by leaders and by states (Levy, 1997; McDermott, 2004). But prospect theory, and framing more broadly, quite clearly matters for a very broad range of political decisions. Consider work on the potential important of framing (Stone, 1989; Druckman, 2004) as well as risk specifically (Hood, 2002) in policymaking. Consider also the related, and burgeoning, literatures on negativity biases in political communication, political be-

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havior and policy debate (Lau, 1985; Soroka, 2014). The way in which elected officials decide in situations involving risk is, we believe, of real consequence for the functioning of representative democratic institutions.

We are interested, then, in how politicians make decisions when faced with alternatives of varying risk levels, and in how different frames impact their risk preferences. We deal with two related issues below. First, we explore the possibility that politicians have different preferences for risk and responses to frames relative to non-politicians. We do so by comparing their overall risk preferences to that of a sample of citizens. We also compare the impact of different frames on MPs relative to how citizens respond to them, and to meta-data collected from previous studies on individuals' response to frames. Second, we ask what is the source of such differences, so far as they exist: is it because (a) politicians operate in an environment with heightened political efficacy, one which makes them think differently about the choices they make - and which would make any individual placed in it respond differently, or (b) elected politicians are fundamentally different from non-politicians, either because people who seek office have systematically different behavioural preferences relative to those who do not, or because they have accumulated expertise in the domain of politics over their career, which alters how they operate. Here we are able to explore the first alternative, by manipulating political efficacy levels of a specific task.

To explore elite preferences for risk and susceptibility to frames, we conducted experiments among national level politicians in three countries: Belgium ($n = 82$), Canada ($n = 43$), and Israel ($n = 29$). Our experiments occurred within hour-long interviews with the subjects and were conducted on tablet computers. We employ Tversky and Kahneman's (Tversky and Kahneman, 1981) "Asian disease" experiment, which traces both overall risk-seeking preferences and how they change in response to different task frames. In this protocol, subjects are presented with a hypothetical scenario in which an exotic disease is expected to kill 600 people. Two proposals for combatting this epidemic are presented. Choice A, the riskless option, has the certain result of 400 people dying and the remaining 200 people being saved. Choice B involves risk: there is a 1/3 chance of no one dying (or everyone surviving) and a 2/3 chance of everyone dying (or no one surviving). In the experiment, and following directly on Tversky and Kahneman's work, the framing of the two choices was manipulated such that half of subjects were presented the risky option with a gain frame ("200 people will be saved") and the other half were presented with a loss frame ("400 people will die."). We note the explicitly political nature of this question, namely that decisions about public and not private matters are being made. Subjects were randomized to one condition.

The one (important) way in which our experiment differs from the original – above and beyond our politician subjects, of course – is that we randomly manipulate the situation's level of political efficacy by changing the hypothetical location of the disease threat and the importance of decision that the subjects are asked to make. This manipulation is orthogonal to the original gain/loss framing manipulation. In the low efficacy condition,

the disease was said to be threatening a country geographically removed from the politician's country (Germany in the Canadian case, and the United States in the Belgian and Israeli cases), and the politician was asked what she/he would do. In the high efficacy condition, the politician was told the disease was in their country, and that they were on the health committee making a final vote over the two options. Note that by varying the location of the decision's consequences, from domestic to foreign, this manipulation produces one variant in which the likelihood of electoral sanction is low (i.e., when there are no direct consequences of the decision for the politician's electorate), and another in which the likelihood of electoral sanction is much more likely, and the decision itself having a more tangible nature. Subjects were randomized to one condition, independent of their assignment to gain-loss frames, thus resulting in a 2x2 between-subjects experimental design.

Our principal analysis relies on three quantities. First, by observing the average response of subjects across conditions we can recover politicians' baseline preferences for risk. We then compare these to risk preferences recovered from nationally representative samples of citizens in each of our countries.[1]

Second, by observing the average effect of the gain/loss frame manipulation, we can compare them to the frame responses of our sample of citizens. In addition, we obtain an estimate of the overall base-rate response by relying on previous work that categorizes expected framing effect sizes by the task design. We also rely and on studies that explicitly promote expectations regarding politicians' response to framing attempts. According to the results of a comprehensive meta-analysis (Kühberger, 1998)[2], if politicians respond to the manipulation in the Asian disease experiment as citizen do, we should expect to see substantial framing effects. Specifically, Kühberger's estimates mean that we should expect to see a Cohen's *d* effect size of 0.26 to 0.64 across conditions. Non-experimental work suggests that we should see smaller or no framing effects among politicians. For example, Jervis (1992) argues that re-election considerations make politicians likely to be more risk-averse in the domains of losses relative to non-politicians, because of the potential political repercussions. Other work suggests that as experts, politicians should exhibit more 'strategic' and 'rational' behaviour (Hafner-Burton et al., 2013),[3] again hinting at heightened resistance to the Asian disease's framing manipula-

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[1]At this point in time, we only have estimates for Canada.

[2]Our experimental design falls into the following categories in his typology: it uses a reference to a risky event (rather than outcome salience); it presents a choice between a riskless and a risky option (rather than risky/riskier); it deals with a single risky event; the primary framing manipulation is loss/gain (rather than task-responsive); the response mode is choice (rather than rating/judgment); we use comparison between subjects rather than within subjects; use individuals (rather than groups) as the unit of analysis, and primarily employ an adult, non-student sample (a student sample is used for control).

[3]We note finally that our design should work against framing effects generally, as some evidence indicates that the hedonic tone of the problem (being about life/death rather than about monetary loss, for example) dominates the loss/gain frame setup, in that when a life or death scenario is used, the loss/gain framing does not result in preference reversal. Instead, participants are always more risk-taking

tion.

Third, by observing differences across our political efficacy levels, we can estimate whether politicians make different decisions when their choices plausibly have more consequence. If we find that politicians are less risk-seeking, overall, or are less susceptible to frames, when considering a (hypothetical) situation for which they could face sanction, i.e. their vote on a health committee, then this provides evidence that the task environment plays a role in accounting for decision-making differences between politicians and non-politicians.

Figure 1 presents the overall rates of MP risk seeking by country. Our results suggest that the overall rates do not vary significantly across our three cases (Belgium=56.3% (95% ci 46, 69), Canada=61.8% (95% ci 45, 77), Israel=59% (95% ci 41, 75)).[4] The average rate of risk seeking among Canadian politicians (62%) is somewhat higher from that observed in a representative sample of Canadian citizens (54%), but in both cases there is an overall preference for the risky choice.

Figure 2 shows the rates of risk seeing across framing conditions. In each country, a loss framing induces more risk seeking. While the Israeli results do not reach conventional statistical significance ($chi^2 = .81, p = .37$), logistic regression results which condition the loss frame on country suggest that Israeli reactions do not differ significantly from the framing effects seen in Belgium and Canada (see Table 8).

Figure 3 presents the difference between Canadian MPs and representative sample of 515 Canadians. The overall patterns observed for MPs and for citizens is strikingly similar. However, the effect size observed in Canadian MPs (Cohen's $d = 1.05$ (95% ci 0.40, 1.61)) is larger than that estimated among Canadian citizens (Cohen's $d = .76$, (95% ci 0.76, 0.94). It also exceeds the estimate derived from a comprehensive meta analysis (Kühberger, 1998).

Figure 4 demonstrates the impact of low and high efficacy levels on risk taking. Efficacy levels have a contradictory effect across our cases: in Belgium, high levels of political efficacy lead to reduced risk-seeking. In Canada the opposite trend is borne out, and high political efficacy leads to *more* risk-seeking. And efficacy levels do not appear to impact Israeli MPs' risk preference. However, logistic regression analysis suggests that the effect of efficacy does not significantly differ across frames or across countries (see Table 9).

Within Canada, there is a divergent impact of political efficacy on MPs and on citizens: politicians' risk preferences increase with heightened efficacy, while in the general

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than not, even in the gains frame, but still markedly less so than in the losses frame (Boettcher, 2004; Druckman and McDermott, 2008)

[4]To parcel out the effects of treatment, these estimates are derived from predicted probabilities after a logit regression, using Clarify. See SI 7 for full results.

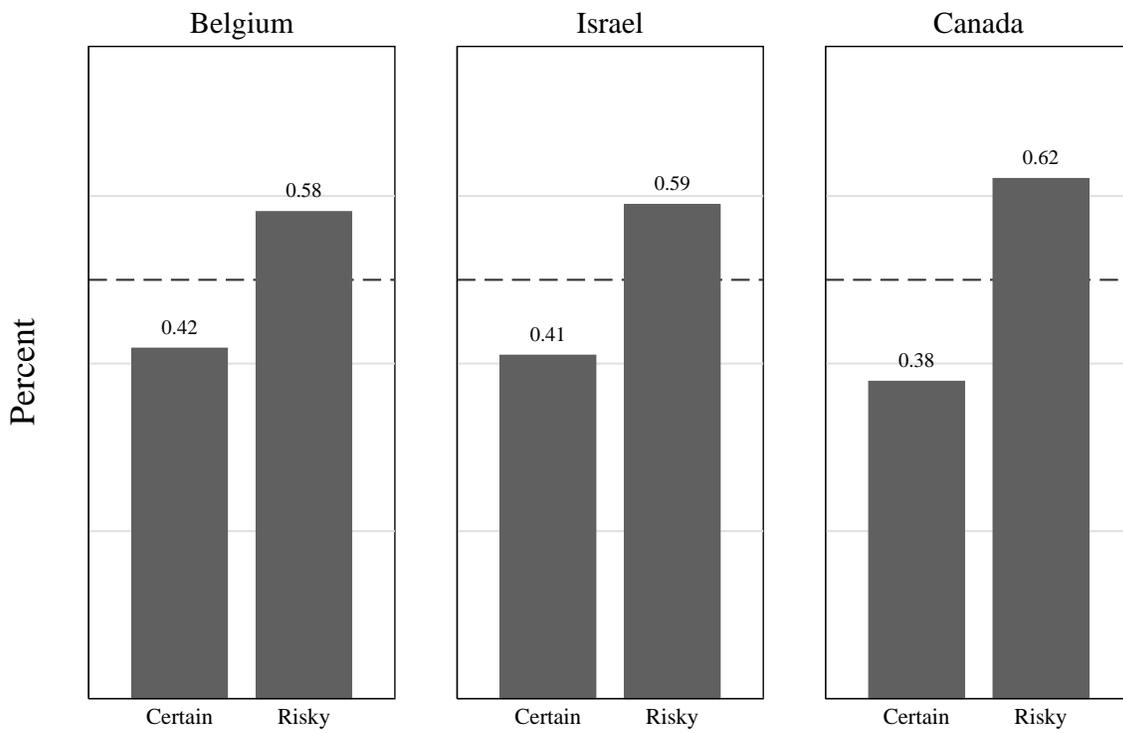## MPs' Overall Risk Preference, by Country
Predicted Probabilities

Figure 1: Overall risk-seeking frequencies of MPs. Data are predicted probabilities computed from logit regressions. $N_{BEL} = 82, N_{ISR} = 29, N_{CAN} = 43$.

MPs' Response to Gains/Loss Frames
By Country; Predicted Probabilities
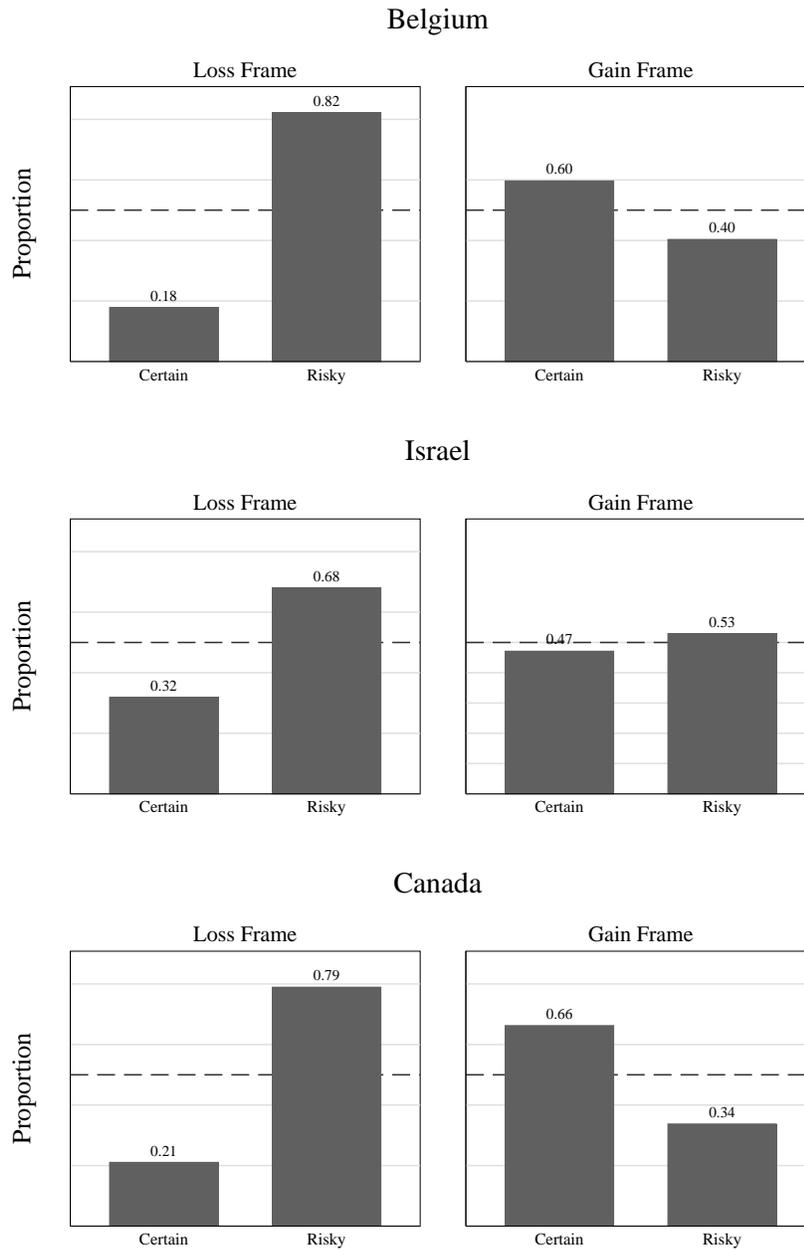
Belgium

Israel

Canada

Figure 2: Overall risk-seeking frequencies of MPs, by gains/loss frame and country. Data are predicted probabilities computed from logit regressions. $N_{BEL} = 82, N_{ISR} = 29, N_{CAN} = 43$.

Gains/Loss Frames: Canadian MPs and Citizens
Predicted Probabilities

Canada − MPs
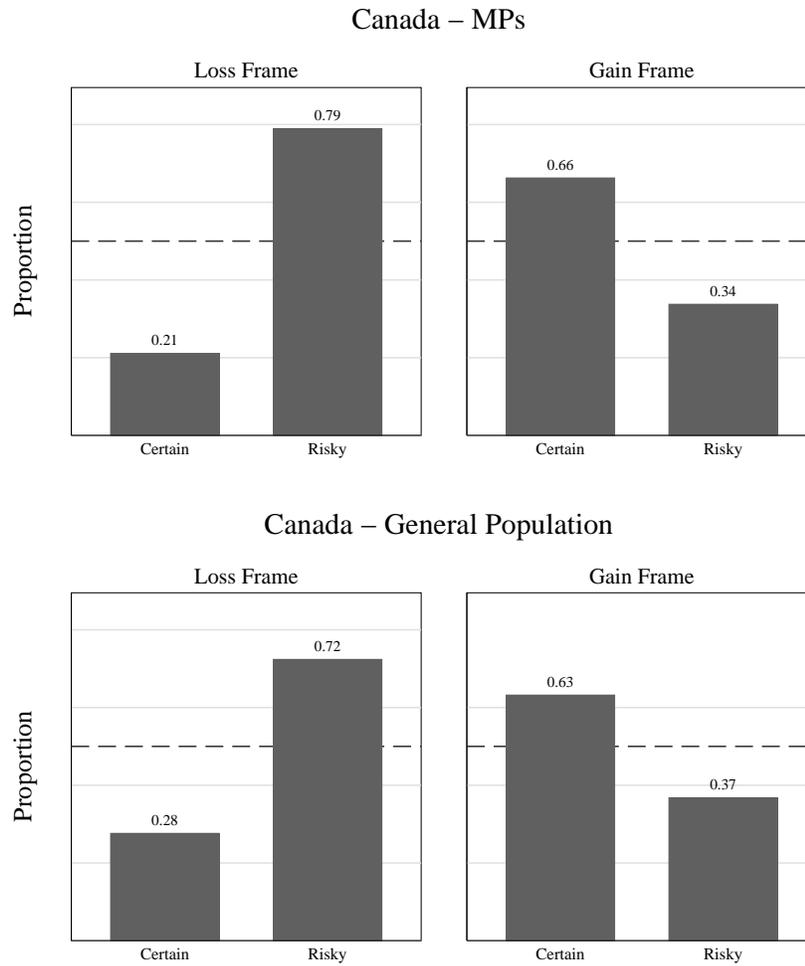

Canada − General Population

Figure 3: Overall risk-seeking frequencies of Canadian MPs and citizens, by gains/loss frame and country. Data are predicted probabilities computed from logit regressions. $N_{MPs} = 43, N_{GenPop} = 515$.

MPs' Risk Prefernces by Low/High Efficacy Conditions
By Country; Predicted Probabilities
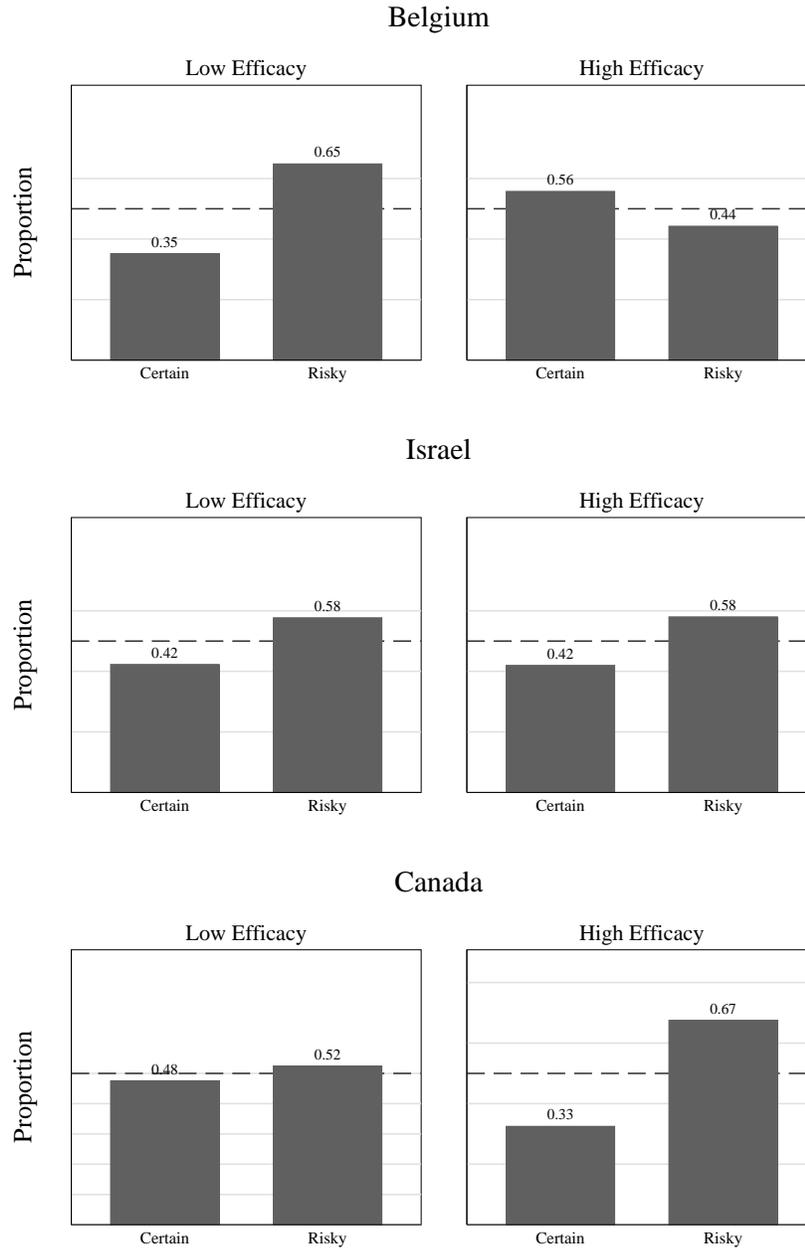
Belgium

Israel

Canada

Figure 4: Overall risk-seeking frequencies by efficacy levels. Data are predicted probabilities computed from logit regressions. $N_{BEL} = 82, N_{ISR} = 29, N_{CAN} = 43$.

population it is slightly reduced. This finding may be indicative of differences between MPs and the general population that go beyond situational effects and may have to do with self-selection (that is, that politicians' decision-making differs from that of citizens' not only because the task environment is more efficacious, but because of some inherent behavioural differences). However, considering the contrasting results across MPs from our three sampled countries in response to the efficacy levels treatment, for the moment we refrain from making this argument until we obtain similar citizen comparison groups in Israel and Belgium.

We thus find little evidence that elected politicians differ from citizens in their risk-seeking preferences and in how gain/loss frames affect their preferences. Our elite respondents take risky decisions at roughly the same rate as their citizen counterparts. They are also highly responsive to frames, and this effect is not conditioned by whether the frames are hypothetically related to a decision with political consequences. One explanation for the absence of systematic differences between politicians and citizens is that those who seek office and are likely to become expert political decision makers are not more strategic individuals, despite some theories assuming so. It could be that differences between politicians and non-politicians, and among politicians themselves, develop over time, such that more experience results in different behaviour. However, our data can also rule out this possibility. When our subjects are split above and below the median on number of years in office, we find no differential effect of loss frames (see Table 10) or levels of political efficacy, though there is evidence that more experienced politicians are more willing to take risky decisions.

In summary, in what we believe is the first experiment to test well-known framing effects among national-level political elites, we find little evidence that these elites differ in their decision making from normal citizens. To the contrary, they are on the whole strongly responsive to frames. This anomaly is not attenuated by increasing the democratic salience of their decision. Nor is it corrected by experience in office. Democratic government relies on the delegation of decision making to agents acting under strong incentives. These actors, however, remain just as human as those who elect them.

Impact of Efficacy: Canadian MPs and Citizens
Risk Taking Frequencies; Predicted Probabilities
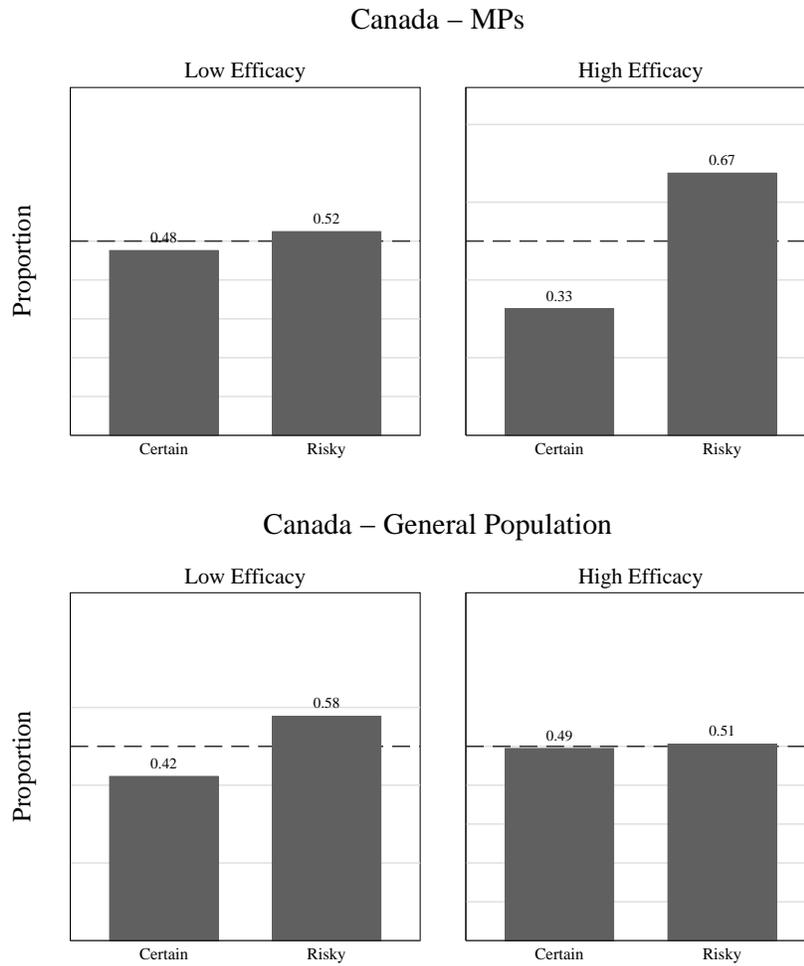
Canada – MPs

Canada – General Population

Figure 5: Overall risk-seeking frequencies by efficacy levels; Canadian MPs and Citizens. Data are predicted probabilities computed from logit regressions. $N_{MPs} = 43, N_{GenPop} = 515$.

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Supporting Materials: Expertise and Efficacy in Elite Political Decision Making

Description of the Study and Instruments

The reported study was conducted as part of an ongoing ERC-funded project called INFOPOL[5], in which politicians and their staff are extensively interviewed with the purpose of studying the determinants of their information processing and actions. The bulk of data collected in this project was obtained during hour-long interviews with members of national parliaments in Belgium, Canada, and Israel that were conducted during 2013 and 2014. During these interviews, participating politicians answered both open-ended questions and responded in person to a survey containing closed questions and experimental protocols that was administered on iPads. Most interviewees were also recorded.

154 incumbent parliament members of national parliaments participated in our reported experimental protocol: 82 from the Belgian Federal Parliament (all Flemish), 43 from the Canadian House of Commons, and 29 from the Israeli Knesset. The reported experiment was included in the last section of the survey for all interviewees. The phrasing of questions and conditions was identical in all three countries, and was translated to Dutch (for Belgian MPs), Hebrew (for Israeli MKs) and French (for French-speaking Canadian MPs) from the same English text.

The survey instrument was directly adopted from Tversky and Kahneman's (Tversky and Kahneman, 1981) Asian Disease problem, in which participants were randomly presented with either a gains or a losses frame of the two alternative choices. In addition, we included a manipulation of political efficacy, orthogonal to the original two frames: we randomly manipulated the hypothetical location of the disease threat. In the low efficacy condition, the disease was said to be threatening a country geographically removed from the politicians country (Germany in the Canadian case, and the United States in the Belgian and Israeli cases). In the high efficacy condition, the politician was told the disease was in their country and they were on the health committee making a final decision over the two options.

Subjects were randomized to one efficacy condition, independent of their random assignment to gain-loss frames. This resulted in a standard 2x2 experimental design. Random allocation was achieved by administering the questions using the online survey program Qualtrics, on iPads.

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[5]For more details on the project please visit: http://www.infopol-project.org/

Summary Statistics

Table 1: Summary Statistics - Age and Year of First Election to Parliament

| | Belgium | | Canada | | Israel | |
	Mean	Range	Mean	Range	Mean	Range
Year of birth	1967	[1949 - 1987]	1961	[1943 - 1990]	1959	[1945 - 1978]
Year of first election	2005	[1985 - 2012]	2006	[1993 - 2012]	2006	[1981 - 2013]
Overall	82		43		29	

Country effects on age: $F = 8.26, p = .0004$
Country effects on year of first election: $F = 0.26, p = .774$

Table 2: Summary statistics - Gender

| Country | | N | | | Proportion | |
		Overall	Male	Female	Male	Female
Belgium	Sample	82	53	29	64.63%	35.36%
	Parliament	150	91	59	60.67%	39.33%
Israel	Sample	29	24	5	82.76%	17.24%
	Parliament	120	93	27	77.50%	22.50%
Canada	Sample	43	31	12	72.09%	27.91%
	Parliament	308	231	77	75.00%	25.00%

Table 3: MP preference for risk, by country

| | Belgium | | Canada | | Israel | |
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Certain	36	44%	17	40%	12	41%
Risky	46	56%	26	60%	17	59%
Overall	82		43		29	

$(\chi^2 : p = .916)$

Table 4: Gains/loss framing and risk preferences of MPs

Frame	Choice		Total
	Certain	Risky	
Losses	13	52	65
	(20%)	(80%)	(100%)
Gains	52	37	89
	(58%)	(42%)	(100%)
Total	65	89	154

Frame effect: $F = 27.13, p = .000$ ($\chi^2 : p = .000$)

Citizen Study

We are in the process of obtaining a comparison group of citizens in all three participating countries. Currently, such a comparison group has been obtained in Canada, where a representative sample of 515 Canadian adults (Mean age 49.6, proportion female: 50.1%), proportionally distributed across provinces, participated in an online survey that included the Asian Disease experiment.

Table 5 summarizes the Canadian citizen sample responses. Table 6 compares the distribution of responses between Canadian MPs and citizens. Overall, the response patterns are similar, but the Canadian MPs are more risk-seeking (60% vs. 54% in the citizen sample), and respond more strongly to the gains/losses framing manipulation, with a Cohen's d value of .943, compared with a .714 value for the citizen sample. The efficacy manipulation also yields stronger results for MPs (Cohen's d = .319) than for the citizens sample (.143).

Table 5: Gains/loss framing and risk preferences of Canadian citizens

Frame	Choice		Total
	Certain	Risky	
Losses	71	184	255
	(28%)	(72%)	(100%)
Gains	165	95	260
	(63%)	(37%)	(100%)
Total	236	279	515

Frame effect: $F = 75.13, p = .0000$ ($\chi^2 : p = .000$)

Table 6: Risk preference and framing: Canadian citizens and MPs

Frame	MPs		Citizens	
	Certain	Risky	Certain	Risky
Losses	5	20	71	184
	(20%)	(80%)	(28%)	(72%)
Gains	12	6	165	95
	(67%)	(33%)	(63%)	(37%)
Total	17	26	236	279

Cohen's d effect sizes: MPs = .943, Citizens = .714

Tables

Table 7: Preferences for risk by country

Variable	Coefficient	(Std. Err.)
country==CAN	-0.225	(0.429)
country==ISR	0.148	(0.471)
Loss Frame	1.802**	(0.389)
Intercept	-0.328	(0.262)

Significance levels :   † : 10%   ∗ : 5%   ∗∗ : 1%

Table 8: Loss frames and preferences for risk, by country

Variable	Coefficient	(Std. Err.)
country==CAN	-0.304	(0.574)
country==ISR	0.495	(0.539)
Loss Frame	2.038**	(0.564)
(country==CAN)*loss	0.041	(0.905)
(country==ISR)*loss	-1.296	(1.003)
Intercept	-0.389	(0.283)

Significance levels :   † : 10%   ∗ : 5%   ∗∗ : 1%

Table 9: Loss frames, efficacy, and preferences for risk, by country

Variable	Coefficient	(Std. Err.)
country==CAN	-0.823	(0.696)
country==ISR	0.137	(0.670)
Loss Frame	2.158**	(0.707)
(country==CAN)*loss	-0.014	(0.919)
(country==ISR)*loss	-1.311	(1.013)
efficacy==1	-0.707	(0.538)
(efficacy==1)*loss	-0.254	(0.792)
(efficacy==1)*loss	0.000	(0.000)
(efficacy==1)*loss	0.000	(0.000)
(efficacy==1)*loss	0.000	(0.000)
(country==CAN)*efficacy	1.179	(0.896)
(country==ISR)*efficacy	0.778	(0.923)
Intercept	-0.062	(0.374)

Significance levels :   † : 10%   ∗ : 5%   ∗∗ : 1%

Table 10: Loss frames, efficacy, experience and preferences for risk, by country

Variable	Coefficient	(Std. Err.)
loss==1	1.703**	(0.478)
Political Experience	1.235*	(0.578)
(loss==1)*EXPERIENCED	0.629	(0.871)
efficacy==1	0.008	(0.463)
(efficacy==1)*EXPERIENCED	-1.034	(0.778)
country==CAN	-0.309	(0.446)
country==ISR	-0.062	(0.491)
Intercept	-0.592	(0.379)

Significance levels :   † : 10%   ∗ : 5%   ∗∗ : 1%