How does public disclosure of performance information affect politicians’ attitudes towards effort allocation? Evidence from a survey experiment.

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Abstract

Does relative performance information (PI) still impact politicians’ attitudes when the potential for external blame or credit is limited? And, if not, is the active disclosure of PI about government activities with a low propensity for media attention an effective strategy for increasing the effect of PI? Despite the tendency to progressively disclose PI, empirical evidence on the effectiveness of publicly disclosing PI is almost non-existent. Hence, a survey embedded experiment was developed, building on self-determination theory and blame-avoidance theory, to assess how the provision of PI with a low propensity to attract media attention affects politicians’ attitudes towards resource allocation and whether this effect is altered by the public disclosure of PI. Data from 795 Belgian (Flemish) local councilors indicates that PI with a low propensity for media attention does impact politicians’ attitudes towards effort allocation but that public disclosure of PI mitigates the effect size in the case of negative-valence PI. Thus, the results draw attention to the unintended—and potentially dysfunctional—effects of the disclosure of PI.

Key words

Performance information, Self-determination theory, experiment, politicians, disclosure
Introduction

Performance measurement has become a central activity in many public organizations (Andersen and Hjortskov 2016; Barrows et al. 2016; Nielsen and Baekgaard 2015; Petersen, Laumann, and Jakobsen 2019). One of the primary drivers responsible for this present-day ubiquity of public sector performance measurement is the assumption that performance information (PI) will advance the performance of public organizations (Andersen and Moynihan 2016; Moynihan 2008) by improving the decision quality of public managers (Holm 2018; Andersen and Nielsen 2020), enabling citizens to exercise democratic control (James 2011; James and Mosely 2014; Porumbescu, Piotrowski and Mabillard, 2020) and providing politicians with the ‘appropriate information to ensure that they are able to carry out their democratic responsibility for organizational outcomes and meet the requirements of internal control and external accountability’ (Walker, Jung, and Boyne 2013, 835). However, although one of the principal functions of PI is ‘to assist elected politicians in holding government agencies accountable and making more informed decisions on resource allocation and institutional design’ (Nielsen and Baekgaard 2015, 545), insights into if and how PI impacts the preferences, attitudes, and behavior of political decision-makers are limited (George et al. 2017; Geys and Sørensen 2018; Nielsen and Moynihan 2017a; 2017b).

A recent surge of studies has tried to shed light on this research gap (e.g., George et al. 2017; Geys and Sørensen 2018; Nielsen and Baekgaard 2015; Nielsen and Moynihan 2017a) by using blame-avoidance theory to analyze how PI impacts politicians’ decision-making. These studies argue that politicians’ response to PI is driven largely by their predisposition for blame-avoidance and their susceptibility to negativity bias (Hood 2007; 2011; Nielsen and Baekgaard 2015). It has been argued that PI, and especially PI signaling low performance, impacts politicians’ decision-making processes because politicians want to avoid negative media coverage that could damage their political positions (Soroka 2006).
Central to this stream of research is the assumption that politicians will exclusively react to PI prone to media attention because only high-profile PI activates the credit and blame dynamics responsible for attitudinal and behavioral changes amongst politicians (George et al. 2017; Geys and Sørensen 2018; Nielsen and Baekgaard 2015; Nielsen and Moynihan 2017a). The presence of such attention bias, however, could have significant consequences for the governance of public organizations and the process of democratic accountability. Due to the limited potential for blame or political payoffs (Hood and Dixon 2010), PI with a low propensity for media attention runs the risk of being largely neglected by politicians. Given the far-reaching implications of politicians’ potential insusceptibility to certain types of PI, many governments have reverted to the public disclosure of PI with a low propensity for attracting media attention in an attempt to make organizational activities and performance directly observable by the public at large (Hood 2007; Lewis 2019). As such, they increase citizens’ capacity for holding politicians responsible (James and Mosely 2014; Mizrahi and Minchuk 2019), which, in turn, is expected to foster politicians’ responsiveness to PI. However, despite the fact that the production of publicly-available PI has increased tremendously (Lewis 2019), insights into whether ‘the diffusion of performance disclosure to less [eye-catching] policy areas is an effective way of enhancing performance and achieving policy goals’ are lacking (Olsen 2013, 4). Does PI still influence the attitudes and behavior of politicians when impending public scrutiny, and thus the potential for blame or credit, is taken out of the equation? If not, is making PI about less prominent policy domains and government activities available for public scrutiny by increasing its accessibility an effective attention bias modification strategy?

To address these questions, we formulated a set of contradictory hypotheses whereby we integrate theory on blame-avoidance and negativity bias into the wider theoretical framework of self-determination theory (SDT) (Ryan and Deci 2000a; 2000b) to gain a more
fine-grained understanding of (a) why PI regarding less prominent government activities affects (or does not affect) politicians and (b) if shifting PI with a low propensity to generate external attention to public fora alters the effect of this type of PI on politicians’ decision-making. Based on SDT, we hypothesize that, in the absence of opportunities for credit-claiming or a need for blame-avoidance (i.e., a lack of external regulation), PI will elicit attitudinal reactions amongst politicians only if it prompts feelings such as guilt, disappointment, or pride (i.e., introjected regulation) or if it is believed to have an instrumental function that can help accomplish other goals (i.e., identified regulation). Increasing the accessibility of PI with a low propensity to generate media attention, in turn, is hypothesized to be an effective attention bias modification strategy if it goes hand-in-hand with the introduction of a motivational mechanism based on external regulation (i.e., fosters blame-avoidance or credit-claiming).

As the provision of (public) PI is often driven by the intention to impact politicians’ attitudes, preferences and behavior, this study uses data from a randomized vignette experiment involving 795 council members (nested in 275 Flemish local authorities) to assess how PI about the specificity of a local authority’s strategic plan (i.e., admittance of a performance information cue) and the public disclosure of this PI (i.e., admittance of a public disclosure cue) affect council members’ attitudes towards strategic board engagement (i.e., a decision on effort and resource allocation). The study’s dependent variable—strategic board engagement—reflects the degree to which a board member is engaged in strategic initiatives/processes as well as monitoring strategy implementation and is deemed highly relevant because it is presumed to be an antecedent of organizational performance (Huse 2005; Minichilli, Zattoni, and Zona 2009). The independent variable, PI on strategic plan specificity, is a relative indicator of the degree of policy content transparency of a strategic plan (Grimmelikhuijsen and Welch 2012). It provides councilors with a benchmark to assess
the transparency of their municipalities’ strategic plan and, as such, can help councilors make better-informed decisions about the need to (de)invest in strategic board engagement. Although, at first sight, de study’s variables may seem to have a narrow focus strategic board engagement is illustrative for various sorts of purposeful organizational behavior that councilors are expected to conduct but for which they, according to blame-avoidance theory, have no incentive due to the fact that such behavior consists largely of individual cognitive processes that cannot be directly observed and, thus, cannot be rewarded or enforced (Moynihan et al. 2012). Strategic plan specificity, in turn, is representative of the variety of bureaucratic-organizational performance indicators that have pervaded public sector management in recent years with the intention of stimulating good governance and management by making activities and results verifiable for organizational actors (Hood 2007).

The study results indicate that, despite the absence of blame or credit dynamics, PI with a low propensity for media attention still impacts politicians’ attitudes towards the allocation of effort. Attitudinal adjustments are thus not caused solely by politicians’ desire to avoid blame but, rather, but can also be rooted in introjected and/or identified regulation of behavior. The public disclosure of PI, however, produced rather unanticipated negative effects whereby, the diffusion of performance disclosure to policy areas and government activities that are less prone to media attention appears to be an ineffective strategy for fostering performance (Olsen, 2013). These findings contribute to the literature in at least two ways. First, by integrating theory on blame avoidance and negativity bias into the framework of SDT, the study results provide more detailed insights into the drivers underlying politicians’ reaction to PI and, more precisely, PI with a low propensity to generate media attention. Second, the study ‘explores what happens when the much-discussed doctrine of transparency as a key to good governance meets the widely observed behavioral tendency of
blame avoidance in politics’ (Hood 2007, 191). As such, attention is drawn to the unintended negative effects of the disclosure of PI that occur when performance management systems operate based on false assumptions about the impact of the production of publicly-available PI on politicians’ decision-making (Franco-Santos and Otley 2018).

**Theory and Hypothesis**

**The Motivational Mechanisms Underlying Politicians’ Reactions to Performance Information**

One of the main assumptions underlying performance management is that PI will assist political decision-makers in making better-informed decisions about resource and effort allocation (Moynihan 2008; Nielsen and Baekgaard 2015). Specifically, social comparative PI (whereby, for example, a specific performance point is positioned in the best, middle, or worst third of a group of actors in a performance category) is expected to stimulate performance by fostering learning, effective decision-making, and informed interventions, as it provides political decision-makers with social reference points that act as evaluative standards (Askim 2009; Eyring and Narayanan 2018; Geys and Sørensen 2018; Olsen 2017a). Such accurate self-evaluations based on social comparison with peers are deemed of particular relevance to goal-based learning by politicians (Brown et al. 2007), as the ability to identify low and high performers warns ‘politicians when the performance of organizations and/or individuals falls below the expected level of performance and enable[s] them to take corrective action’ (Bjørnholt, Baekgaard, and Houlberg 2016, 563). In reality, however, research indicates that political decision-makers often use PI politically rather than purposely.

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1 Comparative PI can also be based on historical reference points whereby historical performance on the same performance indicators is evaluated. Given that research shows ‘that social reference points are almost twice as important in citizens’ evaluations as historical reference points’ (Olson 2017a, 565) and that politicians are often presented with social comparative PI (Nielsen and Baekgaard 2015), the study at hand focuses only on social comparative PI.
(Moynihan et al. 2012) as politicians’ reaction to PI is driven largely by their inherent predisposition to avoiding blame (Hood 2007; 2011; Nielsen and Baekgaard 2015). Following this blame-avoidance perspective (Weaver 1986), it is argued that a key element of understanding how PI impacts politicians’ preferences, attitudes, and behavior is the widespread presence of a negativity bias (Hood 2007; Hood, 2011). Negativity bias encompasses the notion that ‘negative events are more salient, potent, dominant in combinations, and generally efficacious than positive events’ (Rozin and Royzman 2001, 297). Given that negative events have an asymmetrically more negative impact on policy evaluations by citizens and the media (James et al. 2016; Olsen, 2017a), which, in turn, might evoke more complaints and, thus, lead to reputational loss, weaker positions of politicians, and, ultimately, damaged re-election chances and career opportunities (Soroka 2006), politicians are strongly driven by blame avoidance (Hood 2007). Moreover, given the unequal weighing of blame and credit by citizens (Geys and Sørensen 2018; Hood 2011; James et al. 2016), ‘policymakers will let their behavior be overly influenced by the avoidance of blame’ (Olsen 2017b, 4). A growing body of empirical evidence supports this perspective and indicates that ‘rational politicians are […] blame minimizers rather than credit-claiming maximizers’ (Nielsen and Moynihan 2017a, 271). Nielsen and Baekgaard (2015) and George et al. (2017), for example, find evidence of blame-avoidance and negativity bias impacting politicians’ attitudes towards spending and reform, while other research indicates that negative PI significantly affects preferences for governance-related reforms (Geys and Sørensen 2018) and politicians’ responsibility attribution processes (Nielsen and Moynihan 2017a; 2017b). Moreover, these studies find no or only limited evidence for credit-claiming behavior by political decision-makers.

A common denominator of studies within this research stream is that they perceive the provision of PI as an external intervention that is expected to trigger extrinsically motivated
behavior: Politicians are expected to respond to PI, and especially PI signaling low performance, due to their desire to avoid the loss of a reward (Nielsen and Moynihan 2017a; Geys and Sørensen 2018; Nielsen and Moynihan 2015). This causality implies that the impact of PI on political decision-makers’ attitudes, preferences, and behaviors is contingent upon the degree of external attention that PI is expected to attract. Conversely, if PI is not expected to attract any external attention, the provision of PI will probably not elicit any behavioral or attitudinal adjustments, as the provided PI does not signal an opportunity for utility maximization or blame-avoidance. Bureaucratic-organizational performance indicators, such as strategic plan specificity, which have a low propensity for attracting external attention because they evaluate an internal process-oriented activity with a limited direct impact on stakeholders, are, thus, not expected to impact the decision-making processes of politicians due to the absence of blame-related (evoked by PI signaling low or average performance) and credit-related (evoked by PI signaling high performance) motivational mechanisms. Consequently, we hypothesize that:

**H1**: PI about strategic plan specificity has no impact on politicians’ attitudes towards engagement in strategic board roles regardless of the valence of the provided information.

We argued previously that blame-avoidance theory interprets behavioral and attitudinal adjustments due to PI as extrinsically motivated behavior given that these adjustments are driven by external reward contingencies. However, SDT (Ryan and Deci 2000a; 2000b) argues that extrinsic motivation is not a unidimensional concept (Ntoumanis 2002) but, rather, an overarching term referring to different motivational processes or regulatory styles (i.e., external regulation, introjected regulation, and identified regulation) (Ryan and Deci 2000a; 2000b). These regulatory styles have in common the fact that ‘they can be classified as extrinsic motivations because they do not involve engaging in [an] activity for its own sake (i.e. they are not intrinsically motivated)’ but vary in the degree to which they are autonomous and internalized (Sheldon et al. 2003, 363). The most extrinsic—
and, thus, non-internalized—form of motivation is external regulation (Ntoumanis 2002). External regulation is the type of motivation that is most often referred to when extrinsic motivation is discussed. The motivational mechanisms triggered by blame-avoidance can be viewed as a form of external regulation: Attitudinal and behavioral adjustments are a direct response to external pressures whereby adjustments are actuated by a desire to obtain a desired consequence (e.g., an outside reward) or to avoid an undesired one (e.g., an outside punishment) (Cantarelli, Belle, and Longo 2019; Chen and Bozeman 2013; Gagné and Deci 2005; Sheldon et al. 2003).

Based on the blame-avoidance behavior of politicians (Weaver 1986), we argued that PI susceptible to external attention will trigger attitudinal and behavioral adjustments while PI with a low propensity for generating external attention will have no impact due to the absence of blame and credit dynamics. SDT (Ryan and Deci 2000), however, argues that even if no direct external reward or punishment is at play, individuals can be motivated to engage in specific behavior as a result of an internal reward or punishment system (i.e., introjected regulation) or because they find a specific behavior to be valuable (i.e., identified regulation). Within this perspective, it is suggested that even in the absence of external credit and blame dynamics, PI with a low propensity for external attention could still impact politicians’ preferences, attitudes, and behavior based on more internalized forms of extrinsic motivation. One explanation for the potential impact of PI with a low propensity for external attention is that such information can prompt introjected regulation. Introjected regulation is a motivational mechanism activated by internal feelings (e.g., pride, guilt, and/or a need for self-approval from others) (Cantarelli, Belle, and Longo 2019; Chen and Bozeman 2013; Gagné and Deci 2005) caused by external sources. Consequently, the provision of PI could be viewed as an intervention that responds, by introducing social reference points, to individuals’ ‘fundamental drive to evaluate […] themselves against similar others’ and their desire, in general, to do better than others (Brown et al. 2007, 60), as well as a desire to avoid/generate ‘feelings of utility (disutility) from being ahead (behind) of others’ (Azmat and Iriberri 2010, 436). Politicians are expected to be susceptible to external regulation as ego and perceived competence offer, in part, an explanation for politicians’ behavior. Van der Wal (2017), for example, indicated that politicians are often driven by the supposition that they have valuable skills and expertise which can benefit society. Consequently, negative feedback may have a harmful effect on politicians’ self-confidence or trigger feelings of competitiveness which, in turn, may prompt corrective action. In a recent study, Baekgaard,
Larsen and Mortensen (2019) provide individual-level evidence of such negative feedback effect amongst politicians.

Accordingly, in the absence of blame dynamics, PI signaling low or average strategic plan specificity could, thus, impact politicians’ attitudes towards engagement in strategic board roles because unfavorable upward social comparisons can generate feelings of disutility and uncertainty rooted in guilt, a need for self-approval from others, and/or not meeting expectations (Azmat and Iriberri 2010; Eyring and Narayanan 2018). To reduce these negative feelings about their performance as board members and strategic actors, politicians could display a higher intention to invest in strategic board roles. Investing in strategic participation increases politicians’ influence on the content and format of their strategic plan, while higher levels of strategic control can reduce feelings of uncertainty about the fact that the current strategic plan does not seem to allow for the effective monitoring of the organization’s performance. By contrast, favorable comparisons, based on PI signaling high performance, will have no discernible impact on politicians’ intentions to invest in strategic board roles given the increasing proof that ‘rational politicians are [...] blame minimizers rather than credit-claiming maximizers’ (Nielsen and Moynihan 2017a, 271).

A second theoretical explanation for the potential impact of PI with a low propensity to attract external attention could be its ability to prompt identified regulation. In contrast to external and introjected regulation, individuals with an identified motivation have a greater degree of volition to perform a specific behavior (Gagné and Deci 2005): They perform a behavior because they “want” to as opposed to because they feel as though they ”ought” to (Moran et al. 2012). Even if a behavior is not viewed as particularly interesting or is not associated with direct benefits, identified regulation prompts specific attitudinal and behavioral adjustments because individuals perceive this behavior as being valuable and important (Cantarelli, Belle, and Longo 2019; Gagné and Deci 2005). This could also be the case with strategic planning. Although many scholars have argued that politicians will resist the adoption of management tools (Diefenbach 2009; Pollitt and Bouckaert 2011) ‘because the underlying managerial rationality appears to be at odds with the reality of politics and public decision-making’ (Desmidt and Meyfroodt 2020, 6) dictating that politicians are driven primarily by the desire to attract voters, realize policy preferences, and/or gain political advantages (Hansen and Ejersbo 2002), evidence indicates that political decision-makers can see the potentially instrumental value of management tools and view strategic planning as a facilitator of sound governance (Liguori, Sicilia, and Steccolini 2009). Recent
research indicates that local politicians are not, per definition, opposed to strategic planning but, rather, are relatively supportive of strategic planning processes and believe that the adoption of strategic planning processes can benefit the performance of their municipality (Desmidt and Meyfroodt 2020). Consequently, PI signaling low or average plan specificity could prompt politicians to invest more in strategic board roles, as lower levels of strategic plan specificity could be detrimental to the “instrumental efficiency” of strategic planning processes and, thus, the achievement of higher-order goals. This perspective resonates with prior academic work stating that politicians are not driven exclusively by individual utility maximization but also often by a desire to “do good” and contribute, improve or serve society (van der Wal 2013). Building on SDT, Grant (2007; 2008) characterized such a desire to provide meaningful public service as a state of introjected or identified regulation (Cantarelli, Belle, and Longo 2019) that will lead to a higher willingness to use PI and to the acceptance of the cognitive burdens associated with the disruption of existing patterns of decision-making due to conclusions derived from PI (Moynihan et al. 2012). Based on insights derived from SDT and negativity bias, we, thus, hypothesize that:

**H2a:** PI about strategic plan specificity signaling low or average performance has a positive impact on politicians’ attitudes towards engagement in strategic board roles.

**H2b:** PI about strategic plan specificity signaling high performance has no impact on politicians’ attitudes towards engagement in strategic board roles.

The Moderating Effect of Publicly Disclosing PI

Given the negative effect of politicians’ potential neglect of PI with a low propensity for attracting media attention on good governance, the question is raised of how this effect can be counterbalanced. Many public management scholars and practitioners point in the direction of transparency by arguing that transparency can act as a catalyst for good governance (da Cruz et al. 2016; Grimmelikhuijsen and Welch 2012). In an attempt to strengthen transparency (and, thus, accountability), many governments now extensively disclose information to citizens about how they are performing (Barrows et al. 2016; de Boer
et al. 2018; Grimmelikhuijsen and Welch 2012; Hood 2007) by means of online websites, as such information technology enables ‘the provision of government information to the public at relatively low cost, without the traditional boundaries of space and time’ (Grimmelikhuijsen and Welch 2012, 563). Hood (2007) argues that such attempts to increase transparency are driven predominantly by a desire to create a lever that induces performance improvements. Specifically, the production of publicly-available PI is expected to increase citizens’ capability for holding public providers accountable, which, in turn, will stimulate politicians to improve performance (de Boer et al. 2018; James and Mosely 2014; Lewis 2019). Increasing the susceptibility of PI to attract public scrutiny is, therefore, expected to motivate politicians to pay attention to PI that previously left them indifferent or to magnify the existing effect of PI on politicians’ preferences, attitudes, and behavior (Mizrahi and Minchuk 2019).

The question, however, of whether ‘the diffusion of performance disclosure to less [eye-catching] policy areas is an effective way of enhancing performance and achieving policy goals’ has remained largely unanswered (Olsen 2013, 4). According to blame-avoidance theory, a dissemination strategy will impact politicians’ behavior only if politicians are convinced that disclosing PI on government websites has the potential to generate external attention and, thus, could result in reputational damage. However, if politicians assume that such organizational-bureaucratic PI is not of interest to stakeholders and the media, and, thus, will not motivate citizens to withhold resources, voice concerns (Barrows et al. 2016), or attribute credit, then shifting PI from the organizational sphere to the public domain will not motivate politicians to display any behavioral or attitudinal adjustments. Research by James and Mosely (2014) corroborates this by indicating that the collective citizen voice is not a behavioral response to PI signaling low public performance, while Mizrahi and Minchuk (2019) concluded that ‘the usefulness of performance reporting
mechanisms as a major tool for strengthening accountability’ is questionable given that citizens ascribe relatively little value to this kind of PI. Hence, we hypothesize that:

**H3: Informing politicians that PI about strategic plan specificity will be publicly disclosed does not impact the relationship between the provision of PI and politicians’ attitudes towards engagement in strategic board roles regardless of the valence of the provided information.**

However, conversely, if politicians do think that the public disclosure of PI has the potential to activate stakeholders and the media, the public disclosure of PI could be an effective strategy to motivate politicians to address performance shortcomings due to the increased blame potential. Research findings suggest that ‘politicians […] have good reason to be concerned about information revealing poor performance’ (James and Mosely 2014, 505). Given that citizens often do not know how to assess the performance of government activities, the provision of comparative PI increases citizens’ ability to hold public providers accountable (James 2011; Olson 2017c). In particular, ‘performance information across different local units offers a benchmark to anchor judgements about local responsibility, with extreme relative performance suggesting to citizens that the provider’s conduct is a substantial part of the reason for the extreme performance’ (James and Mosely 2014, 497). Moreover, even if politicians are already motivated by introjected or identified regulation to address performance shortcomings, an increased blame potential could strengthen the magnitude of this relationship, as behavior is often the result of a combination of regulatory mechanisms (Ryan and Deci 2000a; 2000b). Based on these arguments and the fact that policymakers will let their behavior be overly influenced by the avoidance of blame rather than by the gain of credit (Olsen 2017b, 4), we hypothesize that:
**H4a:** Informing politicians that PI will be publicly disclosed reinforces the positive impact of PI signaling low or average strategic plan specificity on politicians’ attitudes towards engagement in strategic board roles.

**H4b:** Informing politicians that PI will be publicly disclosed does not impact the relationship between PI signaling high strategic plan specificity and politicians’ attitudes towards engagement in strategic board roles.

**Research Design and Data**

**Empirical Context**

**Case Setting**

In line with the governance approach propagated by strategic planning (Bryson, Edwards, and Van Slyke 2018), the Flemish government (i.e., the highest authority within the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium) mandated Flemish local governments to adopt, as of 2014, an integrated policy and management cycle. The central goal of this administrative reform was not only to foster a more rational approach to strategic decision-making and strategy implementation but also to increase the internal and external transparency of the strategic planning processes of Flemish local authorities. A pivotal element within the integrated policy and management cycle is the development of a multiannual strategic plan (subject to content and development process guidelines) for the period 2014-2019 (George, Desmidt, and De Moyer 2016). In practice, the political parties that form a coalition government, which are the vast majority of Flemish local governments, develop a coalition agreement stating their most important policy goals (Meyfroodt, Desmidt, and Goeminne 2019). These coalition agreements form the starting point for the development of a multiannual strategic plan. These multiannual strategic plans, in turn, are drafted by a planning team chaired by the local authority’s senior manager, while the local council is legally responsible for the approval of the strategic plan, its implementation, and annual plan adjustments. Hence,
Flemish local councilors are expected to be active strategic actors who contribute to the strategic processes of the organization by engaging in specific strategic board roles (i.e., strategic participation and strategic control) (Huse 2005; Minichilli, Zattoni, and Zona 2009).

Given that one of the underlying tenets of public strategic planning is the assumption that the adoption of management systems increases organizational learning and fosters decision quality (Bryson, Edwards, and Van Slyke 2018), the Agency for Local and Provincial Governance conducted a content analysis of the mandatory strategic and financial documents developed by all Flemish local authorities with the aim of developing a benchmark tool intended to provide local officials and administrators with the opportunity to evaluate the specificity of their local authority’s strategic plan. Initially, the developed rankings would be disclosed only to (local) officials and administrators. However, in a second phase, the Agency for Local and Provincial Governance decided to develop a website containing the strategic plans of all Flemish authorities as well as an interactive tool allowing for the comparison of (performance) data from different local authorities and consult rankings. The main goal of this website was to increase policy content transparency (Grimmelikhuijsen and Welch 2012) by enabling citizens to consult and evaluate the strategic plans of Flemish authorities.

Testing the formulated hypotheses in this specific case setting offers several advantages. First, the decision to publicly disclose PI regarding strategic plan specificity mirrors a wider observed tendency amongst regulating governments and agencies to shift PI from rather secluded bureaucratic settings to public fora (Hood 2007). Second, it provides a unique opportunity to assess whether the provision of bureaucratic-organizational PI activates a motivational mechanism based on introjected and/or identified regulation. The design allows for the isolation of these motivational effects from extrinsic regulatory mechanisms (i.e., blame avoidance) because (a) the introduced performance indicator reports on
performance regarding a government activity with, at the time of data collection, very limited public exposure and a low propensity to generate media attention, (b) councilors have no historical reference points (Olsen 2017a) because it is the first time that councilors are confronted with this type of PI, and (c) no direct reward or punishment is linked to an authority’s ranking. Third, given that data were collected shortly before the public disclosure of the PI on strategic plan specificity, the case setting provided a unique opportunity to experimentally assess (based on true information) whether and how the public disclosure of PI with an otherwise low propensity to generate media attention affects councilors’ motivation to address performance issues.

Data Collection

One type of local authority subjected to the legislative provisions of the Flemish regional government consists of Public Centers for Social Welfare (PCSW). PCSW are responsible for social services within the geographical boundaries of a municipality. Each PCSW is governed by a PCSW council consisting of 9 to 15 members (depending on the population size of the municipality). After municipal elections (term of office of six years), the new city council appoints politicians as members of the PCSW council. The allocation of seats in the PCSW council is based on the electoral results of the political parties represented in the city council. The politicians appointed in the PCSW council are responsible for overseeing the funding, resource allocation, and organization of social services within their PCSW.

An invitation to complete an online survey was sent to (nearly) all council members of the 308 Flemish PCSW in November/December 2017. We stipulate that the survey experiment was sent to ‘nearly’ all council members of the 308 Flemish PCSW because a database containing the email addresses of all PCSW council members is not publicly available. Hence, we supplemented a database containing demographic information about all
3,072 PCSW council members (developed by the Flemish Agency for Local and Provincial Governance) with the council members’ email addresses. We derived these email addresses from personal, municipal, and political party websites. By scanning these websites, we were able to identify the email addresses of 2,921 council members (success rate of 95%). After sending an invitation email and four reminders, we received 799 valid responses (response rate of 27.4%). The respondents are nested within 275 PCSW (89% of all PCSW) while the number of respondents per PCSW ranges from 1 to 8 (average of 2.9). Forty-eight percent of the respondents are female and the average age of the respondents is 53 years (SD = 12.3, range 23-80).

To determine the representativeness of the sample, we assessed the differences between respondents and non-respondents by conducting logistic regressions whereby the coefficients (relating to individual and municipal characteristics) predict the likelihood of having responded to the survey. Information about the characteristics of the population and the municipalities in which they are nested is derived from publicly accessible databases developed by the Flemish Agency for Local and Provincial Governance (reference year is 2017). Table 1 provides the details of the conducted logistic regressions.

[INSERT TABLE 1]

The results indicate that there are no significant differences between respondents and non-respondents with respect to municipal characteristics. There are also no significant differences between the sample and the population regarding the majority of the included political parties, though council members belonging to the NVA (a right-winged party) and Groen (a left-winged party) seem to be slightly underrepresented in the sample.
Independent Variables: Experimental Treatments and Randomization

The developed survey contained two treatments: a PI cue and an information cue regarding the public disclosure of PI. The PI cue is based on a content analysis of PCSW’s strategic plans conducted by the Flemish Agency for Local and Provincial Governance. More specifically, Flemish legislation advises that the strategic plans of local authorities should include strategic policy priorities and earmarked investments. Strategic policy priorities are policy goals that the council must actively and continuously monitor. Given their importance, strategic policy priorities must be specified in clear organizational goals and translated into targets and indicators so that the goals can be linked to performance outcomes and earmarked investments. This approach facilitates councilors’ task to take action and influence achievements against targets (Walker, Jung, and Boyne 2013) as well as to monitor the deployment of financial resources. The use of strategic policy priorities, performance indicators, and earmarked investment increases the degree of policy content transparency (Grimmelikhuijsen and Welch 2012), which, in turn, facilitates internal control and external accountability. Accordingly, strategic plan specificity indicates the extent to which (in relation to other local authorities) a local authority’s strategic plan contains strategic policy priorities that are specified in clear organizational goals, targets, indicators, and earmarked investments.

Based on the analyses of strategic plan specificity conducted by the Flemish Agency for Local and Provincial Governance, we divided the 308 PCSW into three performance groups of equal size: the lowest, middle, and highest performing thirds. The use of such performance categories allows for (1) the investigation of three basic categories of performance signals (i.e., low, average, and high) while sufficiently large subsamples are upheld (George et al. 2017; Nielsen and Baekgaard 2015) and (2) a focus on ‘the basic performance categories that the media and other actors typically focus on’ (Nielsen and
Moynihan 2017a, 274). The use of a ranking based on the analysis of the actual strategic plans by the Flemish Agency for Local and Provincial Governance offers the additional advantage of the fact that the administered PI cues are based on real performance indicators, which eliminates ethical concerns regarding the ‘detrimental effects of deceiving political decision-makers’ (George et al. 2018, 12).

Within each of the three performance groups (low, average, and high), all respondents were randomly assigned to either the control group (subgroups 1 to 3), treatment group 1 (subgroups 4 to 6), or treatment group 2 (subgroups 7 to 9). Separate models for each of the three performance groups were estimated so that treatment groups were compared only to a control group with the same performance level (Nielsen and Moynihan 2017a). We decided to adopt this approach to counterbalance the fact that respondents of the control group could potentially have existing notions about the specificity of their PCSW’s strategic plan. By comparing control and treatment groups within only the same performance group, we can isolate the effect of the treatments and the effect of the type of performance information that the respondents received.

Respondents from all nine subgroups received an identical introduction ‘to ensure that only the performance cue varies between the treatment and control groups and not the general cue to think about performance measurement as such’ (Nielsen and Moynihan 2017a, 274). Additionally, the respondents in treatment group 1 received information about the score of their PCSW’s strategic plan (i.e., best, middle, or worst third), while respondents in treatment group 2 also received information indicating that the relative performance indicators would be disclosed to external stakeholders and parties via a website hosted by the Agency for Local and Provincial Governances allowing for the comparison of local authorities. Full descriptions of these conditions as well as the vignettes can be found in the supplementary appendix S1.
Measuring the Dependent Variable

Politicians’ attitudes towards the council’s engagement in strategic board roles are measured using five items (seven-point Likert scale, ranging from fully disagree to fully agree). These items are derived from the literature on board role expectations, which generally makes a distinction between board service tasks and control tasks (Huse 2005; Minichilli, Zattoni, and Zona 2009). Board service roles, which build on resource dependence theory, include offering advice and counsel (Huse 2005). One specific form of board advice and council is the board’s strategic participation role, which denotes a board’s ‘involvement in the different phases of the strategic decision process (i.e. the formulating, evaluating and implementing)’ (Minichilli, Zattoni, and Zona 2009, 58). Board control roles are based on agency theory and include behavioral control (e.g., monitoring senior management behavior) and output control (e.g., monitoring the organization’s financial performance) (Huse 2005; Minichilli, Zattoni, and Zona 2009). The selected items were based on a previous study analyzing board roles (Minichilli, Zattoni, and Zona 2009) and extended to fit the specific context of this study. Respondent answers were scored and summed to yield a Summated Rating Score, which is used to index the respondents’ attitudes towards the behavior of interest. See supplementary appendix S2 for a full description of the items.

Analyses

As the data of this study has a nested structure (i.e., council members are clustered within municipalities) the intraclass correlation coefficient (ICC) was calculated for each performance group to assess the degree to which respondents from a subgroup resemble each other each other in terms of a quantitative trait (i.e., the dependent variable). The results\(^2\) indicate that the variability between the subgroups is limited and that the nested structure of

\(^2\) Low-performance group ICC[1] = .11; Average-performance group ICC[1] = .03; High-performance group ICC[1] = .07; All performance groups combined ICC[1] = .06. Threshold values are ≥ .10 for a small effect, ≥ .30 for a medium effect, and ≥ .50 for a large effect (Murphy, Myors, and Wolach, 2014).
the data will probably not, or only to a limited extent, impact the results of statistical analyses. Consequently, the regression models presented below do not account for clustering. However, to be able to rule out any effects of clustering, supplementary appendix S3 presents regression models using a robust method for estimating the standard errors of the parameter estimates. Analysis indicates that the statistical results do not differ between models with and without clustering.

**Balance and Manipulation Checks**

The validity of the results of every survey experiment is dependent on the fulfilment of two important conditions: (1) the successful randomization of respondents between control and treatment groups, and (2) the effectiveness of the treatment embedded in the survey experiment. First, we assessed whether the control and treatment groups balance by conducting a series of logistic regressions predicting the likelihood of being in the treatment group. Table 2 indicates that there are no significant differences ($p < .05$) between the different treatment groups and their corresponding control groups with respect to individual and municipal characteristics.

[INSERT TABLE 2]

Second, for an information treatment to have any impact on a selected dependent variable, two specific conditions must be met (George et al. 2017): (1) Respondents in the experimental group must be aware of and understand the information presented in the treatment, and (2) the information embedded in the treatment cannot be common knowledge among respondents of the control group or it will be impossible to isolate the impact of the information treatment. To assess whether the current study meets these conditions, a manipulation check was included in the survey experiment. Specifically, respondents from
both the control and treatment groups were asked (after the information treatment) to indicate on a seven-point scale (ranging from “fully disagree” to “fully agree”) to score the following statement: ‘In comparison with the multiannual strategic plans of other PCSW, the multiannual strategic plan of the PCSW of [name of respondent’s municipality] can be considered detailed and transparent’. If both conditions are met, we would expect that respondents from the treatment group who received the information that the overall specificity score of their PCSW’s strategic plan is low (providing that they had read and understood the provided treatment information) would significantly disagree more with this statement than would respondents from the corresponding control group (providing that respondents from the control group were not aware of the low specificity score of their PCSW’s strategic plan). Conversely, respondents receiving the information that the specificity score of their PCSW’s strategic plan is high were expected to significantly agree more with the provided statement than would their corresponding control group, while respondents in the average-treatment group were not expected to differ significantly from the corresponding control group. The results of the conducted analyses, displayed in Table 3, confirm these assumptions and provide evidence of the effectiveness of the information treatment.

[INSERT TABLE 3]

Given that the estimates of ordinal regressions are often difficult to interpret, the results are discussed using odds ratios. The analyses reveal that the odds that respondents from the low-performance treatment group would indicate that their PCSW’s strategic plan is detailed are significantly lower than those of respondents from the corresponding control group (Exp(B) = .331 times, 95% CI, .195 to .562, p = .000). Conversely, the odds that respondents from the high-performance treatment group would indicate that their PCSW’s
multiannual strategic plan is detailed are 2.769 times (95% CI, 1.732 to 4.426, p = .000) higher than those of respondents from the corresponding control group. Meanwhile, in the subgroup ‘average’, no significant difference (at 95% confidence level) is detected between the control and treatment group (95% CI, .400 to 1.006, p = .111).

**Analyses of Hypotheses**

The collected data are analyzed using generalized linear modelling and the results of these analyses are reported in Table 4. To provide a more intuitive presentation of the results reported in Table 4, the treatment and control group averages are illustrated in Figure 1.

[INSERT TABLE 4]

[INSERT FIGURE 1: Figure 1. Impact of PI treatments (group means and 95% CI)]

One of the main goals of this study is to assess whether the provision of a performance cue about a government activity with a low propensity to generate external attention impacts the decision-making of politicians. The results in Table 4 show that the general provision of PI about strategic plan specificity has no significant impact on councilors’ attitudes (relative to the control group) towards engagement in strategic board roles. However, the effect of treatment 1 (i.e., the provision of PI) is significant when the valence of the provided PI is taken into account and when respondents from the treatment group are compared to their non-treated counterparts in the same performance group. The fact that the group means of the three control groups (i.e., low, average, high) differ significantly (one-way ANOVA, F(2,235) = 5.913, p = .003) provides evidence that it is relevant to analyze the data as three sub-experiments based on performance level. Post hoc comparisons using the Tukey HSD test indicate that the mean score for the high-performance condition (M = 23.40, SD = .48) is significantly different from those of the low (M = 21.42, SD = .55) and average conditions (M = 21.28, SD = .47), while the low and average performance conditions do not differ significantly. Specifically, the findings of the analysis at the performance
subgroup level indicate that PI with a low propensity for generating external attention can affect the decision-making processes of political decision-makers as the performance cue about strategic plan specificity affects councilors’ attitudes (relative to their performance control group) towards engagement in strategic board roles (i.e., H1 is not supported). The direction of the identified effect, however, is contingent upon the valence of the provided PI. A performance cue signaling low or average performance triggers a motivational mechanism that positively impacts councilors’ attitudes (relative to their non-treated counterparts) towards engagement in board roles (i.e., H2a is supported). By contrast, PI that signals high performance has a significant negative effect (i.e., H2b is not supported). When councilors are informed that their organization’s strategic plan is ranked in the highest-scoring performance group, their willingness to invest in board service and control tasks is (relative to the high-performance control group) significantly lower. The fact that PI signaling low or average performance increases councilors’ willingness to invest in board service and control tasks, while PI signaling high performance has the opposite effect, suggests that negativity bias moderates the impact of PI on councilors’ attitudes.

The second goal of this study was to assess whether the public disclosure of PI with a low propensity for generating external attention moderates the effect of PI on councilors’ attitudes towards engagement in strategic board roles. Again, Table 4 shows that if the valence of PI is not taken into account, shifting PI from the private-organizational sphere to public fora has no significant effect. The attitudes towards board engagement of councilors in treatment group 2 (i.e., received the performance cue and the information that PI will be publicly disclosed) do not differ significantly from the attitudes of the councilors in treatment group 1 (i.e., performance cue) and the control group (i.e., no information cue). However, when the valence of PI is taken into account, the results indicate that the public disclosure of PI does impact the relationship between the provision of PI and councilors’ attitudes towards
strategic board engagement (i.e., H3 is not supported), though only for the low-performance condition. In contrast to what was hypothesized, informing councilors that PI signaling low performance will be publicly disclosed has a negative effect on councilors’ attitudes (in comparison to their counterparts who received only the performance cue) towards strategic board engagement. Public disclosure of PI signaling low performance seems to eliminate the positive effect of the performance treatment, as the attitudes of the councilors in treatment group 2 (i.e., performance cue and public disclosure cue) do not differ significantly from the attitudes of those in the control group, while councilors in treatment group 1 (i.e., performance cue) scored significantly higher than did the control group. As indicated, the effect of performance disclosure is significant only for the low-performance subgroup. Public disclosure of PI does not affect the councilors in the average performance group. The findings indicate that providing councilors with PI about strategic plan specificity has a positive effect on their attitudes towards board role engagement (in comparison to the control group) but that the magnitude of the effect is not impacted by informing councilors that the provided PI will be publicly disclosed. Given the detected negative effect of public disclosure of PI on the attitudes of councilors in the low-performance group and the non-significant effect within the average-performance group, Hypothesis 4a is not supported. As expected, the public disclosure of PI signaling high performance does not significantly increase or decrease the effect of the provision of PI on councilors’ attitudes towards board engagement (i.e., H4b is supported).

Discussion and conclusion

Governments worldwide have invested a lot of resources into the creation of publicly-available PI based on the premises that PI will assist politicians in making more informed decisions (Nielsen and Baekgaard 2015) and that the public disclosure of PI will create a mechanism, based on improved transparency and accountability, that increases politicians’
responsiveness to PI (Lewis, 2019). Although these assumptions are deeply embedded in organizational reality and are at the heart of many performance management reforms, theoretical and empirical insights into whether and how PI, especially in the absence of blame dynamics, affects the decision-making of politicians are still limited (Nielsen and Moynihan 2017), while the effectiveness of public disclosure of PI as a strategy to stimulate the impact of PI has been contested (Olson, 2013). To our knowledge, this is the first study to examine these research gaps by analyzing whether (a) PI with a low propensity for media attention still impacts politicians and (b) whether shifting PI to public fora increases the effect of PI on politicians while using an experimental approach to detect causal connections.

First, does PI still impact politicians when the potential for external blame or credit is limited? The results indicate that, notwithstanding the dominant assumption that politicians’ attention to PI is contingent upon the media attention that PI is expected to attract (Geys and Sørensen 2018; Nielsen and Baekgaard 2015; Olson 2013), PI with a low propensity for media attention still impacts politicians’ decision-making processes. Even when the potential for blame or credit is (largely) taken out of the equation, politicians respond to the provided PI cue. Thus, the findings indicate that other motivational mechanisms besides blame and credit dynamics are likely to influence politicians’ responses to PI. PI signaling low or average performance fosters politicians’ willingness to invest in a behavior that is not directly related to rewards or blame given that it is difficult to observe. The result indicates that even without the impending doom of external blame, politicians are willing to address performance shortcomings as well as to ‘reduce the relative and absolute quality, quantity, and efficiency of a given task’ (Askim, Johnsen, and Christophersen 2007, 300) when PI signals high performance. The opposite effect of PI signaling low and average performance, on the one hand, and PI signaling high performance, on the other hand, provides evidence that PI is, in this case setting, purposefully used by politicians to better target resources based
on goal-based learning. The question now arises as to how this effect can be explained. The study findings lend support to previous research arguing that politicians are driven not only by a self-serving interest to address the needs of political parties, the media, and/or specific voters but also by a community interest and a desire to cater to the needs of a broader public (Pedersen 2014; Ritz 2015). Building on SDT, Grant (2007) argued that such prosocial motivation can be viewed as a form of introjected regulation and/or identified regulation of behavior whereby individuals are driven by a desire to realize organizational/societal goals and not only by individual utility maximization. Consequently, the study findings illustrate that more fine-grained insights into the motivational mechanisms driving politicians’ behavior are needed. Despite the substantial value of studies building on blame-avoidance theory, the study findings highlight (based on SDT) the fact that blame-avoidance is not the only regulatory mechanism impacting politicians and that more research is needed into how different types of PI activate different regulatory mechanisms, as well as into their distinct impact on politicians’ decision-making.

Second, is the production of publicly-available PI an effective strategy to nudge politicians to pay more attention to PI about less prominent policy domains and government activities? Following the assertion that the more closely we are watched, the better we behave (Hood 2007), this study examined whether shifting PI from a “closed” bureaucratic-organizational setting to “open” public fora impacts the effect of PI on politicians’ attitudes towards the allocation of efforts. Despite the widespread assumption that public reporting of PI should impact politicians’ motivation to address performance issues (James and Mosely 2014; Lewis 2019; Mizrahi and Minchuk 2019), the results provide a more nuanced picture and indicate that public disclosure of PI about government activities that are less prone to public attention has no effect or even an unintended counterproductive effect depending on the valence of the provided PI. The results, thus, lend support to authors who questioned
whether disseminating PI on less prominent activities is a worthwhile strategy if the goal is to increase performance (Olsen 2013). Increasing the public accessibility of PI signaling average or high performance does not significantly alter the magnitude of the effect that such PI, with the same valence, has on politicians. This null effect could be rooted in the fact that, in accordance with blame-avoidance theory, the disclosed PI is, given its positive valence, not expected to generate negative attention or blame and, thus, does not act as an incentive to adjust behavioral intentions. However, the public disclosure of PI signaling low performance has an unanticipated negative effect. Although, aligned with blame-avoidance theory and the underlying concept of negativity bias, one would expect that the public disclosure of PI would provide an additional impetus for addressing performance failure, the results indicate that the public disclosure of PI almost completely erases the positive effect of the provision of PI. The introduction of a motivational mechanism based on external regulation (i.e., increased blame-potential) thus offsets the positive motivational effect, based on introjected and/or identified regulation, of the provision of PI. The difference in the effect of disclosing PI signaling low performance and providing not-publicly-disclosed PI could be rooted in politicians’ blame-avoidance behavior (Weaver 1986) and could constitute politicians’ attempt to distance themselves from negative performance by reducing their involvement in the underlying activity (James et al. 2016). A similar explanation can be found in the literature on work motivation that builds on SDT. Namely, in a multi-task environment in which subjects have discretion over how they allocate efforts across tasks, and in which specific tasks have a low external reward expectancy and/or high blame potential, negative valence feedback can trigger a coping mechanism whereby (to maintain a positive self-image) efforts are shifted to activities and performance indicators that allow one to affirm his or her competence and claim credit (Hannan et al. 2012).
Despite the relevance of the study findings, it is important to take into account the limitations of the study design when interpreting the results. First, despite a high level of internal validity and the potential to establish causal relationships, vignette experiments are often criticized for their low level of external generalizability (Thomsen, Baekgaard, and Jensen 2020). Hence, more research is needed to examine if the study findings are representative for other sorts of PI in different policy domains. Besides examining the potential impact of more objective PI characteristics, analyzing the impact of politicians’ preferences could also be a fruitful research avenue as prior research has indicated that political ideology and policy preferences impact politicians’ decisions and behavior (Baekgaard, Blom-Hansen and Serritzlew 2015; Sørensen and Bay 2002). Besides policy domain salience, a politician’s preference or passion for a specific policy domain could thus help explain politicians’ responsiveness to PI. Second, although the study’s vignettes are based on an actual policy intervention and real PI, the research design used only allows us to determine how politicians react to the information that PI will be publicly disclosed while, in reality, politicians’ reactions to this information are further shaped by subsequent events, additional information and learning curves. The developed research setting measures politicians’ initial reaction to an information cue that PI will be publicly disclosed but is not able to assess how ensuing information use by citizens will impact the detected effect. Will politicians’ initial reaction change when they notice that the website is not consulted by citizens or that citizens are not interested in this type of bureaucratic-organizational PI (Mizrahi, and Minchuk 2019)? Or will their reaction change when citizens do not blame the politician for low performance (Sievert et al. 2020)? What happens when interest group advocates downplay or highlight the importance of the disclosed PI (Nielsen, and Moynihan 2017a)? Third, the design is not able to assess if the identified attitudinal adjustment, which are a result of administrated treatments, will translate into actual behavior. The experimental
design also does not allow to determine how perishable the effect is (Meyer-Sahling, Mikkelsen, and Schuster 2019). Fourth, although the study findings provide evidence that other motivational mechanisms (than blame-avoidance) impact the attitudes and preferences of politicians, more research is needed to assess the kind of regulatory mechanism that is predominantly responsible for the results. Moreover, as the regulatory styles external, introjected and identified regulation form a continuum, more fine-grained research is needed to uncover how combinations or interactions of regulatory styles influence behavior as well as how underlying psychological needs (e.g., competence) form the foundation of the regulatory styles which impact the behavior of politicians. Fifth, although a specific strength of the independent variable of the study (i.e., strategic plan specificity) is the fact that this performance indicator is derived from an actual case setting and used in practice, it is also an example of the multitude of bureaucratic-organizational performance indicators which have been created in recent years and which have been used to bombard politicians with information but have been only to a limited extent subjected to “quality” assessments (i.e. reliability, validity, credibility) (van Thiel and Leeuw 2002). Although strategic plan specificity is presented as an indicator of strategic plan quality it is a crude measure that measures the degree of detail of a strategic plan and not the relevance of the selected strategic policy priorities nor the validity of the linked targets, indicators, and earmarked investments. Improper interpretations of strategic plan specificity scores by politicians could thus have unintended negative consequences. A fixation on improving the organization’s strategic plan specificity score, for example, could actually reduce attention for the quality of the strategic plan or even result in perverse learning whereby performance indicators are manipulated. On the contrary, a high strategic plan specificity score could inhibit further improvement of the organization’s strategic planning processes based on a false sense of accomplishment (Smith 1995). Future research should thus not only pay more attention to the potentially negative
consequences of performance information use by politicians but also to how the sprawl of performance measurement within public organizations may have diminished the quality of performance information and how this affects politicians’ decision-making processes.

The presented findings contribute to the literature in at least two ways. First, the findings contribute to recent calls for more insight into how PI affects the decision-making of politicians (Geys and Sørensen 2018; Nielsen and Moynihan 2017). The study complements existing research by focusing on the impact of PI that is related to government activities that have a low propensity for external attention. The results indicate that even in the absence of blame or credit dynamics, PI has the potential to impact politicians’ decision-making processes. These findings have far-reaching implications as they suggest that the motivational mechanisms underlying the behavior of politicians are more complex than suggested by blame-avoidance theory. Second, although the production of publicly-available PI is often driven by the premise that accessibility will foster performance by increasing accountability (Barrows et al. 2016; de Boer et al., 2018; Grimmelikhuijsen, and Welch 2012; Hood 2007), the study results indicate that the mere publication of certain types of PI is not only an ineffective strategy to influence politicians’ attitude, preferences and behavior, but that PI publication can even produce unintended/undesirable consequences. Hence, the results nuance the assumption that ‘the more closely we are watched, the better we behave’ (Bentham 2001, 277) and point to the potentially negative effects of publicly disclosing PI and thus, the need to further examine ‘what happens when the much-discussed doctrine of transparency as a key to good governance meets the widely observed behavioral tendency of blame-avoidance in politics’ (Hood 2007, 191).
Data Availability

The data underlying this article will be shared on reasonable request to the corresponding author.
References


https://doi.org/10.1093/jopart/muv038


https://doi.org/10.1093/jopart/muv036


https://doi.org/10.1093/jopart/mum012


https://doi.org/10.1093/jopart/muw028


Meyfroodt, K., Desmidt, S., S. Goeminne. 2019. Do Politicians See Eye to Eye? The Relationship between Political Group Characteristics, Perceived Strategic Plan


*Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* 25 (2): 545-569.
https://doi.org/10.1093/jopart/mut051


https://doi.org/10.1093/jopart/muy035


Table 1. Validity of the sample

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*Note: Logistic regression. * = p < .05, ** = p < .01 and *** = p < .001*
Table 2. Balance test (split by performance group).

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<td>N (PCSW)</td>
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Note: Logistic regression. * = p < .01, * = p < .05, ** = p < .01 and *** = p < .001
Table 3. Manipulation check: impact of the performance information treatment (split by performance group).

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<td>B</td>
<td>95% Confidence Interval</td>
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<td>Wald χ2</td>
<td>16.711*** (.000)</td>
<td>(.000)</td>
<td>3.743* (.053)</td>
<td>18.116*** (.000)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N (Politicians)</td>
<td>786</td>
<td></td>
<td>227</td>
<td>278</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N (PCSW)</td>
<td>274</td>
<td></td>
<td>87</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Ordinal regression. Standard errors are displayed between brackets. P-values are displayed between parentheses whereby * = p < .1, * = p < .05, ** = p < .01 and *** = p < .001
Table 4. Overview results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>All groups</th>
<th>Low performance group</th>
<th>Average performance group</th>
<th>High performance group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Treatment 1</td>
<td>Treatment 2</td>
<td>Treatment 2 vs. Treatment 1</td>
<td>Treatment 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>.548</td>
<td>.344</td>
<td>-2.04</td>
<td>1.862**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>p-value</td>
<td>.133</td>
<td>.344</td>
<td>.543</td>
<td>.006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N (politicians)</td>
<td>786</td>
<td>548</td>
<td>226</td>
<td>161</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N (municipalities)</td>
<td>274</td>
<td>184</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Ordinal regression. Standard errors are displayed between brackets. P-values: * = p < .01, * = p < .05, ** = p < .01 and *** = p < .001

TR1: effect of treatment 1 whereby the control group is the reference category
TR2: effect of treatment 2 whereby the control group is the reference category
TR2-TR1: effect of treatment 2 whereby treatment group 1 is the reference category