



GÖTEBORGS
UNIVERSITET

DEPARTMENT OF POLITICAL SCIENCE

SWEDISH MPS' PERCEPTIONS OF THEIR ABILITY TO ACT ON CLIMATE CHANGE

An interview study of external efficacy,
representation, and climate change

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| Master's Thesis: | 30 credits |
| Programme: | Master's Programme in Political Science |
| Date: | The third of March, 2023 |
| Supervisor: | Anna Bendz |
| Words: | 19 266 |

Abstract

National politicians are appointed to govern, but the ability to do so is not clear-cut. Previous studies have overlooked politicians' perceptions of this ability, called external efficacy. The purpose of this study is to explore how politicians perceive their external efficacy regarding climate change. The theoretical approach is that politicians' perceptions of external efficacy need to be related to their ideals of representation, since ideals that includes running public opinion from above implies a broader spectrum of abilities for which external efficacy is needed than ideals that do not. Additionally, it is theoretically argued that external efficacy has two dimensions, outcome efficacy and means efficacy. By conducting semi-structured respondent interviews with Swedish members of parliament, four general approaches to external efficacy regarding climate change are formulated. In addition, it is shown that ideals of running public opinion from above predominate, but when it comes to questions of lifestyle, the ideal is diverged from as lifestyle changes are seen as beyond their external efficacy. It is shown that electoral receptivity, defined as perceptions of the electorate's openness to opinion leadership, is the most important factor for the respondents' perceptions of their external efficacy regarding climate change. More specifically, it is argued that only measures that do not imply lifestyle changes are seen as possible, as the electorate is perceived as unreceptive regarding changes in lifestyle.

Keywords: External efficacy, representation, climate change, members of parliament, Sweden

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Introduction

If democratic rule is legitimized by output, political actors need to be able to govern. Politicians are appointed to represent the people by facilitating change, but their ability to actually do so is not clear-cut. Some suggest that the national political room to maneuver is increasingly limited by foreign principals (Ostrom et al 2002) due to globalization, Europeanization and the hegemony of liberal economic policy (Mair 2009; Hellwig 2015; Ezrow & Hellwig 2014; Steiner 2015:120). Wilson & Swyngedouw (2014) diagnose contemporary politics as *post-politics*, where politics is reduced to a management of economics rather than envisioning and creating a different society. In a similar vein, Habermas claimed that modern western politics consisted of a pragmatic ideological alignment among political actors. Instead of deliberating on a new society, politics settled with how to maintain the current order (1971). At the same time, others argue that the conditions for political change have not been undermined by forces such as globalization, since the policy responses to such challenges varies substantively across countries (Rothstein & Steinmo 2002; Garrett & Mitchell 2001). Others have shown that a state's administrative capacity to implement policy increases when its democratic institutions consolidate, making older democracies more capable to govern (Bäck & Hadenius 2008).

Even though the feasibility of political change is a crucial feature in democratic systems, few have studied how politicians themselves perceive their ability to govern. Alas, those who have (cf. Hellwig 2015; Willis 2018a; Willis 2018b; Willis 2020) I argue do not theorize this perceived ability with enough precision and broadness to make account for politicians' perceptions of their ability to govern as a whole. For instance, Willis looks at politicians' perceptions of their ability to bring about climate policy but use no theoretical concept for these perceptions. In contrast, Hellwig uses the concept of politicians' 'perceptions of the policy room to maneuver' to theorize how politicians perceive their ability to change society, but this concept is too narrow as it is limited to how politicians perceive the effect of globalization on their abilities. In a wider sense, the author has found no study that makes a theoretical account of how to conceptualize politicians' perceptions of their ability to govern as such.

This explorative study is a step towards filling this gap by conducting in-depth interviews with Swedish members of parliament (henceforth MPs) about how they perceive their ability to govern regarding the case of climate change. It is argued that the term external efficacy, “*the degree of influence people perceive to be able to exert, due to the actual functioning of the political system*” (Caprara et al 2009:1001) is useful to conceptualize politicians’ perceptions of their abilities. Apart from by making comparisons of statistical means with ordinary citizens, this term has not been applied in-depth on politicians before. Although these comparisons show that politicians feel more efficacious than citizens (Caprara et al 2009) there is still a vast array of unanswered questions. For instance, how politicians’ external efficacy ought to be theoretically understood as opposed to citizens, who unquestionably have disparate functions in the political system, is yet to be disentangled. The thesis also constitutes a methodological contribution, as politicians’ perceptions of their external efficacy has not been studied with interviews before, making this the first attempt to provide in-depth descriptions.

The thesis provides two theoretical contributions. First, the concept of external efficacy is related to the literature of political representation. It is argued that to understand politicians’ perceptions of their abilities, we also need to look at how they understand their role and what they are obliged to do (cf. Willis 2018b). In other words, what kind of ideals is it that the politicians perceive that they need to have the efficacy to fulfill? It is argued that the central division is if politicians ought to lead public opinion or not. Second, two dimensions of external efficacy are identified, which have been mixed together in previous studies; outcome efficacy and means efficacy. Outcome efficacy is defined as perceptions of one’s ability to reach a certain *outcome*, in this case sufficient (as defined by the politician) emission cuts. Means efficacy is defined as perceptions of one’s ability to strive towards the outcome with *means* that are desirable in the views of the politician. There are four logically possible permutations of the relationship between outcome efficacy and means efficacy, which are given shape and color by the interview material. In addition to these four general approaches to external efficacy, the thesis empirical contribution is to inform which factors in the political system the politicians can perceive as limiting or enabling, with a focus on climate change.

Thus, the purpose of this study is to explore how politicians perceive their external efficacy regarding climate change. The following research questions are investigated:

- 1) How do politicians perceive their external efficacy to bring about what they perceive as satisfying reductions of national carbon emissions with means they find desirable?
- 2) How do politicians' perceptions of external efficacy relate to their view of representation when it comes to climate change?

The first research question is designed to capture the two dimensions of external efficacy: outcome efficacy (to bring about 'satisfying reductions')¹ and means efficacy (through desirable means). The second research question is designed to provide an answer to how ideals of representation matter for perceptions of external efficacy in the case of climate change.

The thesis is focused on the issue of climate change since it is of extra-scientific importance to provide some insight into what politicians perceive as the main hindrances for the action not yet seen. As others have pointed out, very little is known about how politicians understand climate change in general (Jordan et al 2022:4; Fielding et al 2012:713; Willis 2020). Due to politicians' pivotal role as change-providers and the large impact of political elites on citizen's perceptions (Cohen 2003) it is surprising that scholars hitherto have neglected this operating actor. As politicians are the most 'crucial' among decisionmakers (Willis 2017:212ff), this omission needs to be corrected. Also, the response to climate change has so far been characterized by political failure, as the necessary society-wide and fast reduction of emissions has not yet occurred (Rogelj et al 2018). As such, it actualizes changes on an unprecedented scale that the appointed politicians need to materialize, making climate change a least likely case for external efficacy. This means that if politicians perceive themselves as efficacious regarding this issue, they are likely to believe that they are capable to govern other societal issues as well. When it comes to climate change, Jackson is right to ask “[i]s the vision of a captured, powerless, inefficient government the only one available to us?”

¹ The subjective definition of 'satisfying' reductions is motivated under the headline *Operationalizations*.

(2017:186). Nonetheless, as Jordan et al points out, “[i]t would be especially interesting to explore whether politicians even perceive themselves to be ‘trapped’” (2022:7).

In broader terms, it is crucial for the public to know whether their representatives perceive that they can govern society, because: 1) The public needs to be able to assess the conditions in which the politicians work to make sure that they are able to fulfill their tasks. If politicians find that they are inefficacious due to the political system, institutional change could be needed. 2) In connection to means efficacy, the belief that ‘there is no alternative’ could deprive elections from a qualitative choice. If politicians do not believe that they can create a variety of responses to for instance climate change, the voters are left without options regarding which type of society they prefer. 3) Finally, if politicians do not believe that they are capable of handling complicated issues such as climate change, they are unlikely to be motivated to prioritize them over more attainable goals without regard to the proportionately dire consequences of such a neglect.

In the results of the thesis, four general approaches to external efficacy are presented and analyzed. In addition, the results show that the MPs here interviewed perceive that they have outcome efficacy when it comes to climate change, but with an important exception: The electorate is seen as hard to influence, especially when it comes to lifestyle preferences. The politicians who believe that the best response to climate change requires lifestyle changes do not perceive themselves as having means efficacy. As the respondents perceive opinion leadership to be a part of their representative task, the unreceptive electorate is a limitation to their external efficacy since they cannot fulfill their ideal of representation fully. When it comes to questions of lifestyle, the ideal of running public opinion from above is discarded as lifestyle changes are seen as beyond their external efficacy.

The thesis precedes as follows. First, the theoretical approach is introduced. Then, previous research is presented, followed by the methodological approach and design. Thereafter the results are presented and discussed. Finally, the thesis ends with conclusions.

Theory

In the following section, the theoretical framework is presented. First, external efficacy is defined. Second, it is argued that external efficacy has two dimensions: Outcome efficacy and means efficacy. Lastly, the concept of representation is introduced. In this way, external efficacy can be related to the task at hand; What is it that the politicians need to have external efficacy to perform?

External efficacy – the perceived ability to represent

Political efficacy was originally defined as “*the feeling that individual political action does have, or can have, an impact upon the political process, i.e., that it is worthwhile to perform one’s civic duties. It is the feeling that political and social change is possible, and that the individual citizen can play a part in bringing about this change*” (Campbell et al. 1954:187). Evidently, the original definition was intended to denote perceptions among the electorate. To be applicable for politicians, some elaboration is needed.

Since introduced, the concept has been split into two categories (Lane 1959). Internal efficacy captures ‘*beliefs regarding the ability to achieve desired results in the political domain through personal engagement and an efficient use of one’s own capacities and resources*’ (Caprara et al 2009:1001). Although the assessment of one’s internal efficacy influences choices of courses of action, effort, and learning (Bandura 1982:123) as well as political participation (Caprara et al 2009:1002-1003) the psychological mechanisms of self-reliance is not the focus of the thesis, but rather if it is possible to influence society due to factors surrounding the individual.

External efficacy concerns “*the degree of influence people perceive to be able to exert, due to the actual functioning of the political system*” (Caprara et al 2009:1001). The functioning of the political system is mostly operationalized as perceptions of the government’s *willingness* to be responsive to citizens rather than their *ability* to do so (Moor 2016:643), and often in a way that equates it with perceptions of responsiveness (Esaiasson et al 2015). However, both aspects of the political system are important, as “*states have an ‘input structure’ that can be*

more closed or open to citizens' demands [willingness], and they have an 'output structure' that determines their ability to effectively produce political outcomes [ability]" (Moor 2016:643, my parentheses). So, for the electorate to have external efficacy, they need to perceive their representatives as willing to be responsive and able to produce outcomes due to the output structure. An output structure is strong "*when its internal organization allows it to effectively develop and implement public policy, when there are few external forces that inhibit this ability, and thus, when its decisions and actions have a strong impact on society"* (Moor 2016:645). Traits of the internal organization that are thought to make the output structure strong are centralized public administration, government control over economic actors and the relative autonomy of the judiciary (Kitschelt 1986:63-64). In a comparative study, one would have had to take the variation into account, but as this study is within one country, the output structure will remain constant for all respondents.

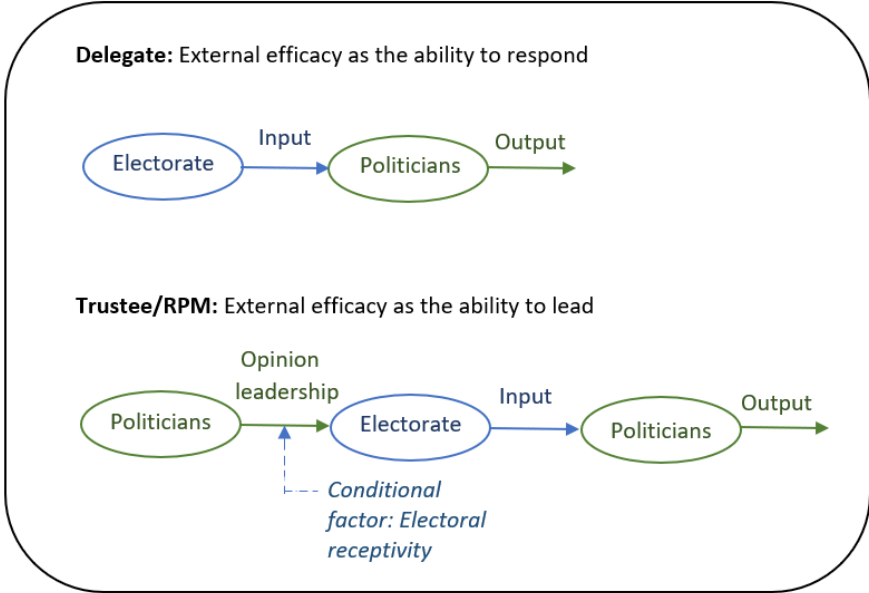
To conceptualize external efficacy so that it is applicable for politicians in a comprehensive way, both the 'ability' and the 'willingness' from the original definition needs to be included. By including perceptions of the output structure, the politicians' perceived *ability* is captured. To capture the 'willingness' in politician's external efficacy, ideals of representation need to be included, since as it is argued below, what these representative ideal entails defines what one needs efficacy for to perform. These ideals are discussed in more detail shortly. For now it is enough to know that a politician with a delegate ideal of representation needs an output structure that enables them to be responsive; to effectively produce the political outcomes that the electorate requests (see Figure 1). External efficacy thus mainly concerns output, as they are not required to lead public opinion.² 'Willingness' is a natural part of the definition of the delegate ideal, since these politicians' main function is to be willing to be responsive to the electorate.

As elaborated shortly, politician with a trustee/responsible party model (henceforth RPM) ideal however, also need external efficacy to lead public opinion. So, for the politicians with the trustee/RPM ideal, the concept of external efficacy also needs to include "willingness to be responsive" but inverted; the electorate's willingness to listen to the politicians. The

² Although these politicians also need efficacy to interpret the will of the electorate.

electorate thus need to be perceived as ‘receptive’ to politicians for them to perceive themselves as having external efficacy to fully fulfill their role as they are required to lead public opinion in these ideals. Taken to the extreme, the delegate is *willing to be responsive*, the trustee/RPM needs the electorate to be *willing to be receptive*. This will be elaborated on in more detail shortly. First, we will look at two dimensions of external efficacy.

Figure 1. A model of representation and external efficacy



Comment: The tasks of the politicians are in green, and the actions of the electorate are in blue.

Two dimensions of external efficacy

The previous models of external efficacy are insufficient in as much as they do not differentiate between perceptions of the ability to produce outcomes and choose means. I call these perceptions outcome efficacy and means efficacy. The two dimensions are explained with the example of climate change, but the dimensions can be applied to any political issue.

Outcome efficacy captures the degree of influence politicians perceive they can exert to reach an end. In this case, it captures whether politicians believe that they have the external efficacy to achieve what they perceive as sufficiently rapid emission cuts.

However, to have efficacy in a meaningful way, I argue, is to also have a certain level of autonomy to choose a *policy orientation* that is more desirable than others to reach an end, rather than solely achieving the end. This dimension is missing or not distinguished from outcome efficacy in previous models of external efficacy. Means efficacy is defined as perceptions of one's ability to strive towards an outcome with *means* that are perceived as desirable. It captures whether politicians perceive that they can choose means they believe have desirable implications for other domains within society, apart from approaching the end itself. An example of a politician with means efficacy and outcome efficacy could be a rightist politician who believe that emissions can be sufficiently lowered with means that benefit the economy. An example of a politician that lacks means efficacy but has outcome efficacy could be a leftist politician who believe that his/her only option to lower emissions sufficiently is to promote green growth strategies, while believing that growth has negative effects on economic equality. Means efficacy does not presuppose many policy options; to perceive that one can employ one desirable means is enough. The other way around, perceivably having many *unattractive* means for approaching an outcome is not to have means efficacy.

Outcome efficacy and means efficacy do not presuppose each other. You can perceive that you lack outcome efficacy, but that you have means efficacy. It is for instance possible, as in the example of the leftist politician above, to believe that you lack means efficacy but will be able to reach the end through sub-optimal means, thus having outcome efficacy and lacking means efficacy. The opposite is also possible, as one can perceive oneself as able to unsuccessfully strive toward an end with desirable means.

Outcome efficacy and means efficacy relate to representation in the same way, in that the sufficient emission cuts and the desirable means are defined by the politicians' understanding of what the electorate wants in the delegate ideal, and by the politician himself/herself in the trustee/RPM ideal. The possible permutations of outcome efficacy and means efficacy provides four general outlooks on external efficacy, which are presented in the first part of the results. Now, it is time to take a closer look at what it means to have external efficacy to perform one's representative task.

Representation – what politicians need external efficacy for

That external efficacy and ideals of representation relate to each other has a clear intuition; since the tasks vary in different ideals of representation, these ideals decide what politicians need efficacy *for*. Formulated as a stipulation, politicians with less extensive ideals of their representative role ought to have a greater tendency to feel efficacious. Empirically speaking, politicians are most likely not either or, but a mix of different ideals (although most are probably leaning towards one ideal). As elaborated on in the method section, the ideal that the politician is closest to can be identified by asking about how they perceive their role vis-à-vis the electorate. What follows is not a thorough introduction to the rich field of representation, but a brief introduction to the concepts most important for the study.

Political representation is a rich concept with multiple meanings. Since politicians' own views are of interest here, a conceptualization of representation as substantively acting for others is the most relevant. Understanding representation as descriptive characteristics of the politicians for instance, would not enable politicians to act in a representative manner (cf. Pitkin 1967:142). To represent thus is to act, and one can perceive oneself to have or to lack efficacy to do so in a satisfying way.

How then, ought a politician act to be a good politician? This question poses a classical controversy within representation literature with two opposed positions: “*Should (must) a representative do what his constituents wants, and be bound by mandates or instructions from them; or should (must) he be free to act as seems best to him in pursuit of their welfare?*” (Pitkin:145). Although the distinction is simplistic (Rehfeld 2009), it serves to illustrate approaches to representation in its ideal form. In the first position, called the delegate position, the desires, opinions, and attitudes of the electorate are to be followed as closely as possible. In this ideal, the politician should not influence the preferences of the electorate. From this follows that “*there is no room within such a concept of political representation for leadership, initiative, or creative action. The representative is not to give new opinions to his constituents, but to reflect those they already have*” (Pitkin:91). Esaiasson & Holmberg describes this view on public opinion as run from below, as this ideal of opinion formation is

a flow from citizens to politicians (1996:5).³ The delegate position is the most prevailing within contemporary political science, as “*mass-driven processes usually are perceived as somewhat more democratic than elite-driven processes. Representation run from below is closer to the original notion of direct democracy*” (Holmberg 1997:269).

In the second position, the trustee, the politician ought to safeguard what he/she believes are in the interests of the electorate, which the politician is expected to be more capable of identifying and realizing than the electorate. From this follows that the trustee position stress that representation means a certain distance to the represented, as their highest quest is to pursue the voters’ interests rather than the voters’ opinions, but while being held accountable to what degree they succeed in doing so (Pitkin:144ff).

In a middle-position of the two poles, there is a third ideal, called the responsible party model (henceforth RPM) (Miller & Stokes 1963). In this ideal, the politicians are also understood to have better insight into how to best serve the electorates’ interests than the voters themselves. Therefore, the politicians are required to change the electorate’s preferences to make them prefer their suggestions for change. Like in the trustee ideal, opinion-formation is understood as run from above (Esiasson & Holmberg 1996:3), thus essentially elitist in character (Holmberg 1997).⁴

Notably, there are dangers with too effective or even manipulative opinion leadership; indeed, “*in rejecting the fascist theory of representation, the represented must be somehow logically prior; the representative must be responsive to him rather than the other way around*” (Pitkin:140). However, there is room within democratic ideals of representation for opinion leadership, as “[i]n a society with freedom of expression, elite-driven as well as mass-driven opinion changes are legitimate democratic processes” (Holmberg 1997:269, see also Pitkin:163). Put differently, the relationship between the public opinion and the political

³ However, some in this position see it as legitimate for the policy initiative to emanate from politicians (Esiasson & Holmberg 1996:5).

⁴ Unlike the trustee however, the PRM politician needs the legitimacy of having convinced the electorate to want the “right” thing before elections, while trustees only need the votes to be in government, whereafter they might act against their will and still perform according to the ideal. Like a cross-fertilizing of the delegate and trustee position, the ideal representation in the PRM is to make the electorate change their opinions to be more in line with their interests as defined by the representative/party.

actors preferably should be dialectical, as “[t]oo much leadership leads to elitism, too much responsiveness leads to populism” (Holmberg 1997:281).

What is important here is that *in its ideal form, both the RPM and the trustee ideal requires the politician to influence the opinions of the electorate, whereas in the delegate ideal he/she do not*. As illustrated in Figure 1, the delegate’s task roughly begins after the election, when they are to create the output that the electorate has informed them to do through their input. The trustee/RPM however also need efficacy to run public opinion from above, giving them a wider set of tasks which they need external efficacy to perform.

Importantly, a potential limit to the efficacy of the holder of the trustee/RPM ideal would be if he/she perceives it to be impossible to run public opinion from above. In other words, if they perceive the electorate to be insufficiently ‘receptive’ to listen or change preferences, the politicians with these ideals cannot fully perform their task. Theoretically speaking, perceptions of the receptivity of the electorate thus conditions the degree to which the trustee/RPM politician perceive themselves as efficacious to fulfill their ideal, while for the delegate politician it does not (see Figure 1). Thus, two politicians in the same situation can perceive their efficacy differently depending on which ideal they hold ideal of representation. For instance, a politician with a delegate ideal who find that they are unable to materialize drastic reductions of emission is still externally efficacious if the voters do not ask for such reductions. This is because if the voters do not want it, the mitigation is not a part of the politicians’ task and should not take place. In contrast, a politician with a trustee/RPM ideal who believes that such reductions are in the electorates’ interest is not externally efficacious in this situation, no matter if the electorate ask for such actions or not.

Summary

External efficacy concerns *‘the degree of influence people perceive to be able to exert, due to the actual functioning of the political system’*. Above it has been argued that for politicians with an understanding of representation closer to the delegate ideal, this means the ability to be responsive to the electorate due to the functioning of the state’s output structure. For politicians with a representational ideal closer to the trustees/PRM, this means the ability to

implement what is believed to be in the electorate's interests due to the functioning of the state's output structure and the electoral receptivity. Further, it is argued that external efficacy has two dimensions; outcome efficacy and means efficacy. Outcome efficacy captures the degree of influence that politicians perceive they can exert to reach an end. Means efficacy captures the degree politicians perceive that they can employ desirable means to strive toward that end.

Previous research

This section provides an overview of previous research relevant for the study. It begins with previous research on citizens' external efficacy. Thereafter, research closely connected to politicians' external efficacy is presented, followed by ditto but with a narrower focus on climate change. After this, actual policy responses to climate change are reviewed. Lastly, relevant research about the Swedish context and the prevailing ideals of representation is provided.

Citizens' external efficacy

Research on external efficacy almost exclusively focuses on citizens. The literature shows that the propensity to engage in politics partly depends on the perception that politics makes a difference. The concept of external efficacy is often used to explain levels of political participation, as individuals who do not believe that the political system enables change has no *instrumental* incentive to participate in political activities. The higher the perceived external efficacy, the higher the participation (Norris 2015:791). Further, citizens' political participation also depends on their perceived internal efficacy, meaning beliefs about one's own political capabilities (Veccione and Caprara 2009).

Just as the individual is more likely to participate in political action if they believe that they can affect outcomes, an individual is more likely to participate in collective action if they believe that the group is able to affect an outcome. So, for instance, a person is more likely to be politically active in a party if he/she believes that the party is efficacious. This perception is called group efficacy (van Zomeren et al. 2008; van Zomeren 2013).

As previously said, external efficacy is often operationalized as the government's willingness to be responsive, but both the government's perceived willingness to be responsive and its perceived ability to do so is positively associated with political participation (Moor 2016). For instance, Steiner shows that citizens who believe that the national government lack the ability to influence the economy are less likely to vote. *'As citizens are exposed to the idea that*

competitive pressures significantly constrain what governments are able to achieve [...] they might reason that it makes less of a difference who gets elected', he argues (2015:118).

The propensity to perceive one-self as externally efficacious have declined over time, at least in the American context (Chamberlain 2012). Income inequality seems to have a negative effect on perceptions of external efficacy and increases in income inequality partly explains the decline (Norris 2015).

Politicians' external efficacy

We now turn to how politicians perceive their external efficacy, but this is more of an open question. Politicians have chosen the most time-consuming form of political participation and are indeed reported to have higher levels of perceived efficacy than the average citizen (Caprara et al 2009)⁵, but apart from a difference in means our knowledge is scarce. As already stated, the author has found no study which departs from the framework of external efficacy among politicians and applies it more in-depth, although some concepts with a large overlap are used but without much depth and focus. As previously mentioned, Hellwig (2015) conducts interviews with politicians about their perceived policy room to maneuver. This concept captures how politics is perceived to be limited by economic globalization. The concept thus has similarities to external efficacy, but with this narrower scope. Hellwig finds that politicians indeed perceive their policy room to maneuver limited by globalization. Similarly, Mair argues that globalization forces politicians to 'act responsibly' by adhering to international agreements on the expense of being responsive to voters. Such "*external political constraints can get in the way of representative politics by prohibiting certain forms of agency or by "forcing behaviour [sic] that neither they nor their principals would have freely chosen"*" (Mair 2009:14, citing Strøm [2003]). In line with this assertion, countries more exposed to economic globalization have lower levels of ideological variation in party positions as leftist parties adhere from more classical redistribution policy in those contexts (Steiner 2015:120; Ezrow & Hellwig 2014, although see Rothstein & Steinmo 2002),

⁵ Note that they use the term self-efficacy, which is closer to internal efficacy than external efficacy.

indicating that economic globalization delimits the actual ability of politicians to govern, both regarding outcome and means.

Furthermore, there are cases where perceptions of external efficacy among politicians are indeed studied, although not expressively labeled with the term external efficacy and the theoretical considerations that follows (see Willis 2018, discussed later). How politicians perceive their external efficacy is *by and large* a blank spot.

External efficacy and climate change

Even less is known about how politicians perceive their external efficacy regarding climate change. Although few, and not theorized with the concept of external efficacy, some results indicate low outcome efficacy among politicians regarding climate change. According to the ‘government trap thesis’, voters attribute responsibility for climate action on politicians, but politicians believe that such action will punish them in elections since voters puts low salience to the issue. Because of this, politicians find no mandate to act (Pidgeon 2012). The theory is based on a review of studies on attitudes towards climate change, but it does not include any study with a sample exclusively made up of politicians, as this thesis does. The proposition of a trapped government is therefore not necessarily based on the views of politicians.

Interviews with politicians in the UK do however show that MPs find it hard to impose mitigation measures while still fulfilling their representative task, as they believe that the public put low priority to the issue (Willis 2018b). To make climate action compatible with the representative task, some use a ‘cosmopolitan claim’ of acting in the interests of the global community in the absence of public pressure. Others use a ‘local prevention claim’ to climate action, which stipulates that climate action is in the electorate’s interest since it lowers the chances of them being exposed to extreme weather events. Most commonly a ‘co-benefit claim’ is used, where the MPs motivate climate action by the benefits it provides for other areas in society, mostly economic. Sometimes they also use a ‘surrogate claim’, in which the politician adheres from mentioning that the policy is about reducing emissions (Willis 2018b). Another study of MPs in the UK shows that a majority express resignation on how induce

change in proportion to what is required due to low priority from the electorate in a combination with local constituency constraints (Willis 2018a). A comparison of the electorate and politicians in Finland indeed finds that politicians are more concerned about climate change and more willing to pay for climate change mitigation than the average population (Rapeli & Koskimaa 2022), lending further support to the government trap thesis.

What means are seen as desirable or do-able? Notably, previous studies connected to this question are focused on an UK context and the author do not discuss what perceptions of the ability to govern mean on a conceptual level. Analysis of political speech show that UK MPs uses a highly scientific, technocratic, and economical language when discussing climate change and by doing so try to present it as a manageable problem. Climate change is not discussed as a social issue, meaning that words such as families, child, children, pensioners, and parents are rarely mentioned (Willis 2017:223). Also, changes implied by climate change policy is isolated to technical innovation and economic management, suggesting that social change is not seen as a fruitful means (Willis 2017). In the language of this thesis, this could mean that UK MPs finds their means efficacy constrained in such a manner that they do not know how to formulate a response with socially desirable consequences. The fact that some politicians instead try to frame climate policy as co-beneficial for economic domains (Willis 2018b) instead suggests that they perceive themselves to have means efficacy for climate policy concerning the economy. Further interviews with MPs in the UK suggests that the politicians usually understand the scientific support for and meaning of catastrophic climate change. However, most do not integrate it into an understanding of the systemic shifts of society that such a catastrophe demands (Willis 2018a).

In sum, previous research has shown that individuals are more inclined to participate in political action if they perceive themselves as externally efficacious. Compared to citizens, politicians have higher levels external efficacy. Further, previous research has shown that politicians find their abilities circumscribed by economic globalization. In regard to climate change, it is suggested that politicians find themselves 'trapped' by a lack of public support for climate measures, although additional studies are needed to conclude this. In particular, the means for mitigation that are seen as possible by politicians in the UK are technological innovation and economic measures, whereas social changes is not. A shortcoming in previous

research is that what politicians' perceptions of their ability to govern means has not been theorized. Further, a discussion of external efficacy has not been combined with theory on political representation (although see Willis 2018a for a discussion of representation in relation to climate change).

The policy-response so-far – two paradigms

Although we have scarce knowledge about politicians' perceptions of their external efficacy concerning climate change, we do know which climate policy that tends to be implemented. As this indicates what sort of climate policy that until now has been (or has not been) seen as possible, this provides some additional insights. Two policy paradigms are identified.

Although dichotomic descriptions seldom reflect the real-world, the distinction will enrich the discussion of means efficacy presented later, as the MPs can be seen as closer or further away from these paradigms.

Most climate policy can be classified as 'ecological modernization'. According to Gunderson, *"[t]he most prevalent and popular prescriptive responses to climate change are mainstream climate mitigation strategies, including improved efficiency, carbon markets, and green growth [...] in line with the framework of ecological modernization"* (2020:608). The heart of ecological modernization is the belief that economic growth and ecological sustainability can be reconciled. In this paradigm, climate change is perceived to be solvable with existing economic, social, and political institutions (Hajer 1995:25f). This is because it is seen as an isolated problem of market failures with unpaid externalities, rather than a systemic failure. A green transition is seen as profitable compared to non-action if all nations cooperate, as this corrects the market failure, in line with classical collective action theory. Nonetheless, the conceptualization of emission cuts as profitable opens for a positive framing of the issue; a win-win description which partly can explain the paradigm's success (Janković & Bowman 2014).

Green parties across Europe have historically posed an alternative to ecological modernization by identifying growth as the root cause of global warming, but they have increasingly abandoned this position and now most commonly identify green growth as a

means for mitigation (Reitz & Jörke 2021). The alternative to ecological modernization policy mainly resides outside politicians' domains. Climate change economics, sustainability scholars, critical theorists and some new but marginal leftist parties (Reitz & Jörke 2021) are questioning the feasibility of a purely economic and technological transition to sustainability. For five decades, cuts in carbon intensity have been accompanied by increases in total energy use and electricity production (York 2016). Annual emission reductions of more than four percent requires not only changes in energy supply, but also in consumer demand. Thus, "*it is generally accepted among climate change economists*" that the necessary 8-10 percent annual reduction is incompatible with economic growth (Gunderson et al 2018:39; e.g., Kallis et al 2012). This paradigm is clearly oriented towards social change, and examples of climate change measures are shorter working hours (Fitzgerald & Clark 2015), collective ownership of energy systems (Gunderson et al 2018), universal income (Hoffmann & Paulsen 2020) and in a wider sense redirecting the economy towards activities of high social value, but low environmental impact (Jackson 2017).

About the context

This study is carried out in a Swedish context. Sweden is a 'climate progressive' nation with relatively high ambitions regarding mitigation rates (Anderson et al 2020). All Swedish parties but the radical right party the Swedish Democrats have agreed on a 'climate policy framework' of no territorial emissions of greenhouse gases 2045 by the latest, thereafter negative emissions (Naturvårdsverket 2022). Sweden's territorial emissions have decreased by 35 percent between 1990 and 2020. However, at the current rate of mitigation, the target for 2045 will be missed (Naturvårdsverket 2022). Additionally, if Sweden is to fulfill its requirements to the Paris agreement and not rely on negative emissions technologies, the annual mitigation rate need to be increased to at least 12 percent (Anderson et al 2020). There are no previous studies of how Swedish politicians' perceive their external efficacy generally, or their external efficacy regarding climate change specifically.

The interview sample consists of Swedish MPs. Although the focus of the thesis is not parties, the positions of the parties show which notions on climate change policy that are established

within the Riksdag (the Swedish parliament). An overview of the party programs of the parties in the Riksdag shows that all of them are closer to the ecological modernization paradigm than the social change paradigm (references to the party programs listed under *Party programs* in the bibliography). The measures suggested are mainly related to technology, science and innovation and economic governance. Growth is believed to be reconcilable with mitigation, although the Environmental party has a position on growth close to an a-growth position (cf. Van den Bergh & Kallis 2012). Also, the Left party suggest that shorter working hours are a means for lowering emissions, although growth is not seen as conflicting emission cuts. In sum, the Left party and the Environmental party are the furthest away from the ecological modernization pole.

Some previous studies show how Swedish politicians understand their ideal of representation. However, most of the studies are outdated, and the ideals of representation might have changed since then. The studies show that Swedish politicians approach representation as trustees/RPM in that they want to make the best decisions for the country rather than to mirror public opinion (Esaiasson & Holmberg 1996; Holmberg 1989; Önnudóttir 2016). The process of opinion formation has mainly been top-down, as Swedish politicians “*primarily obtain the citizens' consent to carry out policies which they themselves have defined and sold on the opinion market*” (Holmberg 1997:281). In essence, they believe that public opinion should be run from above (Esaiasson & Holmberg 1996).

Methodological approach and design

In the following section the overall methodological approach is presented, followed by sampling, operationalizations, data collection, data analysis and challenges.

Methodological approach

Perceptions of external efficacy concerns individuals' own understandings. Thus, an explorative interview study is a good approach, as it facilitates rich descriptions of individuals' experiences and perceptions (cf. Lilleker 2003). The internal structure of politicians' perceptions is analyzed, as to understand the meaning of external efficacy and the political task at hand, but without focus on the causal explanations to these internal structures as such (cf. Alvesson & Sköldbberg 2000:52). Further, this study has a double-hermeneutic approach, as the meanings interpretive beings ascribe to a phenomenon are interpreted (cf. *ibid*:144).

For intra-scientific relevance, the study is designed to enable analytic generalization. The matrix typology later presented is formulated with this in mind; that the concepts developed here can be applied to understand politicians' perceptions of external efficacy regarding other political issues apart from climate change and in other contexts than the Swedish (c.f. Yin 2014:40-41).

The analysis and the result are made with constant interaction with the interview material, but a certain degree of analytical distance from the data is also sought for. As Alvesson et al argues, trying to act as much as a mirror of reality with all its specificities "*hampers the imagination and usually produces low-abstraction, context-specific, and trivial results. [...] reality-mirroring needs be balanced by other criteria, such as the ability to point at deep structures or hidden meanings*" (2017:96). Thus, although the analysis is made with considerations of trustworthiness (cf. Marshall et al 2022:49) taking the analysis to a higher ladder of abstraction is also a primary goal that implies that some specificities or deviations from the most interesting themes are excluded. Thus, a complete and thorough description of

all the examples of hindrances and enabling factors to external efficacy that occurred in the interviews are not reported.

A crucial point considering the purpose of this study is to enable the participants to speak freely. This is a challenge, considering the special obligations politicians might feel to specific causes and their party's interest (Alvesson 2011:90f) and their personal career. Due to these considerations and due to the publicity of MPs, the study has a particular emphasis on anonymity. For instance, one can expect that a politician would not admit that they perceive themselves to lack outcome efficacy if he/she knew that the results would be presented with party affiliation. For this reason, but also due to the scope in this thesis, the results do not reveal party affiliation. The focus is not how efficacy perceptions vary depending on ideological belongings but how MPs in general understand their conditions for changing society and how they respond to these perceived conditions. Also, as special measures are needed to ensure anonymity when it comes to political elites, the quotes are not marked with numbers (cf. Saunders et al 2015). This does however limit the transparency on how the interviews are reported. However, sometimes directions are given in the results on how many respondents that used certain expressions, to enhance transparency. Further measures to protect the anonymity of the respondents include using a specific email for communicating with the respondents, adhering from cloud storage of interviews and transcriptions, excluding personal or in other ways revealing information from the extracts of the interviews and not presenting a full account of each respondent's positions (cf. Saunders et al 2015).

Sampling

As the purpose of the study is to explore how politicians understand their external efficacy regarding country-level concerns, national politicians are interviewed. The data collection is limited to current MPs as to practically enable criterion sampling as well as transparency on what the study covers. The MPs are chosen based on maximum variation regarding party affiliation, as ideology is important for perceptions of climate change (cf. Fielding et al 2012; Edwards 2017). In this way, the important types for external efficacy are more likely to be

represented in the material. Nine interviews were conducted, with politicians from all current parties in the Riksdag.

Within parties, a criterion selection is applied. The criterion is politicians with a particular interest in or experience with climate politics. Information about the sample can be seen in Table 1 (see Table 2 in the Appendix for additional information). To identify the more engaged politicians, the following activities are used as cues: statements in parliamentary debates, social media, and the daily press, a track-record of submitting climate policy motions in the Riksdag and raising questions regarding climate policy in public hearings. To identify the experienced politicians, the following activities are used as cues: Having or having had long experience in the Committee on Environment and Agriculture or having or having had a leading position regarding climate change in the party, the Riksdag or in government. Including politicians with a particular interest in climate change ensures that some respondents have thought-through opinions about climate politics and a high motivation to put their maximal abilities at test. By including politicians who are highly experienced it is ensured that some respondents also have tried to bring about change. Thus, the criterion is designed to provide a broad spectrum of insights. At the same time, the criterion of selection is broad enough to ensure the anonymity of the respondents.

Table 1. The sample

| | |
|-----------------------------|--|
| Party affiliation | 2 Social Democrats, 1 from each remaining party in the Riksdag (Sweden Democrats, Moderate Party, Left Party, Centre Party, Christian Democrats, Green Party, and the Liberal Party) |
| Seniority on climate change | 2 party spokespersons for climate change, 8 also members of the Committee on Environment and Agriculture (current or past positions) |

Additional information about the sample listed in Table 2 (Appendix).

A problem in the research process was to get access to the interviewees. This had the implication that the initial criterion of selection was broadened, from interviewing MPs who are highly engaged *and* highly experienced regarding climate change, to only demand one of

the stipulations. A weakness that followed from this decision is that some of the highly engaged respondents just recently joined parliament. Those respondents have not yet had much time to evaluate their external efficacy on the national level. The initial intent was also to interview two politicians from each party, which explains why two social democrats were interviewed. However, 27 politicians were approached just to ensure the nine respondents, as most politicians did not respond or declined. The judgement was made that a doubled number of participants would have watered out the criterion of selection of whom to regard as highly engaged or highly experienced.

The party of the Swedish democrats stand out as they are the only party to oppose the Swedish participation in the Paris agreement and the Swedish climate goals, and its affiliates sometimes express doubt about the direness of the crisis (Arenander et al 2022). These politicians might find the threat of climate change less urgent than others or even non-existing. As the framework of this study stipulates an agreement about a certain end in broad terms, namely the desirability of mitigating emissions, one could argue that it is not motivated to include Swedish democrats in the sample. However, the examples above show that the party opposes a certain *degree* of commitment; They can still find some degree of mitigation desirable although find that they lack means efficacy to lower emissions fast without conflicting other ends and therefore oppose it. The Swedish democrats are therefore theoretically important to include as they could convey a combination of outcome and means efficacy perhaps not represented in other parties.

Operationalizations

Indicators of the concepts are obtained through interviews. The interview questions are designated with a thematic and a dynamic dimension. The thematic dimension designates the information that is sought in theoretical terms. The dynamic dimension designates how the questions were formulated in the interview setting (cf. (Kvale & Brinkmann 2014:172-174). This information is found in the Interview guide (in the appendix).

As discussed in connection to theory, external efficacy as opposed to internal efficacy does not encompass the ability to exert influence due to one's own personal capacities and

resources. Thus, perceptions of one-self are not important regarding external efficacy *but the general prerequisites* for influence one has. However, in an effective output structure, personal suitability ought to matter for outcomes. Indeed, external efficacy has a dimension of personal agency as again, it concerns “the degree of influence *people perceive to be able to exert*” due to this structure. From this follows that the interview questions aimed at capturing external efficacy are sometimes formulated in general terms, such as “*does one* have more impact if one makes more of an effort?”, and personal terms “*do you* experience that [...]” as to capture the bigger picture of how the respondent perceives the general prerequisites for influence non-regarding if it is oneself or another politician. The questionnaire also allows for some flexibility whether external efficacy is understood in collective or individualistic terms. For instance, when one politician says that they perceive politicians to be efficacious when they act jointly with their party’s MPs, whereas others speak of individual action in committees, both are regarded as external efficacy.

Again, outcome efficacy is the perception that politicians can implement policy that realizes their preferred outcome. Applied on climate change, outcome efficacy is the perception that politicians can implement policy that realizes what they perceive as sufficient national emission cuts. Notably, the end is defined in subjective terms; sufficient emission cuts is in the eyes of the beholder. Another option would have been to define the end by what is needed in relation to fulfill for instance national pledges or the Paris Agreement. However, while interviewing the politicians, such an objective definition was found to be impracticable, as many replied “I have no insight in that exact measure” or the like, while questions where the sufficient emission cuts were unspecified allowed for more interesting replies. A negative consequence of the choice of a relative definition of sufficient emission cuts is that the results do not provide indications on whether their perceptions of these emission cuts are in line with the task at hand.

The following quote from the interviews is understood as outcome efficacy, as the respondent perceives that sufficient (or even astonishing, in this case) emission cuts are possible.

If we can develop technology that make fossil energy less interesting financially, we will be able to get a global exchange of our investments. Everyone will want it. Sweden and the Nordic countries have traditionally been good at innovation, so

I think we can probably succeed with that. And if we do, we'll have an effect that is perhaps a hundred or a thousand times greater than if we only focused on fulfilling our part of the Paris Agreement

Means efficacy is the perception that politicians can choose means that are beneficial for the country at large while striving toward an outcome. Applied on climate change, it is the perception that politicians can choose means for emission cuts that in the views of the politician are beneficial for the country at large apart from the emission cuts as such. The following quote is an example that is seen as means efficacy, in this case the lack thereof.

Already today, it [climate measures] is a tradeoff. It is very difficult to live in the countryside and it has become much more difficult with today's fuel prices, it is a clear tradeoff where your personal freedom is limited

The respondent expresses that climate measures have negative effects on the personal freedom of the electorate, thus lacking means efficacy.

Ideals of representation are identified based on how the respondents express themselves regarding how they understand their relationship with the electorate and what can be expected of them in this relationship. The questions asked to capture these ideals are denoted as 'representation' in the thematic guide. The quotes that these judgements are based upon on are coded (see 'The task to represent' in the codebook) and the most important quotes are reported under the results.

Data collection

The data was collected through semi-structured in-depth respondent interviews. The interviews were semi-structured in the sense that they were conducted with the use of an interview guide, but the order of the questions depended on how the interview developed. Further, when the respondents made deviations from the themes, it was followed up with additional questions.

As approached by e-mail and phone, the respondents were informed that the interviews are anonymous and that the result will not be sorted after party membership, age, gender,

experience, or position. They were also informed that the focus of the thesis is how politicians perceive their room for action when it comes to climate change (see full e-mail in Appendix). Before the interviews they were also told that their responses would not be possible to interlink. The interviews were recorded with consent.

The interviews were conducted via video calls using the software Zoom. During the interviews, I restated my interpretations of the respondents' replies to give them the opportunity to confirm or correct them as in a "self-correcting" interview (cf. Kvale & Brinkmann 2014:236). Although this could lead to wrongful confirmations by the respondent, a judgement was made that it would enhance reliability. These respondents were expected to be confident enough to contradict wrongful interpretations, as interviews with elites means more even power relations than what is normally the case (Kvale & Brinkmann 2014:187).

During the interview process, themes occurred which were not initially thought of as central for efficacy. The questionnaire was therefore adjusted through the interview period, although the overall structure remained the same. As the goal is to find the most interesting aspects in each interview, it is according to Kvale & Brinkmann (2014:230-231) better to be flexible rather than to systematically repeat the same questionnaire with each respondent, especially in explorative interviews.

Data analysis

After each interview, overall impressions are written down. Each interview is transcribed, read through multiple times, and coded using the software Nvivo (see Codebook in the Appendix). The material is analyzed in an abductive manner; Some categories were created a priori based on theoretical expectations (electoral receptivity, outcome efficacy, means efficacy, the structure of the typology matrix), but were modified and further developed after encounters with the data. For instance, the four logically possible permutations of the relationship between outcome efficacy and means efficacy are given shape and color by the interview material. The coding was thus both concept driven and data driven (Kvale & Brinkmann 2014:242).

The interviews were analyzed as one text to identify types and themes present in the material, and not as individuals or parties. The coding consists of meaning concentration, where a paragraph is interpreted and concentrated into a theme, followed by meaning interpretation, where the themes are interpreted more deeply and more critically (Kvale & Brinkmann 2014:245f). Although these analytical procedures “*are close to a traditional notion of knowledge as pre-existing elements that can be reported and collected and mapped*” (my translation, *ibid*:238) the interview material is still inevitably to be seen as a co-construct by the interviewee and the respondents.

The results of the first research question are presented using a matrix typology. In such a matrix, two typologies are intersected which generate four different types (Gerring & Christenson 2017:19). Again, the structure of the matrix was developed before the interviews, but through the interview material the four types gained shape and content.

Challenges

There are reasons to expect that the data are not representations of the interviewees’ own experiences and beliefs. Politicians can be expected to be cautious regarding their anonymity and alter their responses having political consequences in mind (Alvesson 2011:90ff), perhaps “*driven by interests in promoting certain kinds of truth*” (*ibid*:78). They might also be loyal to the institutions they represent by using standardized legitimizations of its workings due to loyalty to its procedures (*ibid*:90f). Also, it can be questioned how free the respondents are to reflect on the premises of change in the dominating discourses (cf. *ibid*:98). However, even if their answers sometimes reflect the dominant structure and nothing more, it still provides insight into the positions that are presently possible to have as MPs.

A weakness in the study is that the questions did not capture what sort of measures politicians perceive their efficacy to manifest through. For instance, whether their ability to exert an influence on society manifests in proposals, debates, internal party discussions and the like. Also, asking the respondents about multiple political issues instead of just one might have provided more varied outlooks on efficacy, but on the other hand it would have taken away depth. Furthermore, since the results show that the RPM prevails among the respondents it

might have been better to ask questions framed around parties instead of individuals, such as if they believe that their *party* has the external efficacy to do a certain thing etcetera.

It is important to be clear about what conclusions cannot be drawn from the study. First, the results do not show actual hindrances to climate action when it comes to the political process, but what the MPs perceive as hindrances. However, these are just as important to map, as they can function as limits for what is imagined or strived for. Secondly, it is important not to over-generalize the results of the study. This is an in-depth exploration of MPs in a specific context, and the result can neither be generalized to the entire population these respondents were chosen from or to contexts other than the Swedish. However, analytic generalizations can be done; The concepts developed can be sought for in other contexts and cases (Yin 2014:68ff).

In three cases, the respondents were too busy to spare an hour, and those interviews had about 30 minutes duration (see Table 2, Appendix). Unfortunately, there was not enough time to ask all questions, so a priority was made based on the direction the interview took as well as what was thought to be highly important questions, marked with highly prioritized in the interview guide.

Results

The results are laid out as follows. In relation to research question 1, four general outlooks on external efficacy are presented. In relation to research question 2, it is shown that politicians who perceive it to be their task to run public opinion from above find their external efficacy limited when it comes to climate change. In particular, they perceive themselves to lack efficacy if they believe climate change measures requires the electorate to live differently.

Reading instructions

In both parts of the results, the following reading instructions apply: If a sentence or more is excluded from a quote, it is marked with [...]. If a larger segment from the interview is excluded, it is marked with [...] and a line break. The shift to a new respondent is marked with an empty line. The interviewee's comments are italicized, and the reply of the respondent is shown after a page break but without cuts in the beginning of the reply. The quotes are not marked with abbreviations, numbers, or parties, as this could risk the respondents' anonymity. However, to enhance transparency, there are directions for how the respondents are represented under the two main headlines of the chapter. The quotes are analyzed using the gender-neutral pronoun "they" to further increase anonymity. The quotes from the interviews are translated and adjusted to some extent. For example, repetitions of words are deleted, and language errors are remedied.

External efficacy – four general outlooks

In the following, the first research question is addressed. Depending on how perceptions of outcome efficacy and means efficacy are combined, four permutations of external efficacy are possible. These are given shape and color by the interview material.

In some cases, the respondents express themselves in a varied and self-contradictory way. For instance, some politicians express optimism about their outcome efficacy at some part of the interview, and resignation at other instances. These variations are incorporated into the

framework by enabling one politician to have several general outlooks on external efficacy, as the material is analyzed as a whole and not individual respondents. Therefore, some respondents that fulfill the conditions for several types are quoted under more than one type. A maximum of two quotes by the same respondent are used under each type. The four types will now be presented.

Matrix 1. Typology of general outlooks on external efficacy

| | | Means | |
|---------|-------------------|-----------------|-----------------------|
| | | <i>Efficacy</i> | <i>Inefficacy</i> |
| Outcome | <i>Efficacy</i> | Optimists | Resigned realists |
| | <i>Inefficacy</i> | Trojan Horses | Politically depressed |

Optimists

The optimists are politicians in the sweet spot of external efficacy. Optimists perceive themselves to both have outcome efficacy and means efficacy (see Matrix 1). Although they still believe that there are some holdbacks to satisfying mitigation measures, they perceive those to be possible to bridge. Three respondents made expressions identified as optimistic.

The optimists imagine that sufficient emission cuts can be done while still favoring the nation at large through the means. In the words of one respondent:

Take renewable fuels for example. They are probably somewhat more expensive at the gas station, but over time our safety situation improves. In addition, with more electric cars you reduce air quality problems and other things [...] so this is a *huge* win. And if we also do something before everyone else, then we get to export all the technology to the rest of the world

The optimism is closely connected to a belief in technological development. Through new innovations the sufficient emission cuts will be provided *and* the economy benefitted. Thus, beliefs in technology enables them to have both outcome efficacy and means efficacy. As another respondent see it:

There are also climate projects that could combine more values and almost every time I think about it, I end up in technology development. As Hybrit [fossil free steel-producing company] for example. Then you could combine climate benefit with increased employment and export revenues. If you sell that steel abroad, you also get a global climate benefit, so it's a very good project

Optimists believe that the lives of the electorate will continue by and large the same. It is a technological transition they envision, not a social one.

Do you think we can live almost like we do now?

Yes, I think so. Same shit but different in some way [laughs] We may not have a petrol car anymore, but we'll have an electric car instead

Economic growth is not viewed as conflicting mitigation. Rather, optimists view it as an enabling and necessary precondition.

We will solve those challenged that we face. But it will take courage and patience not the least. And of course, money. And we get money from growth

As optimists express that climate action will enable them to provide other things that benefits the country, they find it hard to understand the resistance toward climate policy.

It's so difficult to understand why people are so afraid and have such a resistance. Because there's no one who will lose from this change apart from rich oil sheiks and Putin

However, they are optimistic about the electoral receptivity in the long run, perceiving it to be possible to escape the 'government trap'.

Sooner or later it [promoting climate action] will pay off. I think reality will show that it will be worth it and then those short-term gains in voter flows that some

parties are trying to make will then reverse and you will have negative losses from that behavior instead

In sum, optimists are politicians who believe that sufficient emission cuts can be made through means that benefit society. This is possible through technological development, which both enables emission cuts and benefit the economy. Growth is not seen as a hindrance to mitigation, but rather as enabling since it provides funding. As optimists perceive the climate measures as beneficial for the national economy and without restrictions in the citizens' lifestyles, they find it hard to understand the lack of electoral receptivity. They therefore need another explanation for the lack of support than the implications of the measures, and sometimes ascribe it to tactics employed by their political opponents.

Resigned realists

Resigned realists are politicians who perceive themselves to have outcome efficacy but to lack means efficacy. Thus, they imagine that sufficient emission cuts cannot be done while still favoring the nation at large through the means, or at least not with the means they would most prefer. As they find themselves with too low means efficacy for the optimal solution, they must settle for a more 'realistic' option. Three respondents made expressions of resigned realists. The respondent quoted below expressed that they thought the means of carbon capture and storage techniques are necessary, even though they would have preferred more profound shifts in the habits of consumption.

Unfortunately, if I'm being completely honest and realistic, I don't think zero emissions really means zero emissions, I think it means that we manage to remove the emissions that we do. And this is not really something that I wish for, I think I'd rather wish that we'd lived in a society where there wasn't so much production, consumption, and travel but I don't think we can scale back so much social development

The respondent's analysis of the outer limit to their means efficacy is the unreceptive electorate. When humans get used to a certain material standard, the respondent explains, they are not willing to go back.

We will never be able to ban people from going on weekends to New York [...] when we've arrived at a society where we're used to being able to buy food anytime from anywhere, I think it's incredibly hard to scale back

The recurring hindrance to the means which the resigned realists would have liked to see is the unreceptive electorate. The electorate is thought to oppose restrictions and large interventions in their lifestyles. The following respondent mentioned that they would have preferred to advocate bans on fossil fuels but that they feared ending up in the “ban box” which would scare off the voters.

I think we need to be a lot clearer about bans, keep it in the ground [...] at the same time it's so easy for us to end up in a ban box, that you just want to ban everything that's fun [...]

Why don't we have these bans?

Because we do not have a majority for it in the Riksdag. We hardly have that policies ourselves if we're honest, we have financial instruments for most of the time

Thus, this respondent did not perceive themselves as efficacious enough to represent the preferred policy as a party, not to mention to gain electoral support for it. A third respondent said that they would have preferred to make intrusive measures like immediate shifts in the forest industry, restoration of wetlands and taxes on emissions, but that they feared a recoil effect in voting behavior. Therefore, they advocated long-term investment in carbon capture and storage techniques and nuclear power, which they perceived to be more realistic in terms of electoral receptiveness.

The big dilemma is that we are way too late. It is not possible to stop a sea level rise of seven meters and climate refugees [...] and it will not be helpful if we force people to pay more expensive electricity bills and vote even more for the Sweden Democrats and create even more opposition so that they don't want to accept these climate refugees. So, unfortunately, I think we must accept that we're too late, it has consequences and then we must get everyone on board. It's a more realistic approach

Overall, resigned realists are politicians who perceive themselves to lack the means efficacy to employ the best means for mitigation. More specifically, these are means that are more intrusive in the electorates' lives. The electoral receptiveness for such policy is understood to be lacking. Therefore, they choose to advocate second-best options that they believe the electoral receptivity enables; policy which preserves the current way of life.

Trojan Horses

A third approach to external efficacy is Trojan Horses, close to the 'surrogate claim' introduced in previous research (see Willis 2018a). These are politicians who believe that it is impossible to implement policy which generates sufficient emission cuts. However, as they find the means desirable in themselves, they still advocate for so-called "climate action". As a trojan horse, a policy framed as climate action allow the politician to sneak in policy aimed at something else.

Perhaps unsurprising, no politician who admitted that they employed a trojan horse approach was found. Either the approach could be too smug to admit even in an anonymous setting, or it is simply not occurring. However, some respondents accused their opponents of Trojan Horse tactics, by not being competent enough or not putting enough effort into calculating outcomes in terms of mitigation since they value the means in themselves. Two such respondents were identified. The following respondent expressed that they found their opponents too careless about outcome efficacy, as they were eager to employ the desirable means; a shutdown of nuclear reactors.

It is not smart to shut down reactors before you have something else in place.
That's what you react to, you've been guided so much by emotions and climate anxiety, and I also have climate anxiety, but I try to be sane and think how I can do something about it instead of just "no, we just have to shut down all the nuclear power plants now, they are not good", and now we burn more fossil fuels instead

Likewise, the second respondent thought their opponents lacked outcome efficacy, by caring too much about the desirability of the means. Again, this respondent thought that their

opponents should be less “anti-nuclear”; that they ought to care less about the generators of electricity, and more about the outcome on emissions.

I remember the nuclear referendum and all the polarization for 40-45 years. It's still there. It's like, you just can't think beyond the polarization, you've painted yourself into a corner. There's so much prestige for some reason. For example, should we have nuclear power or wind power - screw it! Look instead at, what do we need? Don't keep discussing the power types, but look at what is the problem and how are we going to get out of it?

To sum up, trojan horses are politicians who believe they lack outcome efficacy to sufficiently lower emissions but that they have the means efficacy to employ inefficient but desirable means. No respondent expressed such a view, but two respondents thought that their opponents had these characteristics, in both cases regarding shutting down nuclear reactors. Thus, they thought that their opponents had a naïve approach to what emission cuts practically entails.

Politically depressed

Lastly, politicians who are politically depressed perceive themselves to lack both types of efficacies. They do not find it likely that politicians will be able to realize policy with satisfying reductions of emissions, and they do not find the means at their disposal beneficial for the country at large. So, when it comes to climate policy, they simply do nothing, or cynically work with policy that they do not believe in. Interestingly, some respondents gave mixed answers in the interviews, in some cases expressing up-beat optimism, while in other segments expressing profound resignation. When asked questions with a negative framing, as in the case below, these respondents dropped the optimistic approach. As the respondent previously stated that they did not find the means of carbon capture and storage desirable, they seem to lack both means and outcome efficacy, thus fulfilling the conditions for the politically depressed approach.

Then it sounds very difficult to reach zero emissions?

I think it is very difficult. Actually.

Do you think it is possible?

Well, it depends, I think, on how technological development continues for example when it comes collecting carbon dioxide and things like that [laughs]. But I think it is difficult. I think it's hard to go as far as we would need to go, to be completely honest.

Mm. Uh.

[laughter] That sounds so non-hopeful [sad voice]. But it's honest

Another respondent expressed feelings of temporary political depression, but that they were able to keep those feelings in check.

sometimes I wonder why I even bother, I'm just wasting my breath. Screw it all, take the kids on a sunny holiday trip and let others deal with this doom [laughter] [...] because like, my influence from within is not there, I won't bring it about as long as we're in opposition because nobody's listening now when climate deniers have set the political agenda [...] but I have chosen the political path, and this is the way I will try to have an influence

Another respondent expressed how they felt hopelessness while watching a political debate with MPs about Sweden's energy supply. The respondent expressed that they perceived it to be almost impossible to have a constructive discussion about such a complex issue.

So I felt, I'm not going to say despair, but almost on the verge of giving up. How flawed such a hearing is conducted, how without nuances it becomes [...]

Why don't they talk about it the right way?

I'm not sure you understand the complexity of this issue. We're talking about perhaps a five-dimensional problem [...] so when I sat in front of the TV yesterday, I thought this isn't going to be solved by politics, as little as the market will solve it. And then you feel concerned

To sum up, politically depressed politicians sometimes express that they both lack outcome efficacy to lower emissions in a sufficient way and means efficacy to do so though means beneficial for the country at large. In some way they must deal with these temporary thoughts

of inefficacy, either by not expressing it, as they in other answers expressed optimisms, or by not thinking about it at all.

External efficacy and representation

In the following, the second research question is addressed. First, it is discussed which ideals of representation that occurs in the material. It is shown that RPM ideals predominate, with an ideal of running public opinion from above. Secondly, it is shown that perceptions of electoral receptivity are crucial for external efficacy among the respondents, as they cannot change society without gaining support for change. Thirdly, it is shown that the electoral receptivity for lifestyle changes is seen as in particularly lacking, which is a hindrance to means efficacy for the politicians who believe life-style changes are necessary for a desirable response to climate change. In addition, this shows that regarding questions of lifestyle, running public opinion from above is the ideal for several respondents, but public opinion run from below is a fact. Lastly, it is shown that there is a lack of visions of how the sustainable society ought to be structured, apart from visions of a society that remains the same but high-tech. If nothing else said, one quote per respondent is used under each headline.

The representative task

All politicians here interviewed expressed at some point that they try to affect the opinions of the electorate. When asked what they think about the often-heard slogan that it is the politicians who have the responsibility to stop climate change, many made clear that the responsibility is shared with the voters since they ultimately hold the strings.

It is important to remember that politics is limited as we've touched upon. We can't do things that people don't accept. So from that perspective you can't say that it's entirely the responsibility of politics [to stop climate change] [...] My goal is all the time to do everything I can that is accepted, and I have the opportunity to drive opinion and push those boundaries a little, but I can't push them as far as I

want because there comes a threshold when I don't get the acceptance of the citizens. And then it doesn't work

The respondent above expresses that a representative ought to change public opinion to enable climate policy, as they simply cannot govern without public support. Like a trustee, they would have preferred to do what they believe is best, but they cannot implement as much change as they would have wanted due to actual limitations in support. The electoral receptivity thus becomes the upper limit of possible change. Another respondent expressed a more "passive" relation to the electorate's views.

It is the politicians' responsibility. No one else can solve these big problems. But it also means that it is every person's responsibility. Politicians are only representatives of the voters who have voted for them

In a follow-up question, it was asked who then is responsible for what the electorate wants.

[laughter] I don't know if I understand that question correctly. Who is responsible for what the voters want? [silence] It's almost a philosophical [laughter] question but of course I see that politics has a task to form opinion. To argue for political proposals and political choices of direction, so there is a responsibility there

As in the RPM, the respondent believes that politicians have the responsibility to muster support for their program and drive public opinion from above. However, when asked directly about who is responsible for what the electorate wants, this task appeared not to be top of their mind. This pattern reoccurred, as the question generated confusion as no other question did, but always ended up in an RPM view on representation.

What the voters *want*? Eh [laughter] Eh [silence] It is a shared responsibility. But I think that the responsibility falls partly on politics in terms of the political parties choosing their best communicators, that there is a great responsibility on politics to convey a fair message

Others found the question easy to answer.

It's their own responsibility. So, I really must value and respect every voter highly, I can't go against or run over voters. I must have the voters with me. It must not become this supranationalism

As seen above, a legitimate representative must have electoral support for its policy, so it is clearly not a trustee understanding of representation. However, this respondent also expressed that politicians ought to try to change the electorate so that they desire mitigation policy, in line with the RPM.

Little by little I can change the way people want to live. These laws we implement must be rooted in society and implemented at the right time in a smart way so that it creates incentives to want change

Another respondent expressed that politicians ought to create 'explanation models' so that the electorate understands why they should care about climate change. So, in this sense they expressed that politicians ought to change the electorate's views. However, they drew a clear line at trying to change people's living preferences. So, climate policy which imply changes in living situation of the electorate appears to be beyond the representative task if the electorate does not change their living preferences first.

Can you as a politician change the way people want to live?

[sigh] well, I don't know if it's my job actually as a politician to do that. How people should live, they should live as they want

Another respondent expressed that "political work is about forming opinion, that is influencing people's opinions". However, when talking about climate change mitigation, they took a delegate stand. Thus, if the electorate do not want climate action, the politicians are not responsible to realize such a transition. When it comes to climate change in particular, to represent is to be a delegate and to do what the electorate wants.

If the people have given the politicians that responsibility, it is their responsibility. Because I mean politicians have their justification only as an extension of the will of the people as I see it

Overall, the respondents did not understand their representative ideal as a delegate who ought to implement what the electorate wants; they expressed that politicians also ought to make the electorate want what is best in the views of the representative. However, the electorate is seen as responsible for their own voting behavior and the resulting politics, as the representatives cannot materialize change without voter support. In sum, the politicians here interviewed find their representative task two-folded; to both encompass the input in terms of running public opinion from above and to encompass the output in terms of carrying out the policy. But, as shown below, the opinion leadership task is perceived to be beyond their external efficacy.

The unreceptive electorate

As previously shown, all respondents at some point expressed that representatives ought to run public opinion from above. In other words, they believe that they ought to muster support for the policy change they want to materialize. Assuming that support is in place, most expressed a great optimism about the power at their disposal.

If you get strong enough support from the voters, you have every opportunity to bring about change. That's how it is

If there was public support for the policy you want to see, do you think it would be possible to implement it?

Yes, I think so. Or I am completely convinced of it. If I hadn't been, I probably wouldn't been involved politically

Perhaps not surprising in a democratic regime, the politicians see the electorate as the ultimate limit to their external efficacy; Without public support you cannot hold office and thus cannot change society. However, most respondents express that they perceive their ability to affect public opinion to be limited when it comes to climate change. In the words of one respondent, too rapid change is counterproductive.

It is counterproductive to push too hard with citizens [...] when you push that hard [as the previous government] you create a recoil effect which has meant that the Sweden Democrats have grown a lot. If you talk to rural people in particular,

they blame everything on the Environmental Party for making it expensive for them to heat the house or refuel the car. They are not on board [...]

We have our 1.5 percent goal that we must reach, but try to explain that to some ordinary person who lives in on the countryside who only understands that my electricity bill is crazy expensive

The respondents appeared to be apprehensive in relation to the electorate. As illustrated by the words of another respondent:

We must make an assessment. Is this a campaign that a lot of people are behind, do a lot of people think this? But I would say reductions in petrol prices was an issue where the parties were trying to get their tentacles out, “what do people think? Yes, people think it has become very expensive to buy petrol. Okey, but then we lower it”. And I mean it's not something that has anything to do with my party and our ideology, but we keep the tentacles out and see okay, this is a very big issue we might have to be involved too

Rather than being efficacious to run public opinion from above, they perceive public opinion to be run from below. As shown in the previous section, it is not their conceptualization of the representative task that is the explanation for this more passive approach to public opinion. Another politician expressed that they felt that their tendency to respond to public opinion, rather than running it, has increased over time.

I feel that politics is to a certain extent becoming more sensitive or more receptive to expressions of public opinion [...] I think it can be seen most clearly during election campaigns that we as a collective become a little more anxious and perhaps don't have the time to ask if is this such a big question or are there that many people who really think this? And then like woah, we must keep the initiative we have to go out with a message [...]

Does an expression of public opinion make you focus on a certain issue or take a certain position?

It varies a bit, but I think that the clearest example that I can recall is that some expression of opinion is given so much space that it eats up everything else [...]

we can still end up in the situation where we don't talk at all about any of our priorities because everyone just wants to talk about petrol prices

Even though the respondents perceive it to be their task to run public opinion from above, they themselves as lacking the external efficacy to do so, as the electorate is perceived as unreceptive. Running public opinion from above is the ideal in the views of the respondents, but an approach to public opinion closer to the delegate notion of representation is what is actually taking place. As shown below, the perceived unreceptiveness is about one aspect in particular: living preferences.

Unchangeable living preferences

A recurring theme in the interviews was a fear of public outrage for increased living expenses.

There is a challenge there, because if you ask voters in general what they're worried about, the climate issue is often at the top [...] on the other hand, the question is whether there's receptivity to the measures that are needed. It's enough to think about the latest election campaign and the focus on reduced fuel prices [...] so to go from thinking that this is important to want to make a sacrifice yourself, there's a very big discrepancy today.

What kind of sacrifice are you thinking of?

That it will cost more to drive your car for example, or that it will be more expensive to fly on a holiday

Most of the politicians recurrently returned to the impracticability to gain support for climate policy that implies that the electorate must change their way of life.

One must avoid going below a certain standard of living to have commitment to do something about the climate issue. Because I don't think there's any readiness for feeling bad and solving the climate issue [...]

Do you think voters want a society with a fraction of the emissions we have today?

Yes, all else being equal, yes, I think so. But if it means that you must compromise with other things, it's not certain

The less the change in the living situation, the more appealing it is perceived to be to the electorate, and vice versa. Another respondent expressed:

It [the climate measures] must be appealing to them personally in some way, that you find a quick, simple, good solution that doesn't have such a big impact on their well-being and life. I think that's what the big mass would appreciate, if you could find a quick fix that doesn't make us have to change our way of life

Whatever climate policy the respondents believe they have the external efficacy to gain support for, it does not include policy that imply changes in lifestyle.

I interpret it as getting the citizens on board is the major obstacle to dramatic climate reforms. Is that how you feel?

Mm, yes. I don't think that the population will ever accept such big changes in their own living situation [...]

Do you mean material standard of living?

Yeah, material standard of living. That we live the way we do, that we eat what we do, that we travel the way we do. I think it would be extremely difficult to change

Naturally, to be able to implement policy as a politician, you need public support. The electorate is seen as receptive for climate policy, but their life-preferences as such are not seen as possible to change. This means that the politicians' means efficacy is limited to measures without social change. Perhaps, this could be connected to the following result: a lack of visions.

No visions of a new society

The politicians here interviewed lacked an encompassing vision of how they want a zero-emitting society to look like. When asked broader questions about how they envision the sustainable society and their most preferred orientation of the climate transition, all answers

but one excluded major social changes of society. What is lacking in the replies is an overall vision of what kind of society to strive for, apart from a vision where society remains the same but more technologically advanced.

It's not like I have some idealistic picture of what society will look like in 2050 that I can work toward actually. But I'm a very strong technology optimist, so I think that most of our changes will be based on new technology and, above all, resource efficiency

The transition to zero emissions is not thought of in visionary terms. Technologies in people's everyday life are thought to replace other technologies, but the behavior as such remains.

What does a society with zero emissions look like?

High-tech. Erm, and science-based. There will certainly be some adjustments that you have to make as an individual, but I think you can still live pretty much as usual in that society

One respondent expressed that they avoided talking about system-wide change when campaigning, even though they defined system change in fairly modest terms, such as new car models and recycling.

Of course, I don't knock on doors and say "hey, do you want to vote for [x]? We propose system-wide changes" like that sounds awful but that's what I believe we must achieve [...] we may travel in a different vehicle, or we may sort waste in a different place. Life as I know it will be a little different, but it will continue

In other cases, the vision was expressed in such a high level of vagueness that it would not be fair to call it a vision. In the following, the respondent reasons that they would prefer a stable and fossil-free electricity production, but the rest is less clear.

So, the energy supply would become fossil-free if you were allowed to make major reforms now?

Yes absolutely then you have to change the existing legislation where you sort of see, yes but can we change so that the environmental code also goes hand in hand with what reality looks like, what was once thought that the environmental code

would still be [...] And that the regulations linked to these various bills will still be so good that you sort of realize that yes, but here it is, we've done these big reforms. When they're in place, then it's just a matter of "go for it" because the technology is there but you wait for the legislation

How then can life and society remain the same although climate change requires drastic and immediate mitigation? The answer appears to be the ecological modernization type of policy, which predominates in the replies across all party affiliations. Most said that they envision new technical innovations, for instance regarding energy production, resource efficiency, and carbon capture and storage. As seen in the *Optimists* section, some also expressed hopes to export these green innovations and, in this way, create new jobs and contribute to large emission cuts globally. Thus, most respondents envisioned a society with reforms in the energy, industry, and production but a way of life which by and large remain the same. Even though the need for dramatic emission cuts never before seen was underlined in several questions, reassurances that life will remain unchanged was repeated across and within interviews.

Can you make voters want a different society?

[sigh] but what does a different society mean, because that can scare a lot of people. It's not like people will live in mud huts, people will live in their normal houses, it's just that they will be heated in a different way [...]

So it is not a social upheaval that you see before you?

No. Not one that will make people worse off. And for many, it won't even be noticed

There was one exception to the general pattern, as one respondent mentioned that they in fact believed society would have to fundamentally change to be sustainable, but again, that the public was unreceptive to such large changes. When asked to pretend that this hindrance was removed, they expressed a vision of a fundamentally different society.

If we pretend for a moment that the population is very receptive and on board with everything, how would you like us to structure the sustainable society?

I would have liked us to structure it in [laughs], I was going to say villages. No,

but in much smaller more collective living groups. Like [laughter] the way we used to live in the old days [...] we eat what we grow ourselves and we help each other [...] that's how I think society would have to look like if we are to live sustainably [...] But I think it's impossible to scale back like this. But I do think it's possible to do it in limited parts. I think it's possible to strive for all the apples we eat to be grown in Sweden.

So this is not a vision that you bring up at party meetings?

No. because it's way too big, it's way too unrealistic

This resigned realist outlook means that the politician believe that society needs to undergo dramatic and fundamental change, but they do not even mention it to their party affiliates, as it is seen as a means far beyond their means efficacy to gain support for such a vision. As discussed in more detail below, the lack of visions could be related to a perceived lack of efficacy to get electoral support for life-style changes, as visions of change then becomes useless.

Discussion

In this section, the results are discussed and related to previous research.

This study investigates how politicians perceive their external efficacy, in contrast to previous studies which almost exclusively focuses on citizens (eg. Moor 2016; Veccione and Caprara 2009; Chamberlain 2012; Norris 2015; van Zomeren et al. 2008; van Zomeren 2013). As theoretically argued, external efficacy among politicians needs to be understood in relation to ideals of representation. In line with previous research on Swedish MPs (Önnudóttir 2016; Esaiasson & Holmberg 1996; Holmberg 1997; Holmberg 1989), it is found that the RPM ideal predominates among the respondents. In contrast to previous studies however, several respondents are in fact *acting* as delegates by advocating for the most popular policy that resonates with what the public already desires, due to their perceived lack of external efficacy to lead public opinion regarding policy related to lifestyle. The following quote is telling: “[W]hat do people think? Yes, people think it has become very expensive to buy petrol. Okey, but then we lower it. And I mean it's not something that has anything to do with my party and our ideology”. An interpretation of the result is that previous studies, who do not study representation combined with external efficacy, have overseen which form of representation politicians *act* according to, as opposed to hold as their ideals. However, the small sample encourages caution in generalizing. With this in mind, another interpretation is that the adherence from opinion leadership rather depends on the issue as such, which implications for lifestyle might make it especially hard to act in accordance with the RPM ideal, as the electorate is seen as unwilling to live differently. Or perhaps we are witnessing the beginning of a more general shift among Swedish MPs’ ideals of representation, towards a more delegate standpoint.

In the public debate, you often encounter that politicians have the responsibility to stop climate change (eg. Åkerman & Öberg 2007). This thesis has shown that the politicians here interviewed perceive the electorate as the ultimate limit (or enabler) to their external efficacy to fulfill this task. Even though most interview questions were open in character, no respondent brought up hindrances to external efficacy in the output structure. The input side -

getting the support, is perceived as the critical point for external efficacy and not the output side – carrying out the implementation. With public support in place, several politicians emphasized that they have the external efficacy to materialize policy. In the words of one respondent: *“If you get a strong enough support from the voters, you have every opportunity to bring about change. That's how it is”*. Further, we have seen that most of the politicians here interviewed, in line with the RPM ideal, believe that they ought to run public opinion from above to approve of climate action.

Optimists and resigned realists are commonplace in the material, while trojan horses and politically depressed are not. Both the former types are variations of politicians who perceive that they have outcome efficacy. This tells us that all the politicians here interviewed perceive that they have the efficacy to materialize what they see as sufficient emission cuts. As climate change is viewed as a least likely case for external efficacy, this provides an indication that the respondents perceive themselves as all-in-all capable to govern. However, a perceived lack of means efficacy reoccurred in the material. The resigned realists do not believe they have a realistic chance to ensure that the climate transition takes place with means that are the best for society at large. It may be easier to imagine (or admit) that the means are limited than that the outcome itself beyond reach.

The omnipresent optimism about outcome efficacy regarding mitigation might come as a surprise in times of insufficient climate action (cf. Rogelj et al 2018, Anderson et al 2020). One explanation to the lack of politicians without outcome efficacy could be that the sample consists of senior climate politicians and politicians with a particular interest in climate change. These respondents have chosen to stay focused on climate change for a long time or handle an issue they perceive as important. The interviews also took place right after an election, so one could imagine that potential politically depressed politicians would have chosen to focus on another policy area or change career (or simply did not get elected). If one had interviewed defectors, one might have seen a different result.

As the electorate is seen as unreceptive regarding changes in lifestyle, the politicians here interviewed perceive that they cannot win elections with climate policy that requires citizens to live in another way. Thus, for those who want to see social change as opposed to ecological modernization, the electoral receptivity is the ultimate limit to means efficacy. In accordance

with the ‘government trap thesis’ (Pidgeon 2012) but delimited to the means, the politicians who believe social change are the best means for mitigation wait for an approval they believe is beyond their external efficacy to manifest themselves.

The perception that lifestyle changes are beyond their means efficacy could explain the lack of visions of profound change. You can electrify the carpools, but it is no point in campaigning for a society without cars. Why then build a vision thereof? As one resigned realist comment on their secret vision of the future: “[I]t's way too big, it's way too unrealistic”. In this sense, preservation of the current lifestyle functions as a baseline for the climate policy that is meaningful to envision. Indeed, this could mean that politicians “do not discuss the more far-reaching implications of climate change for social and political life” (Willis 2017:214).

From one perspective, the unreceptivity (perceived or actual) for climate policy that implies lifestyle changes might be *due* to the lack of visions. It is hard to win elections by campaigning on what will be taken away without a picture of what will be gained. The electoral receptivity for lifestyle changes (if this is seen as necessary) might look different if politicians present an encompassing vision of how the social structuring of society could improve *while* lowering emissions. In the words of Cassegård & Thörn, “[t]he truth of a utopia does not lie in how well it predicts the future, but in how well it helps us orient ourselves in the present” (129).

Just as Willis (2018b) found in her study of UK MPs, some respondents, what here are referred to as optimists, can create an economic co-benefit claim for acting on climate change. The optimists believe that the electorate is receptive to the economic benefits they think will follow from climate policy as efficiency improvements. For them, it is possible to gain support for lowering emissions, as they believe the electorate will not need to change their lifestyles with their policy package. Notably, the perceived unreceptiveness for lifestyle changes is omnipresent among these respondents too, but the perceived lack of need for such changes enables the optimists to fully escape the government trap. Economic co-benefits through technological innovations and the lack of need for lifestyle changes thus enabled the optimists to have both outcome and means efficacy.

Notably, the optimists envision the climate transition in technological terms, in line with the ecological modernization paradigm (eg. Hajer 1995; Gunderson 2020) and most party programs. As they do not find profound social changes desirable, they avoid the perceived wall of electoral unreceptiveness regarding lifestyle changes. As mentioned in the introduction, Habermas claimed that modern politics have settled with how to maintain the current order instead of deliberating on a new society and new ways to live together (1971). In line with this assertion, the only ones who hold both types of efficacies imagine that the sustainable society remains the same, but high-tech.

Conclusions

In this segment, an overview of the results and suggestions for future research are presented.

This study investigates politicians' external efficacy with a focus on climate change. It is argued that perceptions of external efficacy need to be related to ideals of representation, as these set the scope of the tasks the politicians need to perform. Further, it is argued that external efficacy has two dimensions previously overlooked, outcome efficacy and means efficacy.

In connection to research question one, four general approaches to external efficacy regarding climate change are found. *Optimists* imagine that sufficient emission cuts can be done while still favoring the nation at large through the means. The potential antagonism between mitigation and its consequences is bridged by a belief in technological innovations that benefits both the economy and provides sufficient emission cuts. Notably, the technological shift is believed to be possible without major changes in the electorate's way of life. *Resigned realists* imagine that sufficient emission cuts cannot be done while still favoring the country through the means, or at least not with the means they would most prefer. The difficulty consists in that the resigned realists believes that the electorate need to change their way of life, but the electorate is unwilling to do so. Instead, the resigned realists align with what they perceive as sub-optimal policy that does not imply such lifestyle changes. *Trojan horses* advocate for so-called "climate action" to sneak in the desirable but inefficient means. No such expressions of efficacy are encountered, but some respondents accuse their opponents of acting in a similar manner. Lastly, the *politically depressed* do not believe that they will be able to realize policy with satisfying reductions of emissions and they do not find the means at their disposal are optimal for the country at large. Some politicians resign temporarily to such a profound resignation, only to return to optimist or resigned realist expressions.

In summary, the politicians here interviewed perceived that they have the outcome efficacy to materialize what they see as sufficient emission cuts. However, the politicians who want a social response to climate change tend to lack means efficacy, due to the perceived lack of electoral receptivity for lifestyle changes.

In connection to research question two, it is theoretically argued that ideals of representation define what tasks the politicians need external efficacy to perform. Empirically, it is found that the politicians here interviewed perceive the representative task to encompass running public opinion from above, but again, that this is beyond their external efficacy when it comes to lifestyle changes. Thus, running public opinion is the predominating ideal, but this ideal is deviated from when it comes to policies that implies lifestyle changes. As the electorate is seen as unreceptive for such climate policy, social change is seen as a means for mitigation beyond their abilities. As such, the notion of what people can perceive to be the good life set the stage for what kind of climate policy that is envisioned. The only MPs who can envision the sustainable society are the optimists, who think that society can remain the same but high-tech. Due to the perceived lack of electoral receptivity, preservation of the current lifestyle becomes a baseline for the climate policy that is meaningful to envision.

Suggestions for future research

Future research should investigate how politicians perceive their external efficacy in other contexts and regarding other political issues, as well as how these perceptions vary with party affiliation. Other groups of politicians than the ones here interviewed, such as former politicians, defectors, and local politicians, could be an interesting scope. Further, future research ought to decipher how politicians' perceptions of external efficacy and ideals of representation are associated statistically, as this design does not allow for such generalizations. Lastly, it would be interesting to see the *actual* electoral receptivity for lifestyle-changing policy as opposed to the perceived; are the politicians here interviewed overestimating the resistance to social climate policy?

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Appendix

Information about the sample

Table 2. The respondents' backgrounds and experiences

| | |
|-------------------------------------|--|
| Gender | 5 males, 4 females |
| Party affiliation | 2 Social Democrats, 1 from each remaining party in the Riksdag (Sweden Democrats, Moderate Party, Left Party, Centre Party, Christian Democrats, Green Party, and the Liberal Party) |
| Time served as MP | Between 2 months to 8 years (mean: 4.5 years, median: 4 years) |
| Seniority, excluding climate change | All current regular MPs. Current or past positions: 2 group leaders, 4 party spokespersons (multiple issues), 1 member of the Swedish Delegation to the Nordic Council. |
| Seniority on climate change | Current or past positions: 2 party spokespersons for climate change, 8 members of the Committee on Environment and Agriculture |
| Interview duration | 3 medium-length (less than 40 minutes) 6 long (one hour or more) |

Interview Guide

| Thematic guide | Dynamic guide | Follow up questions |
|--|--|---|
| Warm-up question | How did you become politically active? | |
| Outcome efficacy Means efficacy (highly prioritized) | You have worked as a politician for several years. You who have been on the inside, would you say that politicians govern what society looks like? | Would you like to mention something that you think makes it possible for politicians to govern society and something that makes it difficult? |
| Outcome efficacy Means efficacy | Do you think it will make a big difference to the voters when we | |

| | | |
|--|--|---|
| | change government? Does it show in their daily lives? | |
| Outcome efficacy regarding climate change Representation (highly prioritized) | In the public debate, you often hear that it is the politicians' responsibility to stop climate change. That's quite a task. | How do you feel about being appointed with that task? Does it feel manageable? What is it that simplifies? What makes it difficult? |
| Outcome efficacy Means efficacy Outcome efficacy and means efficacy regarding climate change (highly prioritized) | Do you think that personal commitment among Riksdag politicians pays off? Do you make more of an impact if you make an effort? | Does it matter how personally involved a politician is in the climate issue? Does commitment pay off? How? |
| Outcome efficacy regarding climate change | As a politician in the Riksdag, you have more insight than many others. Do you think it is politically possible for Sweden to reach net zero emissions by 2050? | Do you see it as likely that we will get there? Why, why not? What's stopping us? |
| Perceptions of climate change | How do you think the world's climate will look like in 50 years? | You are a politician, you have more insight than many others. Do you think we have a chance? |
| Perceptions of climate change | A lot of people feel very worried when they imagine the climate of the future. How do you feel? | |
| Outcome efficacy regarding climate change Means efficacy regarding climate change (highly prioritized) | Which orientation do you think is the very best to have on climate policy? What kind of policy do you prefer? | <i>Find out whether it is with emission reductions or other effects on society in mind.</i> Do you think that you have the conditions for realizing those measures? Why/why not? |
| Outcome efficacy regarding climate change Means efficacy regarding climate change | There are different views on how quickly emissions need to be reduced, but a new study shows that countries like Sweden need to reduce their emissions by 12 percent every year for the next few decades to fulfill the Paris Agreement, compared to 5 percent per year according to current climate | Should we try to reduce emissions by 12 percent per year? Yes: Why? Are there any obstacles to that policy in your opinion? Could you elaborate on that? |

| | | |
|---|--|--|
| | goals. What do you think about that? | No: Why not? |
| Means efficacy regarding climate change | What consequences do you think annual emission reductions of 12% would have for Sweden? | |
| Means efficacy regarding climate change (highly prioritized) | Do you think that large emission reductions can be made while we're getting a better society? | Yes: In what way? How do you see your opportunities to make that to happen? No: Why not? |
| Means efficacy regarding climate change Visions (highly prioritized) | If we imagine for a moment that all the obstacles for major reforms are gone, how can a future Sweden with zero emissions look like? What would be desirable? | Do you feel that it is possible for you as a politician to exert an influence so that we approach such a society? What obstacles or opportunities do you see? |
| Perceptions of growth | Now I will ask a few questions about how you perceive economic growth. It can be said that there is a consensus within Swedish politics that Sweden's economy should continue to grow. Do you personally think that growth is good for Sweden? | In what way? |
| Outcome efficacy regarding climate change Perceptions of growth | Do you think that growth can be combined with large and rapid emission reductions, and by extension net zero emissions? | Why/why not? |
| Means efficacy regarding climate change Outcome efficacy regarding climate change Perceptions of growth | If the economy could have been stable without growing, would you have wanted to see the same climate policy that your party is currently advocating for? | |
| Electoral receptivity Means efficacy regarding climate change Outcome efficacy regarding climate change | What do you think is required for voters to find one's climate policy attractive? | Do you think voters want the politics that a society with a fraction of today's emissions entails? |

| | | |
|---|---|-------------------------|
| (highly prioritized) | | |
| Electoral receptivity Representation (highly prioritized) | Can you as a politician change the way people want to live? | Should politicians try? |
| Representation Vision leadership (highly prioritized) | Who is responsible for what the voters want? | |

Comment: Translated from Swedish. Note that many questions are thought to capture both outcome efficacy and means efficacy. Although they are separated on a conceptual level, they are hard to distinguish into separated questions in an interview where the respondents are encouraged to speak freely. Several questions concern perceptions of growth, as this was expected to be important for external efficacy regarding climate change due to previous research (presented in The policy-response so-far).

Codebook

| Codes |
|---------------------------------|
| Outcome efficacy |
| Means efficacy |
| The electorate |
| Electoral receptivity |
| Unchangeable living preferences |
| The task to represent |
| Delegate |
| RPM |
| Trustee |
| Opinion leadership |
| The type of transition |
| Ecological modernization |
| Economic growth |
| Social visions |
| Media and social media |

Request mail

Hello,

I study at the political science department in Gothenburg and write a master's thesis on how politicians perceive their room for action when it comes to climate policy. I am writing because I want to interview you.

I am contacting you because I believe that through your experiences with climate policy and politics in general, you can help generate key insights. Perhaps you would also find it a worthwhile opportunity to reflect on the conditions politicians have to enforce changes; a basic condition for politics that has been neglected in previous research.

The interview takes a maximum of one hour and is conducted on Zoom or Teams during November whenever it suits you. You will of course be anonymous, and I will follow all regulations for research ethics. I will not indicate gender, party or age in the results, nor will the reader get a composite picture of each individual politician's statements. You can also decide in advance whether any other information needs to be hidden so that your anonymity is not revealed.

Are you able to participate?

My supervisor's name is Anna Bendz and can be reached at X.

Sincerely,

Filippa Werner Sellbjer

Comment: Translated from Swedish.