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Explaining MPs' Perceptions of Voters' Positions in a Party-Mediated Representation System: Evidence from the Portuguese Case

Abstract

The article addresses the crucial but still relatively understudied issue of political perceptions, specifically the perceptions of members of parliament (MPs) regarding the positioning of voters on the left-right spectrum, and the accuracy thereof. It focuses on the Portuguese case which differs from others studied to date in terms of the links between MPs and voters (in contrast with prior research, Portuguese voters do not vote for an MP candidate but for a party list; the representation process is mediated by political parties). The article begins by characterizing Portuguese MP perceptions of voters' left-right positions, and then explores the reasons for MPs' perceptual accuracy. The findings show that MP perceptions are shaped by wishful thinking, reiterating previous research, and that *party integration* is an important new factor explaining perceptual accuracy.

Key-words: political perceptions, legislators, voters, left-right classification, Portugal.

Legislators' political perceptions have been for some decades acknowledged as being an important feature to take in to account when studying democratic representation. From an empirical point of view, there is evidence that the performance of political parties is often determined by the view that leaders have of the stance of their supporters (see e.g. Clausen, 1977; Miller and Stokes, 1963). These findings are significant enough to make party leaders' political perceptions a crucial topic of study. The literature on political representation has increasingly recognized the importance of the role of citizens in the political decision-making process (see e.g. Norris, 1999), suggesting that successful political leadership depends on knowledge of voters' preferences and interests. Furthermore, the accuracy of legislators' perceptions seems to be connected with the quality of political representation (Miller and Stokes, 1963). Thus, the success of political parties and their ability to represent the citizenry depends on correctly perceiving voter attitudes, beliefs and preferences, which can be seen as a strategic goal.

Notwithstanding the importance of political leaders' perceptions, the topic remains understudied. One important unexplored aspect is the explanation of variance in the perceptual accuracy. The literature suggests that the electoral system is an important explanatory variable (Powell, 2000; Wessels, 1999), but this has seldom been taken into account. Most research has focused essentially on cases where electoral systems promote a direct relationship between legislators and constituencies (thus implying responsiveness to the latter), such as the United States of America and France, and to a lesser extent Sweden, Germany, Norway and the Netherlands (see Freire et al., 2002: 95). Such systems (especially the former) permit an assessment of contextual variables which studies have found to be relevant when explaining variance in perceptual accuracy (Clausen et al., 1983; Hedlund and Friesema, 1972; Miller and Stokes, 1963).

However, these independent variables are only valid for these specific electoral systems, but not for others with weak links between MPs and voters.

The Portuguese electoral system is generally regarded as generating few incentives for strong ties between MPs and voters; indeed, Portugal is seen as one of the European countries with the weakest capacity for this sort of linkage (Freire et al., 2002: 93-5). Portugal has a proportional system with closed lists, and uses the d'Hondt formula to allocate seats. Citizens vote for parties and cannot select preferred candidates because lists are closed. Parties control the candidate-selection process, selecting MP candidates for the party lists in a highly centralized process that generally excludes the intervention of the party grassroots, being also the only agents that can present candidate lists to parliament. After elections, seats are allocated to party candidates in the order they are included in the list, and depending on the number of votes attained. So the vote of citizens can determine the number of elected candidates per party, but not which candidates are elected. Additionally, there is no regional representation since regional parties are prohibited by the constitution and MPs have national mandates, representing the country as a whole and not the constituencies. The Portuguese parliamentary system is also seen as highly disciplined: MPs almost without exception follow the party line and therefore what they may perceive of the voters' political views does not necessarily influence their legislative behavior. For these reasons the Portuguese parliament is considered as a highly centralized and party based system (see Leston-Bandeira: 2009: 695, 697-8). As a result, parties control the elective process, and the incentive to establish a direct linkage between voters and elected representatives at the constituency level is very weak. These are the reasons why the Portuguese

electoral system is considered as party-mediating the relationship between MPs and voters (Leston-Bandeira: 2009: 698).

This article explores whether an electoral system in which the constituency-legislator linkage is party-mediated generates similar levels of accuracy and similar patterns of causality as found in other studies that considered electoral systems that promote stronger direct linkages. To that end, recent data on Portugal are compared with findings for other cases (although there is not much comparable data available). Looking at the Portuguese case is also of value because it is rarely included in research on this topic (an exception is Belchior, 2010: 131-3).

Structurally, after a survey of the literature on political perceptions and discussing the research hypotheses, sources and data analysis options are explained. The article continues by characterizing how MPs from the different Portuguese political parties perceive the left-right positioning of voters. Finally, on the basis of the research findings and theoretical contributions on the topic, an explanatory model of the variance in MPs' perceptual accuracy is presented and discussed.

The analysis includes the political parties currently represented in the Portuguese Parliament. The Socialist Party (*Partido Socialista*, PS) and the Social Democratic Party (*Partido Social Democrata*, PSD), are the largest parties and were both founded in the early 1970s. They are essentially "catch-all" parties and have alternated in government since the transition to democracy in 1975, after the 1974 revolution which brought about a transition from dictatorship to democracy. Despite its name, the PSD is on the centre-right of the political spectrum and is a member of the European Parliament EPP-ED conservative and Christian Democratic group. The Democratic Social Centre/People's Party (*Partido do Centro Democrático e Social/Partido Popular*, CDS-

PP), a cadre-type party founded in 1974, is the party that is furthest to the right and most conservative. The Communist Party (*Partido Comunista Português*, PCP) is Portugal's oldest party, founded in 1921, and is the only proper mass party. The Portuguese Greens, founded in 1982, have been in a coalition with the PCP since 1991, the Unitarian Democratic Coalition (*Coligação Democrática Unitária*, CDU). Since the Greens do not differ significantly from the PCP in political or programmatic terms, for analytical purposes, the analysis focuses on the CDU rather than on each of its constituent parties individually. Finally, there is the Left Bloc (*Bloco de Esquerda*, BE), a new left party founded in 1998.¹ Since their appearance on the political scene, these parties have been part of the Portuguese Parliament, either individually or in coalitions.

The Portuguese party system is considered to be weakly polarized regarding the two major parties and comparatively to other European party systems (Freire, 2005: 32-5; Jalali, 2007: 63-8). It is characterized by a rigid bipolarization of the two centrist parties, whose policies are sometimes intertwined. That may contribute to explain the difficulty of the electorate to disentangle the policy issues associated to the ideological left and right. Furthermore, it has important political consequences in political behavior and attitudes, namely regarding voters ideological positioning. Another important feature regarding the Portuguese party system is the increasing percentage of voters that cannot find a party that represent their political views. This is demonstrated by the rising number of abstentionists that in the last two parliamentary elections overthrew the percentage of voters in any of the major political parties.²

Theories of Elite-Based Perceptions

The seminal work of Miller and Stokes, *Constituency Influence in Congress* (1963), marked the acknowledgment of how relevant it is to study the accuracy of legislators' political perceptions. These authors claim that the degree to which legislators effectively represent constituents can be partly or even entirely explained by the accuracy with which they perceive constituents' policy preferences (1963: 52-3). Indeed, legislators' perceptions of how the electorate feels constitutes one of the four corners in Miller's and Stokes' "diamond" model of representation. Other authors have addressed this topic since, notably Hedlung and Friesema (1972), who focus on U.S. representatives; Converse and Pierce (1986: chapter 2), who study elite understandings of the views of their constituents; Clausen et al. (1983), who looks at the Swedish case; and Holmberg and Granberg, who have studied Swedish, American and European Parliament representatives (Granberg, 1985, 1987; Granberg and Holmberg, 2002a, b; Holmberg, 1989, 1999).

Since the study by Miller and Stokes, the literature on political perceptions has been dominated by *displacement theory*. This offers a perspective on the subject: one state that people are motivated to agree with their preferred candidates or parties, and to disagree with those they dislike. This suggests that voters tend to *assimilate* their candidate's or party's position; put differently, they tend to distort that position so that it matches their own (the so-called *assimilation effect*). The same argument is made about MPs, who supposedly distort supporters' positions so that they become closer to their own. This kind of "wishful thinking" permits MPs to believe their voters' positions are closer to their own than is actually the case (Hedlung and Friesema, 1972: 242-4). Although empirically supported, the displacement theory fails to comprehensively address the question of political perceptions. Because it focuses essentially on

individuals, it tends to lose its explanatory power at the aggregate level. For example, the theory may fail to have noticeable effects on perceptual accuracy, since errors and distortions tend to cancel each other out at the aggregate level (Granberg, 1985: 506). All the same, displacement theory is a valid point of departure or basis to anchor and develop a more elaborate theory of political perceptions. It also offers an indication of what is worth to be looked at concerning legislators' perceptions, that is, if they in fact tend to engage in wishful thinking processes distorting voters' political views. In particular, it is important to understand if this process is independent of the incentives that the electoral system may provide. Since, as seen above, most of the studies on this matter have focused in quite different electoral systems than the Portuguese, which contrarily to the former displays low incentives for MPs' correspondence to voters' preferences, the Portuguese case is used to test that theoretical assumption.

Displacement effects are responsible for introducing error in the opinion formation process when politicians tend to erroneously believe that their voters share their views (Esaiasson and Holmberg, 1996: 116-7; Holmberg, 1989: 24-6; 1999: 235-51; Miller and Stokes, 1963: 51). Their wishful thinking arises from perception bias and is conducive to miscommunication between party leaders and their supporters. However, representatives' tendency to engage in wishful thinking may also promote stability and harmony (see e.g. Holmberg, 1999: 235-6). That is why some scholars believe that a modicum of wishful thinking is positive for the democratic quality of electoral politics (Granberg and Holmberg, 2002b). Although some authors emphasize that it contributes to peace in political systems, the phenomenon can also produce other less beneficial outputs, such as voter apathy and distrust (because representatives do not live up to expectations), or low levels of responsiveness to the demands of citizens by

legislators (because these are under insufficient pressure to be close to their constituents). Disregarding what the effects might be, it is unquestionable that this bias in legislators' perceptions has consequences in the representation process and, as a consequence, in the quality of democratic representation. In this regard, and considering the political apathy and discontent currently characterizing the Portuguese electorate, of which the rising abstention rates are the most visible aspect, the most important consequence of the prevalence of this wishful thinking process among party MPs respects to the reinforcement of the divorce between Portuguese MPs and voters.

Hypotheses

Research has been proving that the ability of legislators to understand how constituents feel is uneven. Miller and Stokes found that it is reasonably high for civil rights issues, but quite low in the area of social welfare or foreign affairs (1963, 52). It has also been demonstrated that legislators are better predictors of voters' attitudes when it comes to politically-charged issues (Hedlund and Friesema, 1972: 741-2; Holmberg, 1989: 24). In this article, the variable at play is left-right positioning. This presents some difficulties when comparing MPs and voters (see below) but, as for politically charged issues, it is expected that there are high levels of MP' recognition of voter' left-right positions. This expectation is supported by the importance of the left-right dimension in organizing and shaping political thought and behaviour in most European countries, including Portugal.

According to the assimilation effect, one can expect greater convergence between the assessment that MPs make of voters' position and their own position, than with voters' actual position. Considering that wishful thinking is an internal psychological

process frequent among MPs and that the Portuguese electoral system does not promote high MP-voter correspondence, it is reasonable to expect that the Portuguese MPs also engage in distorted perceptions about voters' real positions. Consequently, as regards the first hypothesis: *H1: It is expected that the perception of MPs' of voters' left-right position in the party is more congruent with their own than with the real position of voters.*

Research on the explanation of MPs' perceptual accuracy refers to two causal factors: the characteristics of individual legislators and contextual factors (Clausen, 1977; Clausen et al., 1983; Hedlund and Friesema, 1972; Miller and Stokes 1963). As various authors have acknowledged, the study of individual characteristics has not been a great success, and some demonstrated that contextual factors such as the homogeneity, polarization, salience or stability of constituents' views are more important when explaining variance in perceptual accuracy (Clausen et al., 1983. See also: Converse and Pierce, 1986: 656-7; Hedlund and Friesema, 1972; Holmberg, 1989: 24-5, Miller and Stokes, 1963). On this view, the accurate perceptions of voters' views seems to depend less on personal characteristics or leadership capabilities, and more on external factors affecting the political system, which may facilitate or limit view-sharing among constituents and leaders.

One particularly significant contextual variable is the tendency of MPs to project their opinions onto their voters (Clausen et al., 1983: 454-5; Holmberg, 1989: 24-5). This is referred to as *attitude-dissonant perception* (ADP), the measure of which is the difference between MPs positions and their perception of the electorate's position. ADP was found to be essential when explaining the accuracy of perception of Swedish MPs (Clausen et al., 1983). The Swedish electoral system, as the Portuguese, is also

proportional and with closed party lists (however parties may opt to leave to voters the nomination of their preferred candidate), but opposing the Portuguese case it promotes higher participation of voters in candidates' selection and better levels of MPs-voters' correspondence (Freire et al., 2002: 93-95).

As to some extent recognized by the authors (Clausen et al., 1983: 456), it seems inappropriate to consider ADP as a contextual factor. Unlike other contextual variables, far from being an external characteristic of legislators, ADP involves an internal individual process and should be considered part of MPs' *attitude perceptions* regarding the representation process (discussed below).

Given the nature of the Portuguese electoral system, ADP is the only "contextual" variable that can be tested for this case. As noted above, perceptual accuracy is best explained by contextual factors, but such factors have only been tested in the case of the U.S., which has an electoral system that promotes direct legislator-voter links, and legislator responsiveness to constituencies. This is not the case in Portugal, so including constituency variables such as homogeneity, polarization, salience or stability as independent variables would be meaningless. What, then, explains perceptual accuracy when the electoral system does not establish strong ties between legislators and voters? In the Portuguese case and others like it, two other alternative dimensions are expected to play a relevant role: MPs' party identification and ideology, and MPs' *attitude perceptions* (including ADP) of representation.

It is commonly assumed that ideology and party identification significantly shape the thought and behaviour of political leaders. Hedlung and Friesema explored the causal relevance of those variables in perceptual accuracy of U.S. legislators, but their findings revealed that "political parties as linkages between legislators and

constituencies seem obscure” (1972: 744), and weak statistically significant relationships were found (1972: 744-8). These results notwithstanding, party identification and ideology may play a more relevant role in electoral systems where parties mediate between representatives and represented. Compared to the American or French systems in which voters directly choose their preferred candidates, the Portuguese electoral system concedes a more relevant role to political parties giving them the power to decide who the candidates that can be elected are. For this reason, party features such as party membership and party ideology are expected to have a significant impact in the accuracy with which Portuguese MPs perceive the positions of the electorate.

Some scholars have included the type of representation role preferred by legislators as an explanatory factor. The positions are those of delegate (when legislators voting behaviour is bound by their constituency position); trustee (when legislators voting behaviour is bound by personal judgment rather than constituency position); and politico (when legislators either follow their own judgment or defer to constituents depending on the situation or issue at stake) (see Converse and Pierce, 1986: chapter 21). In Hedlund and Friesema (1972: 742-4, 749), representation role theory did not predict perceptual accuracy: legislators who saw themselves as delegates were not more but less accurate in their perceptions of constituents’ views. Holmberg (1989: 9-12) has also found that MPs’ perception of their representational role was not significant. As he notes, legislators in Sweden that evince “a delegate role preference, are a little better at accurately perceiving voter sentiments than other members,” (1989: 12). Despite the weak and controversial results, legislators’ view of their representational role is theoretically relevant (Clausen, 1977: 374-6). For that reason

this independent variable shall also be included in the study of the Portuguese case, being interesting to understand if MP's delegate role preference reveals to be more important in an electoral system that generates low incentives for MPs-voters' correspondence. Legislators who prefer a delegate role are supposedly more inclined to follow their voters' views and therefore more attentive (and perceptually accurate) regarding the latter's positions.

There is another variable which has yet to be empirically tested but whose theoretical relevance has been acknowledged. Clausen refers to the perceptions of fellow MPs and their close political cohorts as a factor explaining perceptual accuracy of MPs. Political cue theory posits that the views of cohorts and colleagues are a source of information about the views of constituents, or serve to confirm MPs' already established perceptions of their constituents (1977: 381-2). The role of parties in the Portuguese electoral system reinforces the pertinence of the influence of social interaction. To operationalize it we assume that MPs with perceptions close to the median perception of the party are those most prone to discussing and sharing their perceptions of voters' views with their colleagues; and that those furthest from the median tend to follow more isolated processes of perception formation, then the distance between MPs' perception and the median party perception is the measure to include in the analysis. This measure is designated *party perception distance* (PPD).

To summarise, a set of independent variables are used based on the most relevant explanations of MPs' perceptual accuracy, namely: MPs' individual characteristics and political experience; ideological and party identification; and MPs' *attitude perceptions* of representation (which include: ADP, self-perception of role representation, and PPD). MPs' individual characteristics are expected to play a lesser role, and the other factors

are expected to be more significant. This leads to the second hypothesis: *H2: MPs' perception accuracy regarding their voters' left-right placement is best explained by party and ideological identification, and attitude perceptions towards representation, rather than by MPs individual characteristics.*

Data and Sources

When exploring MPs' perceptions regarding voters' ideological positions, ideology is measured using an eleven point (0-10) left-right scale. This choice is not straightforward. The left-right *continuum* establishes an abstract ideological identification, the results of which may differ from those obtained using other measures (attitudes towards substantive public policies, for instance). Moreover, comparing citizens and elites raises methodological problems (see, for example, Converse and Pierce, 1986: chapter 7). Unlike MPs, voters are not a coherent collective entity, so their positions have different meanings. For this reason, high correlations between elites' and electorates' positions do not necessarily mean greater proximity between them (Powell, 2000: 94).

However, the literature suggests that the left-right dimension captures the comparative ideological positions of citizens and parliamentarians reasonably well (McDonald and Budge, 2005: 31-8, 228; Powell, 2000: 162-3; Thomassen, 1999). It has also been demonstrated that voters place themselves quite accurately within ideological families and on the left-right scale (Klingemann, 1995: 192), and that they use the latter to map party policy positions, and make use of the ideological positions of parties as cognitive cues to compensate for their lack of knowledge of party positions on concrete issues (see Van der Brug, 1999, on the Dutch party system). For these reasons, a left-right

scale has been used in many studies of the positioning of citizens and political elites (e.g. Granberg, 1987; Granberg and Holmberg, 2009 (1988): chapter 2; McDonald and Budge, 2005; Powell, 2000; Van der Brug, 1999). The location of voters on a left-right spectrum by MPs is particularly interesting, as MPs can estimate the policy perspectives of their voters on the basis of their perception of voters' ideological positioning (Thomassen, 1999: 35-6).³

The empirical analysis presented here is based on two surveys of Portuguese citizens and MPs in 2008, undertaken in the context of the project *Portuguese MPs in Comparative Perspective: Elections, Leadership, and Representation*. One of these surveys, the *Portuguese Citizens' Study*, is based on a representative sample of 1,350 eligible voters. It is based on a multi-stage probabilistic sample of citizens living on the Portuguese mainland aged 18 or over. The second survey, the *Members of the Portuguese Parliament Study*, covers the members of the Parliament in the Legislative Assembly (*Assembleia da República*). 141 of the 230 MPs' responses were validated (61.3 percent), a remarkable response rate for surveys on parliamentarians, although the absence of a 100 percent response rate does raise some problems (studies available at: Freire et al., 2009). The major problem with a small sample size is its impact on the smaller Portuguese political parties. Although this problem is quite common in research of this kind (e.g. Schmitt and Thomassen, 1999), it makes the interpretation of the results difficult. But because MPs' have the role of representing people, this problem is not as severe as it would be in a sample of ordinary citizens. The data is also validated by the consistency between previous findings and this analysis.

The Assimilation Effect among Portuguese MPs

The first goal of the analysis is to describe Portuguese MPs' perceptions of the left-right positioning of voters. The analysis begins with a comparative analysis of MPs' positions, their perception of their voters' positions, and their voters' *true* position, in order to assess the assimilation effect among Portuguese MPs. Figure 1 depicts this analysis.⁴

Figure 1. (ABOUT HERE)

The Ideological Position of MPs and Voters and MPs' Perceptions of Voter Position

The figure confirms that, at an aggregate level, as in other previously studied cases, in a highly centralized and party based parliament such as the Portuguese, parliamentarians also perceive voters as being closer to their own ideological position than they actually are, suggesting that there is an assimilation effect at play. Voters are generally further to the right than MPs think. The differences are not too extreme, however. A more detailed analysis of the relationship between the three variables is presented in Figure 2, which shows mean values for each of the variables and for each of the five Portuguese political parties.

Figure 2. (ABOUT HERE)

MPs Ideological Position, their Perception of Voters' Positions, and Voters' Position

For every party except the CDS/PP, MPs' perception of voters' left-right position is more congruent with their own views than with the real position of voters in the party. Only the conservative party MPs think the position of their voters is more dissonant with theirs than it actually is (although these MPs usually misperceive voters as being

further to the right, when they are actually further to the left). It appears then, that the CDS/PP MPs are the only ones whose perceptions are not shaped by wishful thinking.

For the other four parties, the assimilation effect is not similar. MPs of the far left parties (BE and CDU) accurately perceive voters as being somewhat distant from their own position (as being more centrist than their party's parliamentarians – indeed, as it turns out, voters are even further to the centre than these MPs think). By contrast, the centrist PS and PSD MPs perceive voters' close to their own left-right position. Socialist MPs are particularly accurate: there is significant congruence between their perceptions and their supporters' true position. This finding is especially relevant if we take into account that the PS was the party in government at the time, and that it was in last year of its first four-year term. The MPs of the PSD, the main party in opposition, display the highest level of wishful thinking. With the exception of the CDS/PP, then, notwithstanding wishful thinking, the Portuguese parliamentarians generally can recognize the centrist ideological tendency of voters, and are aware of the dissonance between their views and those of their supporters.

Moreover, all MPs except those of the CDS/PP accurately view voters as being more to the centre (BE, CDU, and PS) or to the right (PSD) than they are. The exceptionalism of Portuguese conservatives in this regard has already been demonstrated with data from 2007 (Belchior, 2010: 137). Indeed, mainstream research on political congruence has shown that elites on the left and on the right tend to be more extreme than their supporters (Belchior, 2010; Converse and Pierce, 1986: 128; Dalton, 1985: 275; Esaiasson and Holmberg, 1996: 92-5, Granberg and Holmberg, 2009 (1988): 118-9; Thomassen, 1999: 46–50). Summing up, MPs tend to think voters have an ideological position closer to their own than is actually the case, whether one considers

all the parties together or looks at them individually (except for CDS/PP) thus generally supporting the first hypothesis (H1). This suggests that no noticeable impact is produced by the fact that the Portuguese system of representation is party-mediated, since an assimilation effect in the process of MPs perceptions' formation seems to occur, similarly to what happens in non party-mediated systems.

In order to measure the strength of the assimilation effect among Portuguese political parties, correlations between MPs ideological self-position, their party's perceived left-right position, and their supporters' left-right position, were computed⁵. There is a slightly stronger correlation between MPs' ideological self-description and the perceived ideological position of their party than there is between the former and their supporters' left-right positioning (respectively: $r=0,79^{***}$ and $0,700^{***}$). This is not surprising as MPs and their parties are part of a single reality. What matters is that when we compare this result with the magnitude of the relationship with the perceived position of voters, the coefficient is almost as strong as it is for the perceived position of parties. The magnitude of the correlation indicates a strong linear relationship between MPs' left-right position location and their view of where voters stand. This not only supports that there is an assimilation effect at play but also that it is rather strong among Portuguese parliamentarians (similar results were found for European party systems, see Belchior, 2010: 131-3).

Given the scarcity of studies on political perceptions, it is not easy to thoroughly evaluate the levels of perceptual accuracy. As Holmberg points out about the Swedish case, “an unequivocal assessment [...] probably is unattainable” (1989: 24). Even assuming that the same is true for the Portuguese case, one can still conclude that the

pattern of Portuguese MPs' perceptions of their supporters' left-right position is not significantly different from that in the other European countries where legislators tend to engage in wishful thinking on this matter. It is relevant to understand how much this process also occurs regarding substantive polity issues, and what the consequences are for the representation process. In this particular case, a dissonance between voters' expectations and MPs' identification of these expectations can potentially lower the levels of MPs-voters' correspondence and, consequently, penalize democratic representation.

Explaining MPs' Perceptual Accuracy

What limits or enhances the accuracy of parliamentarians' perception? As noted above, the second goal of this article is to explain MPs' perceptual accuracy of their voters' left-right position. For that, we analyze three main dimensions: MPs' individual characteristics and political experience; ideological and party identification; and MPs' *attitude perceptions* regarding representation.

In line with previous research (Clausen, 1977: 376-8; Esaiasson and Holmberg, 1996: 129-30; Hedlund and Friesema, 1972: 744-6) in the first dimension the following MPs individual characteristics and political experience are considered independent variables: age, university degree (area of specialization), social class, number of years in the party, number of years of party experience, number of years of political experience, number of times elected.⁶ The research does not have much to say about the impact of socio-demographic variables since previous research has been inconclusive in this regard. We can however expected that the parliamentarians with a university degree in

law or political science and the more experienced are more likely to be accurate in their perceptions.

The second dimension - ideological and party identification - includes: MPs' left-right self-positioning; the distance of MPs' position from the ideologically "neutral" centre (that is, from the median position in the left-right scale); and party membership. Previous studies do not provide much information about the effect of party ideology or party membership on the assessment of elites' perceptual accuracy (Hedlung and Friesema, 1972: 744-8). When studying the Swedish parliament Holmberg noted that the parties at the extremes of the left-right spectrum evinced the lowest and the centre parties the highest levels of intra-party congruence (1989: 16-9). In the Portuguese party system the centre-left PS also proved to be the most congruent party (Belchior, 2008). The suggested explanation is that "parties located toward the wings of a policy dimension have to stress policy leadership and opinion formation more than centrist parties" (Holmberg, 1989: 17) and so tend to be more incongruent. Considering that centre parties are the most congruent and that there is a connection between congruence and perceptual accuracy (Miller and Stokes, 1963), and because, as seen before, there is a general tendency for voters to place themselves in more central ideological positions, we can expect centrist parties and centrist MPs to be the most accurate in their perceptions of voters ideological positions. As Figure 2 shows, the PS has the most perceptually accurate Portuguese MPs and since this party proved to be the most congruent of the lot (Belchior, 2008), centre-left MPs are expected to be the most relevant when explaining accuracy.

Distance from the "neutral" ideological centre (the median point in the left-right scale) is another variable that helps us to understand the importance of ideology in

explaining MPs perceptions, since accuracy seems to be more frequent at the centre than at the extremes of the ideological spectrum. The measure is computed by subtracting five (the “neutral” point of the left-right scale) from MPs’ left-right self-positioning. Since only the magnitude – and not the direction – of the distance matters all values are positive. The distance is expected to be inversely related to perceptual accuracy.

The third dimension – MPs’ *attitude perceptions* on representation – includes MPs’ *attitude-dissonant perception* (ADP), MPs’ self-perception regarding their representational role, and MPs’ *party perception distance* (PPD). ADP is measured on an eleven-point scale (0 being complete consonance between MPs positions and their perception of the electorate’s position, and 10 complete dissonance). Perceptual accuracy is expected to increase as the distance between MPs’ positions and their perceptions decreases. This happens because MPs with attitude-consonant perceptions achieve accuracy based on their closeness to voters, while MPs with attitude-dissonant perceptions have to resort to information gathering, which can be unreliable (Clausen et al., 1983: 456).

Based on what Holmberg has admitted fragile findings, when studying the Swedish case (1989: 9-12), MPs that identify with the representation role of delegate can be expected to be slightly more perceptually accurate than MPs that identify with the trustee or politico representation roles. From a deductive point of view, legislators that consider that voting behaviour should be bound by the constituency position are expected to be more aware to what the voters views are than the ones that do not, which makes this variable theoretically relevant.

Finally, the more distant the MP is from the median perception of voters' views of the party as a whole (measured by PPD), the lower the effect of perceptions held by fellow MPs; and, as stated by Clausen (1977: 381-2), the lower the expectation of high perceptual accuracy. MPs with perceptions close to the median perception of the party are supposed to be better integrated in the party process of perception formation and, for that reason, to be more accurate regarding their voters' views.

In short, it is likely that MPs' party and ideological identification, and their *attitude perceptions* of representation have a bigger impact on their capacity to correctly judge voters' left-right positioning than their individual characteristics and party experience (H2).

Perceptual accuracy has been previously measured by computing the difference between the estimate and the parameter (namely the difference between the perceptions of another's position and the actual position). Here, the dependent variable – perceptual accuracy – is computed by subtracting MPs' perception of their voters' left-right position from voters' mean position in the party (as in Clausen et al., 1983; 453-4, and appendix). Negative signs are left out, since it is the magnitude of the distance and not the direction that counts. The higher the scores, the higher is the perceptual inaccuracy. Table 1 operationalizes the variables for the model's three dimensions, and Table 2 presents the results of the regression analysis.

Table 1 (ABOUT HERE)

Model of Variance and Causality of Perceptual Accuracy - Variables Categorization

Table 2 (ABOUT HERE)

Explaining MPs' Perceptual Accuracy, OLS (method enter)

Regression coefficients render rather unsatisfactory results, as only a few variables prove to be statistically significant⁷ (weak results are common in this area, as noted by Esaiasson and Holmberg, 1996: 130-1; and Hedlung and Friesema, 1972). Since increasing scores in the measure of perceptual accuracy mean decreasing levels of accuracy, negative signs indicate increasing accuracy. Given that all the significant relationships have positive signs, this means that the increase in the independent variable reflects higher levels of perceptual inaccuracy.

As previous research indicates, the individual characteristics and political experience of MPs do not seem to have a significant impact on their ability to assess voters' preferences accurately. Legislators' personal characteristics have tended to account for only a very low percentage of variance in their perceptions accuracy (Converse and Pierce, 1986: 656-7; Holmberg, 1989: 24). In the Portuguese case, the variance is only 4 percent, and is mostly attributable to differences in social class. MPs with high level professions do not seem to be more accurate; indeed, they seem to be less able to identify their voters' ideological position than their less qualified counterparts. This may be the case simply because less qualified MPs are socially closer to ordinary citizens and tend, for that reason, to be more able to understand them. The magnitude and consistency of the coefficient is reinforced by the second and third blocs of variables. These findings suggest that it is not the legislator personal profile or his/her political experience that makes him/her more accurate when identifying their voters' ideological positions. The explanation for perceptual accuracy should be looked at in other dimensions of the legislators' political life. This is what is done in the second and third blocs of the model.

In the second bloc, only PSD membership plays a significant role, contributing to lower accuracy (as expected). The regression analysis tells us little about the PS, as the party was used as the reference category. The distance of MPs' positions from the "neutral" central of the left-right spectrum is only significant before the introduction of the third bloc of variables, working in the expected direction: the greater the distance of MPs' self-position from the ideological centre, the less accurate their perceptions. A key explanation for this finding is that Portuguese voters tend to position themselves more to the centre than their legislative representatives (Belchior, 2008), and centrist MPs are more likely to perceive this. This supports the contention that centre parties are more perceptually accurate. However, the results for the PSD do not corroborate this: membership of this party contributes to inaccuracy and not the reverse. The analysis presented here does not permit us to draw further conclusions about the differences between the two centre parties at this point.

As shown for other cases, the regression coefficients reveal that ADP is the most robust variable for the Portuguese case (the more dissonant MPs are the most perceptually inaccurate). As expected, the distance of MPs' perception from the median perception within the party is also significant: the greater the distance from the median of the party as a whole, the higher the level of inaccuracy. Indeed, ADP and PPD are similar sorts of variables and have a particularly notable effect on perceptual accuracy. Both are measures of dissonance: the first between MPs' positions and their perceptions; the second between MPs' perceptions and the median party perception. In both cases, the issue is how close MPs are to the true or dominant position.⁸ A substantial percentage of the variance in the accuracy measure results from these two variables, increasing the explained variance by more than 11 percent. This suggests that

in order to explain the perceptual accuracy of MPs, it is necessary to take into account this aspect of their integration in the party (concerning mates and supporters): it is expected that the more *integrated* MPs are the more accurate their perceptions will be. Finally, self-perceived representation roles proved to be insignificant, as other research has also demonstrated.

To summarize, MPs' perceptual accuracy of their voters' left-right placement in the Portuguese party-mediated representation system is essentially explained by the ADP. Other features are significant, including social class, party membership and PPD. The explained variance increases particularly in the third dimension of the model, indicating that the *attitude perceptions* of representation has the greatest impact on the perceptual accuracy of Portuguese parliamentarians. This means that MPs' party integration is expectedly important to explain accuracy in electoral systems such as the Portuguese, which are anchored in parties as exclusive and centralized representation agents. With the exception of the social class dimension, then, this analysis backs H2.

Clausen notes that correlation techniques may not be the most appropriate for measuring perceptual accuracy. If there are low levels of variance in the distributions (if differences between voters are very small and MPs are accurate in their perceptions) the correlation is likely to be very weak, since it is supposedly based in the co-variation of minor differences between the two distributions. The same levels of perceptual accuracy can thus lead to different correlation scores as a function of the variance in the distributions (1977: 371-2). This problem is aggravated when dealing with left-right placement since voters tend to locate themselves at the centre of the left-right spectrum, lowering the variation of the distribution. As an alternative, Clausen suggests as a base line to measure accuracy a comparison between the percentage of correct estimates and

the number of correct estimates that could have occurred by chance (Clausen, 1977: 372). Based on this reasoning, Table 3 presents the differences between MPs' estimates of voters' position in the party and their true position.

Table 3 (ABOUT HERE)

MPs Estimates and Voter Positions (%) by Political Party

The differences are very large between parties, which clarifies the results obtained by the regression analysis. Indeed, party membership is significant when explaining the variation in perceptual accuracy: MPs of the more left-wing parties (CDU and BE) are the less accurate, while Socialist Party MPs are the most accurate, exhibiting very low percentage differences. Similar results were obtained with 2007 data, which corroborates the unique status of the Socialist Party in this regard (Belchior, 2008: 466-8).

Final Considerations

This article has examined legislators' perceptual accuracy regarding the ideological position of voters. The findings reveal that, although Portugal has an electoral system that is not expected to encourage perceptual accuracy, Portuguese parliamentarians do not differ from their European counterparts in this regard. Although there is consonance between previous findings and the analysis undertaken in this article, a new perspective of perceptual accuracy variance in studies of electoral systems with no direct MP-voter linkage is needed.

Portuguese MPs exhibit a tendency for wishful thinking about their supporters' left-right position similar to that of their counterparts elsewhere. MPs think their voters

are closer to their own position than is in fact the case; and when they perceive in the “right direction” they tend to misperceive the *distance* between their position and that of voters. An assimilation effect was observed for all parties but one. Indeed, wishful thinking has usually proved to be very strong among members of parliament, especially when compared to that of voters (Esaiasson and Holmberg, 1996: 135; Granberg and Holmberg, 2002a).

In spite of the relative convergence between MPs’ perceptions and voters’ real positions, these findings suggest that MPs nearly always assume a level of ideological congruence greater than exists in reality, and which in some cases is far off the mark. If the notion of strong ideological convergence maintains a distance between elites and voters because the former believe that such closeness already exists, this can have an impact on political decision-making and, consequently in the quality of the representation process.

As research shows for other cases, with the exception of social class, legislators’ individual characteristics and political experience are essentially irrelevant in explaining Portuguese MPs’ perceptual accuracy. By contrast, party membership is significant, with the centre-left party proving to be the most accurate. In general, being at the ideological centre seems to produce more accurate perceptions. As shown elsewhere, the attitude-dissonant perception was the strongest explanatory variable, and the median party perception distance was also significant, suggesting that MPs’ *attitude perceptions* of representation is a fundamental explanatory dimension.

What is more, it appears we must take another explanatory factor into account when examining MPs’ perceptual accuracy in a party mediated representation system. MPs’ perceived distance from voters, and the distance between MPs’ perceptions and

the median party perception proved to be among the most significant variables in the expected direction: the closer to the true or dominant party position, the greater the level of accuracy. This suggests that variance in perceptual accuracy in this kind of electoral system should take the level of *party integration* of MPs' into account. To consolidate these findings, we clearly need more studies about the importance of electoral systems, and MP-voter perceptual accuracy in particular, on substantive policy issues.

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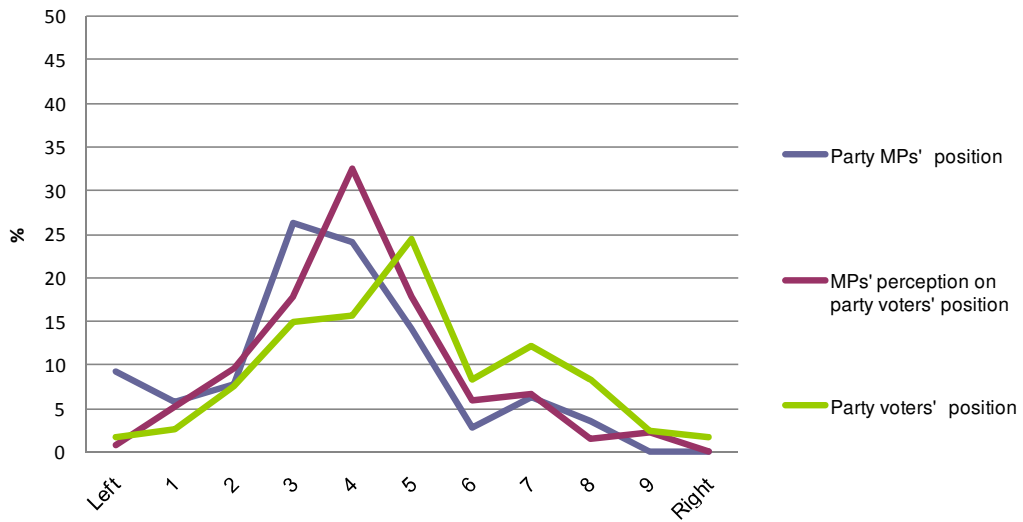
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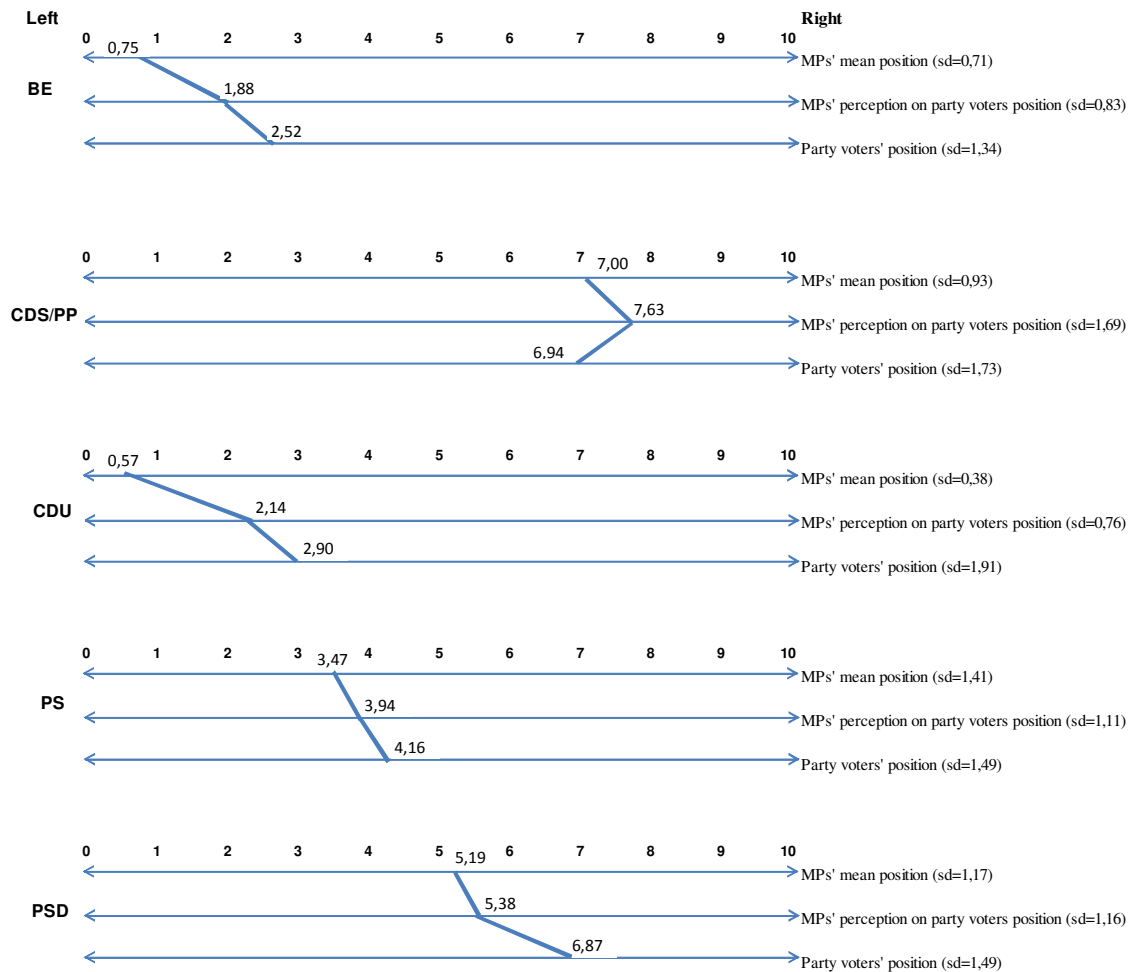
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Figure 1
The Ideological Position of MPs and Voters and MPs' Perceptions of Voter Position
 (Sample Size: 135 MPs; 1,025 Voters)



Sources: *Portuguese Citizens' Study*, 2008 and *Members of the Portuguese Parliament Study*, 2008.

Figure 2
MPs Ideological Position, their Perception of Voters' Positions, and Voters' Position
 (Sample size: 8 BE; 8 CDS/PP; 9 CDU; 21 PSD; 89 PS)



Sources: *Portuguese Citizens' Study*, 2008, and *Members of the Portuguese Parliament Study*, 2008.

Table 1
Model of Variance and Causality of Perceptual Accuracy - Variables Categorization

INDEPENDENT VARIABLES	CODING	
Individual characteristics and political experience	Age	
	University degree (dummy)	1 = Political Sciences and Law; 0 = other areas
	Social class 1 (dummy)	1 = High level professionals; 0 = other
	Social class 2 (dummy)	1 = Middle level professionals; 0 = other
	Number of years in the party	0 - 38 years
	Number of years of party experience	0 - 106 (additive index)
	Number of years of political experience	0 - 57 years
	Number of times of election	0 - 12 times
Ideological and party identification	Left-right self-positioning	0 = Left; 10 = Right
	Distance from the “neutral” centre (MPs left-right position minus 5 - all values positive)	0 = in the ideological centre; 5 = in the far left / right
	Party membership 1 (dummy)	1 = BE; 0 = others
	Party membership 2 (dummy)	1 = CDU; 0 = others
	Party membership 3 (dummy)	1 = PSD; 0 = others
MPs attitude perceptions of representation	Party membership 4 (dummy)	1 = CDS/PP; 0 = others
	How to vote if voters have a different opinion from the party (dummy)	1 = MPs should vote according to the position of the party; 0 = others
	How to vote if MPs have a different opinion from voters (dummy)	1 = MPs should vote according their own opinion; 0 = others
	Attitude dissonant perception (MPs positions minus their perception of the electorate’s position)	From -10 to +10
	Party perception distance (MPs’ perception minus the median party perception)	
DEPENDENT VARIABLE		
Congruence of perceptions (mean left-right position of the electorate minus MPs perception of the electorate’s position)	From 0 to 4	

Table 2
Explaining MPs' Perceptual Accuracy, OLS (method enter)

	Bloc 1	Bloc 2	Bloc 3
Individual characteristics and political experience			
Age	-0,12	-0,09	-0,07
University degree	0,01	0,14	0,15
Social class 1 (high level professionals)	0,21*	0,31**	0,32**
Social class 2 (middle level professionals)	-0,11	-0,04	-0,04
Number of years in the party	-0,12	-0,14	-0,18
Number of years of party experience	0,08	0,04	0,01
Number of years of political experience	-0,09	0,01	0,10
Number of times of election	0,22	0,07	0,04
Ideological and party identification			
Left-right self-positioning	-	0,26	-0,20
Distance from the "neutral" centre	-	0,41*	0,29
Party membership 1 (BE)	-	-0,16	-0,17
Party membership 2 (CDU)	-	-0,03	-0,12
Party membership 3 (PSD)	-	0,28*	0,30**
Party membership 4 (CDS/PP)	-	-0,15	0,08
MPs' attitude perceptions of representation			
How to vote if voters have a different opinion from the party	-	-	-0,07
How to vote if MPs have a different opinion from voters	-	-	-0,05
Attitude dissonant perception	-	-	0,38**
Party perception distance	-	-	0,24*
	<i>Adj R²</i>	<i>4,0%</i>	<i>11,0%</i>
		<i>22,3%</i>	

Sources: *Portuguese Citizens' Study* 2008, and *Members of the Portuguese Parliament Study*, 2008.

Notes: values are standardized coefficients. ** p < 0.01; * p < 0.05. N = 135.

Table 3
MPs Estimates and Voter Positions (%) by Political Party

	BE	CDS/PP	CDU	PSD	PS
Left	44	0	56	0	1
1	24	0	23	0	3
2	15	0	18	0	3
3	39	6	33	2	1
4	8	0	17	7	6
5	3	17	5	34	3
6	0	7	0	14	0
7	3	14	3	16	2
8	0	28	3	24	2
9	0	13	0	10	0
Right	0	11	1	2	1
Sum of Diff.	136	95	159	108	20
<i>N (MPs)</i>	8	8	9	21	89
<i>N (voters)</i>	36	18	77	323	264

Sources: *Portuguese Citizens' Study*, 2008 and *Members of the Portuguese Parliament Study*, 2008.

Table A. Turnout and vote by political party in parliamentary elections, 1991-2011 (%)

Election year	BE	CDS/PP	CDU	PSD	PS	<i>Abstention</i>
1991	-	4,4	8,8	50,6	29,1	32,2
1995	-	9,1	8,6	34,1	43,8	33,7
1999	2,4	8,3	9,0	32,3	44,1	38,9
2002	2,7	8,7	6,9	40,2	37,8	38,5
2005	6,4	7,2	7,5	28,8	45,0	35,7
2009	9,8	10,4	7,9	29,1	36,6	40,3
2011	5,2	11,7	7,9	38,7	28,1	42,0

Source: CNE – National Elections Commission (available at: <http://eleicoes.cne.pt/>).

¹ For detailed information about the Portuguese party system, see for instance, Freire (2005) and Jalali (2007).

² **Table A (ABOUT HERE)**

Turnout and vote by political party in parliamentary elections, 1991-2011 (%)

³ For a literature review of the validity of using the left-right dimension see Van der Brug and Van der Eijk (1999, 130).

⁴ The questions posed to voters and MPs alike were: “If you can, where would you place yourself on a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 means the most left and 10 means the most right?” The question posed to establish voters’ party identification was: “Is there any party to which you feel closest? If so: To which party?” The question posed to measure MPs’ perceptions was: “Using the same scale, on average where would you place your party’s constituents?”

⁵ Due to the small sample sizes of the smaller Portuguese parties, only correlations for the set of the political parties are presented.

⁶ Social class is measured by an index including profession and professional situation (see Erikson and Goldthorpe 1992) (1 – Bourgeoisie; 2 - Higher level professionals; 3 - Middle level professionals; 4 - Clerks and salesman; 5 - Manual workers). The number of years in the party is established by the question “In what year did you join this [your] party?” The number of years of party experience is an additive index compiled by responses to the following questions: “Please indicate for how many years you have: held a local/district/regional/national party office.” The number of years of political experience is established in response to the question: “For how many years have you been a Mayor; a member of local/regional/national government; a member of a local/regional/national assembly, or a member of the European Parliament?” The number of times elected is established in response to the question: “In which years have you stood as a candidate for the national parliament and have you been elected in those years?”

⁷ The small sample size may have contributed to the low number of significant relationships.

⁸ The same logic underlies the ideological distance from the “neutral” centre, which loses statistical relevance with the introduction of ADP and PPD.