Informed about whom? Politicians' Attention to Episodic Information

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Abstract

Do politicians pay more attention to episodic information than statistical information? While the answer to this question and its implications have been extensively studied for average citizens, it remains unclear for politicians. Despite the recent interest in misinformed politicians, few studies have considered the role attention to episodic information can play as a mechanism for understanding misinformation among politicians. This mechanism is important as, if politicians give disproportionate weight episodic information, this could be an important source of bias into their assessments of constituents' preferences, their agendas and their priorities. Using a survey experiment design applied to political elites in Chile (N = 290), this pilot study is the first attempt to fill this gap by examining whether politicians overestimate the relevance of information from personal experiences (episodic information) while ignoring statistical information (thematic frames). The results show politicians give excessive attention to episodic information while ignoring statistical information, measured both as the influence episodic have on politicians' assessment of policies and how much they remembered about experiences in a public service. With this, this article reveals clear evidence about politicians use of this cognitive shortcut and raise the need for further research on the topic.

1   Introduction

As it is sometimes hard to navigate through all of it, individuals use different mechanisms to deal with the information surrounding them. One of these mechanisms is the attention paid to episodic information. Generally speaking, individuals' attention are caught more by personalized information than by generalized information. Coming from attribution theory (Kelley, 1967), episodic information is typically described as information derived from personal stories. It focuses on the experiences of a single or small group of people and recounts great details of an event from a circumstantial-single point of view. Unlike statistical information (also known as thematic frame in the communications literature), which provides a more generalized, distant perspective, episodic information elicits emotional responses and draws people's attention to it (Nisbett and Ross, 1980). This can have important political implications. Evidence show, episodic information makes individuals attribute responsibility to single actors for the outcome, and less likely to hold the society or government accountable for the problems (e.g. Iyengar 1994). Other authors have argued that episodic information can be more effective at shaping political attitudes (Spence 2010, Springer and Harwood 2015).

Despite its political significance, we do not know whether episodic information has a similar effect on politicians' perceptions to those found in previous literature. While research on misinformed politicians has gained momentum, revealing politicians to actually know less about non-affluent constituents and those with less access to them (Broockman and Skovron 2018; Pereira 2021), research about cognitive shortcuts on information processing as mechanisms behind these outcome has focused mostly on the choice anomalies and heuristics described by Kahneman and Tversky's (1974) research (e.g. Linde and Vis 2017; Sheffer et al. 2017; Vis 2019). Nevertheless, in this regard, attention to episodic information as a cognitive shortcut may be important for politicians' decision-making.

There are two reasons why this may be specially relevant for politicians. First, given the nature of their jobs politicians have to deal with overloads of information when taking

a decision (Walgrave and Dejaeghere, 2017), making them experts in its use. Or at least they should be. While the assumption of politicians as experts has been debated in the literature for some time (Hafner-Burton, Hughes and Victor, 2013), it is expertise one of the predictors of the use of certain heuristics in the decision-making process that would deviate expectations from those of average citizens (e.g. Herrnstein and Murray 2010). Furthermore, politicians are not fully representative (in the descriptive sense) of the average populations. In terms of other characteristics that are similarly connected with trained heuristics, such as education, they instead typically belong to a particular subgroup (e.g. they are highly educated individuals). Moreover, statistical information is readily available for them in particular. Politicians get regular reports on many topics from governmental institutions, interest groups, and their staff. Finally, given the limited time they have, the overview statistical information can provide is probably more revealing than episodic information would. Therefore, politicians' attention to episodic vis-a-vis statistical information may differ from that of the general public.

Secondly, and maybe more crucially, this mechanism can have more impactful for politicians. Not only does the nature of their professions require them to make constant decisions about issues that affect entire communities, but also that they are subject of constant attempts of influence from a wide variety of individuals and groups with as wide diversity of intentions. As a consequence, how they deal with such information can have a significant impact on their decision-making process. Their agenda-setting, priorities, voting behavior, and, ultimately, their ability to represent may all be explained by how they process information and decide what to pay attention to. If politicians pay exaggerated attention to episodic information, they are relying on personal experience to modify or generate views, ultimately generalizing problems or priorities over which they act from a very limited group of people. Simply put, their opinion-formation will will be highly contingent on a few individuals' perceptions. Consider this: if you learn about a service's quality from a survey that shows 95% of customers are satisfied, your perspective of the service will likely be substantially different

than if you learn about it from a friend who had a bad experience. Nevertheless, the two (having 95% favorable reviews and someone with a terrible experience) are not mutually exclusive. Whether you pay more attention to one or the other will have a significant effect on your assessment of the service's quality.

Then, what can an exaggerated attention to episodic information mean for political representation? Episodic information can have two important downsides. On the one side, as mentioned, if politicians overestimate the value of personal experiences, it will affect their understanding of social conditions and reality as they have only access to a narrow portion of them (see: Thal 2016). Those individuals will probably not be just a random selection out of the population, but members of close circles who will have easier access to tell their narrative firsthand. Who they are can be an important piece in explaining biases in their perceptions and their misinformation more broadly. Broockman and Skovron's (2018) paper illustrates this more concretely. They argue that the asymmetric polarization found in the United States can be explained by the fact that Republicans (and specially a particularly conservative group within the party) were more likely to contact their elected officials directly, biasing their views about the electorate. On the other side, following Iyengar (1994) findings, if politicians ignore statistical information in favor of episodic, they will be more likely to attribute responsibility to single individuals rather than the governments they themselves work in, meaning that they may underestimate the role they decision may play in dealing with or solving certain issues. Thus, this articles deals with the question about the underlying cognitive mechanism behind these findings: do politicians pay more attention to episodic information than statistical information? This question is pertinent also given the fact that empirical research that inquiries about the effect of evidence on politicians' perceptions and standpoints has mostly used statistical information in their treatments (e.g. Kalla and Porter 2020; Pereira 2021). Nevertheless, we have not considered whether this is how they would ordinarily learn about an issue.

Using a series of survey experiments conducted among Chilean political elites (N=290),

this paper seeks to fill the gap. In it, I test whether politicians pay more attention to episodic information from three indicators: *influence*, *memory* and *saliency*. I show that politicians give excessive attention to personal stories and experiences while ignoring statistical information when assessing a policy, demonstrating that episodic information is more persuasive than statistical. Additionally, when compared to statistical information, my results indicate that politicians remember episodic information better. I extend the analysis and show that neither experience (as in years in charge) nor party type (i.e. mainstream vs anti-establishment) predict different levels of attention. Finally, I compare these findings to those of average citizens (N = 960), demonstrating that politicians show similar levels of attention to episodic information than the rest of us, consistent with previous findings on politicians' use of heuristics [Note to reader: Results from survey to citizens are still preliminary].

These results contribute to the literature on both politicians' decision-making and political misinformation. It does so by exploring a specific mechanism of information processing often overlooked by previous research. In this regard, it opens the door for future research on political communication, misinformation and representation.

2 Episodic v. Statistical Information in Political Decision-Making

While there is no research looking at the attention to episodic information like a mechanism for information processing among politicians, it has been extensively explored in other fields. Studies about these types of information can be traced back to attribution theory (Kelley 1967; Nisbett and Borgida 1976), but Iyengar (1991) and Nisbett and Ross (1980) were the ones to more precisely report the differences in the effect of episodic information when compared to statistical. They argued that the empirical results psychologist were getting when testing attribution theory was due to an emotional mechanism. Individuals system-

atically ignored *consensus information* (that is statistical information or base rates) when attributing causality to an event because they were less likely to have emotional responses to generalized information, which made it hard for them to engage and eventually be affected by it. Personal stories, instead -called *episodic information* by Iyengar (1994)- were more vivid and provided details and bits that made it more relatable, prompting more sensations (Nisbett and Ross, 1980). In other words, statistical data is abstract, cold, and remote, but episodic data is more vivid and detailed, evoking concrete images and feelings (Zillmann, 2006).

The difference in attention to episodic and statistical information has been studied in the field of political science from the perspectives of political communication, public policy, and political psychology. While the first looked at how the news framed information and the disparities in its effect on attribution of responsibility (e.g. Aarøe 2011), public policy scholars were concerned in how episodic information influenced perceptions about public services (e.g Olsen 2016). Political Psychology was particularly concerned in how the disparity in attention influenced political decision-making. Authors focusing on it argued that episodic information was relevant in the construction of political and group attitudes (Spence, 2010). Nonetheless all these literature highlights the important implications of the difference in attention, it is remarkable that no space has been given to how it can affect politicians. This, specially considering the implications it may have for political representation, as previously discussed.

The closest literature available about politicians' information processing is in the use of heuristics. Politicians are overloaded with information (Walgrave and Dejaeghere, 2017), forcing them to go through it using some kind of process, whether conscious or unconscious. Focusing on the latter, heuristics are an important driver that directs politicians' attention to specific information. Thus, most of the literature in this regard focus on the question: Do politicians use heuristics like the rest of us? Political scientists have frequently assumed politicians to behave like experts (e.g. Hafner-Burton, Hughes and Victor 2013) which, fol-

lowing evidence on that regard, would suggests they have developed techniques to efficiently deal with information. Specialists in different fields have "trained" heuristics that help them achieve optimal results more rapidly (e.g. Herrnstein and Murray 2010; Raufaste, Eyrolle and Mariné 1998). In simple, this would mean politicians do not use heuristics like the average citizens. Nevertheless, recent studies reveal that politicians' heuristics, like those of most ordinary people, often lead to sub-optimal decision-making. Scholars have demonstrated that politicians are influenced by how information is presented and are vulnerable to frequent choice anomalies (Baekgaard et al. 2019; Butler and Dynes 2016; Sheffer et al. 2017; Stolwijk and Vis 2021).

Following this, differences in attention to episodic or statistical information is also embedded in the unconscious processing of information individuals make. As mentioned previously, authors have argued that the emotional responses episodic information evokes direct people's attention to it (Nisbett and Ross, 1980). This, even when individuals report they would prefer statistical information to learn about an issue (Olsen, 2016). Thus, the exaggerated attention individuals pay to episodic information over statistical previous evidence found is yet another "choice anomaly", falling in Kahneman and Tversky's notion of heuristics, or what Vis (2019) calls the *heuristics and biases* tradition. Now, focusing on politicians, while different authors have found experts are better at reducing these biases in attention, considering the findings described before, my general expectation is that they will pay more attention to episodic information than they do to statistical information.

Thus, the expectation comes from previous findings on average citizens. The exact mechanism that draws attention to is an emotional one. Episodic information gives a more vivid and distinct picture, revealing more details about the characters and the context. When compared to the cold and distant sight statistical information provides, episodic information is more likely to elicit emotional responses, triggering "sensory information (Nisbett and Ross 1980; Gross 2008). In simple, the vividness episodic information generates draws our attention to it.

More concretely, to look at the difference between episodic and statistical information's effect on attention, I use three indicators as proxies for the dependent variable: persuasion, memory and saliency. The first indicator, which I call *influence*, is related to the ability of the information to influence individuals' perception of an issue. The emotional response episodic information elicits on an individual will make it more likely to *influence* his or her assessment of a policy (Olsen, 2016). Thus, I expect episodic information to also have a higher influence on politicians than statistical information.

(1) Hypothesis 1: Episodic information will be more influential on politicians' assessment of the quality of a policy than statistical information

The second indicator I use as proxy for attention is *memory.* Psychologists have found that episodic information is easier to store in and retrieve from our memories. This is related to what they has often referred to as "episodic memory" (Tulving, 1993) Therefore, the expectation is:

(2) Hypothesis 2: Politicians will be more likely to remember episodic information

Finally, the last indicator for attention I use comes from what the field of Political Communication calls framing effect. Given that news are generally clearly framed in one or the other way, the difference between frames is especially relevant. Thematic frames are basically statistical information, they focus on political issues in a more general context, presenting abstract and broad evidence. Episodic framing, on the other hand, describes specific occurrences and circumstances (Iyengar, 1991). Just as previously stated, research has shown that episodic frames have a stronger impact on people thanks to being more relatable, their ability to trigger emotional responses, and being more readily available (Aarøe, 2011; Gross 2008). As a result, news framed in this manner should stand out or be more *salient* to

individuals.

(3) Hypothesis 3: Episodic Framings will be more salient for politicians than Thematic Framing in news stories

Heterogeneity in the effects

But while the expectations of the hypotheses described before come from the idea that politicians will not behave differently than average citizens, finding evidence that supports them do not completely rule out the idea that they might. On the one hand, if experience is the main reason behind the alternative expectation of a different treatment effect, this may be expressed in different ways. The idea that politicians' experience will lead them to be affected by episodic information differently cannot be ruled out by the accepting the previous hypotheses. First, though politicians may be more attentive to episodic information, it may be the case that while they share the direction, the magnitude of the effect is smaller for them than for average citizens. In other words, while episodic information does draw representatives' attention more than statistical, it does less so than with citizens. Secondly, while differences in the treatment effect may be particularly focused in more experienced politicians, the average effects may be more representative of those newcomers of the sample.

On the other hand, the attention to episodic information may be rationally relevant for certain subsets of the sample, like the parties representatives belong to. The intuition is that some of the new parties in the country will compete in the party system against mainstream ones by promoting a "new" type of doing politics. Certain parties share a common anti-establishment approach to do politics to the extend that, at least, they all claim to connect with the people more directly (Alenda, 2020). Considering the focus of this article, this would mean that at least strategically, parties within this group will try to pay more attention to episodic information.

Therefore, looking at the differences in the treatment effect can be important to have a clearer picture about the effect of episodic information on politicians attention. Following the theory I build upon, I expect the results to be consistent across all the aforementioned heterogeneity. That is, in this regard I do not expect politicians to behave either differently than average citizens nor across subsets of the sample. Keep in mind, this comparisons are exploratory in nature and its expectations were not preregistered.

3   Data

For this study, a survey was conducted among political elites in Chile. The target population can be described as any elected politician. This includes members of local governments (majors and councils), regional governments (governors and regional council), the Constitutional Convention and the national Congress. As elections were held at the time the survey started for the latter, both outgoing and incoming congresspeople were included in the sample. The target population totaled approx. 3400 representatives. Table 1 summarizes each population.

The survey was online based. Representatives received an email with an invitation to participate in the survey. As no previous systematization of their emails existed, a team of 4 research assistants had the task to compile the contact information from the different websites. The same team was used for calling representatives both as a follow-up to the invitation and -more importantly- a process to update the database with the contacts, as in many cases the online information found was outdated. The survey was applied between the 15th of March and the 15th of May.

Of the 3400 representatives, about 2571 ended up being contacted. This because for some of them there was no way of contact, plus about 400 of the sent emails failed. The number of usable responses for my project was about 290, which means that the total response rate considering those contacted was about 11%.

		Population	Contacted	Sample*	Response Rate**
Position	Local	2887	2148	235	11%
	National	470	423	20	5%
	Unknown			36	
Party Ideology (based on party affiliation)	Left	1352	1002	132	13%
	Right	902	643	65	10%
	Indep	1105	926	94	10%
Gender	Female	1080	858	126	15%
	Male	2279	1713	160	9%
	Unknown			5	
Total	Politicians	3359	2571	291	11%

* Sample of total at least partially usable answers

** Response rate based on partially usable answers and actually contacted representatives.

4   Experiments and Results

To empirically test the hypotheses outlined before, three sets of experiments were used. Each was designed to test one of the indicators aforementioned: *influence*, *memory* and *saliency*

4.1   Influence - Information and Policy Evaluation

The first experiments intend to determine how politicians' assessment of the outcome of a policy are affected by either statistical or episodic information. I refer to this as *influence*. Two questions were applied for this purpose, based mostly in the classic work of Nisbett and Ross (1980), who argue that individuals are prone to ignore statistical (consensus)

information when attributing causality.

4.1.1 Design

As mentioned, the first hypothesis theorizes that episodic information will be more influential than statistical information. To test this, I use two vignette experiments with similar purposes. The first follows more closely the design of Nisbett and Ross (1980), and more specifically, the iteration of such design used by Olsen (2017). Respondents are presented with a short text about a public service, which is manipulated for each treatment group. One of the groups receive a negative personal experience with such service (episodical information); the other, a statistics about complains (i.e. 30% complains about the service). Following that, respondents were asked to evaluate the service based on the information provided. Subjects were randomized to one treatment.

Table 2: **Episodic vs Statistical Vignettes**

Vignette 1:	
Treatment 1:	Treatment 2
The new law that regulates the National Consumer Service (SERNAC), which came into effect last year, seeks to grant it greater powers to oversee user claims. **Andrea made a claim for a product bought online that she did not receive, without receiving any solution: "Even though the company basically scammed me, SERNAC did absolutely nothing. It's been 3 months now!"**	The new law that regulates the National Consumer Service (SERNAC), which came into effect last year, seeks to grant it greater powers to oversee user claims. **About 30% of the users of the Service report not receiving a concrete or useful solution.**
On a 1 to 10 scale, where 1 is very bad and 10 very good, how would you evaluate the Policy?	
Vignette 2:	
Treatment 1:	Treatment 2
Erik just had medical treatment in the local public hospital. **He claims his experience was very bad**, the care providers treated him poorly, and that he will never go back to the same hospital. However, **the hospital reports that about 1% of the users complain** about the service	Erik just had medical treatment in his local public hospital. **He claims his experience was excellent** and he was very grateful for the service provided. He will always go to the same hospital from now on. However, **the hospital reports that about 20% of the users complain** about the service.
On a 1 to 10 scale, where 1 is very bad and 10 very good, how would you evaluate the hospital?	

The second experiment instead uses episodic and statistical information in both the treatments. By doing so, it seeks to further explore the differences in attention to each kind of information by looking at their effect when facing both at the same time. Subjects were presented with a text about a Public Hospital. The information they read are manipulated such that half of the subjects read a text with a negative personal experience (episodic information) together with a small (1%) percentage of unpleasant experiences reported in the same hospital (statistical information). The other half instead were presented with a text with a positive personal experience in the hospital and a 20 times larger (20%) percentage of unpleasant experiences reported in the same hospital. Once again, respondents were asked to evaluate the service based on the information provided.

Following the argument outlined in the theory section, episodic information should draw subjects' attention more than statistical information. This means that, for the first experiment, the treatment group receiving the negative personal experience about the public service should be more affected by it and hence the information have a stronger influence on their perception about the service. Concretely, as the experience is negative in the episodic treatment, the evaluation they make about it should be worst than those receiving statistical information, despite the fact that the first is reporting from a single experience and the latter on a much broader group. For the second experiment, if episodic information is driving the influence of the treatment as expected, those that the received the negative personal experience should evaluate the hospital much worse than those that received the positive one; regardless of the fact that the difference of statistical information provided in each treatment was of 2000%.

The difference in the means of each treatment group in each experiment should reflect how large is the impact each information type has on politicians' assessment of policies. In a nutshell, if hypothesis 1 is correct, those that received the treatment with negative episodic information (bad experiences) in both experiments should, on average, evaluate the policy worse than in those that received the treatment with negative statistical information (high

percentage of complains).

4.1.2 Results

Figure 1 illustrates the differences in the means of both experiments. The findings of the first experiment are depicted on the left panel. In it, as expected, those that received the episodic treatment (a experience of a user of a public service) had a substantially lower opinion of the service's quality. This groups graded the service with an average of 2.6 on a scale from 1 to 10, whereas those that received the treatment with statistical information graded the service with a 4.5, almost a 2 point difference (p-value < .05).

Statistic vs Episodic information on Policy Evaluation
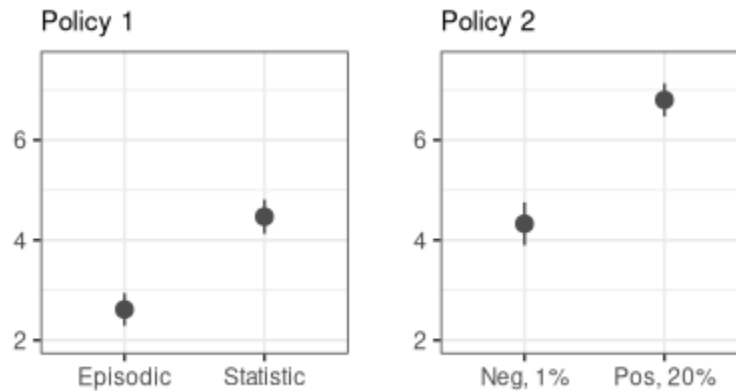
Figure 1: Left panel: t-test for differences in means between episodic vs statistical treatment (P-Value < .05). Right Panel: t-test for differences in means between Negative Episodic information and Positive Statistical information (1%) vs Positive Episodic information and Negative Statistical information (20%). P-value < .05

The results of the second experiment follow a similar pattern (right panel), but because individuals were given both statistical and episodic information, the difference in the effect of episodic information is even more clear. Representatives who were treated with a negative personal experience rated the hospital with a grade 2.5 points lower than those who read about a favorable experience (4.3 vs 6.8 on a 1 to 10 scale, p-value <.01), even though for

the first the hospital had only 1% of complains whereas for the latter was 20 times higher. These findings support hypothesis 1. When evaluating a policy, representatives pay far more attention to episodic information than statistical information, even though statistical information may depict completely different realities.

4.2 Memory - Information and Episodic Memory

Moving along, the second experiment is used to measure differences in attention to information in terms of *memory*. The experiment is designed to test how much politicians remember about a piece of information. Concretely, the last hypothesis predicts that politicians will remember more episodic information than statistical information.

4.2.1 Design

To test hypothesis 2, subjects were presented with a piece of information at the beginning of the survey and after a few unrelated questions, asked to write what they remembered about it. The manipulation consisted in one group receiving a text about a personal experience in a public service (episodic information) and the other a text on the percentage of bad experiences (30%) reported for that same service (statistical information).

Table 3: **Memory Vignettes**

| Treatment 1: [at the beginning of the survey]	Treatment 2: [at the beginning of the survey]
"Juan had a problem with his tax declaration and needed to go to the IRS offices for help. He complains that the personnel treated him poorly"	"A study shows that about 30% of the users have complained about the IRS user services"
[In the middle of the survey] What do you remember about the information presented at the beginning of this survey?	

The outcome is measured from the number of politicians remembering something about the information, and the "concreteness" of what they remember. A coder blind to the treat-

ments was used for this. Those remembering nothing or mentioning completely unrelated things were coded as 0, those recalling only vaguely the topic of the issue were coded as 1, and finally those that remember the details were coded as 2. Differences on the average of what they remember should reflect the treatment effects. If the theory behind hypothesis 2 is correct, the text about the bad personal experience in the public service (i.e. the episodic treatment) should trigger stronger emotional responses among those who received it and therefore they should be able to remember more about it than those who received the information about the overall complains for the same service.

4.2.2 Results

The differences between treated groups are in line with the expectations of hypothesis 2. Though subjects on average did not remember things very concretely (both averaged less than 1 in the two-points scale); the group that was presented with episodic information had an average of 0.79, and those that read the statistical information had a average of 0.59. This means that survey respondents can indeed remember more about a text that contains episodic information than statistical information (p-value < 0.1)

Statistic vs Episodic information and Memory
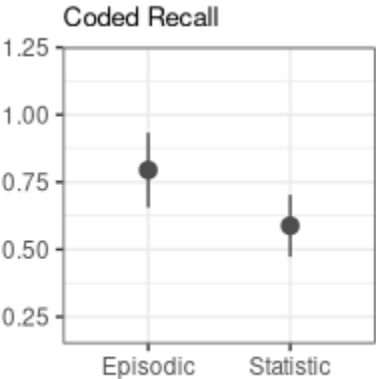
Figure 2: T-test for differences in the concreteness of what respondents remembered, following the described coding. P-value = 0.054.

4.3 Saliency - Information and News Attention

Thus far, I have looked at influence and memory as indicators for attention. The last indicator is built upon the literature on news framing. It seeks to test whether news framed as episodic are more *salient* for politicians than those framed as thematic (hypothesis 3). Evidence show individuals are more prone to be affected by news framed as episodic more than statistical (thematic) (e.g. Aarøe 2011; Iyengar 1991). Building upon these findings, I here test whether episodic news is more salient for politicians than thematic ones.

4.3.1 Design

Table 2: **News Framing Vignettes**

| Based on the titles alone, which of the two following newspapers articles you would most likely read?		
	Topic A: **Wild Fires**	**Topic B:** **Drought**
Treatment 1	**Episodic:** Victim of the 2018 forest fires: "I lost everything; even some of my memories were burned by the fire. I can't even look at old photos of my wedding anymore"	**Thematic:** Problematic Desertification: Some areas of the country are completely dependent on cistern trucks to access water.
Treatment 2	**Thematic:** Two years after the 2018 fires, victims have not recovered their previous lifestyle. About 40% of them reported having lost everything to the fire.	**Episodic:** Neighbors of Decertified Areas: "We have to survive with what the cistern truck bring us every week. Sometimes we have to decide between flushing the toilet or giving water to our animals"

To test the third hypothesis, I use another vignette experiment. Survey respondents had to pick between two newspaper titles based on which article they would most likely read. The actual topic of each title is constant in both treatment groups, with only the framing differing. In other words while topic A (wildfires) and topic B (droughts) remain the same for both treatment groups, the manipulation consist in that while for one treatment topic A was presented as episodic and topic B as thematic; for the other treatment topic A was thematic and B episodic. Due to the similarities of the topics, discrepancies in preferences for one or the other should be explained solely by the framing.

I expect concretely that those getting the news headline of topic B as thematic (treatment 1) will pay less attention to it than those receiving topic B as episodic (treatment 2). Thus, if hypothesis 3 is correct, respondents of the first treatment group should prefer topic B in a larger proportion than those in the other group. Subjects were randomly selected to each group.

4.3.2 Results

Figure 2 reports the proportion of respondents favoring Topic B in each treatment. While in the expected direction, these results indicate that there is no significant difference between the groups in terms of attention to each issue, not supporting hypothesis 3. As shown in the figure the mean of both treatments' attention to topic B is close to 0.8. (0.86 and 0.79 respectively, p-value = 0.21). This suggests that, despite the efforts of selecting two extremely similar news headlines, about 80% of survey respondents chose the Topic B, regardless of its framing, which indicate that it was a highly salient topic to representatives to begin with when compared with Topic A.

Statistic vs Episodic information and News Saliency
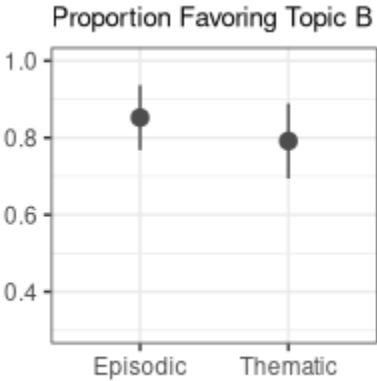
Figure 3: T-test for differences in proportion of respondents favoring Topic B in each treatment. P-value = 0.21

4.4 Heterogeneity in the Effects

In this section, I look at how how they travel subsets of subjects that for which the effect, according to related evidence, may potentially differ. As outlined in previously, I'm here referring to the effect of (1) experience; and (2) mainstream parties vis-a-vis new parties. This section is exploratory in nature, as their hypothesis were not pre-registered and only intends to confirm previous findings. Furthermore, I also look at how the findings described before can be compared to citizens.

4.4.1 Experience

Politicians v. Citizens. I first test the differences between politicians and citizens. As argued in the beginning, politicians may deviate from average citizens behavior as. given their jobs, they are more experienced in dealing with different kinds of information. Though throughout this article I've shown that political elites are also victims of episodic information as a cognitive shortcut; the case may be the magnitude of the effect may be smaller.

Given certain constrains, only one of the experiments was included in the survey to citizens: experiment 1.2 about influence as indicator for attention. I decided to compare this particular experiment as I believe it is the one with the clearest implications. As described in section 5.1.1, this vignette uses episodic and statistical information in both the treatments. Subjects were presented with a text about a Public Hospital. Half of the subjects read a text with a negative personal experience (episodic information) together with a small (1%) percentage of unpleasant experiences reported in the hospital (statistical information). The other half were presented instead with a text with a positive personal experience in the hospital and a 20 times larger (20%) percentage of unpleasant experiences reported in the same hospital.

As education is one of the variables that have been related to the use of heuristics (Lesgold et al, 1998), I not only compare the whole sample of citizens to the one of politicians, but I subset for those citizens with completed superior education. This given the fact that

politicians are a far more educated group. More than 90% hold a superior degree.

Figure 4 report the results. As can be seen, On the contrary to the expectations of experienced politicians, considering the direction of the difference, politicians actually show a higher difference on the influence of episodic vs statistical information: politicians are affected more by negative episodic information than citizens and educated citizens (4.3 vs 4.8 and 5.0, p-values < 0.1). This, while no statistically significant differences can be observed between highly educated citizens and the complete citizen sample.

[Note to reader: Results from survey to citizens are still preliminary].

**Citizens v. Politicians attention to Episodic Information**
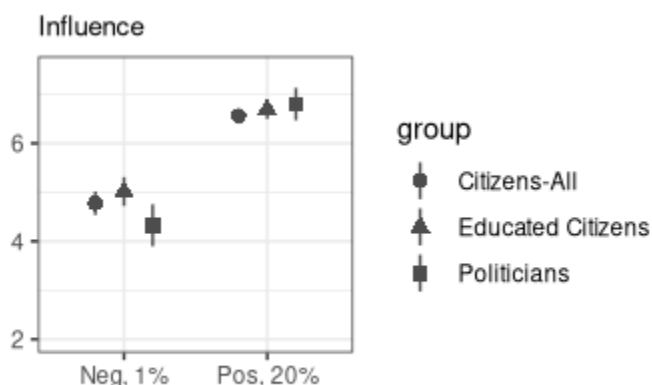
Figure 4: Differences in attention to episodic vs statistical information of politicians, citizens and citizens with higher education. Averages of the policy evaluation for treatment 1: 4.8, 5.0 and 4.3 (Citizens, Educated Citizens and Politicians respectively, t-test p-values = .07 and .009 when compared to politicians). For treatment two results are: 6.5, 6.7 and 6.8 (Citizens, Educated Citizens and Politicians respectively, t-test p-values = .2 and .6 when compared to politicians). P-value < 0.01 for all treatment effects.

Experienced v. inexperienced politicians. The expectation here comes mainly from literature on expert processing of information. Authors have discussed that experts deviate from average citizens in the use of heuristics. Their training helps them in using specific cognitive shortcuts towards more efficient decision-making. This idea is also behind the "politicians-as-experts" assumption, in which politicians should also deviate from the public

in certain mechanisms (Hafner-Burton, Hughes and Victor, 2013). I here look at whether those politicians that are new in office (i.e. less than one complete term) have a different influence from episodic information given that they are not experienced politicians. In other words, as becoming a politician is not a university degree, it is actual experience that would make one an expert. Thus, following this idea, the expectation is that representatives with longer periods in office should have a lower impact from episodic information when compared to newcomers.

The results summarized in Figure 5 show the effect of episodic information in *influence* and *memory* for those with less than 4 years of experience and those with more. As can be observed, the effect of episodic information seem to be consistent across groups and indicators. While for *influence*, there are no significant differences between groups (see left panel in figure 5), for *memory* once again the results are against the expectations. Experienced politicians are affected more by episodic information than non-experienced politicians: treatment effects are non significant for the latter. It specially important to note that, given the electoral periods in the country, almost all new politicians have been in power only since 2021. This means that the difference in effect cannot be attributed to them being already exposed to the job for almost a whole term.
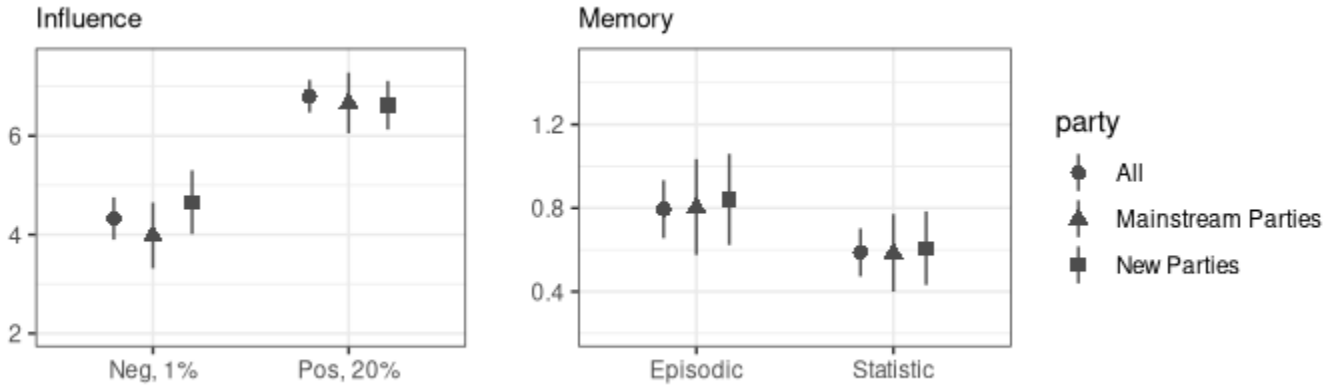
Different Treatment Effects: Experience
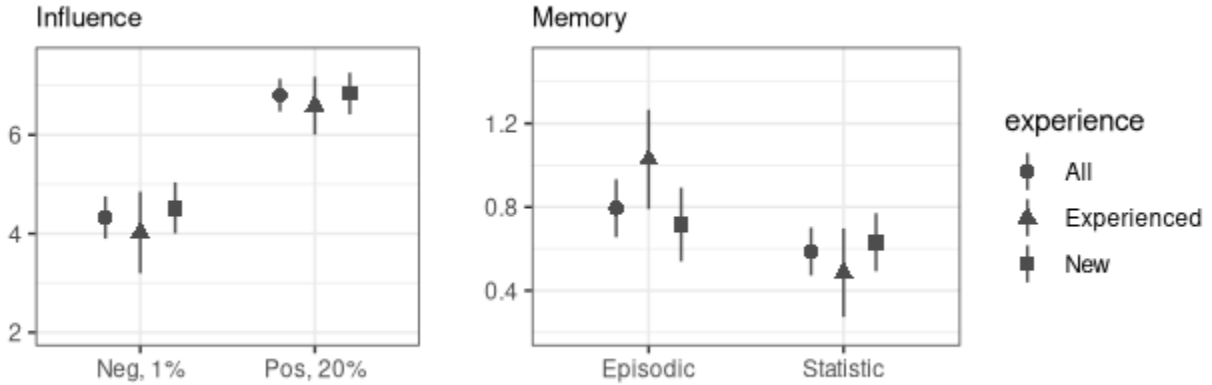
Figure 5: Differences in treatment effects for experienced and inexperienced politicians for influence and memory. **Left panel**: averages in evaluation of policy for treatment 1 are 4.5, 4.9 and 4.3 for the whole sample, experienced politicians and new politicians respectively (p-values > 0.2 in all cases). For treatment 2 are 6.8, 6.6 and 6.8 respectively (p-values > 0.5 in all cases). P-value < 0.01 for all treatments effects. **Right panel**: averages in coded memory for treatment 1: 0.8, 1.0 and 0.7, respectively (p-values > 0.2 in all cases). For treatment 2: 0.6, 0.5 and 0.6, respectively (p-values > 0.5 in all cases). P-value for treatment effects are 0.05, 0.005 and 0.5 for the whole sample, experienced politicians and new politicians, respectively.

4.4.2   Party

Finally, the second heterogeneity I look at is the type of party. As argued, under this idea, new parties in the country will compete in the party system against mainstream ones by promoting a "new" type of doing politics. In this regard, the new parties grouped in the Frente Amplio coalition as well as the Partido de la Gente and the Chilean Republican Party, share a common anti-stablishment approach to do politics to the extend that, at least, they all claim to connect with the people more directly. Considering the focus of this article, this would mean that at least strategically, parties within this group will try to pay more attention to episodic information. Thus, here effects I look at the difference of the effect of episodic information on attention between new and mainstream parties in the country. According this argument, the expectation would be that those in new parties will pay more attention to episodic information than those from mainstream parties.

Different treatment effects: party type

Figure 6: Differences in treatment effects for mainstream and new parties for influence and memory. **Left panel**: averages in evaluation of policy for treatment 1 are 4.5, 4.7 and 4.1 for the whole sample, mainstream parties and new parties respectively (p-values > 0.2 in all cases). For treatment 2 are 6.8, 6.6 and 6.6 respectively (p-values > 0.5 in all cases). P-value < 0.01 for all treatments effects. **Right panel**: averages in coded memory for treatment 1: 0.8, 0.8 and 0.8, respectively (p-values > 0.7 in all cases). For treatment 2: 0.6, 0.6 and 0.6, respectively (p-values > 0.8 in all cases). P-value for treatment effects are 0.05, 0.2 and 0.2 for the whole sample, mainstream parties and new parties, respectively.

The results (summarized in Figure 6) follow a similar pattern than the previous findings. The effect of episodic information on politicians' attention are consistent in both members of mainstream as well as new parties. This means that similar results can be found across party types and indicators.

5   Discussion

Do politicians pay more attention to episodic information than statistical information? The short answer would be *yes*. In this paper, through a series of experiments, I have shown that, at least according to two of the three indicators used, politicians pay more attention to episodic information than they do to statistical information. I argued that when assessing the quality of a policy, episodic information is more *influential* and *memorable* than statistical

is. Furthermore, I show that there is no difference in subsets of the population about which, according to alternative theoretical explanations, the effect should have been different.

While the results are in line with those of previous authors looking to different sets of cognitive mechanisms (REF), reinforcing the idea that politicians do not behave like experts but instead are much like the rest of us; the implication of the specific mechanism I study can have relevant implications. First, as argued, attention to episodic information entails potentially adopting policy positions or setting the agenda based on the opinions and experiences of a small group of individuals. These individuals will probably not be representatives of the populations, but belong to a particular group of people that commonly will have better access to politicians. This is probably related to what Thal 2016 argue: people tend to believe their social situation (i.e. their communities and neighbours) to be a reflection of the overall status of the society. By paying exaggerated attention to episodic information, politicians may be conceiving the social reality about which they act based upon their close circle.

Secondly, as episodic information draws attention thanks to its vividness, what politicians end up paying attention to may no necessarily be the most important issue. As Nisbett and Ross put it: vividness is orthogonal to importance (1980, pg 62). A good example of this is the constant attention certain issues, like deliquency, sometimes disproportionately receives (REF). Finally, considering the thesis of Iyengar 1994, attention to episodic information is correlated with attributing responsibility to the involved actors rather than the collective, like the government. This is crucial given the fact that are politicians themselves a central piece in the actions that a government can carry out. If they underestimate the responsability they have about certain issues, this can lead to sub-optimal decision-making as well.

In this way, attention to episodic information may be extremely relevant for explaining politicians' misinformation. and biases. Thus, although this paper focuses empirically in a single mechanism in a particular case and not in its implications, it opens the door for new research. Further investigations on this respect is definitely needed.

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