How do politicians evaluate public opinion? Which signals do they pay the most attention to? And how do citizens evaluate what their politicians say and do? These are some of the core questions investigated by the research group Media, Movements, and Politics (M²P) at the University of Antwerp. Together, these themes cover a broad field within empirical political science.

Current research topics include public support for climate policy, the role of information and disinformation, manipulation and interference across countries, and the mechanics of protests. “In our work, three research domains stand out: political communication, social movements and political participation, and public opinion and elections,” says Professor Dr. Stefaan Walgrave, coordinator of M²P’s Polpop research project.

“The M²P team includes around forty people, including three professors. The other researchers are PhD students and postdocs. The Polpop subgroup studying the relationships between politicians and citizens has ten members. For Polpop, we collaborate closely with international colleagues. Initially, in 2012, only three countries were represented; today, researchers from fifteen countries are involved. In total, currently about forty researchers currently work on the project.”

Prof. Dr. Stefaan Walgrave - © M²P

Polpop

Politicians’ Evaluation of Public Opinion (Polpop) is a cross-national project that studies how politicians evaluate public opinion. Every two to three years, Polpop researchers conduct face-to-face surveys with full-time politicians, as well as online surveys with representative samples of citizens in participating countries. The collected data are used

to assess how accurately politicians perceive public opinion and how closely their views align with those of citizens.

Each iteration of the project has a different focus:

- Polpop I examined how accurately politicians estimate public opinion.
- Polpop II focused on identifying which signals politicians pay the most attention to.
- Polpop III, currently in the field (2025), investigates how politicians perceive the malleability of public opinion and how they evaluate different signals based on tone and source.

The Antwerp M²P team - © Jonathan Ramael / M²P

People = strength

“We don’t have expensive lab infrastructure. Our strength lies in our people,” Walgrave explains. “Polpop’s operations are built on a cohesive international network. Because we have a presence in several countries, we can effectively study both similarities and differences between political systems.”

Walgrave received his first ERC grant for Polpop in 2012. The current phase is funded by a second ERC grant running through 2026. “Our operating budget comes entirely from public institutions. We do not commercialize our data or findings. Each local partner retains co-ownership of their share of the data and is free to publish independently. We make decisions by consensus – although, since the ERC grants were awarded to Antwerp, we have the final say when necessary.”

Walgrave emphasizes the importance of personal contact with international partners: “We carefully select participants to ensure they are free from political pressure in their own countries. This independence fosters trust among politicians, which is why we achieve response rates, in Flanders as high as 92%. In some countries, the only politicians who don’t participate are those facing serious health issues during the fieldwork period.”

Ena data

In addition to Polpop, M²P manages various other data-driven research projects. One of them is the Electronic News Archive (Ena), which archives and codes Flemish news broadcasts and newspapers. “The dataset spans from 2003 to the present and is updated quarterly. Professors, researchers, students, journalists, teachers, civil society organizations, and government bodies can request access after submitting a motivated application.”

Incipol

Incipol is a research program funded by the Flemish regional government. It brings together experts in political science, communication science, and computational linguistics to examine how citizens and their elected representatives interact. Amid rising dissatisfaction with political representation, Incipol asks: is the communicative link between citizens and politicians broken? And if so, what does that mean for democracy? “In Incipol, we study how citizens send signals about public opinion to politicians, how politicians interpret these signals and act on them, how they communicate with citizens, and how citizens in turn interpret and respond to that communication.” Here, researchers from M²P collaborate closely with colleagues from the research groups Media & ICT in Organisations and Society (Mios) and Computational Linguistics, Psycholinguistics, and Sociolinguistics (Clips).

In terms of methodology, Incipol uses a mixed design. “We do open-ended interviews with politicians in eight countries, parallel surveys with politicians and citizens, longitudinal content-analyses of political text from both politicians and citizens, and extensive experimentation including lab experiments grasping citizens’ physiological reactions to political messages.”

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