

# How the political elite make decisions

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## Abstract

The political elite make policy decisions in noisy environments and under time pressure, and so are prone to using heuristics. There are conflicting schools of thought as to whether it is appropriate for them to do so. Experienced decision-makers are thought to be more effective at using heuristics, so it is possible that for the political elite with experience in a particular context, heuristic decision-making is appropriate. Yet, many politicians are asked to make decisions on matters about which they are not experts. To add to the debate, we facilitated a discussion with a highly experienced cohort of 21 current and former senior politicians, former advisers, and current and former senior bureaucrats. When presented with a carefully considered and innovative new transport network pricing policy, we sought to identify whether and, if so, how they used heuristics to make a decision. We found that they used heuristics (1) to decide whether to engage with the issue at all and (2) how to act, having made the decision to engage. We describe how these heuristics were used and discuss the implications for theory and public administration practice.

## KEY WORDS

biases, heuristics, political decision-making, political elite, transport

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**Points for practitioners**

- There is a growing body of evidence that the political elite use heuristics for decision-making and that the use of heuristics is influenced by seven factors.
- We gained rare access to the political elite deciding on a politically risky issue and observed not only which heuristics they used, but how they used them.
- We observed a three-step decision tree, incorporating the 'wait-and-see' heuristic being used to decide whether to act, and political empathy, or intuiting voter heuristics to help decide how to act.
- We outline five options for public administrators who think that the political elite are using heuristics inappropriately for decision-making.

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

The power elite is a small group of individuals who occupy positions of influence in politics and society, have a disproportionate influence on events, have access to resources (Daloz & Hoffmann-Lange, 2017), tend to recognise one another, and act and think alike (Mills, 1956). Power in this context could be described as the ability to influence the definition of the situation (Goffman, 1974). The political elite are a subset of the power elite and can be senior public administrators, politicians, and their advisers. The political elite have an important role in policymaking, including the initiation of major transport infrastructure and policy.

The political elite can be exposed to stressful situations (Weinberg, 2012), and stress encourages intuitive rather than considered decision-making (Morrison et al., 1996). Contextual factors such as the 24/7 news cycle (Flinders et al., 2020), noisy environments (Kahneman & Klein, 2009), and divergent opinions (Mintz & Wayne, 2016) can result in the political elite relying on heuristics or 'rules of thumb' for making consequential decisions (Stolwijk & Vis, 2021; Vis, 2019).

While there is an emerging field of literature on how the elite use heuristics for political decision-making (Miler, 2009; Mintz, 2004; Weyland, 2009), there is also a debate between two leading schools about the appropriateness of using heuristics for decision-making in general (Gigerenzer, 1996; Kahneman & Tversky, 1996). One school claims that heuristics are not appropriate for political decision-making (Kahneman & Klein, 2009), whereas the other school argues that heuristics are suitable for environments where the probabilities are unknown or unknowable, and there are multiple goals or ill-defined problems (Gigerenzer, 2008) which can be the case in political decision-making (Kelman, 2011).

In short, two key schools of thought appear at odds regarding political decision-making; however, influencing factors such as decision-maker experience and context may mean that either or both styles are appropriate rather than one or the other. Not enough is known about how politicians make decisions, when they use which heuristics, and with what effect (Vis, 2019).

Therefore, this paper addresses this question: How does the political elite use heuristics when making decisions?

## 2 | LITERATURE REVIEW

Heuristics can be defined as ‘methods for arriving at satisfactory solutions using modest amounts of computation’ (Simon, 1990, 11), or more colloquially, as ‘rules of thumb’. Biases occur when a heuristic is used in the ‘wrong’ context and can ‘...lead to severe and systematic errors’ (Tversky & Kahneman, 1974, p. 1124). There are two distinct schools of thought regarding heuristics—the heuristics and bias (H&B) school led by Kahneman (2011) and Tversky (1981) and the fast and frugal (F&F) school led by Gigerenzer (2008).

### 2.1 | Heuristics in political decision-making

The literature shows that the political elite use heuristics when making decisions and which ones they use. The political elite are likely to be more sensitive to losses than gains, known as prospect theory (Banuri et al., 2019; Belle et al., 2018; Hafner-Burton et al., 2013; Vis, 2011), to suffer from overconfidence (Hafner-Burton et al., 2013), to use the availability heuristic (Vis, 2019), to rely on the representativeness heuristic and stereotyping (Bordalo et al., 2016; Stolwijk & Vis, 2021; Vis, 2019), to be prone to self-serving bias (Esaiasson & Ohberg, 2020), status quo bias, anchoring, and decoy effect (Belle et al., 2018), to experience escalation of commitment bias (Cornelio et al., 2021; Sheffer et al., 2018; Staw, 1981), and to use the trust or source credibility and facts trump speculation heuristics when considering communications (MacGillivray, 2014).

According to the literature, seven factors influence how the political elite use heuristics:

1. Experience: Political decision-maker experience is argued as being a moderator of the effective use of heuristics (Hafner-Burton et al., 2013).
2. Context: Experience is domain specific (Schreiber, 2007) and so judgements made out of context benefit little from experience (Ericsson, 2005) and can result in poor outcomes (Tetlock, 2005).
3. Complexity: More complex issues are associated with greater use of heuristics in decision-making (MacGillivray, 2014).
4. Urgency: In time-pressured contexts, a heuristics-based approach is common (Chaiken & Trope, 1999; Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 2005; Haidt, 2001); absent this pressure, and when combined with complexity, decisions can be avoided with the ‘wait-and-see’ heuristic (Walgrave & Dejaeghere, 2017). However, little is known about how the ‘wait-and-see’ heuristic is used.
5. Self-interest: For example, gaining or remaining in office has been seen to influence decision-making (Bowler et al., 2006).
6. Ideology, for example political ideology such as conservatism or socialism. For instance, using political ideology to determine priorities when allocating funding to competing demands (Christensen et al., 2018).
7. Emotion: For example, British Prime Minister Herbert Asquith’s decision to enter World War One was thought to have been influenced by anger and fear (Young, 2018). Political trust is also seen as important in making re-distributive decisions on government funding (Rudolph & Evans, 2005).

## 2.2 | The H&B school

The H&B school begins with the premise that decisions can be made either quickly or deliberatively; however, these are the extremities of a spectrum (Chaiken & Trope, 1999; Kahneman, 2011; Kahneman & Klein, 2009; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). Mostly, decision-making operates between or uses a combination of those two extremes. The H&B school claims that the problem with decision-making consistency is evidenced by the framing effect, where subjects are shown to reverse preferences as a result of information being presented differently (Tversky & Kahneman, 1981).

The H&B school argue that in most cases, heuristic-based decision-making is inferior to elaborate thinking (Kahneman & Tversky, 1986). Despite this, heuristics are seen as sometimes useful by the H&B school (Tversky & Kahneman, 1974), particularly in contexts where there is high cue validity (consistent, reliable behavioural signals with little feedback delay) and the opportunity to develop skilled intuition through pattern recognition (Kahneman & Klein, 2009).

Germaine to our research, Kahneman and Klein (2009) argue that ‘... long-term forecasts of political events are made in zero validity environments’ (p. 524). The high cue validity needed is not present, as feedback can take years to arise, and the meaning of feedback is contestable leading to doubt over whether those involved can develop skilled intuition. However, a criticism of much of the H&B research is that it is set in experimental situations with student subjects deciding on theoretical scenarios as individuals (Kelman, 2011), whereas complex political decision-making is often done in groups by those who could gain or suffer as a result (Saunders, 2017).

## 2.3 | The F&F school

According to the F&F school, ‘A heuristic is a strategy that ignores part of the information, with the goal of making decisions more quickly, frugally and/or more accurately than more complex methods’ (Gigerenzer & Gaissmaier, 2011, p. 454). The F&F school argues that using heuristics can result in decisions that are fast and accurate, not requiring a trade-off between the two (Hafenbrädl et al., 2016).

This school of thought, pioneered by Gigerenzer and colleagues (Gigerenzer, 2008; Gigerenzer & Gaissmaier, 2011; Gigerenzer & Goldstein, 2011; Gigerenzer & Todd, 1999), argues that because of bounded rationality (Simon, 1955, 1979), the intractable nature of some problems, and the need to filter out noise (Gigerenzer, 2008), simple decision rules can be more effective than complex ones regardless of effort.

Gigerenzer and colleagues suggest three categories of heuristics—recognition-based heuristics, ‘one good reason’ heuristics, and trade-off heuristics (Gigerenzer & Gaissmaier, 2011; Neth & Gigerenzer, 2015). The recognition-based heuristic decision rule states that ‘If one of two alternatives is recognised, infer that it has the higher value on the criterion’ (Gigerenzer & Goldstein, 2011, p. 103). For example, when asked which city has the greater population, Detroit or Milwaukee, approximately 60% of US participants answered correctly (Detroit) versus approximately 90% of German participants (Gigerenzer & Goldstein, 2011). Though German participants had less information about both cities than their US counterparts, they recognised Detroit more readily than Milwaukee. Gigerenzer and Goldstein (2011) argued that Detroit was more often correctly chosen as the city with the greatest population than a similar cohort in the United States despite the US participants having more knowledge of both cities.

The ‘one good reason’ heuristic is used when deciding to use one dimension of a multi-dimensional phenomenon, rather than all dimensions. This approach can also be used in successive steps such as decision trees. They have been used, for example, to decide whether to grant bail or not (Dhami & Ayton, 2001), or whether a patient is having a heart attack or not (Marewski & Gigerenzer, 2012). On the other hand, a trade-off heuristic rather than using one dimension takes all dimensions of a phenomenon into account and weights them equally to arrive at a decision. An example of a trade-off heuristic is the  $1/N$  financial investment decision rule which says that one should divide one’s investments equally among all stocks rather than use a complicated formula (DeMiguel et al., 2009).

Proponents of the F&F school argue that where the probabilities of the various possible outcomes are unknown, or unknowable, the problem is poorly defined, or there are multiple goals, heuristics are often more effective than elaborate decision models (Gigerenzer, 2008; Marewski et al., 2010). Political decision-making is characterised by such uncertainty (Walgrave & Dejaeghere, 2017; Walgrave et al., 2018), and so following the F&F school and in contrast to the H&B school, heuristics could be appropriate for dealing with political decisions.

The two schools of thought on decision-making recommend differing approaches to the use of heuristics for political decision-making. On the one hand, the H&B school has been clear that the use of heuristics for political decision-making is inappropriate (e.g. Kahneman & Klein, 2009), whereas the other school, F&F, allows for such use. The debate between both schools continues, despite attempts at reaching common ground (e.g. Kelman, 2011).

However, it is possible that the appropriate decision-making approach may depend on influencing factors such as experience, context, or urgency. More research is needed to understand how the political elite use heuristics to make decisions.

### 3 | METHODS

Determining which school is most appropriate for political decision-making is not provable in a positivist sense, for three reasons.

First is the normative problem. It is likely that the ‘correct’ outcome of a political decision on a policy matter is unknowable in advance, or possibly ever because political problems can be very complex (e.g. Saunders, 2017). That lack of a ‘correct’ political outcome and therefore testing is at odds with a positivist ontology.

Second, it has also been argued that political events are impacted by those making the decisions (Saunders, 2017) and that those decisions are made not by individuals in laboratories, but in group settings with other politicians (Kelman, 2011). The separation of the knower from the ‘known’ required in a positivist paradigm (see Denzin & Lincoln, 2018) is absent.

Third is consequentiality—politicians can be motivated to stay in office (Bowler et al., 2006). Motivated decision-making is at odds with a positivist axiology.

We wanted to understand how the political elite use heuristics to make decisions and therefore wanted to replicate as closely as possible the decision-making process actually used (Lau & Redlawsk, 2001), which is group based and deals with consequential rather than theoretical issues. As a result, we convened a discussion forum, as the use of case studies to generate theory is well established (Flyvbjerg, 2006).

### 3.1 | Decision-making context

Road congestion in large cities is a significant issue in Australia (Terrill et al., 2016, 2019). Charges for road use in Australia are currently levied upfront (e.g. vehicle registration tax) and do not reflect actual road usage. An alternate approach to pricing road usage is transport network pricing (TNP), whereby users pay more to travel during peak times, for greater distances, or into highly congested zones. However, the introduction of TNP policy would have political consequences by creating winners and losers in different electorates, thus making findings from this case study applicable to other contexts with political consequences.

The politico-administrative context in Australia where the research was carried out is a Westminster-style system of government where public servants are independent of the ministers they serve and are encouraged to provide frank and fearless advice.

### 3.2 | Discussion forum

The forum was convened to allow an open discussion of the acceptability of a proposed TNP policy, to discover how to make the proposals more attractive to stakeholders and decision-makers, and to identify which heuristics the political elite used to make decisions.

#### 3.2.1 | Recruitment

Participant recruitment was a key part of the research, given that access to the political elite is notoriously difficult (Hafner-Burton et al., 2013). We wanted to recruit party or state-level leaders and were successful in recruiting three, including representation from the two major political parties. We were also interested in non-leader politicians whose constituents would have been most affected by the changes (i.e. an outer Metro area). Senior advisers were recognised as having an important role in influencing political decision-making (Saunders, 2017; Walgrave et al., 2018), so we sought to recruit advisers to senior politicians. In addition, senior public administrators with experience implementing transport-related policies were sought, as they have been shown to have an influence on political decision-making (Banuri et al., 2019). To enable this, we had two key contacts who had extensive political networks, having been either a very senior politician or a senior bureaucrat, and whose networks we relied on to connect with and recruit other members of the political elite on both sides of the political divide.

To allow freedom of voice, participants recruited were no longer in the roles they represented in the study, however all were former senior politicians, advisers, and bureaucrats at the time of the forum (however, one has since been elected and another returned as a senior bureaucrat). Participants were also recruited, roughly evenly, from both major sides of politics. There was a total of 21 participants, six of whom were current or former senior politicians (from both major political parties), seven current or former senior bureaucrats (i.e. heads of departments), and eight current or former political advisers. Therefore, the composition of the group reflected a spectrum of actors one would expect to see in political decision-making. As the participants were no longer in positions of executive power, we hoped to minimise the risk of strategic presentation management overlaying the decision-making process (Butler & Vis, 2022). In recognition for participating, each participant either received AUD500 as a gift card or, upon request, had a donation made on their behalf to a charity of their choice. As transport congestion had been a prominent political issue

in the State, with specific infrastructure proposals the subject of bitter debate, most participants were very familiar with the issues and the strengths and weaknesses of competing arguments, but not the details of the TNP proposal. This made the case study analogous to other high-profile strongly contested policy debates.

### 3.2.2 | Format

The forum had the following four features: First, a briefing document outlining the issue and potential policy solutions was circulated to participants in advance. Second, an explanatory statement about the project was given to participants at the start of the forum, explaining the potential solutions, that this was a theoretical discussion for research purposes and how the information generated during the forum would be stored and used. Third, an experienced and independent facilitator curated the discussion. And finally, the Chatham House rule was used (Parmar, 2000), meaning anyone who attends a meeting is allowed to use the information gained in the discussion, but cannot attribute any comment to a specific attendee. The rule was employed to allow frank, off-the-record discussion.

Reconciling the Chatham House rule with the stated purpose of gathering data for research purposes was done in two ways. First, one of the authors was introduced to the forum as one of the two note-takers, whose role was to gather data for research. Second, it was explained to all participants that any research output would not attribute comments to any of the individuals present, would not identify the party that any participant represented, and would keep the identities of those who attended confidential so that no inference could be made.

### 3.2.3 | Data

Two researchers took notes at the forum and compared their notes shortly afterwards, striving for triangulation of findings. Data were initially recorded in note form during the forum and, after discussion between the scholars, were transferred by one scholar to NVivo qualitative data analysis software. Based on the findings of the literature review, and with the aid of the Cognitive Bias Codex, 2016), (Manoogian & Benson, 2017), statements were classified by bias or heuristic. The format and meaning of each statement were agreed upon between the scholars, and each statement was mapped individually to the Cognitive Bias Codex, and that mapping was compared between the scholars. Where there was a difference in mapping, the scholars explained the reasons for the mapping and debated the merits of each classification before agreeing on a classification. A third scholar then reviewed that output and challenged some of the classifications. Again, where there were differences of opinion, they were debated until a consensus was reached.

That classification was then shared and reviewed by all authors, differences of opinion were discussed, and a consensus was reached for the classification of comments by the heuristic. Only those results where consensus was reached through both processes are presented.

## 3.3 | Trustworthiness

Credibility of the findings was sought by several means—triangulation, peer de-briefing for referential adequacy, and formal and informal member checks. Multiple investigators conducted

observation and data analysis and discussed their findings, thereby enabling triangulation. We also engaged in peer de-briefing by having one of the authors who did not attend the forum review the initial findings. Referential adequacy was enabled by having the two researchers who attended the forum compare and discuss their transcripts of the statements made at the forum.

Formal and informal member checks were also carried out by replaying our initial findings to one of the senior politicians who attended the forum, and by asking for feedback on the conclusions drawn in this paper.

Transferability is considered difficult in naturalistic enquiry because of the importance of context and time in influencing findings, and therefore, providing a ‘thick description’ or a database of the case study is recommended as a mitigating measure (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 316). To that end, the lead researcher provided a co-author, who had not carried out the analysis with the notes agreed by two independent researchers, the categorisation of remarks according to the Cognitive Bias Codex, and the output of the systematic literature review for assessment.

Provision of these data also enabled an audit trail of the findings to be established by a co-author, thereby enabling confirmability.

## 4 | RESULTS

We found that the political elite used heuristics in two ways—first, to decide whether to act based on a decision tree, and second, how to act based on political empathy. These findings complement a growing body of research on behavioural decision-making in politics (Banuri et al., 2019; Battaglio Jr. et al., 2019; Belle et al., 2018; Dudley & Xie, 2020; Hollibaugh Jr. et al., 2020). The decision on whether to act or not is of particular importance to this study, as it reveals the use of heuristics for avoiding decisions, rather than for making decisions as much of the literature has focussed on.

### 4.1 | How the political elite use heuristics

In deciding whether to act, the forum participants used the ‘wait-and-see’ heuristic. While ‘wait and see’ has already been identified as a heuristic the political elite use (Walgrave & Dejaeghere, 2017), we were able to see ‘in the wild’, nested in a decision tree. Having decided on whether to act, we also saw the political elite using empathy to explore how to act. In both cases, deciding whether to act and how to act, we saw the different elements of the group—politicians, bureaucrats, and advisers—re-enforcing each other’s position and reaching consensus. That the group coalesced quickly and cooperated in using this heuristic could be seen as evidence to support the description of the elite by Mills (1956) as thinking and acting alike.

#### 4.1.1 | The ‘wait-and-see’ heuristic—whether to act

Tellingly, participants neither referred to the detail in the briefing documents nor debated the effectiveness of the TNP policy proposals. Rather they focused on deciding whether to act by filtering behavioural cues using a simple decision tree (Hafenbrädl et al., 2016; Todd & Gigerenzer, 2012).

A summary of that decision tree is shown below in Figure 1. The “wait-and-see” heuristic for political decision-making and is an example of a ‘one good reason’ lexicographic heuristic similar

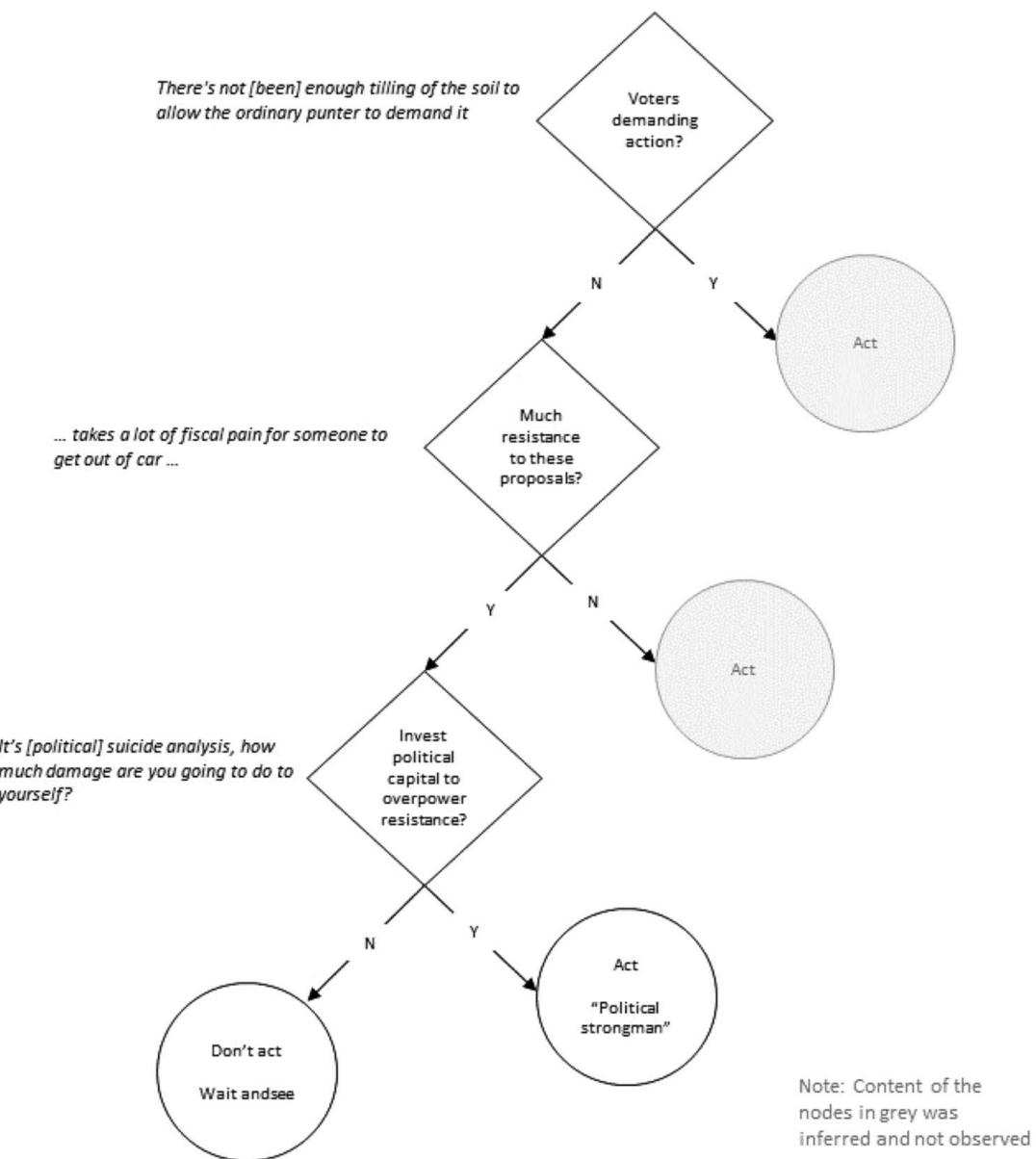


FIGURE 1 The 'wait-and-see' heuristic for political decision-making, based on the discussion forum.

to the strategy adopted by doctors (Marewski & Gigerenzer, 2012) or magistrates (Dhami & Ayton, 2001).

#### *Are voters demanding urgent action?*

Forum participants immediately recognised that the TNP proposal brought consequences for politicians who represented those constituents that would 'lose' if the policy was implemented (i.e. travel would cost them more), thereby causing political risk.

[It is about] equity ... who will lose [former senior bureaucrat].

Identify who they are [winners and losers] so we could run a smarter campaign [former advisor].

Forum participants went on to suggest a lack of community support for this issue.

There's not [been] enough tilling of the soil<sup>1</sup> to allow the ordinary punter to demand it [former politician].

So, characterising the issue as being risky, with there being no community demands for action, the question became, whether or not to take the risk.

*How much resistance will there be to this proposal?*

One senior politician reflecting on his experience of using pricing to change car usage behaviour answered the question clearly:

Pricing hasn't worked. [It] takes a lot of fiscal pain for someone to get out of car. It needs to be a serious pricing signal [for behaviour to change], which makes the politics even harder [former senior politician].

*Willing to spend political capital to overpower any resistance?*

If the proposed policy were to survive, it would have to be forced into law on a majority rule basis, but against the will of those who could lose out. Knowingly ignoring resistance and using power to overcome it, known as the 'political strong man' approach, would require spending political capital.

The political strongman approach was taken in New York [where traffic congestion pricing for the central business district was passed in 2019] [former senior politician].

It's [political] suicide analysis, how much damage are you going to do to yourself [former advisor].

When the challenge was bluntly put to the forum by a former senior bureaucrat, there was a short reply from one of the senior politicians in the room.

Does any politician think that the big problem is congestion and that the answer is pricing [former bureaucrat]? No. Not yet [former senior politician].

There was no dissent when this comment was made, and so the complex issue of introducing a new approach to road pricing was put off with the third step in the decision tree. Though the discussion carried on and explored heuristics that the political elite thought voters would use, the hypothetical decision on how to deal with TNP proposals was effectively made—namely do not act yet, best to wait and see.

Having decided to wait and see, the question became—waiting for what?

We actually need the punter demanding it. We need [local populist newspaper] campaigning for it. Need [local talk show radio host] complaining [former politician].

So, the forum explored how they could influence public opinion to favour the TNP, or at least identify the signals that the time was right to act:

How can we weaponise the issue of congestion because we've heard all that before, put an extra lane on the [main highway] and all it did was create more traffic [former advisor]?

[Go] negative ... [use] dirty up tactics to sell the problem of congestion, e.g. [it would] shut down [the] economy and jobs [former advisor].

the notion of a three-hour congestion is a big political issue [former advisor].

Increased electric vehicle usage was explored as a possible cue to introduce the TNP:

There's change occurring with electric vehicle usage [former advisor].

With electric vehicles [we] could do distance-based charging ... [former senior politician].

Start bringing in distance-based travel on electric vehicles [former advisor].

Despite the strong environmental and economic arguments in favour of the TNP, the political elite appeared not to judge the matter of the TNP as a standalone case, but to take a portfolio view of all the issues facing them and used heuristics to decide which ones to act on, and which to ignore.

#### 4.1.2 | Political empathy—how to act

We found that the political elite assumed that voters also used heuristics to decide what was salient. If communications about the TNP required voters to think, the political elite's view was that those communications would fail and the TNP would not be accepted.

If you have to explain it, you've lost [former senior politician].

To identify the heuristics voters might use, the political elite used political empathy—putting themselves in voters' shoes. This skill—political empathy—allowed the political elite to identify which heuristics voters would use when judging a policy.

##### *Stereotyping—Cranbourne man*

Though stereotypes have limitations (Jussim et al., 2016), we saw the invention of a localised stereotype called 'Cranbourne man', named after Cranbourne, a new fast-growing satellite population centre on the outskirts of the city.

Cranbourne man is impatient, independent, easily upset, and his number one issue is access to roads [former politician].

Cranbourne man is married to Doreen woman [named after an outer suburb], he gets signals from her too, and both of them get signals from their banks [former politician, not as above].

Stereotyping was used to connect with the most obvious aspects of those stereotypes and therefore to intuit voter reactions to the TNP.

### *Trust*

Participants' view was that the greater the trust, the more likely voters would be to support an innovative policy. Because a large infrastructure project to remove railway crossings was being successfully delivered by the State government, it was felt that that program had generated political trust with voters which TNP could try to leverage:

There was a lot of trust generated in the removal of level crossings [former advisor].

[Name of current State Premier or leader] is a hero because of infrastructure investment [former advisor].

Market it as next step to level crossing removals [former advisor].

One former politician suggested a derivation of the political trust heuristic, which might be phrased as 'if they trust you with the small things, they'll trust you with the big'.

You'd have to remove all the small obstacles, like the roundabout [traffic circle] at the end of the road [former politician].

### *Incrementalism*

Incrementalism is the tendency to increase investment in a course of action over time through successive additions. The forum preferred to see policy change that could be introduced piece-meal, rather than risk voter rejection from the shock of great change. For example, they linked the introduction of new road pricing arrangements to the growth in popularity of electric vehicles, reasoning that if the public became used to new pricing arrangements on electric vehicles, it would be easier to introduce new arrangements generally:

[With electric vehicles] there's a real opportunity to tie it to funding infrastructure support, such as charging stations [former politician].

What are the incremental ways in which we could get to a beautiful story to tell [advisor]?

Look at bite-sized chunks, incrementalism, grassroots community campaigning [unattributed].

Start bringing in distance-based travel on electric vehicles [advisor].

### *The decoy effect*

The decoy effect operates when an obviously less attractive option is included when choosing among alternatives (Ariely & Wallsten, 1995). A third alternative, a decoy, is presented that is completely inferior to the one the proposers prefer and partly inferior to the alternative to the preferred. When choices are engineered this way, the preferred option is chosen more often than if the decoy were absent.

Had we gone with the option – the one we wanted plus two horrific ones we would have been right ... If you want to get something done, put up horrible options [former politician].

## 5 | DISCUSSION

Our review of the literature uncovered evidence of heuristic use by the political elite, including framing (Banuri et al., 2019; Belle et al., 2018; Hafner-Burton et al., 2013; Vis, 2011), overconfidence (Hafner-Burton et al., 2013), availability bias (Belle et al., 2018), stereotyping (Bordalo et al., 2016; Stolwijk & Vis, 2021; Vis, 2019), self-serving bias (Esaiasson & Ohberg, 2020), status quo bias, anchoring, and decoy effect (Belle et al., 2018), incrementalism or escalation of commitment bias (Cornelio et al., 2021; Sheffer et al., 2018; Staw, 1981), wait and see (Walgrave & Dejaeghere, 2017), and trust or source credibility and facts trump speculation heuristics (MacGillivray, 2014). Each of these biases or heuristics, or similar, is included in the Cognitive Bias Codex (Manoogian & Benson, 2017).

Our case study found the political elite using some of the heuristics discovered in the literature—namely stereotyping, trust, incrementalism, the decoy effect, and, of course, ‘wait and see’. We also observed political empathy, in other words, politicians putting themselves in voters’ shoes to gauge how those voters might react and so discover what might make those proposals more attractive. Using political empathy, the political elite identified the heuristics to be manipulated if the TNP was to pierce the din of voters’ everyday lives, namely the decoy effect, political trust, and stereotyping.

The literature revealed a debate between two opposing schools of thought on the appropriateness of using heuristics for political decision-making, an apparent conflict that invited investigation. The literature also told us that the use of heuristics was not necessarily a binary decision and that there are seven intervening factors that influence the use of heuristics in political decision-making, namely experience (Ericsson, 2005; Hafner-Burton et al., 2013), the nature of the context in which the decision is made (Schreiber, 2007), issue complexity (MacGillivray, 2014), urgency (Walgrave & Dejaeghere, 2017), self-interest (Bowler et al., 2006), ideology (Bowler et al., 2006; Christensen et al., 2018), and emotion (Young, 2018).

Our forum contained four of those seven influencing factors—experience, context, issue complexity, and urgency. Most of those at our forum, though highly experienced, were not experts in transport pricing policy and therefore context was important. The matter was highly complex, and as there was no pressing need to decide, urgency was low. The combination of those factors influenced decision-making style, and we argue that it caused them to use both styles of thinking, rather than just one. The literature revealed that there are three types of heuristics that could have been used—namely recognition-based heuristics, ‘one good reason’ heuristics, and trade-off heuristics (Gigerenzer & Gaissmaier, 2011). We observed the use of the ‘wait-and-see’ heuristic, an example of a one good reason heuristic, as decision trees are classified according to Gigerenzer and Gaissmaier (2011).

The politicians we observed made a decision about a decision, which could be considered deliberate decision-making based on elaborate thought, thereby supporting the F&F school. However, in arriving at that decision, they did not consider the details of the extensive briefing materials, rather they used a three-step process to reach an acceptable answer quickly—the hallmark of heuristic decision-making, preferring to ‘wait-and-see’. It appears to us that the debate between

the two opposing schools may be a false dichotomy as both styles of decision-making can be appropriate, rather than one or the other.

While most studies of political decision-making focus on decision-making, few address political non-decision-making. For the first time to our knowledge, we have found evidence of the use of heuristics for avoiding a decision and the shaping of public policy by inaction.

A simple decision tree, incorporating the 'wait-and-see' heuristic, was identified as the way in which members in the forum decided whether to act on the TNP or not. And while that heuristic had been noted previously (Walgrave & Dejaeghere, 2017), we uncovered its application in context.

The forum also revealed that the political elite thought their constituents would use heuristics and so we saw the political elite use political empathy and stereotyping to identify the decoy effect, political trust, and incrementalism as heuristics to be manipulated if the TNP was to pierce the din of voters' everyday lives.

## 5.1 | Implications for practice

We suggest five options for public administrators who think that the political elite are using heuristics inappropriately for decision-making.

First, public administrators could try to encourage more deliberate thinking by their ministers and have them engage with the details, thereby forcing deliberate thinking. There are at least three problems with this approach though:

1. The likelihood of success is low. The literature suggests that the political elites' decision-making preference for heuristics is commonplace and so could be hard to change (Belle et al., 2018; Stolwijk & Vis, 2021; Vis, 2019).
2. There are some situations where it is argued that heuristics are preferable to elaborate thinking (Gigerenzer & Goldstein, 2011).

The second approach public administrators could take is to encourage the political elite to become more aware of their biases by, for example, attending de-biasing training as part of their leadership development, but this too has its limitations. It has been argued that de-biasing is insufficient (Foley & Williamson, 2019), is pointless (Noon, 2018), or could even backfire (Atewologun et al., 2018).

Third, public servants could take a portfolio view of policy proposals and use the 'wait-and-see' heuristic to identify which proposals are most likely to succeed and, therefore, pause proposals likely to be ignored, explore what could be done to achieve a better outcome, or monitor the conditions more conducive for political action.

Fourth, public servants could approximate political empathy and use community consultation to identify the heuristics voters would use, thereby gaining a better understanding of how voters might react to policy proposals and providing an extra perspective on their political master's decision-making.

Fifth, public administrators could use the decoy heuristic when proposing policy options to improve the chances of having their preferred proposal accepted. However, there are drawbacks to this approach, because it could open public servants or advocacy groups to the criticisms of libertarian paternalism (Gigerenzer, 2015).

We recommend that public administrators recognise that heuristic decision-making can be appropriate and that a lack of elaborate thinking is not necessarily a sign of poor decision-making—even on politically consequential issues. They could consider the seven factors we

mentioned to understand why heuristics have been used. And if they still consider that heuristics are being used inappropriately, we recommend empathy, in other words putting themselves in the shoes of others by using option 4—using the wait-and-see heuristic to view their proposals from their minister’s perspective—and option 5—consulting with affected voters to gain their perspective and so check their instincts against those of the voters and the minister whose role it is to represent their constituents views.

## 5.2 | Future research

One of the features of heuristics according to the F&F school is that they should be testable (Goldstein & Gigerenzer, 2002). And so, we call for further research, in particular testing of the ‘wait-and-see’ heuristic, recognising the great difficulty of gaining access to live political decision-making.

## 5.3 | Limitations

There are limitations to this research, particularly around the analysis of comments made by the political elite.

First, we acknowledge Gigerenzer’s (1996, p. 593) criticism of the H&B school’s use of heuristics having the validity of interpretations of Rorschach blots. We aimed to minimise this limitation through the involvement of multiple scholars in the analysis and through analysing and discussing our interpretations.

Second, the construction of a decision tree was based on text analysis from one sample of the political elite, discussing one issue, at one point in time. Different members of the political elite debating a different decision or at a different time could result in different behaviours.

Third, while we sourced participants from both sides of politics and from the bureaucracy, it is possible that our recruiters could have biased participant composition and possibly our findings.

Fourth, most of those we recruited had influence and access to power and were active at senior levels in industry and management consulting—for example, they no longer had executive political authority. Had those we recruited been in positions of political or administrative power, they may have acted differently. However, since the time of the study, several who were not in power have been either elected to parliament or re-entered the bureaucracy in senior roles. And so, Mill’s (1956) notion of the political elite is reinforced, and so the effect of this limitation could be argued to be somewhat mitigated.

There are risks to internal validity around the coding of biases to the Cognitive Bias Codex, but these have been mitigated through our methods. Internal validity was mitigated by having two researchers map comments to the codex independently, discuss their findings, debate, and agree on differences. Their output was reviewed and challenged by a third researcher. External validity was somewhat mitigated by the previous identification of the ‘wait-and-see’ heuristic (Walgrave & Dejaeghere, 2017).

## 6 | CONCLUSION

Gaining access to the political elite engaged in decision-making is notoriously difficult (Hafner-Burton et al., 2013). Although there is a growing body of research in behavioural public

administration (Battaglio Jr. et al., 2019; Bhanot & Linos, 2020; Grimmelikhuijsen et al., 2017), and a distinguished body of research on individual decision-making (Gigerenzer & Goldstein, 2011; Gigerenzer et al., 2011; Kahneman et al., 2019; Kahneman & Tversky, 2013; Todd & Gigerenzer, 2012), there are calls for more research into the use of heuristics in political decision-making (Stolwijk & Vis, 2021). Lack of decision-making by politicians can be consequential, and there is a dearth of practical advice for public administrators on why it happens and how to deal with it. This study helps to fill those gaps.

The discussion forum further confirmed the use of heuristics by the political elite and revealed how the political elite use a previously identified heuristic, the 'wait-and-see' heuristic, to avoid making a decision. We uncovered a decision tree with three steps that allowed an innovative policy proposal to be quickly put aside. We also identified what we have called political empathy, which helped the political elite understand the heuristics voters could use when deciding how to act.

In identifying which heuristics the political elite use and how they use them, we contribute to the growing body of research in public administration on political decision-making behaviour and outline implications for practice. We discussed five options for public administrators to explore when dealing with the political elite. Of those alternatives, we encourage public administrators to re-cast policy proposals using the 'wait-and-see' heuristic and approximate political empathy with community consultation and so improve the quality of political decision-making and policy outcomes.

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## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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## END NOTE

<sup>1</sup>Tiling the soil is a colloquialism and taken to mean—shaping of expectations or influencing the electorate's frame of reference in favour of the desired outcome.

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