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NOTE



Partisan bias in public perception of elections polls: experimental evidence from Mexico

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ABSTRACT


While most of the literature on public opinion has explored how motivated reasoning makes some individuals discredit survey results in advanced industrial democracies like the U.S., few studies have considered how voters perceive electoral polling in young democracies like Mexico. This study included a survey experiment that found that voters perceived polls that matched their partisan preferences as more credible. Moreover, voters were requested to provide an estimate of candidates' vote intention. The results highlight that voters' partisan bias – not lack of information, prior expectations or low levels of interest – makes them overestimate their co-partisan candidate's vote intention. The findings of this study contribute to our understanding of the conditions that make some voters interpret political events through a partisan lens. Voters choose interpretations that rationalize their partisan predispositions even in young democracies, where partisanship is commonly perceived to be weak.

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How do voters' attitudes shape their perceptions of electoral polling? While the literature on public opinion has explored how partisanship makes some individuals discredit survey results in advanced industrial democracies like the U.S. (Kuru, Pasek, and Traugott 2017; Madson and Hillygus 2020), the present study analyzes public perceptions of election polls in Mexico. While previous research in Latin America has studied the effects of polling on voters' behavior (Castro Cornejo 2023; Cantu and Márquez 2021), this research argues that citizens in young democracies are also motivated to protect their partisan predispositions, which make them reinforce biased perceptions when evaluating electoral polling (Zaller 1992).

This study conducted a nationally representative survey during the 2018 presidential election in Mexico and included a survey experiment that

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presented two types of polling results: one in which the leading candidate had a comfortable lead and another that suggested a much more competitive race. Consistent with prior studies (Kuru, Pasek, and Traugott 2017; Madson and Hillygus 2020), voters perceived polls that were closer to their partisan preferences as more credible. Building on previous work in American politics, this study also seeks to understand why voters report biased perceptions of polling results. Voters were requested to provide an estimate of the level of support for each major presidential candidate according to public electoral polling. The results highlight that voters' partisan bias makes them overestimate their co-partisan candidate's level of support, more than alternative hypotheses such as voters' prior expectations, levels of information or campaign interest.

The findings of this study contribute to our understanding of the conditions that make some voters discount information that is inconsistent with their political predispositions even in young democracies like Mexico, where partisanship is commonly perceived to be weak (Greene 2011). In the context of political polarization, partisans in Mexico face strong incentives to interpret political events through a partisan lens. As recent studies in Latin America political behavior find (Castro Cornejo 2023; Calvo and Ventura 2021; Lupu 2015; Melendez 2022), partisanship and partisan cues are increasingly relevant to understand voters' behavior and opinion formation.

Electoral polling and campaigns in young democracies

There are reasons to doubt that voters will accept poll results in line with the poll's objective information (Kuru, Pasek, and Traugott 2017). Motivated reasoning theory suggests that voters will evaluate poll results in ways that bolster preexisting attitudes (Kunda 1990; Lodge and Taber 2013). Although it is possible that voters update their beliefs in a Bayesian way, revising their opinions as they consume information (Gerber and Green, 1999), citizens interpret common events, such as polling information, guided by directional goals (Flynn, Nyhan, and Reifler 2017). This means that voters do update their beliefs, but this process is biased by partisan motivations: voters protect their in-group by choosing interpretations that rationalize their prior beliefs, considering polls that are consistent with their preexisting views more credible.

For instance, Kuru, Pasek, and Traugott's (2017) study evaluates the credibility of poll results via an online survey experiment with a national sample in the U.S. Respondents who hold issue positions that contradicted the results of the polls found the polls less credible. Madson and Hillygus's (2020) study also finds that a significant factor in respondents' assessments of polling credibility depended on the poll results themselves. Based on a survey experiment included in the 2016 Cooperative Congressional Election

Study (CCES), the study finds that Clinton supporters rated the poll's credibility higher when they were shown a poll with a large Clinton lead than one that showed a closer margin. Similarly, Kuru, Pasek, and Traugott (2020) also studied the 2016 presidential election in the U.S. and found that individuals disproportionately considered polls in which their preferred candidate was leading as more credible. This suggests that voters reinforce biased perceptions when evaluating the credibility of polling results:

Hypothesis 1. Voters are more likely to find electoral polls more credible when their preferred candidate is leading.

If voters find an electoral poll more credible when their candidate is leading, this raises an important question about how voters form their perceptions about who is winning in an election. The second hypothesis extends research in American politics by seeking to understand why some voters tend to have more biased perceptions of electoral polling, making them more likely to overestimate the electoral strength of their preferred candidate. Consistent with motivated reasoning theory, partisanship is key to understanding voters' biased opinion formation process.

Partisanship constitutes a "perceptual screen" in information acquisition and processing (Campbell et al. 1960). Citizens make every effort to maintain their preexisting opinions by seeking out confirmatory evidence, discrediting information that does not fit their preexisting conceptions, and attributing more strength to arguments that bolster their own opinions (Taber and Lodge 2006). Partisanship increases directional motivations instead of accuracy motivations, making it impossible for voters to be "fair-minded," increasing the likelihood of voters overestimating the electoral strength of their co-partisan candidates:

Hypothesis 2. Co-partisans are more likely to overestimate their co-partisan candidates' level of support than out-partisans.

Political information or campaign interest can also affect perceptions of candidates' electoral strength, although the expectations are less clear. On the one hand, it is expected that voters with high political sophistication will be less likely to engage in motivated reasoning (Bolsen et al. 2014). These voters have higher levels of information, a necessary element to form more accurate opinions. Nevertheless, different studies challenge such an idea; in fact, they have found that higher levels of information exacerbate motivated reasoning (Miller et al. 2016) since voters tend to have more entrenched beliefs (Zaller 1992). We should expect something similar in terms of political interest. While more interested voters likely to acquire more information during the campaign, these voters tend to be more partisan and are highly motivated to protect their beliefs (Miller et al. 2016):

Hypothesis 3a. Low/high levels of sophistication are more likely to affect perceptions of electoral polling than high/low levels of sophistication.

Hypothesis 3b. Low/high levels of interest are more likely to affect perceptions of electoral polling than high/low levels of interest.

An alternative explanation to partisan-motivated reasoning theory refers to the different prior expectations that voters have about electoral outcomes. From this perspective, polling credibility is not driven by partisan motivations but by the fact that polling results are far from voters' prior expectations. Thus, voters judge the poll as less credible (Baron and Jost 2019; Gerber and Green 1999; Tappin et al. 2020). In other words, voters tend to reject evidence or deem the accuracy of information less credible but not necessarily because of motivated reasoning (Gerber and Green 1999). Instead, the beliefs are affecting beliefs rather than desires affecting beliefs (Baron and Jost 2019) as in motivated reasoning:

Hypothesis 3c. Voters are more likely to overestimate a candidate's level of support if they believe that candidate is leading the race.

The 2018 presidential election in Mexico

The Mexican party system is fairly institutionalized compared to the rest of the party systems in the region (Mainwaring, 2018). While most of the literature has argued that partisanship is weakly rooted in society (Greene 2011), recent research suggests that these findings are an artifact of question wording and that partisanship is actually widespread among the electorate (Castro Cornejo 2019). This conclusion is consistent with recent studies on partisans in Latin America (Lupu, 2015) and the Mexican Election Study (Beltrán et al. 2018), which found that around two-thirds of voters self-identified with a party during the 2018 presidential election. Moreover, since Mexico's transition to democracy the proportion of voters who like their party and greatly dislike the opposing parties has increased significantly, what the literature commonly refers as "affective polarization" (Castro Cornejo 2024; Druckman and Levendusky 2019). This context makes voters likely to view information with a partisan lens, particularly on a polarized issue like electoral polling during a presidential campaign.

Empirical strategy

The present study conducted a nationally representative telephone survey experiment between the 3rd and the 11th of April, 2018, the first month of the 2018 presidential campaign in Mexico. The survey was conducted by the polling firm BGC Beltán y Asocs, and the sample consisted of 1,000 respondents, who were randomly divided into two groups. These groups

are balanced across observed covariates (see Table A1 in the appendix). While other studies have focused on polling sources (Searles, Smith, and Sui 2018) or perceived quality methodology (Kim, Weaver, and Willnat 2000; Kuru, Pasek, and Traugott 2017), the following survey experiment focuses on how respondents evaluated survey credibility depending on polling results. Respondents in the first treatment group were informed of an electoral poll that was released by a national newspaper, which reflected the state of the presidential race at the time (see Table 1). According to the poll, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, a candidate of MORENA, was in first place, and Ricardo Anaya, a candidate of the PAN, was in a distant second place.¹ The second treatment group was prompted with polling information that suggested that the presidential race was very competitive, with only a two-percentage points difference between López Obrador and Anaya. The vignette excluded the specific name of the newspaper and the name of the survey research firm in order to avoid the political leaning of the newspaper or the prestige of the polling firm affect the results of the survey experiment.²

After reading the vignette about the electoral poll, respondents were asked if they thought that the polling information was credible or not, which constitutes the first dependent variable of this study: *On a 0–10 scale, where 0 means that is “not credible at all” and 10 means that it is “very credible,” in your opinion, how credible are the results of the electoral poll that I just mentioned?* Although a potential treatment with Anaya in first place would have been a stronger treatment, it would have lacked external validity since every electoral poll released during the 2018 campaign highlighted that López Obrador was in first place; polls only differ in the reported margin between first and second place.

In order to fully understand how perceptions about polling are formed, this study also analyzes voters' perceptions about candidates' electoral strength according to the polls released during the campaign. In particular, the survey requested respondents to provide an estimate of the level of support for each major candidate: *“From what you know or have heard about polls during this campaign, what level of support do you think each candidate running for the Presidency has? For example, what percentage of the electorate do you think will vote for (NAMES OF CANDIDATE)?”* Interviewers were asked to confirm that the reported percentages did not add to more than a hundred

Table 1. Survey Experiment: Treatment Groups.

Treatment 1	<i>A national newspaper recently published an electoral poll that reported that MORENA's candidate, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, is in first place with 40% of vote intention. The PAN candidate, Ricardo Anaya, has 29% of the vote intention and the PRI candidate, José Antonio Meade reports 23% of voters' preference.</i>
Treatment 2	<i>A national newspaper recently published an electoral poll that reported that MORENA's candidate, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, is in first place with 37% of vote intention. The PAN candidate, Ricardo Anaya, has 35% of the vote intention and the PRI candidate, José Antonio Meade reports 23% of voters' preference.</i>

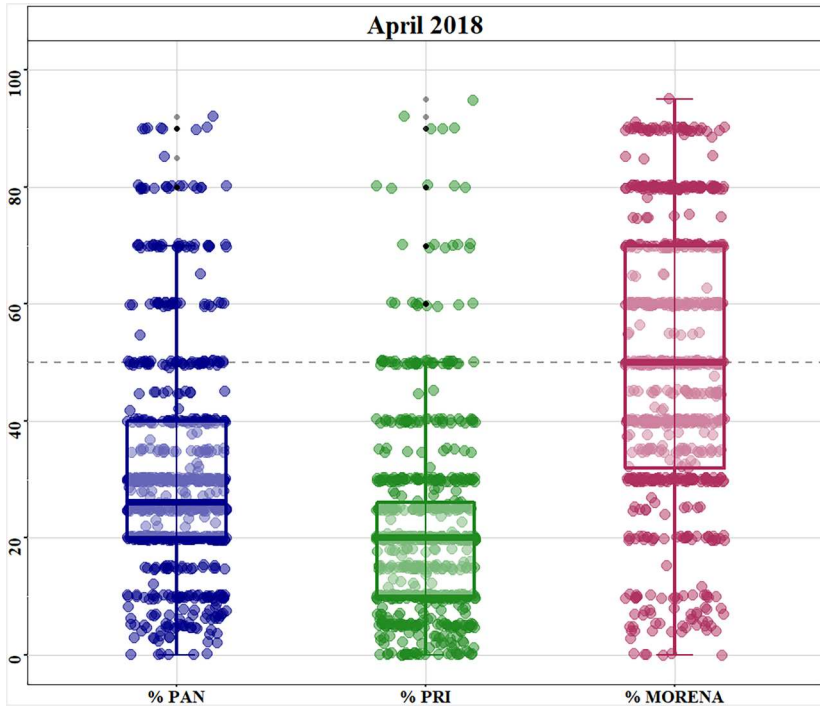


Figure 1. Reported level of support for each candidate.

percent. **Figure 1** shows the distribution of the respondents' reported level of support. It is worth highlighting that the average level of support is fairly close to the one reported by most polls released at that moment of the campaign, with some bias in favor of the López Obrador, who was leading the race: López Obrador (49%), Anaya (30%), and Meade (21%).³ In addition, the survey also analyzed voters' prior expectations about the presidential race, which were fairly homogenous within the electorate: 66 percent believed that López Obrador was winning the election, 24 percent "didn't know", and a minority considered that Anaya (7 percent) or Meade (4 percent) were winning. The question wordings appear in Appendix B.

Results

The following analysis presents OLS models in which the dependent variable is each voter group's mean response on the 0–10 credibility scale. As

¹For treatment 1, the poll results by the polling firm Parametría (conducted in late March) were chosen.

²Since it is a telephone survey experiment, the survey design included a short vignette, in contrast to online surveys that can include more comprehensive vignettes.

³During the first month of the campaign, the polling average was the following: López Obrador (42%), Anaya (29%), and Meade (23%)

expected, [Table 2](#) and [Figure 2](#) show an asymmetrical reaction to the treatment. When the vignette provides polling information that suggests that the race is competitive between PAN and MORENA, PAN partisans are more likely to consider a poll credible than when the poll reports that the MORENA candidate, López Obrador, enjoys a comfortable lead ($p < 0.01$). The opposite happens among MORENA partisans. While in both scenarios López Obrador is in first place, MORENA partisans consider the poll in which López Obrador has a clear lead more credible ($p < 0.05$). Among PRI voters, the difference between the treatment groups is not statistically significant, probably because the PRI candidate placed a distant third place in both polls. These results highlight that voters are more likely to find electoral polls more credible when they are closer to voters’ partisan preferences.

As previously explained, the survey also asked respondents to provide an estimate of the level of support for the three major candidates running for the Presidency. [Table 3](#) and [Figure 3](#) report OLS models which find that partisanship is key to understanding the variation in the respondents’ reported level of support. In column (4), it reports the perceived level of support for the PAN candidate. Compared to PAN partisans, out-partisans and independents report a lower level of support: PRI partisans report a difference of 7.5 percentage points ($p < 0.01$), independents 9.4 percentage points ($p < 0.01$), and MORENA partisans 11 percentage points ($p < 0.01$). The same partisan bias is observed when respondents estimate the level of support for the PRI candidate (column 5, $p < 0.01$) and MORENA candidate (column 6, $p < 0.01$): co-partisans overestimate the electoral strength of their co-partisan candidate compared to out-partisans and independents even when controlling for socioeconomic variables like education, age, and gender. The models also control for the experiment since it would be possible that the treatments will influence respondents’ estimated level of support; however, the experiment did not report any sizable effect ($p > 0.10$). Overall, we see that partisan bias plays an important role when voters report the electoral strength of each candidate. It is also important to highlight that, while the partisan bias is statistically significant, it is also bounded. For example, PAN partisans both

Table 2. OLS Models. Perceived Credibility of Electoral Polling.

	(1) PAN voters	(2) PRI voters	(3) MORENA voters
Treatment	1.41*** (0.51)	-0.05 (0.69)	-0.53* (0.32)
Constant	4.94*** (0.36)	4.52*** (0.47)	6.91*** (0.23)
Observations	140	103	343
R-squared	0.05	0.00	0.01

0-not credible at all, 10-very credible. Standard errors in parentheses, *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$.

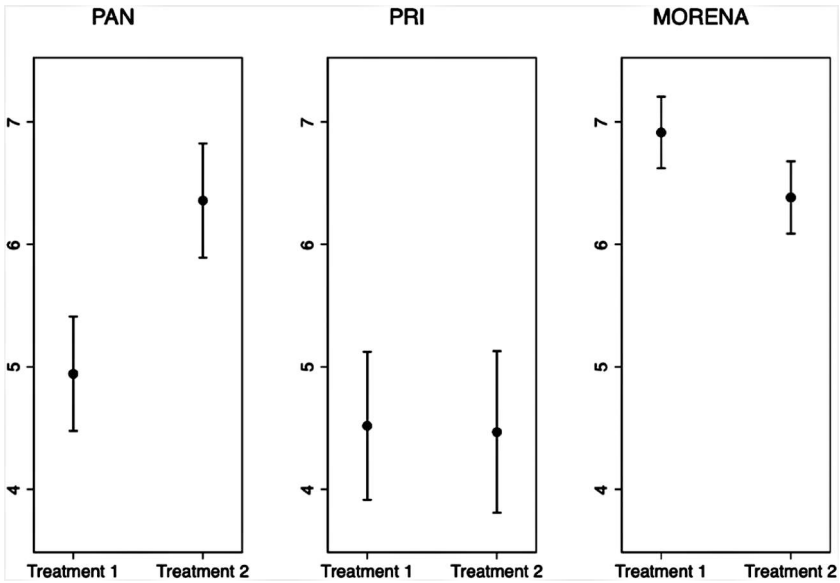


Figure 2. Perceived Credibility of Electoral Polling.

overestimate their co-partisan candidate’s electoral strength but also, on average, place MORENA’s candidate in first place.

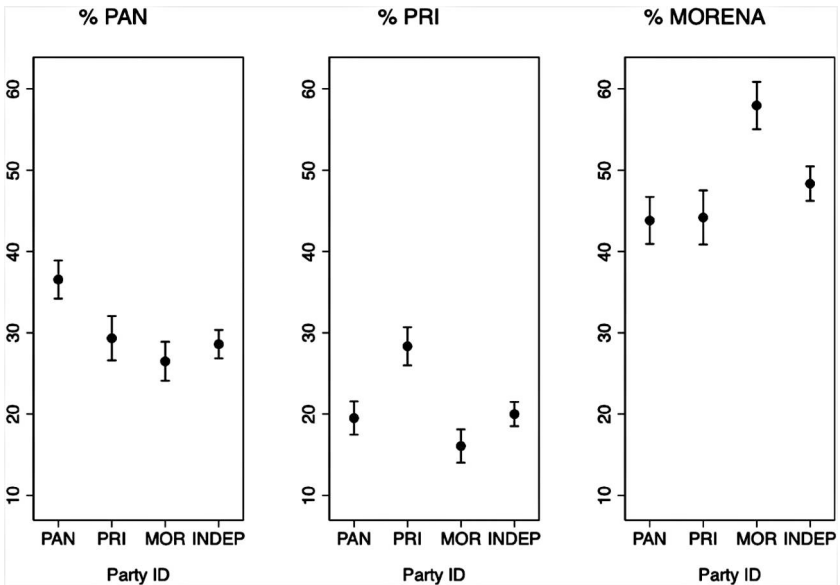


Figure 3. Perceived Credibility of Electoral Polling (reported % of the electorate who will vote for each candidate).

Table 3. OLS Model. Perceived Level of Support (reported % of the electorate support each candidate).

	(1) PAN	(2) PRI	(3) MORENA	(4) PAN	(5) PRI	(6) MORENA
<u>Partisanship (Base = co-partisans)</u>						
PAN partisan		-8.02*** (1.92)	-15.86*** (2.33)		-6.40*** (1.91)	-14.89*** (2.35)
PRI partisan	-7.48*** (2.20)		-14.21*** (2.61)	-7.32*** (2.21)		-11.85*** (2.63)
MORENA partisan	-11.03*** (1.94)	-12.82*** (1.89)		-9.52*** (1.96)	-10.93*** (1.88)	
INDEPENDENT	-9.42*** (1.71)	-7.74*** (1.74)	-10.39*** (1.99)	-8.92*** (1.70)	-6.64*** (1.71)	-8.95*** (2.00)
<u>Expectations (Base = said party is winning)</u>						
PAN is winning					-18.15*** (3.36)	-3.12 (2.78)
PRI is winning				-3.08 (3.91)		-16.20*** (4.01)
Morena is winning				-10.09*** (2.30)	-17.77*** (2.87)	
"Don't know"				-5.94** (2.55)	-15.29*** (3.06)	-5.26** (2.11)
<u>Political Information (Base = Low)</u>						
Middle Level	-3.50** (1.78)	-1.30 (1.56)	-1.76 (2.15)	-2.61 (1.79)	-1.53 (1.55)	-2.59 (2.16)
High Level	-3.25* (1.83)	-1.18 (1.59)	2.93 (2.20)	-1.71 (1.87)	-1.55 (1.61)	1.98 (2.25)
<u>Campaign Interest (Base = Low)</u>						
Middle Interest	1.55 (2.11)	1.10 (1.83)	-2.29 (2.50)	1.52 (2.11)	1.38 (1.81)	-3.40 (2.50)
High Interest	0.17 (2.15)	0.07 (1.87)	1.40 (2.55)	0.38 (2.16)	0.12 (1.86)	-0.08 (2.56)
Female	0.10 (1.28)	1.99* (1.11)	0.40 (1.53)	-0.37 (1.27)	1.62 (1.09)	0.74 (1.52)
Age	-0.34 (0.69)	-0.84 (0.60)	-0.86 (0.83)	0.10 (0.69)	-0.83 (0.60)	-0.90 (0.83)
Education	-0.52 (0.73)	0.57 (0.64)	0.00 (0.87)	0.05 (0.75)	1.03 (0.64)	-0.41 (0.89)
Treatment	0.50 (1.26)	-1.50 (1.10)	-1.87 (1.52)	0.33 (1.25)	-1.41 (1.08)	-2.06 (1.50)
Constant	61.94*** (4.60)	41.55*** (3.93)	29.17*** (3.39)	45.74*** (4.29)	43.50*** (4.29)	65.90*** (4.79)
Observations	778	770	760	764	753	772
R-squared	0.09	0.06	0.07	0.09	0.12	0.11

Standard errors in parentheses, *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$.

In terms of the alternative hypotheses, respondents' campaign interests or political information do not drive variations on the reported level of support estimates ($p > 0.10$). In contrast, while only a small minority of respondents thought that a candidate other than López Obrador was winning the presidential race (7 percent, PAN; 4 percent PRI), voters' expectations report some statistically significant results suggesting that prior information does have some influence on the perceived level of support for each candidate, particularly in the case of the PRI's candidate. In most cases, confidence intervals tend to overlap for the PAN and MORENA, (Figure 4). In contrast, voters

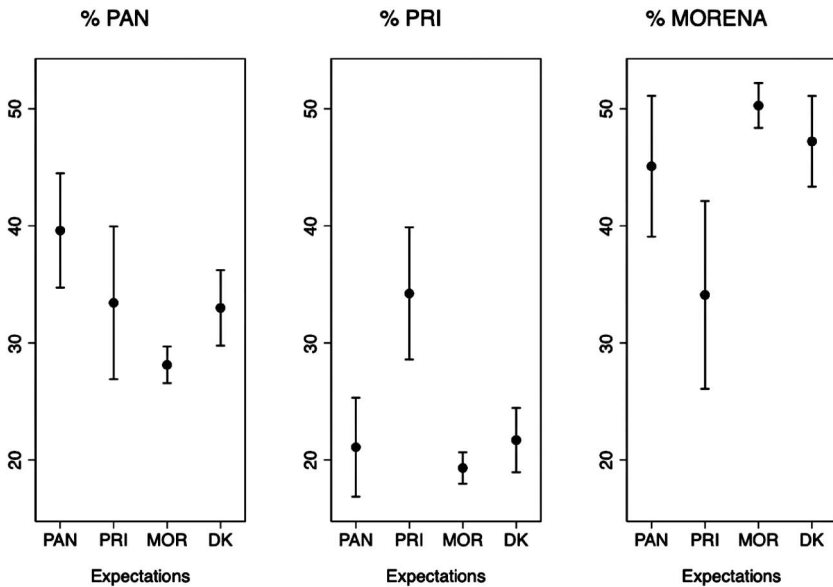


Figure 4. Perceived Levels of Support and Prior Expectations about the election (perception about who is going to win the election).

who believe that the PRI candidate is winning tend to report higher levels of support for the PRI ($p < 0.01$).

Discussion

Polling information does not constitute an objective source of information, their perceived credibility depends on the poll results, which – at the same time – are rooted in voters' partisan preferences. Even when controlling for voters' prior expectations, partisanship constitutes the most important factor for understanding how voters interpret electoral polling. Voters tend to view information less credibly when it contradicts their partisan identities than when it supports it. While the literature has commonly identified motivated reasoning as the plausible causal mechanism, it is also possible that the information treatment affects other political variables (Tappin et al. 2020), that are correlated with partisanship. As such, future research should focus on casual identification and study the conditions in which prior expectations, cognitive shortcuts, trustworthiness, or motivation explain partisans' responsiveness to information. For example, in the 2018 presidential election in Mexico, a strong majority of the electorate perceived that most voters supported López Obrador, making voters' prior expectations a less important variable for understanding voters' perceptions of electoral polling. However, it is plausible that in more competitive elections, prior expectations play a

more important role in affecting the perceived credibility of polling information.

Future research can also replicate the experimental design of this study based on online surveys, which are commonly used in the literature on polling and partisan bias. Given that respondents can see graphs and infographics when participating in online experiments, it is highly likely that such survey strategies make respondents more attentive to such information. On the contrary, in telephone surveys, the versions of a vignette are read to respondents, which can result in weaker treatments. As such, the results of this study are conservative. Moreover, online surveys can include longer vignettes than telephone-based surveys, so it would be possible to include additional information about the survey (e.g. methodology, polling firm) that can potentially influence perceived polling credibility. Finally, while this research has focused on the presidential horse race polling, future research can study the conditions in which voters in young democracies view polls through a partisan lens, such as in issue polls. This is likely to be particularly influential on topics that have a partisan relevance (Jerit and Barabas 2012) or when voters are polarized along partisan lines, as learning new information causes partisans to process information differently.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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