



The effects of election polls in Mexico's 2018 presidential campaign

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ABSTRACT

This research note presents the results of an experimental design to study the effects of poll releases in Mexico's 2018 presidential campaign. Our research design allows us to test the conditions in which polling information can alter voters' reported preferences. The results show that the exposure to polling results makes respondents more likely to identify themselves as undecided. We interpret this change as a sign of voters' willingness to form veridical attitudes. To support this interpretation, we show that the effect is stronger among citizens with the ability and motivation to elaborate on the polling information. The findings contribute to the debate about the consequences of publishing pre-election poll results that show a clear advantage for one of the candidates.

1. Introduction

Polling is an inherent part of modern election campaigns. Media and pundits often comment on the last poll results and their variations over time (Weimann, 1990; Littlewood, 1988; Patterson, 2005; Traugott, 2008; Holt-Bacha and Strömbäck, 2012). Candidates, in turn, publicize any favorable result and discredit adverse ones (Bauman and Herbst, 1994; Jacobs and Shapiro, 1999; Medvic, 2003).¹ The spread of fake election polls throughout social media is now part and parcel of dirty campaigns (Buendía, 2018; Anspach and Carlson, Forthcoming).² Moreover, many countries have a blackout period that bans the publication of polls from 24 hours to more than two weeks leading up to an election (Chung, 2012).³

All of these different uses of election polls rest on the premise that they not only reflect voters' preferences, but also shape them. The validity of such a premise has been extensively revised in the literature of electoral public opinion. Nevertheless, the evidence regarding the ultimate effect of polls on voters' preferences is inconsistent and far from conclusive in providing a unique recommendation (Marsh, 1985; Mutz,

1992; Hardmeier, 2008; Moy and Rinke, 2012). This important limitation leaves government officials and citizens to deduce the effects of election polls based only on normative grounds, rather than on empirical ones (Traugott, 1992; Donsbach, 2001).

This research note aims to contribute to the literature on the consequences of election polls by exploring the effects of poll releases in a context where there seems to be an obvious winner. In particular, we present the results of a survey experiment using real poll data of Mexico's 2018 presidential campaign—a situation in which the leading candidate enjoyed a comfortable advantage. Our findings show that, unlike what is expected by the “bandwagon effect,” the mere exposure to polling information has little impact on voters' support towards the leading candidate. Instead, the information treatment increased the share of respondents who do not opt declare their main preference yet. In particular, individuals exposed to the poll results were about three percent more likely to declare themselves as undecided than those individuals in the control group.

Building on a psychological theory of attitude changes (Petty and Cacioppo, 1986), we posit that this observed effect reflects voters'

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¹ See also, Ellsworth, Brian and Eyanir China, “Venezuela ‘poll wars’ rage as presidential race heats up,” *Reuters*. June 6, 2012. (<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-venezuela-election-polls/venezuela-poll-wars-rage-as-presidential-race-%20heats-up-idUSBRE85512920120606>).

² See also Enten, Harry. “Fake Polls Are A Real Problem.” *FiveThirtyEight*. August 22, 2017. (<https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/fake-polls-are-a-real-problem/>); Harrison, Paul. “Italy's vote: Fake claims attempt to influence election.” *BBC*. March 3, 2018. (<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-43214136>); Goel, Vinu. “In India, Facebook's WhatsApp Plays Central Role in Elections,” *The New York Times*, May 14, 2018. (<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/14/technology/what-sapp-india-elections.html>).

³ Countries with a blackout period longer than 14 days include Argentina, Greece, Italy, or South Korea. See also: “Poll-gaged,” *The Economist*, December 1, 2018. p. 47.

thoughtful consideration of the polling information. To support this interpretation, we show that the results are driven by the attitudinal change among individuals with the ability and motivation to interpret and process the message provided. Our analysis shows that the identified effect is the strongest among educated voters, especially among those with no partisan attachments in the election.

The findings of this study contribute to the ongoing debate on the ways in which polls affect the respondents' reported preferences. As recent examples in Kenya (Cheeseman, 2008), Uganda (Carlson, 2018), and Colombia (Atkenson and Alvarez, 2018, p. 1) illustrate, polls are regarded more often as a marketing tool as opposed to a measurement of citizens' preferences. In the particular case of Mexico, their ubiquitous presence in the media has raised concerns about their potential effects on the electorate (Moreno et al., 2011; Hernández Valdez, 2013; Abundis et al., 2014). The results of this research add important information to this debate by showing how published polling results inform, rather than deceive, voters' preferences.

The rest of the research note is organized as follows. Section 2 reviews briefly the existing debates in the literature and accounts for our empirical contribution. We provide the contextual background of the experiment, present our research design, and explain our theoretical expectations in Sections 3 and 4. Section 5 describes the main empirical findings, and Section 6 concludes and proposes future research avenues.

2. The endogenous shaping of respondents' preferences

Whether election surveys can not only reflect, but also shape voters' preferences is a common concern among government officials, pollsters, and scholars. The early works of Gallup and Rae (1940) or Campbell (1968) warned scholars about exploring this question without pulling apart its causal mechanisms and interpreting the results from non-realistic situations. While this topic has been revisited multiple times, the existing findings have not yet reached a consistent conclusion. While the most intuitive and studied results is the "bandwagon effect," in which voters rally their support towards the leading alternative (Fleitas, 1971; Marsh, 1985; McAllister and Studlar, 1991; van der Meer et al., 2016), other works suggest an "underdog effect" in which polls sway preferences toward the trailing candidate (Laponce, 1966; Ceci and Kain, 1982; Chatterjee and Kamal, 2019). Additional findings include those where polls induce strategic voting (Bartels, 1988; Blais et al., 2006; Rickershauser and Aldrich, 2007) or those documenting no impact on electoral preferences at all (Tuchman and Coffin, 1971; Daschmann, 2000). These ambivalent findings limit the contributions of the field when governments need to regulate poll circulation during electoral campaigns (Hardmeier, 2008).

A potential explanation for the ambiguous accumulation of evidence on this topic has to do with a common problem in social science: the heterogeneity of measurement and design. In particular, this literature presents a variety of methods to measure how voters receive the polling information and change their reported preferences (Marsh, 1985; Moy and Rinke, 2012). From observational data (Sudman, 1986; McAllister and Studlar, 1991) to laboratory experiments (Ansolabehere and Iyengar, 1984; Sinclair and Plott, 2012), most of these works instrument the information from polls by manipulating the content of a vignette (Morwitz and Pluzinski, 1996; van der Meer et al., 2016; Kuru et al., 2017) or the question wording (Mutz, 1992; Castro Cornejo, 2018). Similarly, these studies have measured the change in electoral preferences by using questions about vote intention (Sonck and Looveldt, 2010), outcome expectations (Meffert et al., 2011), or feelings toward candidates or political issues (Marsh, 1985; Rothschild and Malhorta, 2014). Despite the merits of each approach, the conditions in which each of the documented effects is more likely to appear remains unclear.

To contribute to the aforementioned literature, we present below the results of a survey experiment that provides real polling information about the candidates' support. This design allows us to test the conditions in which polls may affect electoral preferences. At the same time,

we limit the generalization of our findings to contexts in which citizens have little incentives for strategic voting. As described in Section 3.1, our study case had one of the candidates consistently enjoying a comfortable margin in pre-election polls. The relative certainty about the election result increased citizens' incentives to vote expressively, rather than strategically (Cox, 1997, p. 77). Before presenting our theoretical expectations, the section below briefly describes our experiment and the context of our study.

3. Research design

3.1. Contextual information

Mexico held its most recent presidential election on July 1, 2018. The candidates in the contest were Andrés Manuel López Obrador of the National Regeneration Movement (MORENA), Ricardo Anaya of the National Action Party (PAN), José Antonio Meade of the incumbent Institutionalized Revolutionary Party (PRI), and Jaime Rodríguez, an independent candidate. The official results gave López Obrador 53.3 % of the votes, well ahead of Anaya (22.3 %), Meade (16.4 %), and Rodríguez (5.4 %). These results resemble those reported by polls throughout the campaign.⁴

As in other democracies, polling in Mexico has gradually become an integral aspect of elections. Candidates often adjust their campaign strategies according to the latest polling numbers (Moreno, 2018), media leans towards providing horse-race journalism centered on poll results (Castro Cornejo, 2018), and parties react strategically to poll releases depending on their results.⁵ On the other hand, the publication of polls in the country has not been controversy-free. During the 2012 presidential election, when many polls overestimated the actual lead of the PRI's candidate, opposition candidates and public opinion raised concerns about the impartiality of the pollsters and their potential effect on the electorate (Cantú et al., 2016).

Election polls are regulated by the National Electoral Institute (INE) to minimize its potential effect on electoral preferences and ensure that published results reflect high-quality data. Between March and June of 2018, the INE registered 60 nationally representative pre-electoral polls, with all of them published in different media outlets. Mexico's electoral code imposes a blackout on publishing new survey results from three days prior to election day until the closing of polling stations in the country.⁶ Pollsters are also obliged to report specific methodological information and make the survey questionnaire publicly available.

3.2. Experiment

We evaluate the effects of exposing survey respondents to the results of published polls by using a survey experiment fielded from June 18–27, 2018—the last two weeks before Election Day. The survey is representative at the national level, and it randomly interviewed 3250 respondents by using a multistage sampling design. Section A in the Supplementary Information provides a detailed description of the methodology and sampling design used in the survey.

Our information treatment consists of a card showing the estimated

⁴ See Table D in the Supplementary Information.

⁵ For instance, in late May 2018, a *Reforma* poll showed López Obrador leading the race with 52 % of the electoral preferences. While López Obrador publicized the result on social media as evidence of his successful campaign, the campaign staff of José Antonio Meade, who had 19 % of the preferences in the poll, discredited the publication as part of López Obrador's propaganda strategy. ("Causa polémica encuesta de Reforma." *El Siglo de Durango*. May 30, 2018 <https://www.elsiglodurango.com.mx/noticia/966662.causa-polemica-encuesta-de-reforma.html>).

⁶ Instituto Nacional Electoral, "Ley General de Instituciones y Procedimientos Electorales." Art 213. Mexico City, 2017.

preferences for the candidates at the time of the survey. This estimation is a weighted average of all the previous pre-electoral polls registered at the INE according to its sample size, pollster, and date.⁷ By summarizing real information provided by multiple pollsters, we mitigate the possibility that respondents would discredit the source of information (Chia and Chang, 2017; Kuru et al., 2017).

When respondents receive the treatment card, the interviewer reads the following statement: “This card shows the estimated electoral support for the presidential candidates, according to the main pollsters in the country. Please take some time to review the card.” We then ask respondents about their electoral preferences by using the following question: “If the election were held today, who would you vote for?” We recorded the answers to this question by using a simulated ballot with the candidates’ names and party logos. Respondents could also refuse to answer the question (*No Response*) or declare that they still cannot answer it (*Undecided*).

We randomly assign 1000 and 2250 respondents into treatment and control groups, respectively. Table A in the Supplementary Information shows that there are no significant differences between groups in our battery of covariates, which includes respondents’ age, gender, region, education, partisan identification, and an index indicating their socioeconomic status.⁸ While both groups were asked about their electoral preferences, only respondents in the treatment group received the polling information before making the question.

As described in the next section, we expect a careful elaboration of the polling information among those individuals who are more likely to scrutinize and elaborate on the polling results (high ability) and with little incentives to resist learning from the information provided (high motivation). As a proxy of ability, we consider the education level of the respondents and split the sample into two groups. The “High education” group contains those respondents with education attainment equal to or higher than incomplete high school, the median category in our sample. The rest of the respondents will be in the “Low education” group.

Similarly, we measure citizens’ motivation to elaborate on the information by identifying those respondents who declare to lack any identification with a political party.⁹ These respondents will be classified as “No partisans.” If they revealed any party affiliation, they will be included in the “Partisans” group. Alternatively, we classified a respondent as “High interest” if she declares having “some” or “a lot” of interest in politics.¹⁰ The rest of the respondents will be classified in the “Low interest” group.

4. Hypotheses

A common expectation when exposing voters to polling information

⁷ Figure A in the Supplementary Information illustrates the card showing the estimated electoral support for the candidates at the time of the survey.

⁸ Our measurement of socioeconomic status uses a hierarchical classification of the respondents’ ability to access a set of goods and lifestyles, according to the Mexican Association of Market Research and Public Opinion (AMAI). The index is composed of the answers to 13 standardized questions regarding the education level of the family’s head, the number of lightbulbs at the home, the number of rooms, and the number of baths with showers, as well as the possession of a car, water heater, hard flooring, computer, microwave oven, washing machine, bread toaster, and DVD player. The answers to those questions are sorted into six socioeconomic levels. For technical details, see <http://www.amai.org/nse/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Nota-Metodolo%CC%2081gico-NSE-2018-v3.pdf>.

⁹ To measure partisan identification, we coded the answers to the following survey question: “Regardless of the party you will vote in this election, do you usually think of yourself as *panista*, *priista*, *perredista*, *green*, *MORENA* supporter, or supporter of any other party?”

¹⁰ For this variable we used the answers to the following survey question: “Please tell me how much interested are you in politics? Not at all, a little, some, or a lot?”

is the “bandwagon effect,” where voters’ preferences sway toward the most popular candidate (Fleitas, 1971; Marsh, 1985; McAllister and Studlar, 1991; van der Meer et al., 2016). Such an expectation assumes that voters, rather than elaborating on the polling information, will solve any cognitive dissonance by following the “wisdom of the crowds” and switch their preference to the winning side (Mutz, 1992; Rothschild and Malhorta, 2014). We treat this claim as a null hypothesis.

Our theoretical expectations stem from the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) (Petty and Cacioppo, 1986), which provides a general theory of cognitive responses and attitude change. The premise of the ELM is that for people to form veridical attitudes after being exposed to a new piece of information, they must have enough *ability* and *motivation* to scrutinize the relevant parts of the message. Petty and Cacioppo (1986) refer to an individual’s ability as her capacity to scrutinize the relevant parts of the message and provide a critical evaluation. This ability is determined by the individual’s prior knowledge on the topic, as well as her cognitive resources to elaborate on the message. Individuals with little ability to elaborate on the information are more likely to have a superficial evaluation of the contents of the message and align their preference with the most popular preference in the poll (Mutz, 1992; Boudreau and McCubbins, 2010; Rothschild and Malhorta, 2014).

Meanwhile, the individual’s motivation denotes her incentives to consciously process the message. Such incentives include the importance that the individual gives to the topic in question or whether the message aligns with her existing beliefs. In this case, voters with strong attitudes towards a candidate are less motivated to elaborate on the information from polls, and they will resist any attitudinal change by counter-arguing the content of the message (Zaller, 1992) or discrediting the impartiality of the information (Kuru et al., 2017).

We then expect that exposure to polling results adjusts the declared preferences of those voters with enough motivation and ability to scrutinize the poll results. The specific realization of such an adjustment, however, depends on the electoral context in which the message is delivered. For example, some studies document how the polling results drive voters to strategically switch their support from their most preferred yet hopeless candidate to one of the top contenders in the race (Bartels, 1988; Blais et al., 2006; Rickershauser and Aldrich, 2007). This behavioral change is more likely to appear in the contexts of tight races, where voters use the information available to adjust their choice based on the candidates who are ahead in the polls (Cox, 1997, p. 122). As discussed in Section 3.1, this condition does not hold in our study case. The wide advantage in the polls for one of the candidates during Mexico’s 2018 campaign diluted voters’ incentives to consider the effectiveness of their vote and consider a strategic behavior.

For the context of our study case, we expect that voters’ scrutiny of the polling information is reflected in their decreasing likelihood to define their vote choice (Fenwick et al., 1982). In this case, rather than providing a quick reaction to the information treatment, respondents consider the information from polls as a “stop-and-think” call to elaborate on the message provided. Among those voters who were leaning toward one of the trailing candidates, the new information will make them understand that their preferences are out of tune with those from the majority of voters, pushing them to not declare their main preference yet (Noelle-Neumann, 1993; Visser et al., 2000). Therefore, our first expectation is that, *compared with individuals in the control group, respondents who were exposed to polling results are more likely to describe themselves as undecided* (H1).

Moreover, if the increase in undecided voters indeed reflects individuals’ willingness to form veridical attitudes, we expect the effect to be driven by voters with both the ability and motivation to elaborate on the information. On the one hand, we expect a more critical evaluation of the polling information among highly educated voters. Previous studies have shown that education positively correlates with their cognitive capability to interpret political and polling information (Redlawsk, 2004; Meffert et al., 2011). Therefore, highly educated voters should be more likely, on average, to comprehend and scrutinize

the message from our treatment.

On the other hand, we expect voters to be more motivated to scrutinize the polling information when they have no partisan attachments. Individuals are prone to discount the information that conflicts with their prior beliefs (Lord et al., 1979; Ditto and Lopez, 1992). Those individuals who identify with a party, they are more likely to discern the information following partisan, rather than accuracy-based, goals (Lodge and Taber, 2000). We expect, then, that voters declaring themselves as non-partisans are less willing to resist an attitudinal change when exposed to the information. As a result, *the increase in the number of undecided voters is stronger among respondents with high levels of ability (high education) and motivation (non-partisan)* (H1a).

Note that our expectations distinguish themselves from two alternative explanations about the existence of undecided voters. First, if the number of undecided voters reflects the little information, they have at hand with which to justify their vote choice, then we should expect a *decrease* in the rate of undecided voters in the treated group. Second, if the raise of undecided voters reflects only voters' aversion to think about and choose between candidates (Krosnick, 1991), then the rise in the number of undecided should be stronger among low-ability respondents.

5. Results

We present first the results of the comparison between treatment and control groups after providing the information treatment. Fig. 1 reports the response rates for each of the alternatives on the ballot. The light bars show the rates for the control group and represent our baseline results, while the darker bars show the rates for those respondents exposed to our information treatment. It is worth noting that a fifth of voters declare themselves as “undecided” or did not provide an answer, a share similar to what is registered in previous presidential campaigns in Mexico (Flores-Macías, 2009; Greene, 2015).

Fig. 1 shows that the information treatment has no significant effect on the electoral preferences towards any of the candidates. This null finding is in line with Moreno et al. (2011), who find only negligible evidence that individuals hide their vote preferences to pollsters when they perceive to support a minority alternative. The results, however, show that the share of undecided voters is larger than the one reported for the control group. While 214 out of 2250 respondents in the treat-

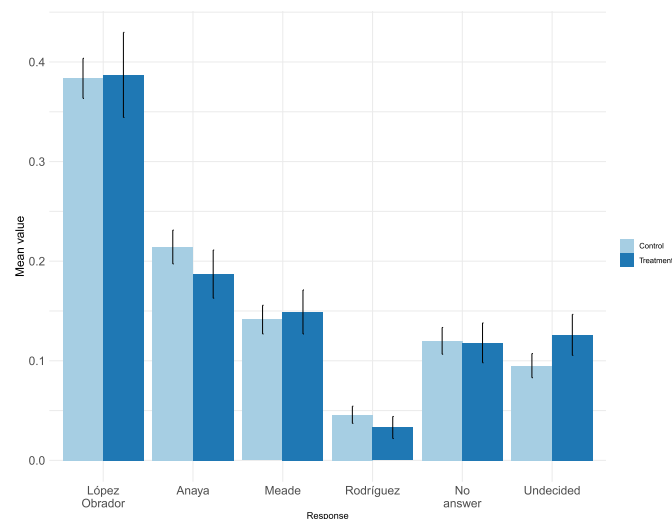


Fig. 1. Proportion of Electoral Preferences in Treatment and Control groups.

ment group declared themselves as undecided, 126 from 1000 respondents in the control group did the same. In other words, and consistent with our Hypothesis 1, individuals exposed to the poll results were about three percent more likely to declare themselves as

undecided, a difference significant at the 99-percent confidence level.¹¹

To test for the heterogeneous effects, Fig. 2 reports the differences-in-means between the control and treatment groups for each alternative after splitting the sample by education and partisan identification. On the vertical axis, we have plotted the average treatment effect estimates with the 95-percent confidence intervals. The top plot displays the overall effect in our entire sample. The rest of the plots show that the shares of undecided voters within the treatment group are larger for individuals in the high education (ATE = 0.041, p < 0.05) and non-partisan (ATE = 0.052, p < 0.05) groups. In particular, among the highly-educated respondents in the treatment group (who represent about 40 percent of the entire subsample), nine percent of the highly-educated respondents in the treatment group declared themselves. The share of undecided among the highly-educated individuals in the control group is about five percent.¹² The difference is similar among non-partisan respondents. While 15 percent of the non-partisan respondents in the control group declare themselves as undecided, the rate of undecided among the non-partisan respondents in the treatment group is 20 percent. Consistent with our hypothesis H1a, we find a positive effect among those individuals with more ability to elaborate on the information from polls and a higher motivation to scrutinize the information, even when the message contradicts their initial belief.

The bottom two plots of Fig. 2 explore the interaction effects between education and partisanship. This interaction is relevant for two reasons. First, it can be the case that better-educated individuals are more able to hold their partisan predispositions in light of different information (Zaller and Feldman, 1992). Second, there is evidence for the Mexican case that individuals with higher education are more likely to identify themselves as non-partisans (Moreno, 2018). As the plots show, the effect appears only among highly educated, non-partisan respondents—which represent 21 percent of the individuals in our sample. On average, the treatment increased the rate of undecided voters among these respondents group by 6 percent (p < 0.05). This finding confirms our expectation that the outcome only appears among voters with both the motivation and ability to scrutinize the polling results.

In sum, our findings show that the mere exposure to polls does little to change voters' preferences. Instead, the information treatment makes respondents more likely to declare themselves undecided about their vote choice. This outcome denotes the willingness of voters to process the content of the message from polls before declaring their electoral support. Moreover, respondents with the ability and motivation to elaborate on the poll information are less likely to reveal their electoral preferences. The findings help us to distinguish the conditions in which we should observe the different types of shifts in the declared preferences of voters.

6. Discussion

This research note looks at the possibility that publishing election polls could affect the reported preferences in subsequent surveys. We focus on the particular case in which polls show a candidate enjoying a comfortable advantage. Under such a context, we can test the conditions proposed in the literature for a “bandwagon effect.” Our results for Mexico’s 2018 presidential campaign show that the mere exposure to polling information is unlikely to sway the electorate towards the leading candidate. Rather, informed individuals are more likely to *not* declare their vote preference just yet. Such an effect is particularly

¹¹ Tables B and C in the Supplementary Information for the results using ordinary least squares (OLS) and a multinomial logit.

¹² ,407 and 486 out of 1000 individuals were coded as “High Education” and “Non-partisan,” respectively, in our treatment group. Similarly, 906 and 1064 out of 2250 individuals in the control group were classified as “High Education” and “Non-partisan.” Highly-educated and non-partisans respondents represent 40 percent and 49 percent, respectively, of the individuals in our sample.

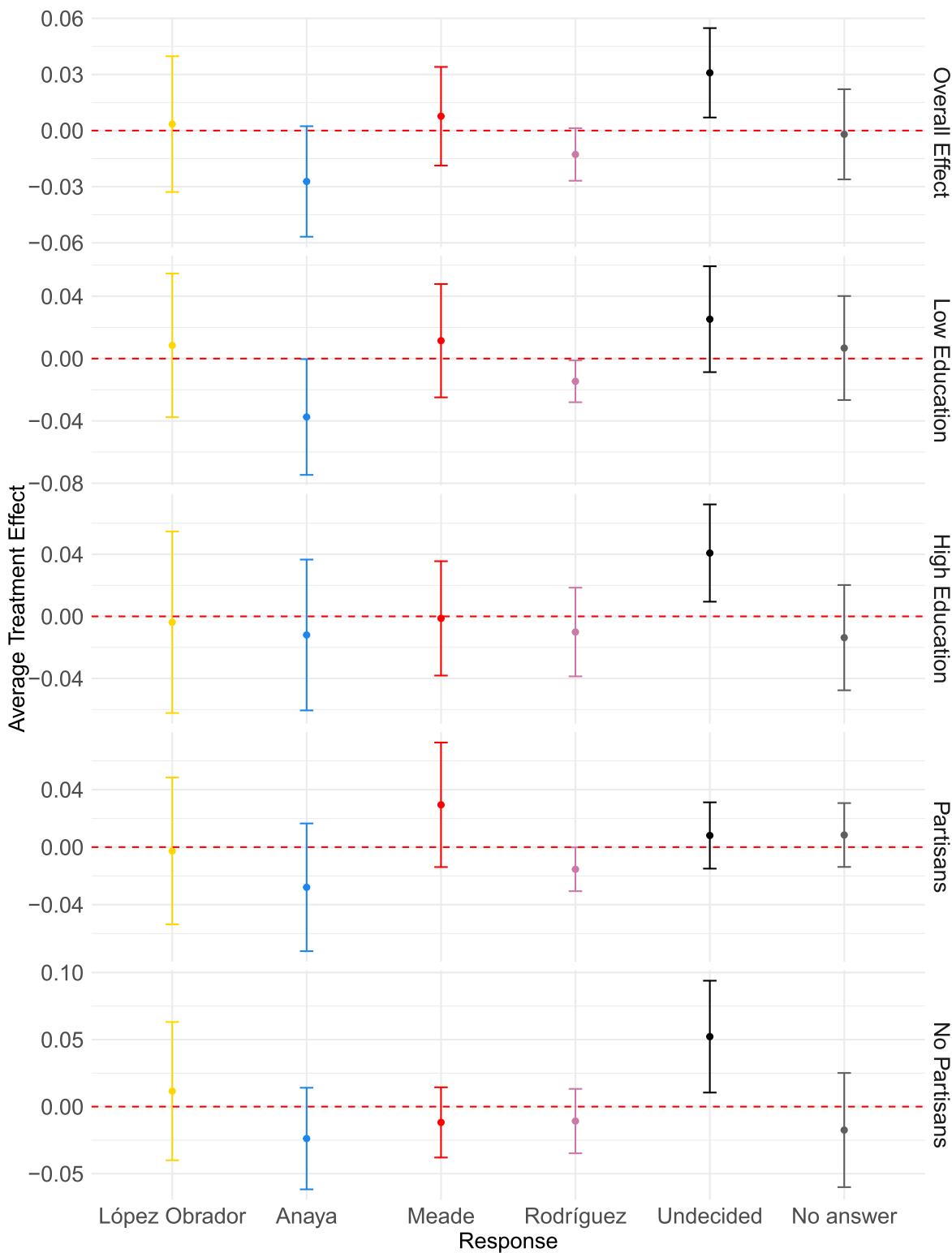


Fig. 2. Average treatment effects for the exposure to poll results.

Notes: Average treatment effects represent the difference on the answers to each of the alternatives on the ballot between the treatment and control group. Lines represent the 1.96 standard deviation confidence intervals (95 %).

strong among individuals who possess both the ability and motivation to elaborate on the message of the polls.

The use of real information in a real election poll allows us to test the conditions in which published polls can affect the subsequent measurement of electoral preferences. In particular, our design gets as close as possible to what we would observe when citizens were informed

about polling results while keeping constant the potential contamination effects. At the same time, the advantage of focusing on a real event for our experimental setting is also its main limitation. The generalization of our findings is limited to non-close elections, where voters have little incentive to instrumentally abandon their support for “hopeless” candidates. An extension of this research can use the same research design

in events with a closer competition between the top-two candidates.

The fact that the information increased the rate of undecided voters by a third emphasizes the importance of understanding the latent preferences of survey respondents (Kushin et al., 2019; Liu et al., 2021). For the Mexican case, in particular, our findings highlight the potential problems of naively reassessing undefined voters according to majority tendencies (Trejo Delarbre, 1996). The results also can be interpreted as evidence for how polls inform, rather than deceive, voters during campaigns. We hope that the results help regulatory bodies and the public in general to concentrate their efforts on improving the quality of published polls, all the while mitigating their concerns about when or how they are published.

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Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2021.102379>.

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