Is Bad News Biased? How Poll Reporting Affects Perceptions of Media Bias and Presumed Voter Behavior

"The #MSM [main stream media] uses skewed polling data to keep you home this #Electionday." That tweet, posted by a conservative activist just hours before polls closed in the 2016 U.S. presidential election, echoes a common refrain in modern politics. Public opinion poll reporting has been a staple of election news coverage for decades, and the 2016 race between Democrat Hillary Clinton and Republican Donald Trump was no exception: So-called "horserace" polls made up over 40% of election news coverage (Patterson, 2016). Alongside this proliferation of horserace poll reports: anxiety among pundits and the public regarding how such reports impact potential voters. The above tweet illustrates two major anxieties brought on by poll-saturated election cycles–suspicion that news media are biased in their poll reports, and fear that these reports will impact the outcome of the election.

Scholars may recognize those fears as textbook examples of two prominent mass media effects: the hostile media perception and presumed media influence on others' behavior. First, citizens may assume that both polls and the media outlets that report on them are biased against their preferred candidate. Second, citizens may assume that these reports are powerful enough to sway others' decision about whom they should vote for, or even whether they should vote at all. In this article, we demonstrate how these beliefs operate among political partisans in American politics.

The hostile media perception is well-known in the study of political communication (Gunther, Edgerly, Akin, & Broesch, 2012). Individuals who care about a topic are likely to perceive bias in balanced stories about that topic. We expect this familiar pattern to emerge when audiences estimate the amount of bias in news stories about election polls, but our interest is in

exploring how these perceptions of bias shift when polling results deliver "good" or "bad" news about their favored candidate. When the news itself–the poll result–is undesirable, are partisans more likely to sense bias in the package containing that unwelcome information?

Our work is conceptually similar to studies in which perceived bias is measured after a news story is deliberately altered by researchers to favor one side. For example, audiences rightfully recognize bias in stories that genuinely slant toward one side (Kim, 2015; Gunther, Christen, Liebhart, Chia, 2001; Brewer, Young, & Jones, 2013), or, similarly, originate from "friendly" or "unfriendly" sources (Arpan & Raney, 2003; Reid, 2012). But we differ from this research in that, in our experimental study (N=863), the *vessel itself* is not slanted. We present poll results from Reuters, a source that is widely regarded as neutral (Kearney, 2017), and we strictly adhere to journalistic principles of balance, using neutral language and sticking to the dry facts. The poll result may be slightly undesirable for the partisan, but that is hardly the fault of the news organization presenting the numbers (but see Groeling, 2008).

We examine how citizens evaluate polling news in the context of "battleground" state polls, which due to the U.S. Electoral College's role in determining the winner of the presidency, are a prominent part of election news coverage. In testing how polling results impact how partisans evaluate the news stories through which the polls are reported, we show that partisans tended to see poll-focused news articles as biased against their candidate and that perceived bias was amplified when a favored candidate trailed in the poll. Additionally, we explored if news consumers believe such polling reports impact others' intention to vote. We found that citizens believe polling stories have consequences on turnout, assuming that such reports motivate their co-partisans but largely have no effect on their adversaries. Partisans thought ingroup members would be particularly motivated by polls showing their candidate slightly behind.

To wit, our project combines an investigation of perceptions of news coverage of polls with perceptions of specific presumptions about behavioral consequences of that news coverage. Understanding how individual perceptions of what others' behavior will be helps scholars and journalists alike understand how poll coverage is interpreted, how individuals perceive the people around them, and how individuals choose to engage in political behavior themselves (see Toff, 2017; Searles, Ginn, & Nickens, 2016).

Hostile Media Perception and Presumed Media Influence on Voting

Day-to-day news reports on the latest polls follow a fairly straightforward format. For traditional news outlets, such a report would generally feature the latest numbers, information about the poll itself (e.g., polling agency, sample size), and a note about how the new figures differ from previous polls. Some reports might also include reaction from the campaigns, quotes from analysts who place the numbers in context, or a comparison of one poll to other new polls– but generally speaking, poll reports are rather uncomplicated. Indeed, their prominence in election news coverage is likely due, at least in part, to the fact that they require little effort to produce. Polling reports lack the narrative frills and flair that would seemingly elicit concerns about bias.

But a long line of research on how partisan audiences evaluate news coverage demonstrates that balanced news reports are frequently regarded as undesirably biased. Hostile media perception (HMP) studies reveal that when opposing partisans evaluate the same, neutral media message, both camps sense bias against their side (Hansen & Kim, 2011; Vallone, Ross, & Lepper, 1985). HMP emerges among individuals who are involved with a topic being reported on in media. Though such topics need not necessarily focus on politics, that elections feature competing groups of involved partisans makes the context particularly amenable for HMP.

Numerous studies have demonstrated that opposing partisans spot hostile bias in election coverage (Beck, 1991; Dalton, Beck & Huckfeldt, 1998; Hoffner & Toohey, 2007; Huge & Glynn, 2010).

We could identify only one study that examines HMP in response to polling news. In their study of voters in a Taiwanese election, Chia and Chang (2015) had voters rate polling articles as favorable or unfavorable toward the candidates, a common tactic for measuring HMP since favoring one side, or candidate, demonstrates journalistic bias. The authors found that voters regarded a news article showing a candidate leading in the polls as more favorable to that candidate, compared to a news article showing the race in a dead heat. Those voters are not wrong, of course: A report showing Candidate X leading is inherently favorable to Candidate X. This finding confirms previous studies demonstrating that audiences can correctly identify the valence of news content when that content is deliberately slanted (though, non-favored partisans tend to exaggerate the article's favorability to the opposing side, a phenomenon known as the relative hostile media perception; see Gunther et al., 2001). In our study, rather than evaluate whether citizens sense that polling reports are favorable to their side, we test voters' willingness to assign the label "bias" to such reports and whether these perceptions are amplified by unfavorable poll results.

Beyond the tendency to believe news coverage is undesirably biased, citizens also tend to believe that coverage will affect how others think and behave. Particularly pertinent to our investigation, people believe polls affect their peers (Wei, Lo, & Lu, 2011; Wei, Chia, & Lo, 2011; Hoffner & Rehkoff, 2011; Pan, Abisaid, Paek, Sun, & Houden, 2015). These studies ask respondents to estimate *the extent* to which others are influenced by polling news (e.g., influenced a little/ influenced a lot), begging the question–influenced *how*? In other words, if

citizens believe news reports of polls influence the public, what sort of effects do they anticipate? There is evidence that news consumers believe both poll reports (Price & Stroud, 2006) and election news coverage in general (Cohen & Tsfati, 2009) impact others' vote choice, but one unexplored possibility is that citizens also believe polling reports impact voter turnout. It is easy to see why they might anticipate such an effect. A citizen may think: "If media keep reporting polls showing my candidate far behind, my side may not bother to show up on Election Day." The tweet at the beginning of this study illustrates this very concern.

News consumers are unlikely to anticipate that poll reports have universal effects. For example, whereas a Republican may be worried that poll reports blunt turnout among his fellow Republicans, he might find those same reports motivate Democrats. In this case, the Republican would deem the story "influential," but would also perceive that the influence would not produce universal outcomes. When individuals are asked to estimate a media message's impact on others, research has shown that estimates vary according to who the "others" are (Cohen, Mutz, Price & Gunther, 1988; Meirick, 2005)–and in particular, whether the others are an ingroup or an outgroup (Duck, Hogg, & Terry, 1995).

In our study, we examine how voters believe polling reports will impact ingroup and outgroup members. Prior research has shown that citizens believe polls have a different degree of influence on political co-partisans and opponents (Hoffner & Rehkoff, 2011; Pan et al., 2005; Wei, Chia, & Lo, 2011) Our study differs in that we explore citizens' perceptions of the sorts of effects polling reports have on ingroup and outgroup members. In other words, rather than examine perceptions of *how much* polling reports influence specific others, we focus on perceptions of *how* polling reports influence specific others. Specifically, we ask individuals to

estimate how news stories about presidential poll results in battleground states impact voter turnout among competing partisans.

Battleground Polls in Presidential Elections

In the past three presidential elections, the amount of public opinion polling about forecasted presidential vote choice has exploded (Theiss-Morse, Wagner, Flanigan, & Zingale, 2018; Sides & Vavreck, 2014). Beyond national horserace polls, differences in the Electoral College and popular vote winner in 2000 (and again in 2016, though this occurred after our study was fielded), the rise of web-based surveys, robo-polls and market pressures have led to an increase in state polling of presidential races. State polling in so-called battleground states is especially newsworthy because of the winner-take-all method of electoral vote awarding in 48 of the 50 states (Shaw, 2008). As such, we focus our analyses on public opinion polls in battleground states–states in which the results are so hotly contested that a result with either candidate in the lead would not arouse suspicion in a typical research participant.

Drawing from previous research on the hostile media perception, we expect that individuals will perceive that stories about public opinion polls in a battleground state are biased against the individual's' preferred candidate. This perception should be amplified when the individual's preferred candidate performs worse than the opponent in a public opinion poll.

H1: The worse an article depicts a candidate's polling performance, the more bias voters will sense against that candidate.

Next, building upon research showing individuals expect distinct groups to behave differently in response to media exposure (Jensen & Hurley, 2005), we anticipate that voters will believe polling articles have unique effects on partisan groups. In particular, we test whether voters expect polling articles to have distinct effects on the voter turnout of their co-partisans (those

supporting their preferred candidate) and their political opponents (those supporting the non-preferred candidate).

H2: Voters will presume public opinion polls have differing effects on ingroup and outgroup members' decision to vote.

Additionally, we test a model to examine which factors might be helpful in determining the sorts of presumed behavior voters might expect in response to public opinion polls. For example, it could have been the case that Clinton voters, convinced at the time that she would win, may have seen their fellow supporters as complacent and thus generally less likely to vote–whereas Trump voters may have seen their fellow voters as likely to show up in support of the "underdog" or even to act as a counterbalanced to a perceived media bias in favor of Clinton (or, conversely, they may have seen their team as discouraged and thus less likely to show up).

Our model includes candidate preference to account for such possibilities. Additionally, the nature and direction of the presumed influence may hinge upon the slant of the story–that is, who is winning the poll. Therefore, we include polling result–which is our experimental condition– in the model. Finally, prior research points to an association between perceptions of media bias and perceptions of media influence: Sensing an article is influential tends to exacerbate perceived bias (Gunther & Schmitt, 2004); at the same time, perceived bias tends to impact the degree (Boukes, Boomgaarden, Moorman, & De Vreese, 2015; Cohen et al., 1988) and direction (Gunther, 1998; Mutz & Soss, 1997) of perceived influence. Studies regarding the relationship between HMP and presumed influence tend to link "perceived degree of bias" to "perceived degree of influence on others," whereas our study looks at perceived degree of bias and perceived *type* of influence on others. Still, we include perceived article bias as a predictor in

our model to examine if HMP helps explain the sorts of effects voters anticipate that polling reports will have on others.

RQ1: Are factors such as poll result, perception of bias, and candidate preference useful in predicting which presumed behavior voters anticipate?

Method

To test our hypotheses and provide evidence to speak to our research question, we conducted an online experiment using a sample of U.S. adults provided by Survey Sampling International (SSI) from Nov. 2-6, 2016, which was the week before the general election vote (Nov. 8, 2016). Respondents were registered U.S. voters who were part of SSI's large, diverse online panel. The present study focused on the 863 voters who indicated they planned to vote for either Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton (n =487) or Republican candidate Donald Trump (n =376). The sample is a non-probability sample, but it is diverse and generally reflects the demographics of Trump and Clinton voters (see Table 1).

[Table 1]

Our primary purpose in conducting the experiment was to test how partisans' assessments of media bias would be affected by the polling results reported in a news article. We created three versions of a Reuters news article, based off of real media reports, that reported the results of a new battleground state poll. The state-level polling results either indicated that Trump was slightly ahead, that Clinton was slightly ahead, or that the race was tied. The articles were short–around 250 words–and were crafted to look like screenshots from Reuters' website (Figure 1). The differences between the articles were the headline and battleground state ("Clinton and Trump tied in crucial Iowa," "Clinton trails Trump in crucial North Carolina" or "Trump trails Clinton in crucial Ohio"), the poll results (race is tied, Clinton ahead by 5%, Trump ahead by

5%), and interchanging the partisanship of the quoted sources depending on how the race was depicted.

[Figure 1]

Respondents were randomly assigned to read one of the three versions of the stimulus article. After reading the article, the perceived effect of the article was gauged by asking respondents, "Do you think articles like the one you just read make Trump supporters more likely to vote, less likely to vote, or do you think they don't affect Trump supporters' decision to vote?" Respondents could choose only one of these three categorical answers. Respondents were asked the same question about Clinton voters. These items were presented in a random order, such that some respondents first predicted the effect of the article on Trump supporters and some first predicted the effect on Clinton supporters. These items were re-coded into variables representing presumed article effect on ingroup members (i.e., Trump voters' predictions about other Trump voters, Clinton voters' predictions about other Clinton voters) and presumed article effect on outgroup members. To measure perceptions of article bias against the candidates, respondents were asked, "Would you say the article was biased against [preferred candidate]?" Answers ranged from 0 (*not at all biased against [preferred candidate]*) to 4 (*very biased against [preferred candidate]*).

Results

We first tested whether voters experienced HMP after reading the polling story. To do so, we performed a one-sample *t* test comparing respondents' perceptions of article bias to the value representing no perceived bias (zero). Over half of both Trump (54%) and Clinton (52%) voters reported seeing at least some bias against their candidate. As expected, perceptions of bias for both Clinton ($M = 1.18$, $SD = 1.38$) and Trump voters ($M = 1.24$, $SD = 1.40$) were significantly

different from zero; Clinton voters = $t(485) = 18.84$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.86$; Trump voters = $t(371) = 17.08$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.89$. Across article conditions, voters from both sides of the aisle tended to regard the battleground state polling story as biased against their candidate.

Next, we focused on how the polling results presented in the article influenced perceptions of bias. We predicted that perceived bias would be lowest in the condition where a respondent's preferred candidate is ahead, higher when the race is depicted as tied, and highest when a respondent's preferred candidate is behind. To test this hypothesis, we performed a 2 (preferred candidate: Trump or Clinton) x 3 (polling story: candidate winning, losing, tied) ANOVA.

There was a main effect for polling article condition, $F(2, 852) = 28.33$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_{partial} = .06$, supporting H1. As Figure 2 illustrates, voters saw the most bias when they read an article that featured a poll where their candidate was losing, a bit less bias when the poll indicated the race was tied, and the least amount of bias when the article highlighted a poll that showed their candidate ahead. There was no main effect for candidate preference $F(1, 852) = 0.13$, $p = .718$, $\eta^2_{partial} = .00$, meaning, Trump and Clinton voters perceived roughly the same amount of bias against their respective candidates. The interaction term was also not significant $F(2, 852) = 1.75$, $p = .175$, $\eta^2_{partial} = .004$, showing that Trump and Clinton voters' perceptions of bias fluctuated similarly across article conditions. There is, however, one notable difference in how Trump and Clinton voters reacted to the polling articles. As can be seen in Figure 2, Clinton voters in the "candidate winning" condition saw about as much bias as their political co-partisans in the "race is tied" condition. Simple effects analyses show that, among Clinton voters, there was not a significant difference in perceived bias between her supporters who read an article where she was depicted as winning ($M = 0.92$, $SD = 1.24$) and those who read a story where the

poll said the race was tied (M = 1.04, SD = 1.35). Perceptions of bias against her were significantly heightened only in the condition where Clinton was depicted as losing (M = 1.56, SD = 1.46). Among Trump voters, perceptions of bias followed the expected pattern: His supporters saw the least amount of bias against him when he was said to be winning (M = 0.72, SD = 1.17), a little more bias when the race was thought to be tied (M = 1.16, SD = 1.37), and the greatest amount of bias when the story indicated Trump was behind (M = 1.76, SD = 1.42).

[Figure 2]

Presumed Influence of Article on Voting Behavior

Ingroup. We next explored which factors helped predict how voters believed the article would affect their ingroup members. To do so, we performed multinomial regression with the three presumed behavior options (article would have no effect/make ingroup members more likely to vote/make ingroup members less likely to vote) as the dependent variable and candidate preference (Clinton or Trump), article condition (candidate winning, losing, tied), and HMP as the primary predictor variables. Age, gender, race (white or non-white), and education level were added as controls. Addition of the predictors to a model that contained only the intercept significantly improved the fit between model and data, χ^2 (16) = 104.63, $p < .001$, Nagelkerke pseudo R^2 = .14. Significant, unique contributions were made by education, χ^2 (2) = 6.65, $p < .05$, gender, χ^2 (2) = 9.46, $p < .01$ HMP, χ^2 (2) = 31.70, $p < .001$, and article condition, χ^2 (4) = 18.68, $p < .01$. The answer to our research question about whether these variables help predict presumed behavior appears to be yes: knowing which article a respondent read and his or her perception of whether it was biased–helps predict what sort of affect that respondent believes an article would have on ingroup others.

The parameter estimates in Table 2 show how these variables helped predict whether a respondent thought the polling article would have no effect or that it would make their ingroup members more or less likely to vote. We will first address the top portion of Table 2, which compares the response category "article will have no effect on ingroup members" to "article will make ingroup members less likely to vote." First, it is important to note that few respondents (7%) believed the article would discourage their ingroup members from voting. Men were more likely than women to choose this option over "no effect," Wald $\chi^2(1) = 7.50$, $p < .01$, as were respondents with higher level of education, Wald $\chi^2(1) = 6.31$, $p < .05$. The perceived hostile bias of the article also significantly predicted whether voters thought the article would make their co-partisans less likely to vote or would have no effect, Wald $\chi^2(1) = 24.49$, $p < .001$, with higher levels of HMP making it more likely that respondents presume a suppression effect on their ingroup. Additionally, compared to those who read an article where the race was depicted as tied, those reading an article where their candidate was winning were more likely to predict a suppression effect, Wald $\chi^2(1) = 6.16$, $p < .01$.

Moving to the lower half of Table 2, the predictors are less helpful in determining whether a respondent believed the article would have no effect on ingroup members (36% of respondents predicted "no effect") or whether they believed the article would make ingroup members more likely to vote (56% of respondents predicted such an effect). Compared to those who saw an article depicting the race as tied, those who saw an article depicting their candidate as trailing in the polls were more likely to believe the article would encourage their ingroup members to vote, Wald $\chi^2(1) = 8.20$, $p < .01$. Indeed, 40% of those who predicted the article would increase voting likelihood among their co-partisans had viewed polling information that showed their candidate behind.

Central to this investigation, the polling information within an article influenced how respondents anticipated ingroup members would react to a news article. Respondents were more likely to assume the article would boost ingroup turnout when the article they read featured an undesirable polling outcome (candidate trailing) rather than a neutral one (race is tied). In other words, respondents believed bad news would be a motivating factor. On the other hand, voters were more likely to predict depressed ingroup turnout when they were assigned to read an article where their candidate was winning and in situations where they believed the article was unfavorably biased against their candidate.

Outgroup. We next repeated the analysis with presumed behavior of outgroup members as the dependent variable. Again, addition of the predictors to a model that contained only the intercept significantly improved the fit between model and data, $\chi^2(12) = 78.99$, $p < .001$, Nagelkerke pseudo $R^2 = .10$. Significant, unique contributions were made by age, $\chi^2(2) = 12.39$, $p < .01$, gender, $\chi^2(2) = 11.33$, $p < .01$, and HMP, $\chi^2(2) = 16.46$, $p < .001$. As can be seen in the top portion of Table 3, men were more likely than women to predict a suppression effect over "no effect," Wald $\chi^2(1) = 7.28$, $p < .01$, and younger voters were slightly less likely to do so, Wald $\chi^2(1) = 11.06$, $p < .001$. The perceived hostile bias of the article also significantly predicted whether voters thought the article would make their opponents less likely to vote, Wald $\chi^2(1) = 15.94$, $p < .001$, with higher levels of HMP making it more likely that respondents presume a suppression effect on their outgroup. This mirrors the association between HMP and presumed behavior observed in the ingroup model: Higher levels of HMP were associated with the belief that news about battleground polls would have a suppressor effect. In other words, given the choice between believing an article will have no effect on turnout or will have a negative effect on turnout, those who experience HMP are more likely to choose the latter.

Unlike what we observed in the model predicting presumed behavior for ingroup members, knowing which article a respondent saw was not helpful in predicting how they believed outgroup members would react. Regardless of whether a voter viewed a poll showing their candidate winning, losing, or tied, they were still most likely to believe the article would have no effect on outgroup members. In fact, nearly half of respondents said the article they read would have no effect on outgroup others, whereas 32% said it would encourage outgroup voting and 20% said it would discourage outgroup voting. At first glance, these predictions look markedly different from how respondents believed the articles would impact ingroup members. Therefore, the next analysis tests whether voters believed battleground polls would have differing effects on ingroup and outgroup members.

Presumed Behavior of Ingroup Versus Outgroup

Our second hypothesis predicted that voters will believe news articles about battleground polls impact their ingroup and outgroup differently. To test whether voters perceived different effects when evaluating the ingroup or the outgroup, we tested the symmetry of the categorical responses. Specifically, we conducted a Bowker-McNemar test, which is appropriate for comparing response proportions across matched-pair items with multi-categorical response options. The distribution of predicted effects for the in-group differs significantly from the distribution of predicted effects for the out-group, $\chi^2(3) = 123.77$, $p < .001$. In other words, voters believed the article would affect their ingroup and outgroup in different ways.

[Figure 3]

The pattern of responses across conditions was consistent and can be seen in Figure 3. Voters tended to say the article would motivate their ingroup members to vote, but when it came to estimating the article's effects on outgroup members, the most popular answer was that it

would have no effect. And while voters seldom said the article would make others less likely to vote, they did so twice as often when evaluating the effect on the out-group.

Discussion

Beyond simply informing a news audience about who is winning and who is losing in an election season, news reports about public opinion polls affect perceptions of media bias and perceptions about how other readers will react to polling reports. The results of this experiment highlight two important assessments that audiences make about news articles reporting election polls. First, partisans are likely to perceive bias against their candidate in straight news reports of poll results presented by a neutral source. Perceptions of article bias were alleviated when the poll results were favorable to respondents' preferred candidate and amplified when polling showed their candidate trailing. Second, when asked to estimate the effect the article might have on ingroup and outgroup members' decisions to vote, respondents tended to believe that the article they read would encourage ingroup voting but would either have a neutral or discouraging effect on outgroup voting.

Bad News Polls and Perceived Bias. Voters generally believed the articles they read deviated from neutral and into unfavorable territory. Given a long history of findings on HMP, this finding is unsurprsing. Indeed, a contentious election undoubtedly provided a strong sense of involvement among opposing partisans–the very context in which HMP is typically observed. What stands out in our experiment is that these perceptions of bias fluctuated in a predictable pattern as the polling outcome changed. A majority (53%) of our respondents assigned the bias label to a plain report describing new polling results, but they were more likely to do so after seeing a poll showing their candidate losing (with 69% reporting bias) compared to when they saw a poll showing their candidate tied or winning (with 44% reporting bias).

It is concerning that the composition of the polling results–something clearly beyond the control of journalists–altered assessments of the news story itself. That audiences are willing to assign the description "biased" to basic polling reports is concerning enough, but that these accusations of bias can be amplified when a preferred candidate holds an unfavorable polling position is especially problematic for journalists. Newsworthy information is often inherently "bad" for one candidate, and through the simple act of relaying that information, the present results show that audiences may believe the story itself is biased. It may be the case that citizens believe news outlets are exhibiting a selection bias (see Groeling, 2008). In other words, audiences could believe the bias stems from reporting the results in the first place–in the eyes of the public, "bad news" may have less news value.

But these findings suggest many members of the public are not untangling the information in the news from the vessel that delivers that information to the public. The descriptor "biased"–once a serious accusation–seems to be synonymous with "the delivery of information that reflects poorly on my ingroup." This is precisely why we asked respondents to assess the article for bias, rather than ask them to indicate whether the article was favorable to a particular candidate. Had we asked respondents to assess whether the article favored one candidate or another–a common technique for measuring HMP–the present results could be interpreted as voters recognizing that polling results do favor one candidate or another. By asking readers to assess the for bias, a term that implies an unfairness in the way the polling results were reported, the results suggest the news product is paying a price for the poll results. Journalists get a chilling message here: Straight news reporting about polls, even close polls, are perceived as part of biased stories told by a media industry experiencing a steep decline in trust and stature in the American mind.

Though both Trump and Clinton voters were equally likely to sense bias in our polling stories, it would be interesting to explore whether such perceptions are amplified among either group post-election. After taking office, Trump continued his public battle with both news media and polls, at one point claiming "negative polls are fake news" (Trump, 2017). It is possible that his supporters may internalize those beliefs, giving them reason to be more suspicious of both polls and the media outlets that report on them. On the other side of the aisle, it would be reasonable to expect Clinton voters to have lost confidence in polling after she lost an election she was widely projected to win.

Perceived Effect of Polling Reports. With few exceptions, researchers investigating the perceived influence of polls have asked respondents to assess "how much influence" polls have on themselves or others. Our findings demonstrate that it is important to investigate not just the degree of perceived influence, but the specific changes that these messages are thought to bring about. *How* do voters believe poll reports affect others? And do those perceived effects differ depending on who those others are?

Our results show that voters tend to think horserace polling news will spur their fellow supporters to vote. Of the three options presented to respondents, this was the most positive effect respondents could have chosen. We might interpret this as voters being optimistic about how their political co-partisans respond to polls showing a tight race. On the other hand, voters tended to predict battleground polling articles would not impact the outgroup's voting behavior, with almost half of respondents saying the polling article would have "no effect" on their political adversaries' decision to vote. This seemingly contradicts research that has found that people typically believe others are influenced by polls (Mutz, 1992) and by media messages (Mutz, 1989); however, in light of the options offered to respondents, perceiving no influence on

the outgroup was to believe that group would fail to experience a positive effect. In other words, while voters thought their own group would be savvy enough to find motivation from horserace polls, they did not believe their political opponents would do the same.

Consistent with ingroup bias, when there was a positive effect offered, voters assumed their ingroup was more likely than the outgroup to experience it. Had we simply asked respondents to assess "how much influence" the articles had on others, we would have missed the ways in which voters believe polling articles impact ingroup and outgroup voter turnout. When examining how audiences believe mass media messages influence other people, it is important for researchers to specify–influence *how* and influence *whom*?

We also examined which factors help predict presumed article effects. We discovered that candidate choice did not have an impact on presumed article influence, i.e., Trump and Clinton voters did not differ from one another in how they believed the articles would impact others' voting behavior. We found that experimental condition did impact presumed voting behavior, but only for ingroup members. Specifically, respondents were more likely to believe an article would increase turnout amongst their ingroup when they were exposed to polling information that showed their candidate behind; respondents were more likely to predict depressed ingroup turnout when they were assigned to read an article showing their candidate ahead. We are hesitant to put much stock in the latter finding because, regardless of which article they read, few respondents thought the article would discourage ingroup turnout.

The former finding is more interesting, demonstrating voters' belief that a "bad news" poll–at least in a tight race–will motivate co-partisans. Whereas 51% of those in the *candidate winning* condition and 54% in the *candidates tied* condition thought the article would increase ingroup turnout, 64% thought so when they saw a poll showing their candidate behind. Whether

polls showing a candidate slightly behind actually increase turnout for the trailing candidate is a question beyond the scope of this study, but what we can say is that voters believe that their team is more likely to turn out after seeing a polling news article showing their candidate behind.

One final result to note is the relationship between the perception that an article is biased and the presumption that the article could influence others' voting behavior, i.e., the relationship between HMP and presumed media influence. There was some evidence that experiencing HMP was related to which effect respondents anticipated the article might have on others. Specifically, higher levels of HMP increased the likelihood that voters believed the article would depress turnout among their ingroup and outgroup. However, it would be incorrect to interpret this result as HMP *causing* voters to anticipate certain types of media effects on others. The exact nature of the relationship between perceptions of media bias and perceptions of media influence is unclear, but it is quite possible that their association is symbiotic. Indeed, a key component of perceived media bias research is that bias perceptions are amplified when a message is thought to be influential–suggesting presumed influence affects HMP; meanwhile, citizens' predictions about how media impact others tend to fluctuate according to how they perceive the slant, or bias, of news–suggesting HMP affects perceptions of media influence. It may be the case that the two perceptions enhance one another and "produce a joint effect" (Wei, Chia, & Lo, 2011, p. 170) or that the two perceptions "not only [have] an interactive relationship but also … may occur at the same point in time," (Barnidge & Rojas, 2014, p. 150). Our design does not allow us to untangle the two media perceptions. In our data, it may be the case that another factor contributes to both perceptions of media bias and perceptions of how that media impacts others. For example, frustrated or pessimistic voters could be especially prone to hostile bias perceptions and particularly likely to assume that political engagement among the public is waning.

As with any research design, our data has limitations that should filter the interpretation of our results. First and foremost, our survey was distributed the week before Election Day. It is possible that the intensity of HMP and the perceived effect on ingroup and outgroup members was driven by the increased salience of the election. It is possible that team-based political group centrism is less influential during different points during the campaign, peaking around key junctures like conventions, debates, and, most importantly, the election day itself. Tapping into voters' perceptions just before they go to the polls has immense value, but it may come at the cost of a more broadly generalizable result. We also relied on single-item measures for HMP and presumed behavior, a decision that provided clarity for our research interests (see previous discussion on why traditional HMP measures would have been problematic), but also increases the chance of measurement error. Finally, while we made every effort to ensure our stimuli resembled traditional battleground poll news reports, we had to account for the fact that respondents had access to (and were likely exposed to) real, recent polls from battleground states. As such, we chose to pair states with polls that reflected the true nature of the race at that time (e.g., race tied in Iowa, Clinton leading in Ohio). The article itself heavily reinforced the cues we were interested in, but it is possible, however unlikely, that participants think about and respond to Ohio poll results differently than North Carolina, for example. We should also note that our "tied" condition featured a poll showing a 44-42 race in Clinton's favor. Though we explicitly highlight the "tied" nature of the race in the headline and emphasize in the lead that the results are within the margin of error, voters may have seen this poll result as slightly advantageous to Clinton.

Future research might probe "bias" as a descriptor. Has the term become synonymous with undesirable information? Is bias still considered a serious press infraction, or, to the public,

has bias become so ubiquitous that neutrality is no longer expected? If it is the case that partisans simply expect bias in today's news and public opinion polls, why is it that such perceptions are not constant, but rather, ebb and flow with even slight variations in polling numbers? Future research could include follow-up items that allow respondents to explain their assessments of bias. Doing so may not reveal how audiences come to the conclusion that news is biased–indeed, citizens are likely unaware of or unwilling to acknowledge the extent to which partisanship colors their perceptions of news–but capturing how audiences understand their own evaluations of bias could shed light on potential ways to discourage audiences from conflating bad news with those who deliver it.

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