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"*Your house won't be yours anymore!*" Effects of Misinformation, News Use, and Media Trust on Chile's Constitutional Referendum

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Abstract

News consumption and voting behavior are interlinked and particularly important in elections where traditional political cleavages are not easily applicable. This relationship becomes more complex and uncertain in contexts of low trust in the news media and high levels of misinformation circulating in different news ecosystems. In this study, we test an indirect path between differentiated news media consumption and voting choices, mediated by belief in misinformation, and moderated by news media trust. Our data come from a two-wave panel survey of 1,332 respondents, conducted in Chile before and after the 2022 Constitutional Referendum, a political event that captured international attention after a constitutional proposal was rejected in a process initiated with high public support. Our analyses found that news media consumption significantly affected voting preferences in the referendum, not only indirectly through the acceptance of misinformation, but also directly, suggesting that news organizations might act, intentionally or not, as soundboards of misinformation. These findings suggest that countries with enough press freedom to rely on the

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news media to be informed but also a high concentration of ownership, topics, and angles covered, might become fertile soil for misinformation to spread in the form of professional news coverage, instead of fabricated, easy-to-spot fake pieces circulating in dubious websites or on social media.

Keywords
news use, misinformation, voting choices, news trust, Chile

Questions about the relationship between news consumption and voting behavior are long-standing in political communication research. The underlying assumption is that the news media play a significant role in shaping peoples' opinions and behaviors in the political realm, particularly in electoral times (de Vreese and Boomgaarden 2006; Prior 2005; Zaller 1992). Increasingly, however, the attention of the field has shifted toward questions about misinformation regarding political issues, amid concerns about the harmful effects that the spread of falsehood may have on people's behaviors and attitudes, and ultimately, on democracy (Bennett and Livingston 2018; Freelon and Wells 2020; Pfetsch 2018). Recent research has linked misinformation exposure to political behavior (Green et al. 2022) and voting decisions (Cantarella et al. 2023; Gunther et al. 2019; Jolley et al. 2022; Zimmermann and Kohring 2020), providing empirical grounds for concerns about the distorting effects that the spread of nonfactual information may cause. In this context, how people get informed about an election becomes a relevant question, and the literature shows consistent results pointing toward social media platforms as spaces where political misinformation spread (Muhammed and Mathew 2022; Valenzuela et al. 2019) impacting people's beliefs (Xiao et al. 2021), contrary to professionally produced news outlets (Altay et al. 2024).

By integrating the research lines briefly described above, we test a mediated-moderated model, probing whether exposure to different types of news media precedes belief in misinformation, which in turn relates to how people voted in the 2022 Chile's Constitutional Referendum. Additionally, and based on the notion that those who express distrust in traditional news media will be more likely to accept misinformation as true (Hameleers et al. 2022; Zimmermann and Kohring 2020), we test news media trust as a moderating variable, theorizing that the effect of consuming different news media on belief in misinformation will be contingent upon news media trust. To the best of our knowledge, this is one of few attempts to discriminate how different types of news media use relate to belief in misinformation, news media trust, and voting choices in an electoral context. Additionally, and considering that most research on this area has flourished ever since the U.S. presidential election in 2016, this study contributes to better understanding how misinformation might affect voters and democracies in contexts other than the Global North.

In September 2022, 62 percent of Chileans rejected the proposal to replace Pinochet's constitution. For some, the text was rejected because it was confusing,

extreme, and based on a process dominated by identity politics (Alemán and Navia 2023). Conversely, others blamed fearmongering, biased media coverage, and disinformation campaigns that flooded social media in the months before the referendum for the result (Carrasco 2022; Piscopo and Siavelis 2023). This political process drew international attention, and while news operations like The Guardian warned about the misinformation surrounding the referendum a week before the vote (Bartlett 2022), others like The Wall Street Journal editorialized with a piece titled "Chile Saves Its Democracy" the day after the referendum, with no mentions to the misinformation problem (WSJ 2022). The "reject" vote in the referendum could certainly be discussed and analyzed from multiple perspectives. However, the argument about the relationship between biased media coverage, misinformation, and the failure of the constitutional process has repeatedly surfaced ever since, echoing concerns raised in contexts such as the 2016 Presidential election in theUnited States, and the Brexit vote in the United Kingdom (Rose 2017).

Our study put this controversy to a test by relying on a two-wave panel survey of 1,332 respondents, in which participants reported their news consumption habits and voting preferences, before and after the vote. Our findings support the idea that different patterns of news media consumption lead to different outcomes in terms of belief in misinformation and do relate to voting preferences in the referendum. They also lend empirical support to media critics and open some questions about the role of traditional news media in a contested political scenario.

The Case: 2022 Chile's Constitutional Referendum

September 4, 2022, was the day in which a progressive constitutional proposal, drafted by a 155-member convention, was decisively rejected by 62 percent of Chileans at the polls. The outcome was not only a failed attempt to replace the current 1980 Constitution—an authoritarian-era text implemented under dictator Augusto Pinochet—but the result of a drastic public opinion reversal about a process initiated a little over a year earlier with high public support (Alemán and Navia 2023; Piscopo and Siavelis 2023).

The constitutional process was the political response to an unprecedented social uprising in Chile in October 2019—the outcome of deep dissatisfaction with political and economic conditions in the country (Peña and Silva 2022; Somma et al. 2021). Massive protests became an institutional challenge for a country considered one of the most stable democracies in the region (Gonzalez and Le Foulon 2020; Sehnbruch and Siavelis 2014). It was also a tough test for the country's political and media institutions, both of which became targets of public criticism (Lazcano-Peña et al. 2021; Orchard and Fergnani 2023). The Chilean news media were widely criticized—and even antagonized—by audiences because of how they covered the protests (Grassau et al. 2019; Proust and Saldaña 2022), a criticism expressed in a sharp decrease in news media trust and an increase in social media use for news (Newman et al. 2020).

The Chilean news media are usually portrayed as highly concentrated, as two companies own most of the print press circulating in the country (Núñez-Mussa 2021).

They are also seen as associated with conservative standpoints (Gronemeyer and Porath 2015) with a worrisome lack of ideological diversity (Bahamonde et al. 2018; Saldaña 2019). The political cycle initiated by the protests, and followed by the constitutional process, caused changes in the news media landscape, especially in the audiences' news consumption habits, who favored alternative media to access different perspectives on current political events (Luna et al. 2022). Additionally, the information environment grew increasingly polarizing during the constitutional process, while circulating misinformation, smear campaigns against the constitutional convention, and biased media coverage became a social and political concern (Piscopo and Siavelis 2023).

Most of the misinformation circulating before and during the 2022 constitutional referendum aimed to discredit the process and those involved (Bartlett 2022), and included manipulated or dubious interpretations of the constitutional proposal. Among the most controversial issues used as ammunition for misinformation campaigns were the end of property rights over houses and retirement funds—a measure allegedly included in the constitutional text—as well as the threat to national identity and territorial unity posed by an extension of rights to indigenous populations (Orchard et al. 2023; Piscopo and Siavelis 2023). These topics became the subject of disparate interpretations and became defining points for a gradually deteriorating public sentiment toward the constitutional process (CEP 2022).

For instance, the idea that "your house won't be yours anymore" was aired on radio stations, promoted on YouTube channels, and distributed as propaganda on public roads (Herrera et al. 2022). Similarly, some interpreted the inclusion of abortion rights as a woman's right to terminate her pregnancy up to nine months pregnant—a claim that was labeled as misleading by Chilean fact-checker *FastCheck* (Osorio, 2022). Contrary to expectations, the news media amplified this kind of content. The Chilean newspaper with the largest circulation in the country, *Las Últimas Noticias*, published an interview with a constitutional convention member with the quote "workers will no longer own their retirement savings" in the cover. Such cover circulated widely on social media, where like-minded politicians shared photographs of themselves holding the newspaper (Chávez and Lagos 2022). As the constitutional proposal did not include the government's right to seize retirement savings, this quote was not a factual assertion but a speculation of what could happen if the proposal was approved. Many saw this cover as a turning point (Troncoso 2002)—one where a legacy news organization provided space for dubious interpretation, rumors, or even political science fiction in the form of factual information.

Several fact-checking initiatives emerged to disprove misleading content on social media (Zúñiga 2022), and even Chile's Electoral Service established an official repository of content labeled as misleading by professional fact-checkers (Chávez and Lagos 2022). Studies trying to explain the referendum results have established that some controversial topics about which misinformation circulated prominently—property rights, indigenous rights, and reproductive rights—were among those that weigh the most to explain voters' decisions (Bargsted and González 2022), ultimately leading to the rejection of the proposal.

The Elusive Link Between Misinformation and Voting Choice

The potential of misinformation to damage political processes has become an increasing global concern, usually associated with social media use (Lazer et al. 2018; Muhammed and Mathew 2022). This concern is justified on classic models of voting behavior, which state that the public makes electoral decisions based not only on predispositions—such as ideological affinities or political preferences—but also on information coming from political actors, political campaigns, and the news media (Zaller 1992).

While the literature provides a variety of terms to address inaccurate facts in the political arena—such as disinformation, fake news, or misperceptions (Wardle and Derakhshan 2017)—in this study, we use the concept of misinformation, defined by Vraga and Bode (2020: 3) as "information considered incorrect based on the best available evidence." Misinformation may originate from rumors, conspiracies, or content characterized by inaccuracy, uncertainty, vagueness, or ambiguity (Valenzuela et al. 2022). Such incorrect information circulates and may be accepted as true, regardless of the intentionality behind those amplifying false claims as factual (Southwell 2018). Additionally, misinformation may induce people to misperceptions, that is "the belief in facts that can be shown to be false" (Nyhan 2020: 220–221).

Ever since the Brexit referendum and the 2016 U.S. election, there has been growing concern about the potential consequences of misinformation in political outcomes (Gaber and Fisher 2022; Rose 2017). During these two electoral events, misinformation was widely shared, disproportionately favoring one option of the ballot (Allcott and Gentzkow 2017), and triggering questions about whether exposure to misleading facts changed the results of those elections. The relationship between exposure to misinformation and political behavior has been an elusive one (Lazer et al. 2018), mostly because of the potential endogeneity in the relationship between exposure and acceptance of one-sided political misinformation and preexisting political attitudes. People spend more time on attitude-consistent political messages (Knobloch-Westerwick et al. 2019) and preexisting political attitudes heavily shape how people react to misinformation (Allcott and Gentzkow 2017; Thorson 2016). Nonetheless, research has provided empirical evidence linking exposure to misinformation to political behavior. For example, Craig and Gainous (2024) show that exposure to false allegations about voter fraud made people more likely to support a postponement of the U.S. 2020 election, whereas Green et al. (2022) found that believing in these allegations was significantly associated to voter turnout in state-level elections. Using data from the United Kingdom, Jolley et al. (2022) show that believing misinformation spread during the Brexit referendum was a strong predictor of voting Leave (as opposed to Remain), even controlling for political orientation. In an Italian context, Cantarella et al. (2023) show a causal effect between exposure to false information and support for populist parties, suggesting that such exposure could explain at least part of the populist vote (nonetheless explained mostly by self-selection). Yet, the nature and strength of the relationship between misinformation and behavior remain a contentious issue (Adams et al. 2023; Curini and Pizzimenti 2020).

Although studies have demonstrated belief in misinformation to be related to political behavior, it is widely accepted that voting decisions are informed by a variety of attitudes and predispositions. As such, and given the potential endogeneity in the relationship between information consumption and vote, it remains an empirical challenge to establish whether the circulation of misinformation might change the outcome of electoral processes (Allcott and Gentzkow 2017).

It is noteworthy that contingent information about the issues to be voted on becomes more relevant in some electoral events than in others (Renwick 2017; Zaller 1992). Referendums involving complex, new, or previously not discussed political issues are, indeed, less predictable than elections where political parties take well-known and anticipated opposite positions, turning elements such as news media coverage or electoral campaigns more relevant for their electoral outcome (Leduc 2022). Arguably, this was the case during Chile's constitutional process, in which voters were asked to approve or reject an extensive, technical text, with potential long-term consequences for multiple spheres of public and private life such as an entirely new constitution. The complexity of the vote increased in a polarized and chaotic information environment that went from exaggeration and hyperbole to outright disinformation campaigns (Piscopo and Siavelis 2023), presenting the average citizen with the challenge of identifying reliable information sources to make an informed decision. Given that most of the misinformation circulating during the constitutional process aimed to delegitimize the process and discredit the draft of the new constitution (Bartlett 2022), we expect those who believed political false claims spread during the process to be less likely to approve the final draft of the new constitution. Therefore, we hypothesize:

H1. Those who believe in false/imprecise information about the constitutional process will be more likely to reject the constitutional proposal (a). Conversely, those who do not believe in false/imprecise information about the constitutional process will be more likely to approve the constitutional proposal (b).

News Use and Belief in Misinformation

It has been generally accepted that news consumption is positively associated with desirable civic behaviors. People learn about politics through the news (de Vreese and Boomgaarden 2006; Prior 2005; Zaller 1992), and those who show higher engagement with news show higher political knowledge (Lee and Yang 2014), political interest (Livingstone and Markham 2008), and voter turnout (Fraile and Iyengar 2014; Sørensen 2016), which aligns with the normative duties attributed to the news media in a democracy.

The increase in the use of social media to access political information raised; however, a series of questions about the relationship between news use and knowledge about politics. The positive effect of traditional news consumption on political learning has been found not guaranteed when political information is acquired from social

media (Lee and Yang 2014; Shehata and Strömback 2021), where not verified, and sometimes openly false information, circulates without professional gatekeeping. Social media are generally regarded as a less reliable information source, which has been backed up by empirical findings that positively associate social media news use with the spread of misinformation (Valenzuela et al. 2019), as well as with belief in misinformation and conspiracy theories (Su 2021, Xiao et al. 2021).

As a result, contemporary high-choice information environments have triggered multiple concerns about whether such informative abundance benefits or hinders opportunities for knowledge and participation in political life, especially in contexts where facts become either disputed or relativized, and polarized information is on demand, potentially facilitating the spread of misinformation in political processes (Hameleers and Van der Meer 2020; Van Aelst et al. 2017).

In contrast, traditional media outlets are organizations expected to provide verified information using professional standards, and therefore expected to counteract the spread of misinformation, at least based on normative grounds. Altay et al. (2024) attempted to measure such expectation and found that professionally produced news helps to increase people's awareness of false claims without strengthening false beliefs acquisition, therefore potentially increasing resilience against misinformation (Altay et al. 2024). In the same vein, Jamieson and Albarracin (2020) discovered through a national survey conducted in the United States that exposure to news from major legacy news organizations such as NBC News or The New York Times was correlated with more accurate beliefs about the SARS-CoV-2.

Despite the latter, the role of legacy media in the spread of misinformation is not entirely settled. Some news media outlets have been found to operate as soundboards for misleading and overtly false information (Jamieson and Albarracin 2020; Phillips 2018), or even to play an active role in the spread of misinformation (Tsfati et al. 2020), suggesting that the relationship between misinformation belief and traditional news media might be best understood as an empirical question.

Based on normative grounds, we would expect that those who get their news from professional news organizations, be those online or offline, will be better equipped to identify false information and will not believe in false claims about the constitutional process. But based on the concerns about the specific role played by professional news outlets in amplifying imprecise information, we ask:

RQ1: How is belief in misinformation related to traditional news media consumption in the context of Chile's constitutional process?

At the same time, and in line with the literature, we hypothesize that consuming news from nonprofessional, unverified sources on social media will increase the likelihood of voters to believe in misinformation. Thus:

H2: Belief in misinformation will be higher for voters who get their news from social media.

News Trust as a Moderating Variable

The sustained decline in trust in the media observed globally in recent years has given rise to a stream of research that seeks to understand why people deem the media and the news as unreliable (Newman et al. 2022). Hanitzsch et al. (2018: 5) suggest that news media trust is "the willingness of the audience to be vulnerable to news content based on the expectation that the media will perform in a satisfactory manner." By establishing trust in news media, audiences can rely on the media's performance to provide them with accurate and valuable news content. When individuals trust reputable news media outlets, they should be exposed to verified and reliable information (Acerbi et al. 2022), whereas trusting unverified sources may lead to a greater belief in misleading information or conspiracy theories (Xiao et al. 2021).

The literature regards the relationship between news trust and misinformation as a reciprocal one (Tay et al. 2024), since misinformation availability may undermine the credibility of authentic news sources (Ognyanova et al. 2020; Stubenvoll et al. 2021, Wasserman and Madrid-Morales 2019), potentially encouraging audiences to find alternative venues for information. As could be expected, individuals who express trust in the media are significantly more likely to choose traditional news sources, whereas those who distrust the media tend to favor alternative outlets (Tsfati and Peri 2006), including social media platforms, where misinformation is more prevalent (Anspach and Carlson 2020).

Meanwhile, empirical works have shown a negative association between trusting the media and accepting misinformation. Humprecht et al. (2020) show that being skeptical of the news media may, indeed, lead to increased exposure to dubious content, while trusting the media, especially traditional media, may act as a defense against misinformation. Zimmermann and Kohring (2020) demonstrate that reduced levels of trust in the news media correlate with a heightened belief in disinformation in Germany. Additionally, comparative studies show that news media trust emerges as an "intangible resource" (Rodríguez-Pérez and Canel 2023) that explains differences in resistance to misinformation across countries (Humprecht et al. 2020). Recent research conducted on misinformation and media trust in Chile by Valenzuela et al. (2022) show inconclusive results about the reinforcing nature of the relationship between the two variables, suggesting that although lower trust in the media appear to be related to higher levels of misinformation—a finding consistent with the study by Hameleers et al. (2022)—higher trust in the media does not shield people against misinformation.

Relevant to our argument, there is also evidence that media trust can moderate the relationship between news consumption and social and political behaviors (Fawzi et al. 2021). In other words, the extent to which people trust the media might modify the relationship between their news use and attitudes, opinions, and behaviors. For instance, previous research shows that agenda-setting effects vary depending on whether people trust the media (Tsfati 2003). Individuals who trust more are more likely to accept media messages and, therefore, form their opinions and attitudes according to the representations depicted in the news (Ladd 2012; Wise and

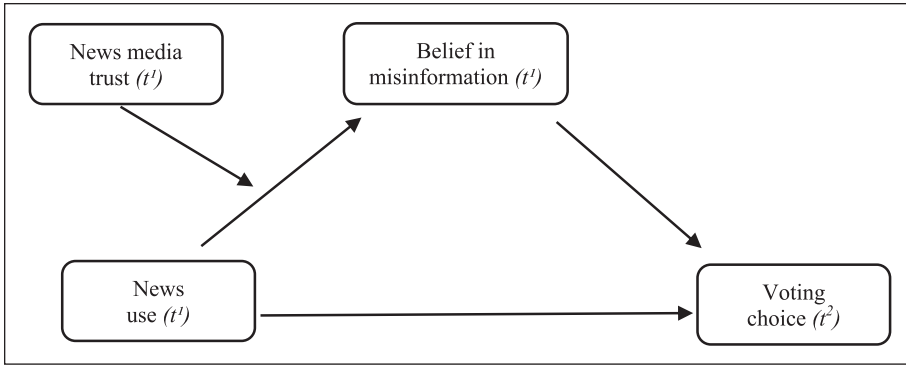

Figure 1. Mediated-moderated model of news use, news media trust, belief in misinformation, and voting choice.

McLaughlin 2016). Conversely, individuals who distrust the media tend to evaluate politics consistently with their political ideology (Ladd 2012).

Building on this research, we theorize that news media trust can operate as a moderator of the relationship between news use and belief in misinformation. Consequently:

> *H3: The relationship between news use and belief in misinformation, in any platform, will be contingent upon news trust. Therefore, individuals who trust more will tend to believe less in misinformation.*

In summary, this study examines whether news consumption, together with distrust in the news media, is related to the acceptance of false claims about the constitutional process in Chile, which in turn might be related to rejecting the new constitution during the 2022 Chile referendum. Thus, we test a mediated-moderated model of news consumption, news media trust, misinformation, and voting choice. Figure 1 illustrates the model proposed in this study.

Methods

This study relies on a two-wave online panel survey conducted in Chile right before and right after the constitutional referendum, held on September 4, 2022. The first wave (*t*1) was conducted between August 25 and September 3 and had a total of 2,117 responses. The second wave (*t*2) was conducted between September 8 and September 14 and had a total of 1,332 responses, yielding a 63 percent retention rate. Participants were recruited through Netquest, an international polling company that has a standing panel of survey participants in Chile. Quotas were established to match the country's distribution of gender, age, socioeconomic status, and region (see Appendix A, Table A1 for demographic profile of the study's survey respondents).

Table 1. Factor Analysis for News Use.

	1	2	3
	Traditional News Media Use	Online News Media Use	Social Media News Use
Network TV news	**0.733**	−0.240	0.194
Cable TV news	**0.729**	0.015	0.202
Newspapers (print version)	**0.609**	0.327	−0.044
Radio news networks	**0.560**	0.317	−0.084
Digital-only news outlets	0.133	**0.760**	−0.027
News podcasts	0.045	**0.660**	0.128
Online versions of legacy news media	0.431	**0.565**	0.103
Social media accounts of legacy/alternative news outlets	0.009	**0.527**	0.460
Twitter	−0.009	**0.520**	0.215
WhatsApp	0.195	−0.063	**0.766**
Facebook	0.086	0.048	**0.708**
YouTube	0.151	0.141	**0.677**
Instagram	−0.181	0.293	**0.611**
TikTok	0.025	0.134	**0.597**
Eigenvalues	2.65	2.28	2.06
% Variance	18.9	16.3	14.7

Note. Extraction method: principal component analysis. Rotation method: Varimax with Kaiser normalization. The analysis converged after six iterations to produce three dimensions. Primary loading of an item on a factor is indicated in bold. $N = 1{,}332$.

Independent Variable

News Use (t1)

We asked respondents how often they used fourteen sources to get news, ranging from legacy news media to social media. A factor analysis revealed three dimensions of news use, and we used the items in each factor to build three variables of news use: *traditional news use* (four items, $\alpha = 0.63$, $M = 2.76$, $SD = 0.97$, range = 1–5), *online news use* (five items, $\alpha = 0.68$, $M = 2.52$, $SD = 0.94$, range = 1–5), and *social media news use* (five items, $\alpha = 0.73$, $M = 3.03$, $SD = 1.08$, range = 1–5). While we initially inquired about differences between traditional news media and social media-based sources, our data show two types of information repertoires coming from traditional outlets: one comprised outlets producing news content in traditional formats (network and cable TV, print newspapers, and radio news) and one clustering together online outlets, such as digital-native, online versions of legacy media, or social media accounts of professional news sources. As such, we decided to compare not two, but three types of information repertoires, based on the dimensions found in the factor analysis. Table 1 illustrates the items included in each factor/variable.

Table 2. Factor Analysis for Misinformation.

	1	2
(FALSE) According to the new constitution, houses purchased with state subsidies will never be owned by the people.	**0.84**	0.08
(FALSE) The new constitution will allow an individual involved in drug trafficking to become a president.	**0.81**	0.04
(FALSE) The new constitution will remove national symbols such as the Chilean flag and the national anthem.	**0.80**	−0.01
(FALSE) Twenty percent of the constitutional convention members did not have a high school degree.	**0.76**	0.09
(FACTUAL) Constitutional convention members who are indigenous peoples received an extra monthly bonus of CLP $300,000.[a]	**0.74**	0.20
(FALSE) Elisa Loncón received a scholarship that was personally awarded to her by former dictator Augusto Pinochet.	**0.71**	0.16
(FACTUAL) Voting in the constitutional referendum is mandatory.	0.09	**0.80**
(FACTUAL) The new constitution will replace the Senate with a chamber of regional representatives.	0.28	**0.73**
(FACTUAL) Rodrigo Rojas Vade returned the salary he earned as a member of the Constitutional Convention after resigning from it.[b]	−0.21	**0.57**
(FALSE) The Electoral Service has announced that individuals over the age of 60 will not be fined if they choose not to vote.[c]	0.25	0.35
Eigenvalues	3.83	1.70
% Variance	38.3	17.0

Note. Extraction method: principal component analysis. Rotation method: Varimax with Kaiser normalization. The analysis converged after three iterations to produce two dimensions. Primary loading of an item on a factor is indicated in bold. $N = 1,332$.

[a]This item was not included in the misinformation index (not a false claim).

[b]Rodrigo Rojas Vade was a member of the Constitutional Convention who resigned from it once La Tercera newspaper exposed that he lied about having cancer. He did return the salary he earned for being part of the Convention.

[c]This item was not included in the misinformation index (did not load together with the other five false claims).

Mediating Variable

Belief in Misinformation (t1)

On a five-point scale where 1 = *not credible at all* and 5 = *very credible*, we asked respondents how credible they found ten claims about Chile's constitutional process. Four of these claims were rooted in factual, verified information, while six claims were based on either false or imprecise information widely spread during the constitutional process (according to Chilean fact-checking organizations such as AFP Factual 2022, El Polígrafo 2022, and FastCheck 2021). A factor analysis indicated that five of the six false claims loaded together in one factor (see Table 2 for claims and loading values). We used those five false claims to build an index of belief in misinformation (five items, $\alpha = 0.86$, $M = 2.62$, $SD = 1.20$, range = 1–5).

Moderating Variable

News Media Trust (t1)

We asked respondents the extent to which they agreed with seven statements commonly used to measure news media trust (Abdulla et al. 2005; Mehrabi et al. 2009; Valenzuela et al. 2022): the news media "are fair," "can be trusted," "are timely," "are clear," "are believable," "cover important issues," and "are more accurate than social media like Facebook or Twitter," on a five-point scale where 1 = *strongly disagree* and 5 = *strongly agree*. We used those items to build an index of news media trust (seven items, $\alpha = 0.89$, $M = 2.72$, $SD = 0.94$, range = 1–5).

Dependent Variable

Voting Choice (t2)

Respondents indicated whether they accepted (1 = *43%*) or rejected (0 = *57%*) the constitutional proposal in the 2022 Chile referendum. We did not include respondents who did not vote or did not respond the question (14% of the total sample).

Controls

Demographics (t1)

Respondent's age ($M = 45.1$, $SD = 14.5$, range = 18–84) and gender (1 = male, 48%) were used as controls, as well as household income, and education. Household income was measured with nine categories, where 1 = *Less than CLP 300,000 monthly* and 9 = *more than CLP 2,400,000 monthly* ($M = 3.4$, $SD = 2.2$, range = 1–9, median = from CLP 600,001 monthly to CLP 900,000 monthly). Education ranged from 1 = *No formal education* to 10 = *Postgraduate degree* ($M = 6.6$, $SD = 2.1$, range = 1–10, median = Community college).

Political Ideology (t1)

was measured by asking respondents to place themselves on a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 = *extreme left*, and 10 = *extreme right* ($M = 5.1$, $SD = 2.8$, range = 0–10).

Political Interest (t1)

On a five-point scale where 1 = *not interested at all* and 5 = *very interested*, respondents indicated the extent to which they were interested in politics, the constitutional process, and the referendum itself. We used those items to build an index of political interest (three items, $\alpha = 0.87$, $M = 3.32$, $SD = 1.32$, range = 1–5).

Statistical Analyses

Independent, mediating, moderating, and control variables come from data collected on the first wave ($t1$), while the dependent variable (voting choice) comes from the second wave ($t2$). We tested our hypothesized model by performing a logistic regression using Hayes' PROCESS macro for SPSS, Model 7 (Hayes 2013).

Results

The main goal of this study is to identify the relationship between different information repertoires and voting choice. To this end, we first assessed the impact of all the independent variables, mediating and moderating variables, and controls, on the dependent variable. The results of the logistic regression indicate that belief in misinformation (Exp(B) = 0.19, $p < .001$), traditional news use (Exp(B) = 0.76, $p < .05$), political ideology (right) (Exp(B) = 0.58, $p < .001$), age (Exp(B) = 0.96, $p < .001$), and education (Exp(B) = 0.88, $p < .05$) were significantly associated with voting choice. Specifically, those who are older, more educated, right-wing leaning, reliant on traditional news outlets to get informed, and believing in false or imprecise claims about the constitutional process, were more likely to vote "reject" in the constitutional referendum (see Table 3). In contrast, being politically interested, using online or social media to get informed, and trusting the work the news media do was not associated with voting choice. Demographics such as gender and household income were not associated with voting choice either.

To test our hypothesized model, we performed three mediated-moderated regression analyses using PROCESS macro for SPSS, Model 7. Our models (see Figures 2, 3, and 4, and Appendix B, Tables B1–B3) indicate a negative and significant association between belief in misinformation and voting choice ($B = -1.71$, $p < .001$[1]), suggesting that those who believed false or imprecise claims about the constitutional process were more likely to reject the constitutional proposal (as expected under H1a), while those who did not believe such claims were more likely to approve the proposal (as expected under H1b). These results support both H1a and H1b.

Results illustrated in Figure 2 indicate that using traditional outlets for political information was positively associated with believing misinformation ($B = 0.19$, $p < .001$) and such association was not contingent upon news trust ($B = -0.01$, $p = .784$). In other words, regardless of the extent to which individuals trust the news, those getting their news from legacy news media in traditional platforms were more likely to believe false or imprecise claims about the constitutional process. Interestingly enough, the model also shows a negative association between traditional news use and voting choice, suggesting that those using traditional news outlets were more likely to reject the constitutional proposal ($B = -0.32$, $p < .01$[2]). These findings might confirm the perception of biased news coverage by legacy media that would lead voters to misunderstand the proposal.

Results illustrated in Figure 3 indicate no relationship between online news use and belief in misinformation ($B = -0.13$, $p = 0.249$), and no interaction effect between

Table 3. Logistic Regression to Explain Voting Choice.

		95% CI	
	OR	Lower	Upper
Demographics			
Gender (male)	1.03	0.66	1.60
Age	0.96***	0.95	0.98
Education	0.88*	0.77	1.00
Household income	0.99	0.89	1.11
Political orientations			
Political ideology (right)	0.58***	0.52	0.66
Political interest	1.21	0.98	1.48
News use			
Traditional news use	0.76*	0.59	0.98
Online news use	1.05	0.78	1.40
Social media news use	1.15	0.90	1.45
News trust			
News media trust	0.81	0.62	1.06
Misinformation			
Misinformation	0.19***	0.14	0.25
Nagelkerke R^2	0.728		
Chi-square	38.29***		
df	8		

Note. $N = 885$. Cell entries (OR) correspond to Exp(B) coefficients. OR = odds ratio; CI = confidence interval.
*$p < .05$. ***$p < .001$.

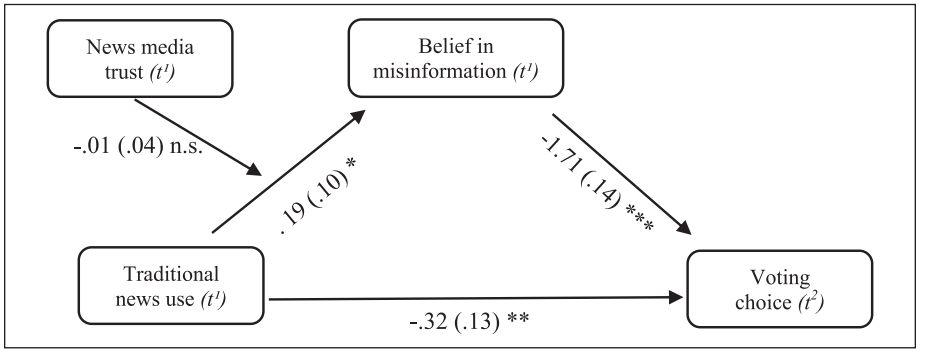

Figure 2. Mediated-moderated model with traditional news media use to explain voting choice.

online news use and news trust ($B = -0.01$, $p = .804$). There is also no direct path from online news use and voting choice ($B = 0.05$, $p = .737$[3]). Similarly, results illustrated in Figure 4 indicate no relationship between social media news use and belief in

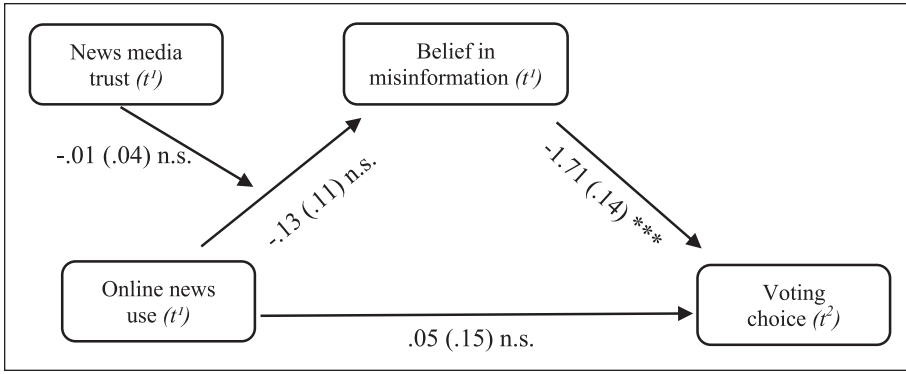

Figure 3. Mediated-moderated model with online news media use to explain voting choice.

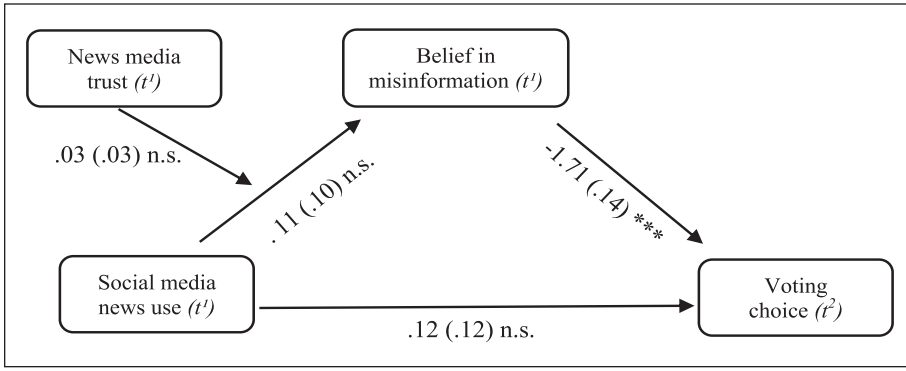

Figure 4. Mediated-moderated model with social media news use to explain voting choice.

misinformation ($B=0.11$, $p=.271$), no interaction effect between social media news use and news trust ($B=0.03$, $p=.457$), and no direct path from social media news use and voting choice ($B=0.12$, $p=0.338$[4]).

Taken together, our results suggest that getting political information from either online news sources or social media did not make people more likely to believe false or imprecise claims about the constitutional process while relying on traditional news outlets did. These results answer RQ1 about the relationship between traditional news use and misinformation belief, and reject H2 about social media news use and misinformation belief. We also found that the relationship between news use and belief in misinformation, in any platform, was not contingent upon news trust, which rejects H3.

Discussion

In this study, we rely on previous research to hypothesize an indirect path between differentiated news media consumption and voting choices, mediated by belief in

misinformation, and moderated by news media trust. We test this argument using data from the 2022 Constitutional Referendum in Chile. Our results do provide evidence of significant associations between different types of news consumption and belief in misinformation, as well as voting decisions, demonstrating that—at least for these data—different information repertoires increase or decrease the likelihood of accepting misinformation as factual, which becomes a significant variable to understand voting decisions. Conversely, we do not find empirical support for the idea that belief in misinformation will be contingent upon whether people trust or distrust traditional news media.

First, our results reveal a significant association between belief in misinformation and voting choices. Consistently across our models, we observe that those who believed in false claims spread before the referendum took place were significantly more likely to reject the proposal, supporting H1. This finding is consistent with previous research that found significant effects of exposure to fake news (Cantarella et al. 2023), as well as the acceptance of false or misleading information about candidates or issues during elections (Gunther et al. 2019) on voting behavior. It is worth noting that all our measures of misinformation (be that false, imprecise, or inaccurate claims) negatively targeted the proposed new constitution, and the constitutional process at large. In contrast, we did not include any false claims that positively portrayed the proposal, or invited people to approve the new constitution based on false promises, simply because that kind of misinformation did not emerge during the process (Bartlett 2022; El Polígrafo 2022). Therefore, we are aware that people could believe such false claims not only because they were misinformed, but because they were attitude-consistent with their opinion of the Constitutional Convention and the constitutional process. To be clear, our findings are insufficient to assert that the result of the 2022 Chilean referendum was caused by the spread of misinformation, but they do indicate that those who voted "reject" were more likely to believe false or inaccurate claims about the process. Research on political misinformation identifies several risks inherent to participatory democracy, including the desire to be consistent with previous attitudes or partisan ideas, which may facilitate people clinging to false beliefs (Allcott and Gentzkow 2017; Jerit and Zhao 2020; Thorson 2016). Accounting for this complexity, a challenge for future research is to look into political misbeliefs representing a broader political spectrum, or to pay attention to swing voters specifically.

Second, we measured the relationship between different types of news media consumption and belief in misinformation. Contrary to our expectations based on previous research (Su 2021; Valenzuela et al. 2019), we did not find evidence that social media news consumption was associated with higher belief in misinformation during the 2022 Constitutional Referendum. This finding rejects H2 and suggests that people might be more skeptical of the information they find on social platforms, making other variables more relevant at the time of predicting belief in misinformation, such as citizens' attitudes and abilities to identify misinformation as a problem, and to discern between true and false claims (Jones-Jang et al. 2021; Rodríguez-Pérez and Canel 2023). We could also speculate that the efforts to counteract falsehood spread in digital contexts (such as the Electoral Service repository) were fruitful to some extent.

For professionally produced news, however, we tested two differentiated models following dimensions of traditional news consumption that empirically emerged from our analysis: news consumed in traditional media platforms such as TV, radio, and print newspapers, and news consumed in online news outlets. Our findings demand a nuanced answer to RQ1. We found no association of online news consumption (such as digital-native news outlets, or online versions and social media accounts of legacy news media) and belief in misinformation. In contrast, we found evidence of traditional media use (TV, radio, newspapers) being linked to more, not less, acceptance of false or imprecise information about the constitutional process, contrary to normative expectations. Legacy news organizations, such as major broadcast television networks and major national newspapers, are still the main agenda-setters in the country (Núñez-Mussa 2021), and are expected to provide fair and verified information to audiences, particularly in times of political uncertainty. And yet, citizens who relied on traditional news organizations were more likely to believe in political misinformation about the constitutional process, and also more likely to reject the proposed new constitution. While this finding is insufficient to assert that journalistic media coverage of the proposal was biased in favor of the "reject" option to the point of influencing voters, our results support the idea that false or incorrect political claims found an outlet in traditional media operations, whether via newscasts, political advertising, or infotainment formats. In other contexts, this has been the case by means of giving space to political actors who spread misinformation (Phillips 2018), and by giving space to journalistic coverage of false claims because of their alleged news value (Tsfati et al. 2020).

As previously discussed, in elections involving new and complex political issues such as the Chilean referendum, the information available to voters may become equally or more important than other types of voting predispositions, making political outcomes less predictable (Leduc 2022). In such a context, our data support the idea that information repertoires in Chile played a significant role in how people (mis) understood the proposal. With a high concentration of media ownership (Núñez-Mussa 2021), a handful of influential legacy news outlets that—despite defining themselves as non-partisan—align with the country's political right-wing (Gronemeyer and Porath 2015), and a general lack of diverse voices in the news mediascape (Bahamonde et al. 2018), voters relying on traditional media were at risk of biased, inaccurate, or imprecise political information, perhaps even more than those who rely on social media to learn from political issues.

Third, our results show that belief in misinformation is not contingent on whether people trust or distrust traditional news media, which rejects H3. A twofold argument could be developed from this finding. Although trust in the media did not moderate belief in misinformation in any direction, when analyzed in conjunction with our finding on traditional media, it rather reinforces the idea that audiences should be able to critically assess media performance instead of just trusting the media, providing that certain levels of skepticism can be beneficial for democracy (Hanitzsch et al. 2018), and even increase resilience to misinformation (Rodríguez-Pérez and Canel 2023). As a consequence, our results invite a careful and situated reconsideration of calls to restore trust in the news media as a response to misinformation problems (Acerbi et al. 2022).

Given the recent discussions and efforts in the identification of strategies to fight misinformation, our results cast doubts on the utility of restoring people's trust in the media as a potential means to diminish belief in misinformation, and give more credibility to other types of interventions such as debunking or prebunking false claims, or increasing people's levels of information literacy (Jones-Jang et al. 2021), or the need of helping journalists to better identify and communicate misleading and false claims to the public (Blair et al. 2023).

This study's findings open at least two opportunities for future research. On the one hand, it opens questions regarding the place misinformation has in legacy news organizations. On the other hand, it demands a better understanding about the role different types of news media literacy could play at the time of navigating complex information systems and being able to identify misinformation (Jones-Jang et al. 2021). While we did not control for people's news or information literacy, future research could delve into potential moderating effects depending on one's ability to recognize false or manipulated news content.

There are three main takeaways from this study. First, in elections involving new and complex political issues, news consumption does affect voting behavior not only indirectly through the acceptance of misinformation but also directly, particularly if news organizations become a soundboard of misinformation. Second, in contexts where trust in the news media is not necessarily strong, efforts should be devoted for news organizations to base their operations on factual information. In other words, the main issue is not necessarily how to restore people's trust in the news, but how to ensure people navigate on reliable news ecosystems. And third, not only do countries with enough press freedom rely on the news media to get political information but also a high concentration of ownership, topics, and angles covered, might become a fertile soil for misinformation to spread in the form of professional news coverage, instead of fabricated, easy-to-spot fake pieces circulating in dubious websites or on social media.

Appendix A

Table A1. Demographic Profile of the Study's Survey Respondents.

	(August to September 2022)
	(%)
Age	
18–24	6.9
25–44	45.1
45–64	37.4
65 or more	10.6
Gender	
Male	47.7
Female	52.3
Education	
No education	0.3
Some elementary school	1.4
Elementary school (completed)	4.7
Some high school	6.4
High school (completed)	26.1
Some community college	8.6
Community college (completed)	16
Some college	11.3
Bachelor's degree	18.2
Graduate degree	7.1
Household income	
Less than $300,000	12.8
$300,000–$600,000	34.8
$600,001–$ 900,000	19
$900,001–$1,200,000	12
$1,200,001–$1,500,000	6.7
$1,500,001–$1,800,000	3.3
$1,800,001–$2,100,000	2.9
$2,100,001–$2,400,000	2.9
More than $2,400,000	5.7
Socioeconomic status	
ABC1	15
C2	13.5
C3	24.8
D	34.5
E	12.2
Region	
Northern Chile	12.2
Central Chile	24.2
Southern Chile	19.8
Metropolitan Region	43.8

Note. Socioeconomic status is usually measured with five strata where ABC1 = the richest and E = the poorest.

Appendix B

Table B1. Conditional Indirect Effects of Traditional News Use on Voting Choice.

			CI	
News Trust	Point Estimate	SE	Lower	Upper
Low trust	−0.30	0.10	−0.51	−0.12
Average trust	−0.29	0.08	−0.46	−0.14
High trust	−0.27	0.11	−0.50	−0.06

Note. Cell entries are expressed in log-odds metric. $N = 885$. SE = standard error; CI: confidence interval.

Table B2. Conditional Indirect Effects of Online News Use on Voting Choice.

			CI	
News Trust	Point estimate	SE	Lower	Upper
Low trust	−0.24	0.11	0.05	0.47
Average trust	−0.26	0.08	0.11	0.43
High trust	−0.27	0.11	0.07	0.51

Note. Cell entries are expressed in log-odds metric. $N = 885$. SE = standard error; CI: confidence interval.

Table B3. Conditional Indirect Effects of Social Media News Use on Voting Choice.

			CI	
News Trust	Point Estimate	SE	Lower	Upper
Low trust	−0.26	0.09	−0.45	−0.09
Average trust	−0.30	0.07	−0.46	−0.17
High trust	−0.34	0.10	−0.55	−0.16

Note. Cell entries are expressed in log-odds metric. $N = 885$. SE = standard error; CI: confidence interval.

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Ethical Approval and Informed Consent Statement

This study is part of a larger research project conducted by the Center for the Study of Media, Public Opinion, and Politics in Chile. The project received ethical approval from Universidad Adolfo Ibáñez Ethics Committee on August 10, 2022. Respondents gave their consent before starting the survey.

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Notes

1. Results expressed in a log-odds metric.
2. Results expressed in a log-odds metric.
3. Results expressed in a log-odds metric.
4. Results expressed in a log-odds metric.

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