

# Polarization and Political Mobilization

Evidence from a Survey Experiment in Uruguay

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2/24/2021

# Roadmap

- About Myself
- The Project
- Puzzle & Research Question
- Hypothesis
- Research Design
- Results
- Conclusion & Extensions

# A Little Bit About Myself

Personal and professional relationships matter!

My second office is here:



# Back to Business: Details of the Project 1

## Objective:

- Understand the effects of polarizing policy messages on the willingness to participate in politics.

## Location/Duration:

- Uruguay. 4 months end-to-end.

## Team/Role:

- Myself (leader), 2 political scientists in Uruguay, and the vendor (**Factum**).

## Deliverables:

- Paper -first to show evidence of the effects of polarization on political mobilization in Latin America at micro-level.-
- Op-ed in Spanish.
- Grant proposal.

# Details of the Project 2

## Constraints:

- Budget
- Distance & time difference.
- COVID!

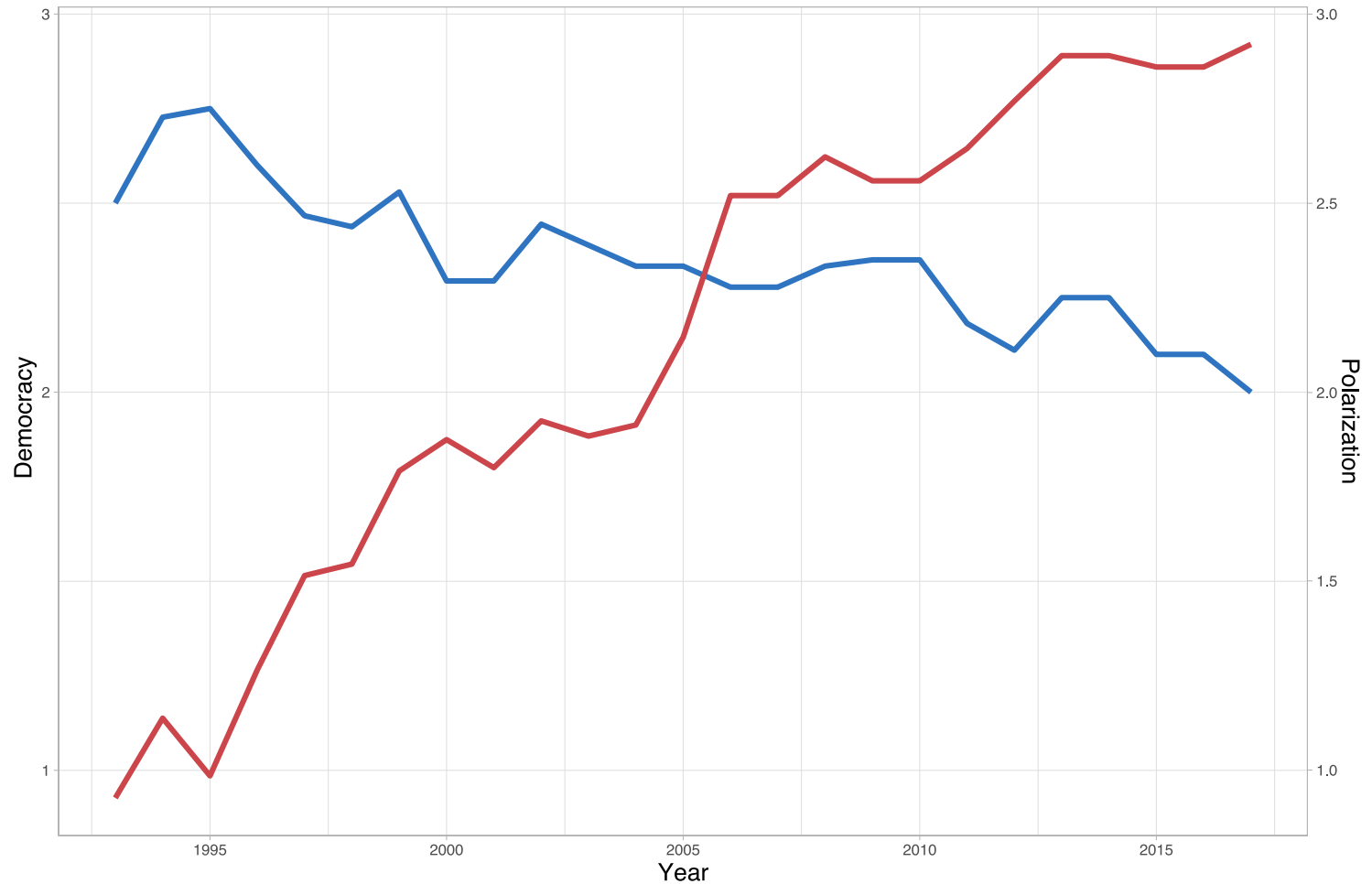
## Roadblocks:

- Survey firm had no previous experience with experiments.
- Management skeptical of the value of a survey experiment.
- Vendor's interest often at odds with mine.

**Regular communication** and a detailed **workflow** helped overcome these issues and allowed the project to be completed successfully.

# Polarization and Democracy in Latin America: 1993 - 2017

Polarization keeps going up while democracy slides



Data: Bejar & Moraes (2020) and Freedom House.

# Motivation

## What do we know?

- High levels of polarization in Latin American democracies, associated with negative democratic outcomes.
- Work in developing democracies focuses on "elite" polarization - aggregate level.-
- Empirical evidence is mixed.
  1. Alienation hypothesis.
  2. Motivation hypothesis.

## What is missing?

- Work outside developed democracies primarily uses aggregate data of elite polarization. Correlation does not necessarily mean causation.
- Work in new and developing democracies at the individual level on the effects of polarization.
- Distinguishing between "affective" and "programmatic" polarization.

# Research Question

How does programmatic polarization affect an individual's likelihood of participating in a campaign rally?

Programmatic polarization (DV): Degree of policy differentiation among parties/candidates. Political mobilization (IV): Assistance to a campaign rally.



# Hypotheses

Some scholars argue that polarization has a positive effect on political participation (Bejar et. al., 2020). Others suggest that it turns people off (Hetherington, 2008).  $H_1$  assesses the validity of the "mobilization" vs. "alienation" hypotheses.

- $H_1$ : Exposure to more (less) polarized policy proposals are more (less) likely to participate in a political rally than those exposed to moderate messages, regardless of individuals' preferences.

Yet, policy polarization may increase political mobilization only when the political message is congruent with voters' preferences. I call this the "congruence" hypothesis.

- $H_2$ : Polarizing policy proposals increase the likelihood of participating in a political rally when congruent with the individual's ideology.

# Research Design

Survey experiment with the following general characteristics:

- **Design:** Between Subjects (Experiment embedded in a long survey, carryover effects a concern). 3-group design.
- **Topic:** Budget Deficit.
- **Manipulation:** Information (How the hypothetical candidate will address the increasing budget deficit in Uruguay).
- **Sample:** National representative sample.  $N = 1,200$ .
- **Stages:** Instrument design & planning, pre-test, final design, data collection, analysis.
- **Delivery:** Phone.
- **Collaborator:** FACTUM.

Power = 80%; Effect Size = .1; Significance Level = .05; Required  $N = 322$

# Explaining the WHY of the Method and Case

## Why a survey experiment?

- It allows me to combine an experimental design with the flexibility of the survey context.
- I can isolate and manipulate specific pieces of information (i.e. polarized messages) in a political campaign scenario which provides clear **causal inferences**.

## Why Uruguay?

- Uruguay has strong party organizations with strong roots in society. Informed voters more likely to evaluate parties/candidates on policy proposals rather than emotions.
- Fiscal deficit was a salient issue in the run-off presidential election.

# Treatment Conditions

Three-arm vignette design where the treatment conditions consist of respondents' exposure to parties that propose alternative solutions to the running fiscal deficit: a) neutral/unspecified fiscal adjustment; b) progressive fiscal adjustment ; c) regressive fiscal adjustment.

**Control group, non-polarizing fiscal adjustment:** *The state spends more than it collects. To solve the problem, some parties consider that taxes should seek economic policies other than raising taxes.*

**Treatment 1, progressive fiscal adjustment:** *The state spends more than it collects. To solve the problem, some parties consider that taxes to the upper or wealthy classes should be raised, rather than reducing public spending.*

**Treatment 2, regressive fiscal adjustment:** *The state spends more than it collects. To solve the problem, some parties consider that public spending should be reduced, rather than increasing taxes.*

# Outcome Variable

Political Participation is measured using answers to the following question:

Would you attend a campaign rally of a party or candidate supporting this proposal?

Respondents have the following options: Strongly agree (4); Agree (3); Disagree (2); Strongly disagree (1); DKN/DNA.

# Independent and Pre-Treatment Variables

## Independent Variable

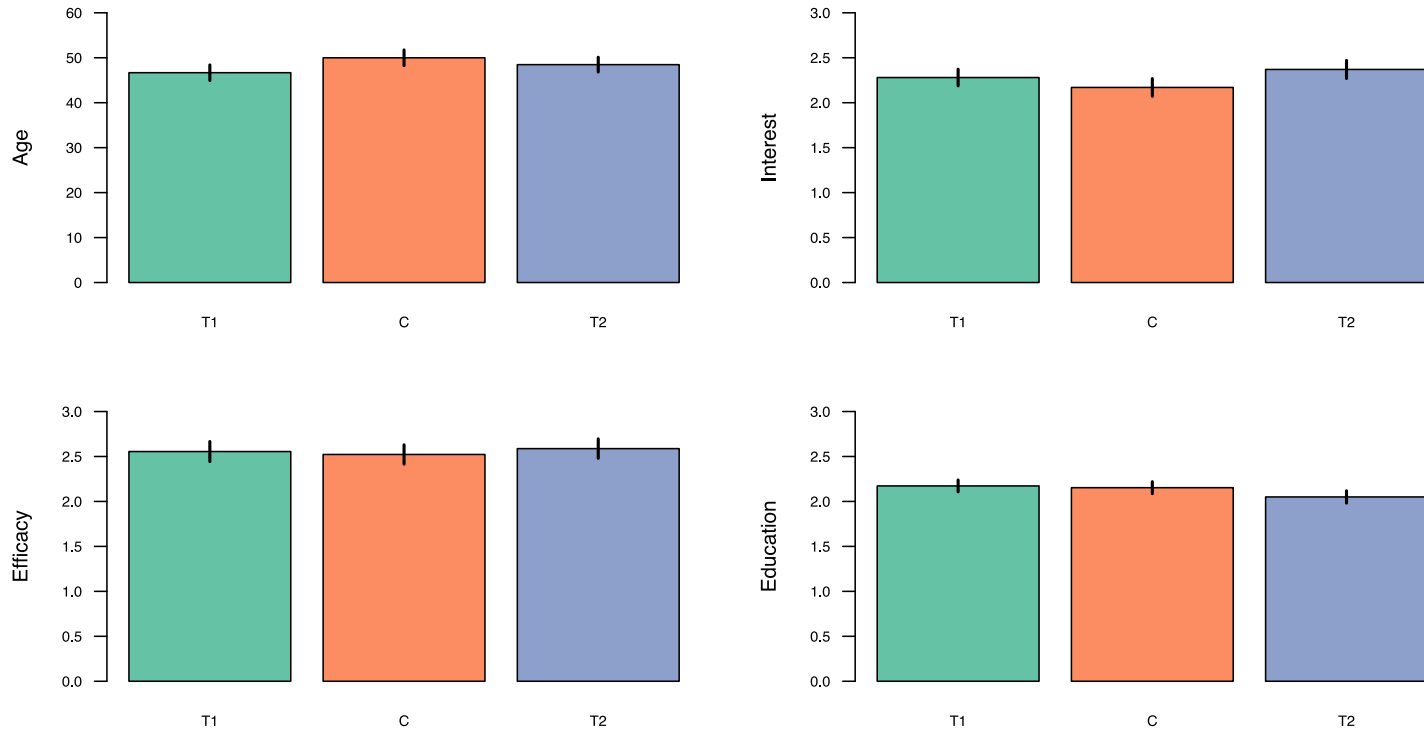
**Treatment Conditions:** Dummies that summarize the three treatment conditions of control (non polarizing fiscal adjustment), progressive fiscal adjustment, and regressive fiscal adjustment.

## Pre-Treatment Variables

- Part ID
- Media exposure
- Interest in politics
- Age
- Education
- Satisfaction with democracy
- Income
- Gender

# Pre-Analysis

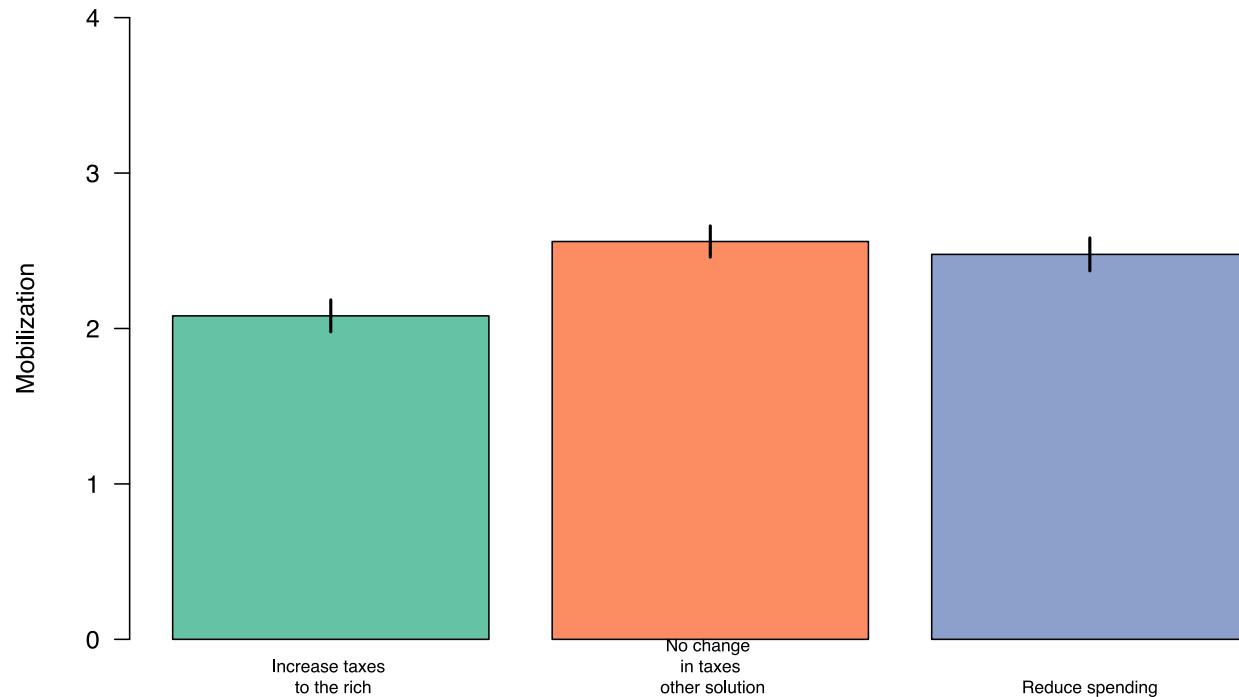
## Means of Selected Covariates Pre-Treatment



Balance across groups minimizes issues of selection bias.

# Results: $H_1$

## Difference in Means

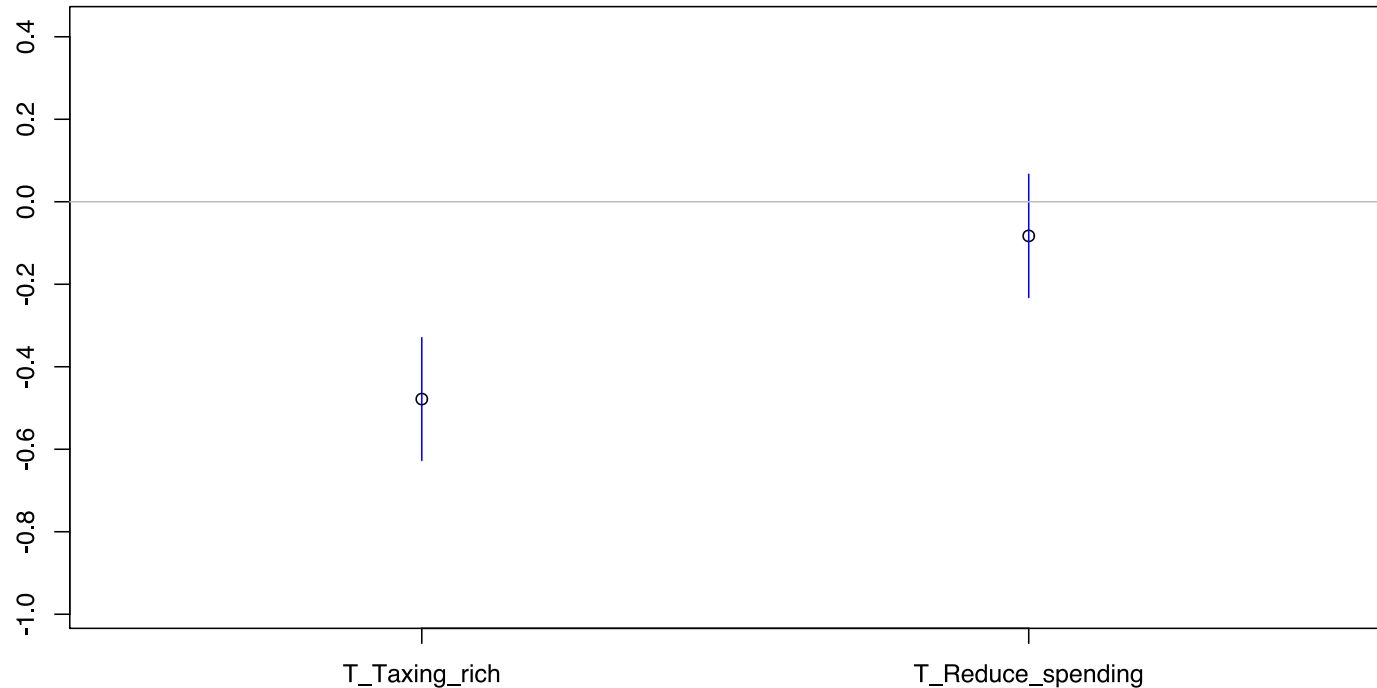


- One-way ANOVA: significant difference between the groups ( $\chi^2 = 23.18$ ,  $p = 1.34e-10$ ).



# Results: $H_1$

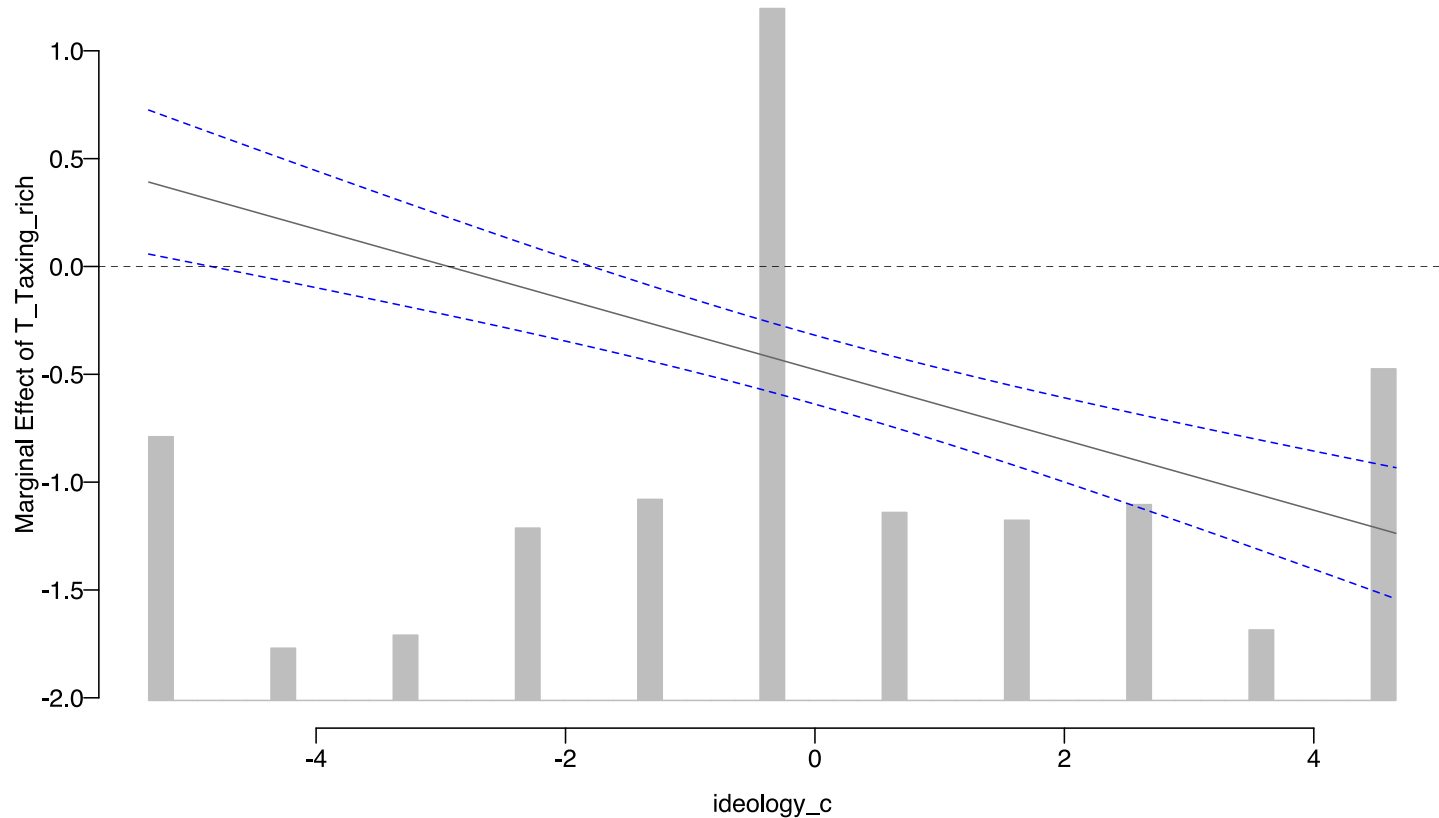
## SATE: Mobilization



- T1 (Taxing the Rich) has a negative and statistically significant effect on mobilization. It reduces it by approximately 17%. This supports the **alienation hypothesis**.

## Results: $H_2$

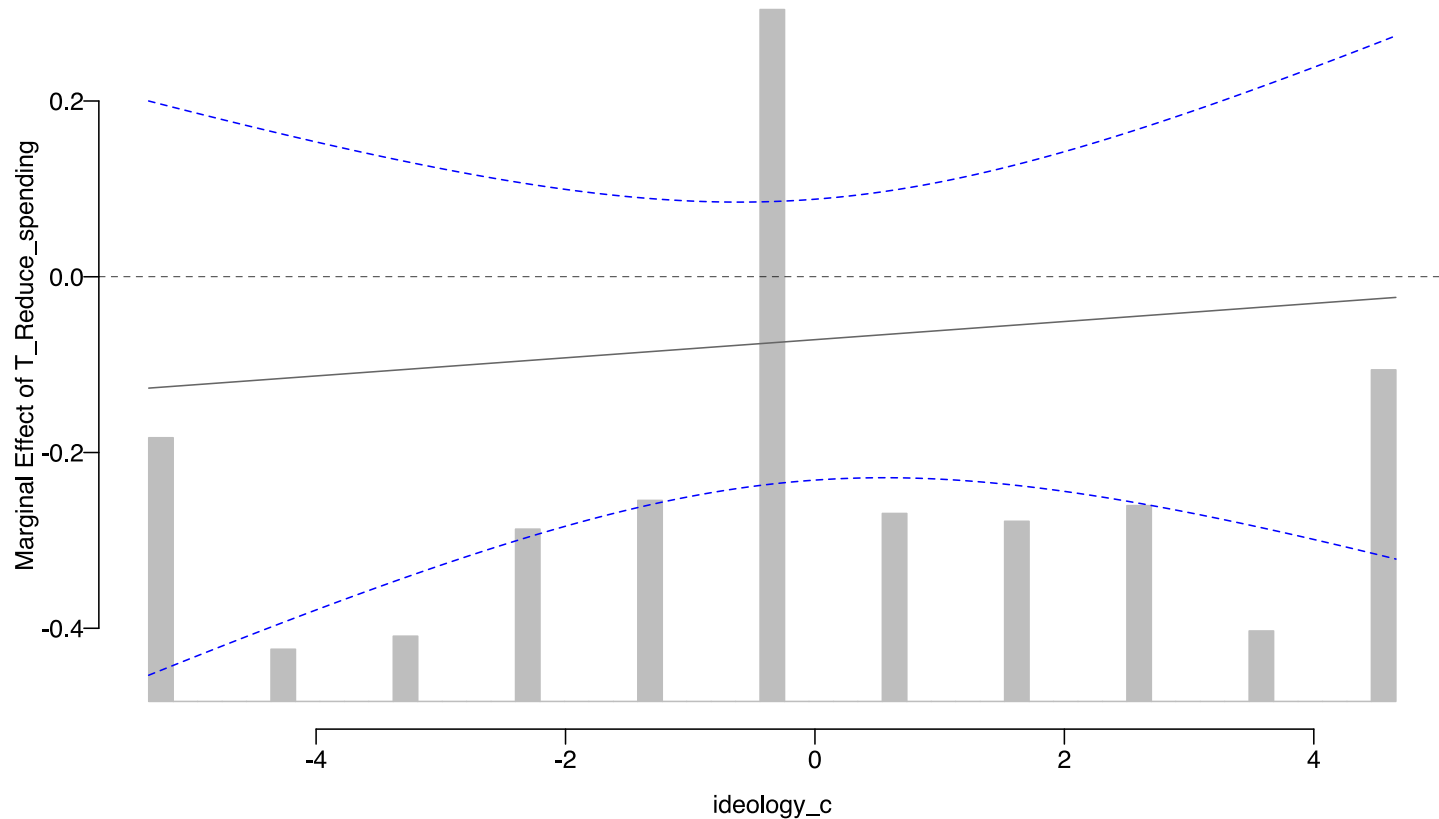
### CATE: Mobilization



The effect of T1 (Taxing the Rich) is conditional on ideology. While negative overall, it mobilizes those who have a leftist ideology. Strong evidence of heterogeneity.

## Results: $H_2$

### CATE: Mobilization



Effect is positive but not statistically significant. No evidence of heterogeneity. Overall poor performance of this treatment condition.

# Conclusion and Applications

Higher levels of programmatic polarization alienate people from participating in politics even when accounting for the mediating effect of political ideology.

But we need to remember that the findings presented here might not travel to other parts of the world. We need to evaluate the external validity of the results presented here.

## Campaign Strategy

- Very polarized programmatic campaign messages might be not only ineffective but counterproductive.
- It is not easy but campaigns should devote time to identify when a polarized message starts creating alienation among their target constituents.

## Social Media Companies

- Content of political ads matters. We just saw that more polarization leads to lower mobilization. It is possible that high levels of polarization not only turn people off from politics, but also reduce user engagement and ultimately lead to churn.

# Extensions (Part 1)

A large scale online survey experiment analyzing the effects of both **affective** and **programmatic** polarization on **offline** and **online** political mobilization.

While some forms of polarization (affective) may have potentially harmful consequences for the quality and survival of democracy, other forms —i.e. programmatic—may be a core mechanism by which democracy can effectively translate preferences into representative public policies.

## Method

Deciding to mobilize in favor of a party/candidate that uses a polarizing strategy is a multidimensional problem. **Cojoint experimental designs** will be advantageous for the following reasons:

- It will allow me to present a number of different electoral scenarios to survey respondents. In each electoral scenario hypothetical candidates from actual parties are sending different social media messages revealing both personal traits and different polarization messages.
- Allows me to randomize candidate attributes such that electoral scenarios vary in polarization levels due to 3 possible situations: none of the

# Extensions (Part 2)

## Sample Selection

- 30,000 survey participants from 5 Latin American countries and the US, online through Facebook ads that direct them toward our online survey programmed in Qualtrics.

## Design of Experiment

- Program a large number of images of Facebook and Instagram posts that randomize the candidates' messages together other text-based personal traits.
- Below each electoral scenario, respondents are then asked to report a) whether they think people from their country should attend to the polls and vote in that particular electoral contest, b) whether they would “like” and “share” one or both of the candidates' messages in social media they just read, and c) they cast a vote in a non-forced choice question where one possibility not voting (abstention).

## Analysis

# The End

Thank you!

	mobilization	Mobilization dummy	Voting	Voting dummy
(Intercept)	2.560 *** (0.053)	0.627 *** (0.025)	2.709 *** (0.053)	0.692 *** (0.025)
T_Taxing_rich	-0.478 *** (0.074)	-0.244 *** (0.035)	-0.405 *** (0.074)	-0.208 *** (0.035)
T_Reduce_spending	-0.083 (0.075)	-0.057 (0.035)	-0.108 (0.074)	-0.065 (0.035)
N	1168	1168	1132	1132
R2	0.039	0.044	0.028	0.031
logLik	-1701.284	-820.144	-1619.319	-780.594
AIC	3410.568	1648.288	3246.639	1569.188
*** p < 0.001; ** p < 0.01; * p < 0.05.				



