



The Effects of WhatsApp on Politics: Evidence From a Deactivation Experiment

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Whatsapp and Politics in the Global South

Disinformation Spreads on WhatsApp Ahead of Brazilian Election

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Fake News Is Poisoning Brazilian Politics. WhatsApp Can Stop It.

Oct. 17, 2018



Even though WhatsApp has received a huge attention from the media and policy makers, no study has so far identified causal effects of WhatsApp on politics.

Our Design: Multimedia Deactivation on WhatsApp

⊕ **Our Solution:** Cut channels through which users' are exposed to misinformation and polarizing content: videos, images and audios (Machado et al., 2019; Resende et al., 2019; Garimella and Tyson, 2018; Garimella and Eckles, 2020; Batista Pereira et al., ND).

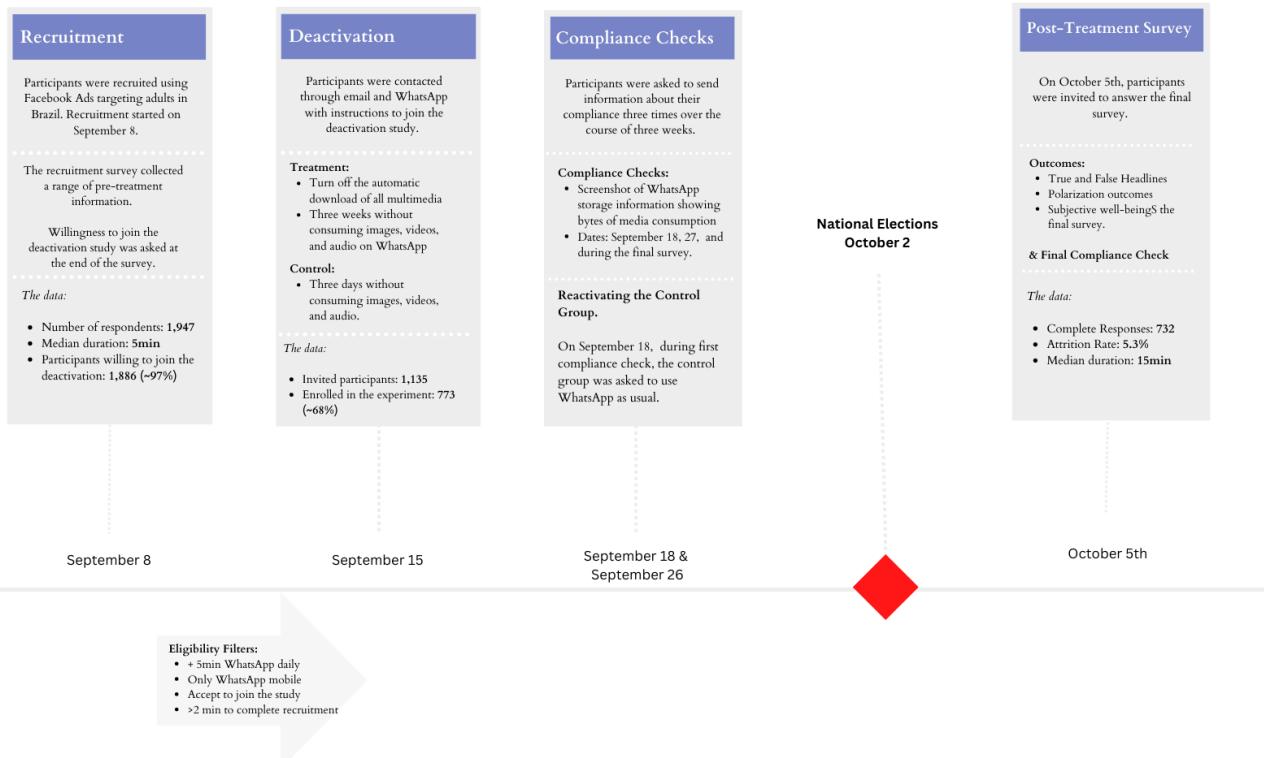
⊕ **Experiment:** Offer respondents a monetary incentive to

- Disable their automatic download of media on WhatsApp
- Do not purposefully click and watch any media on WhatsApp

⊕ **Treatment Period:** Three weeks:

- **Start:** Three weeks before general election in Brazil
- **End:** three days after the voting day

Overview of the Experiment



Deactivation

Participants were contacted through email and WhatsApp with instructions to join the deactivation study.

Treatment:

- Turn off the automatic download of all multimedia
- Three weeks without consuming images, videos, and audio on WhatsApp

Control:

- Three days without consuming images, videos, and audio.

The data:

- Invited participants: 1,135
- Enrolled in the experiment: 773 (~68%)



Compliance Checks

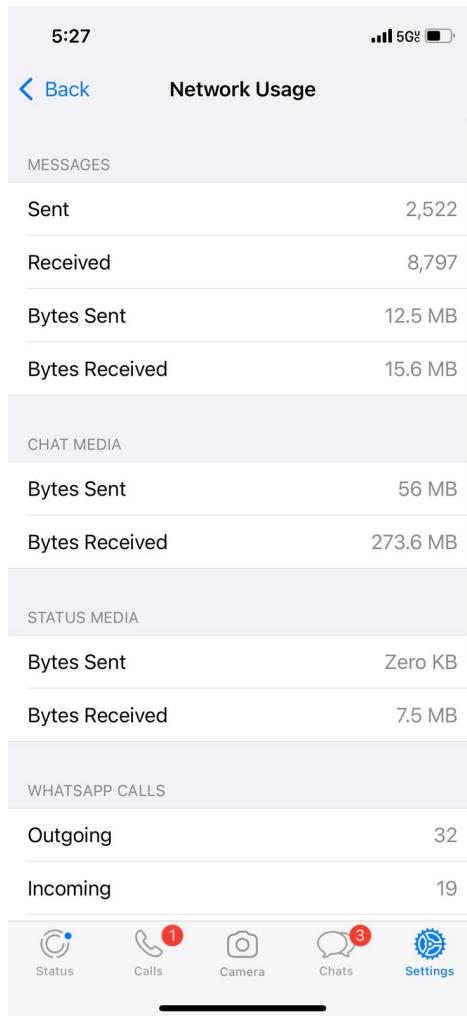
Participants were asked to send information about their compliance three times over the course of three weeks.

Compliance Checks:

- Screenshot of WhatsApp storage information showing bytes of media consumption
- Dates: September 18, 27, and during the final survey.

Reactivating the Control Group.

On September 18, during first compliance check, the control group was asked to use WhatsApp as usual.



Hypotheses

H1: Deactivated users will report lower levels of previous exposure to FALSE rumors.

H2a: Deactivated will display a higher ability to accurately identify FALSE rumors.

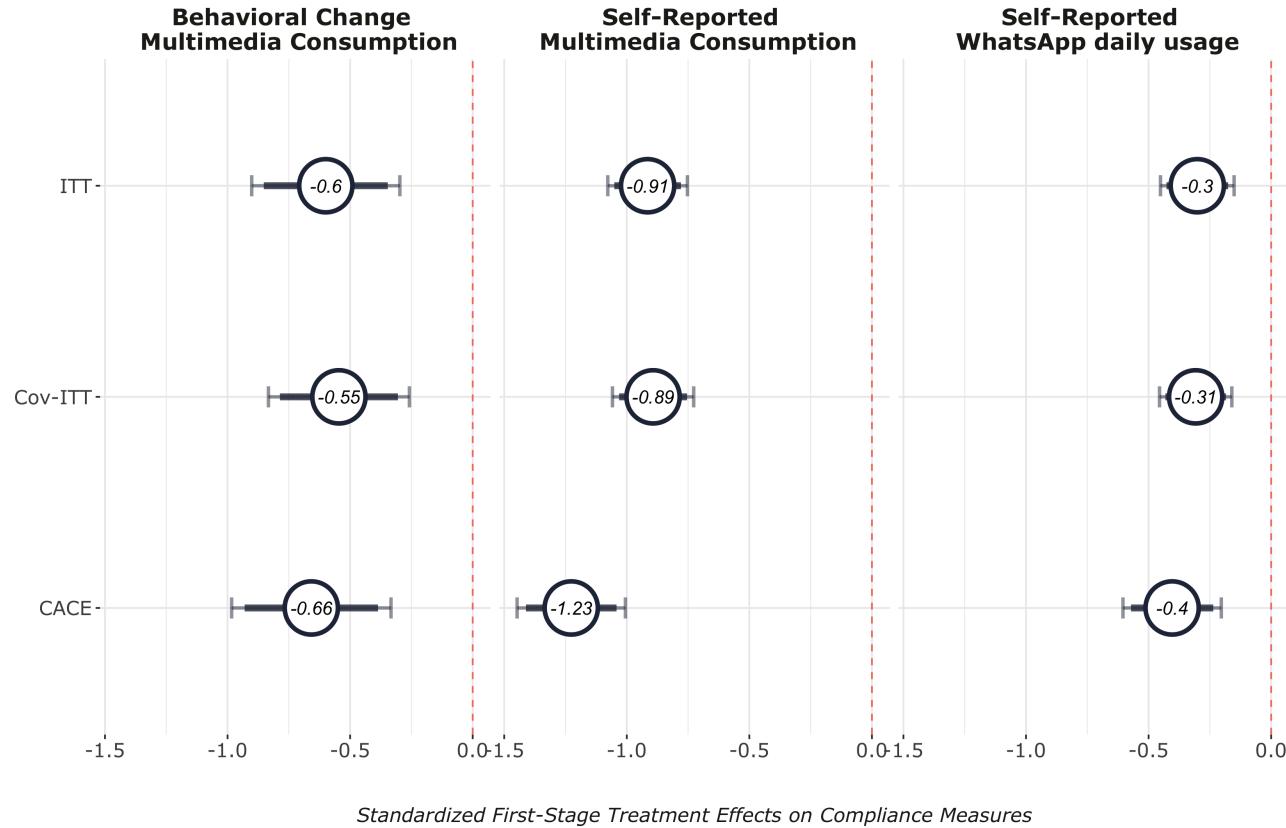
H2b Deactivated users will display lower levels of mainstream news knowledge.

H3: Deactivated will display lower levels of outgroup political polarization.

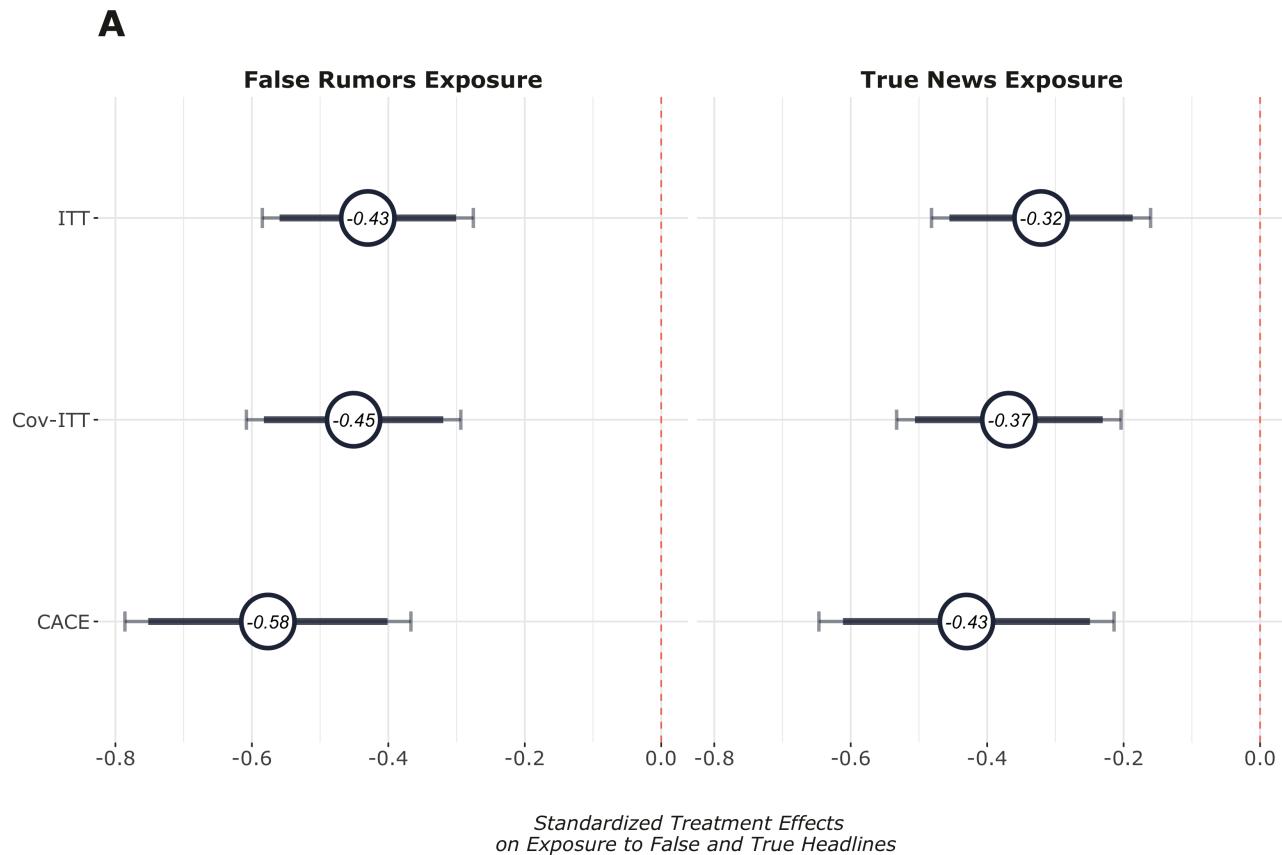
H4: Deactivated will display higher levels of the aggregated index of subjective well-being.

Results

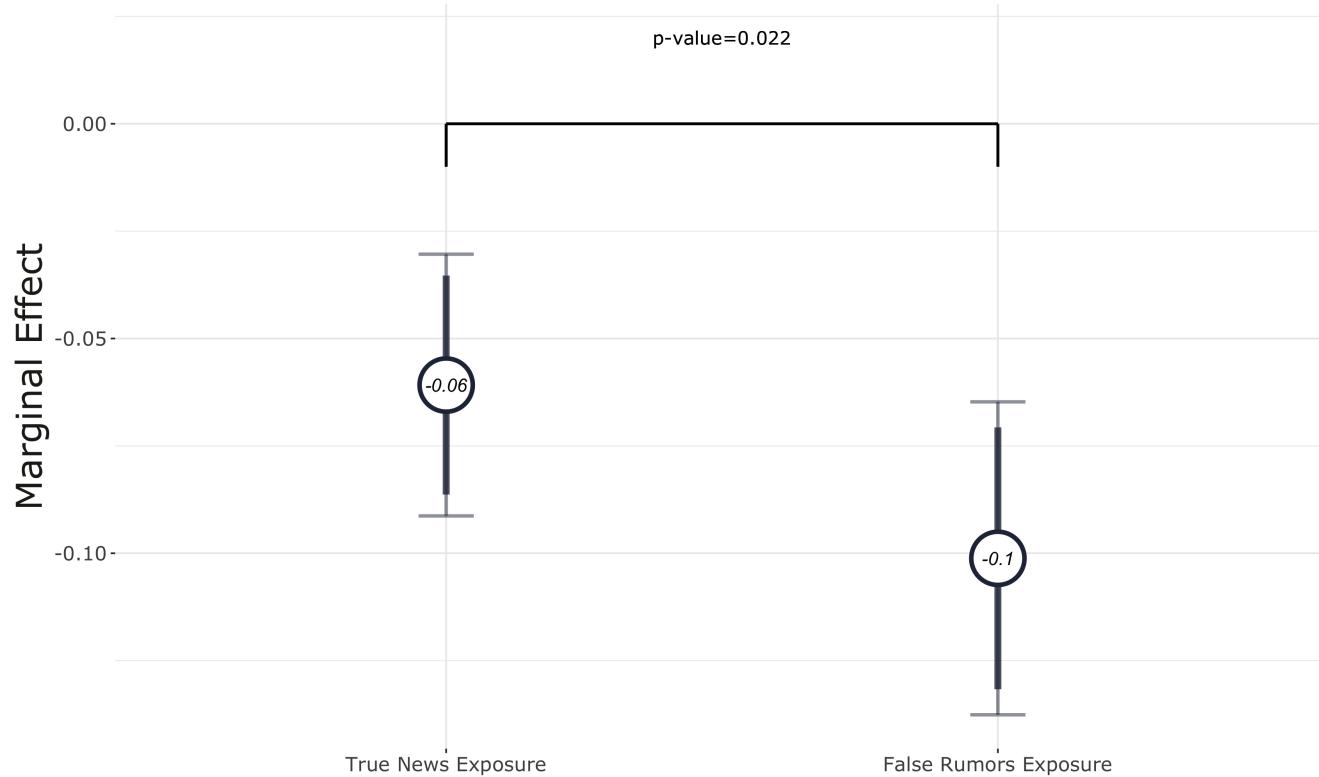
Effects on WhatsApp usage



Effects on Exposure to Misinformation Rumors



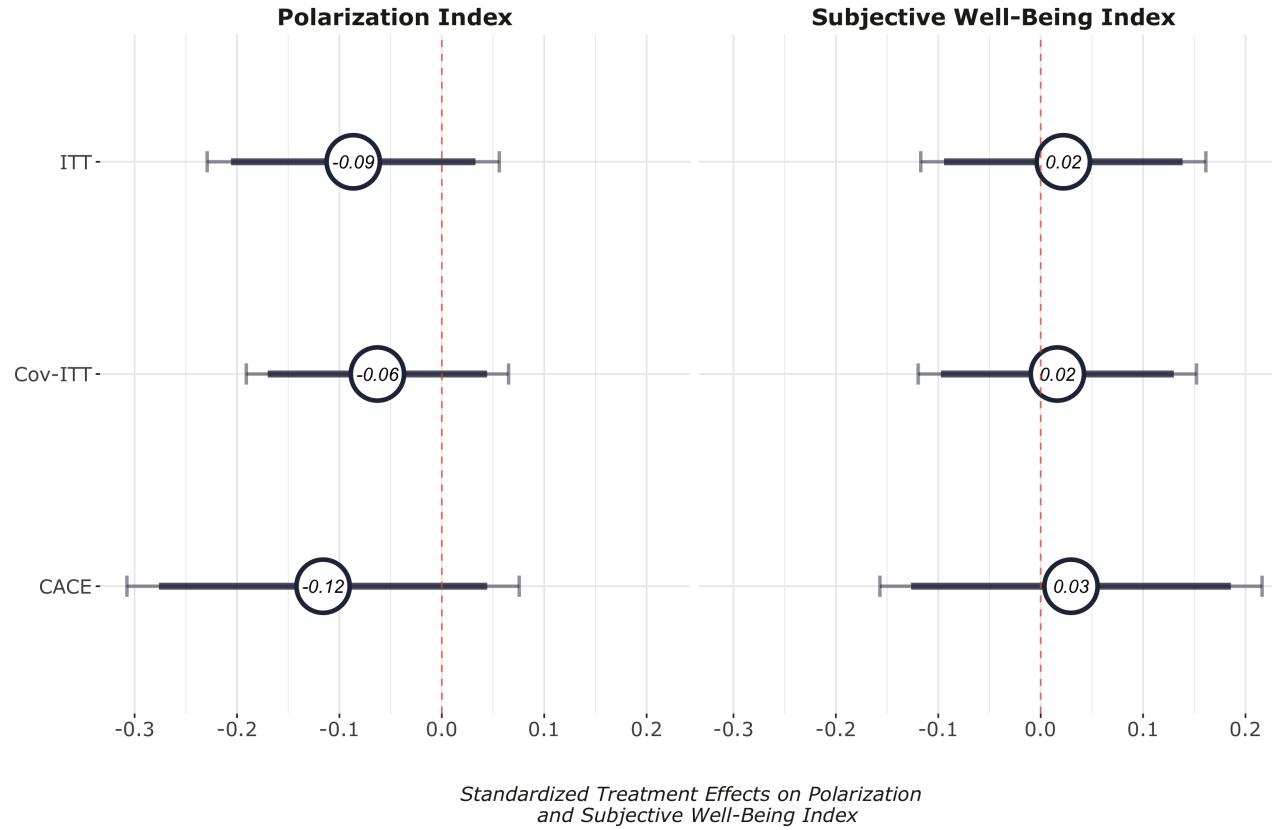
False > True reduction in exposure



Effects on Belief Accuracy



Effects on Polarization & Subjective Well-Being



Discussion

- ⊕ WhatsApp is an important vector through which voters receive misinformation in Brazil at a higher rate compared to true news.
- ⊕ The null results provide support for a minimalist view of the causal effects of WhatsApp on political attitudes.
- ⊕ Exposure to misinformation does not mechanically affect attitudes

BUT...

It would be a mistake to conclude that WhatsApp plays no role in politics.

- Scope conditions: focus on direct effects of WhatsApp.
- Do not rule out the use of WhatsApp as a mobilization and organizational tool by malicious actors.
- Larger effect might exist exactly in hard to reach populations.
- Small effect size vs Power
- Electoral context + Motivated Reasoning

Next steps.

Replication, Replication, Replication

Multi-Country Study

- Contextual variation
- Partial vs full deactivation
- In and out of election periods

Thank you!

Additional Analyses

Recruitment

Participants were recruited using Facebook Ads targeting adults in Brazil. Recruitment started on September 8.

The recruitment survey collected a range of pre-treatment information.

Willingness to join the deactivation study was asked at the end of the survey.

The data:

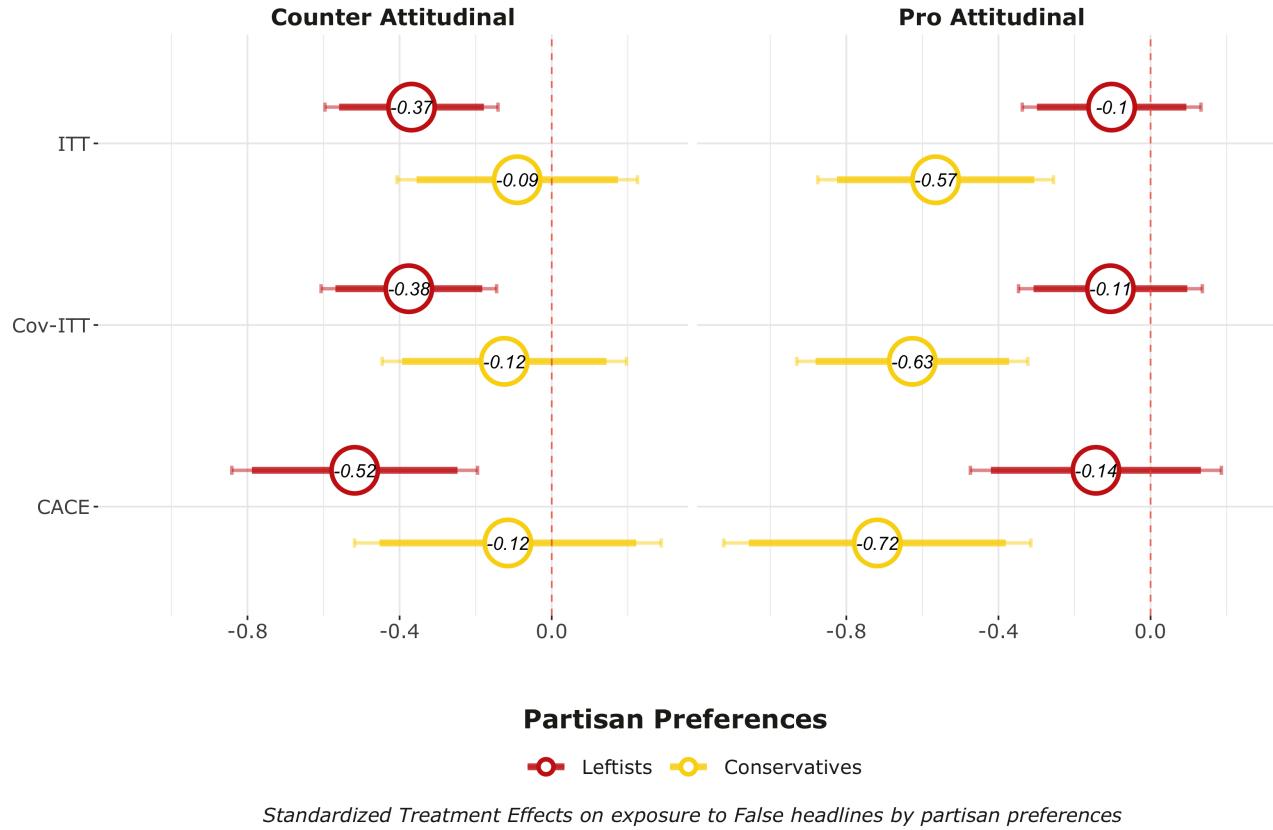
- Number of respondents: 1,947
- Median duration: 5min
- Participants willing to join the deactivation: 1,886 (~97%)



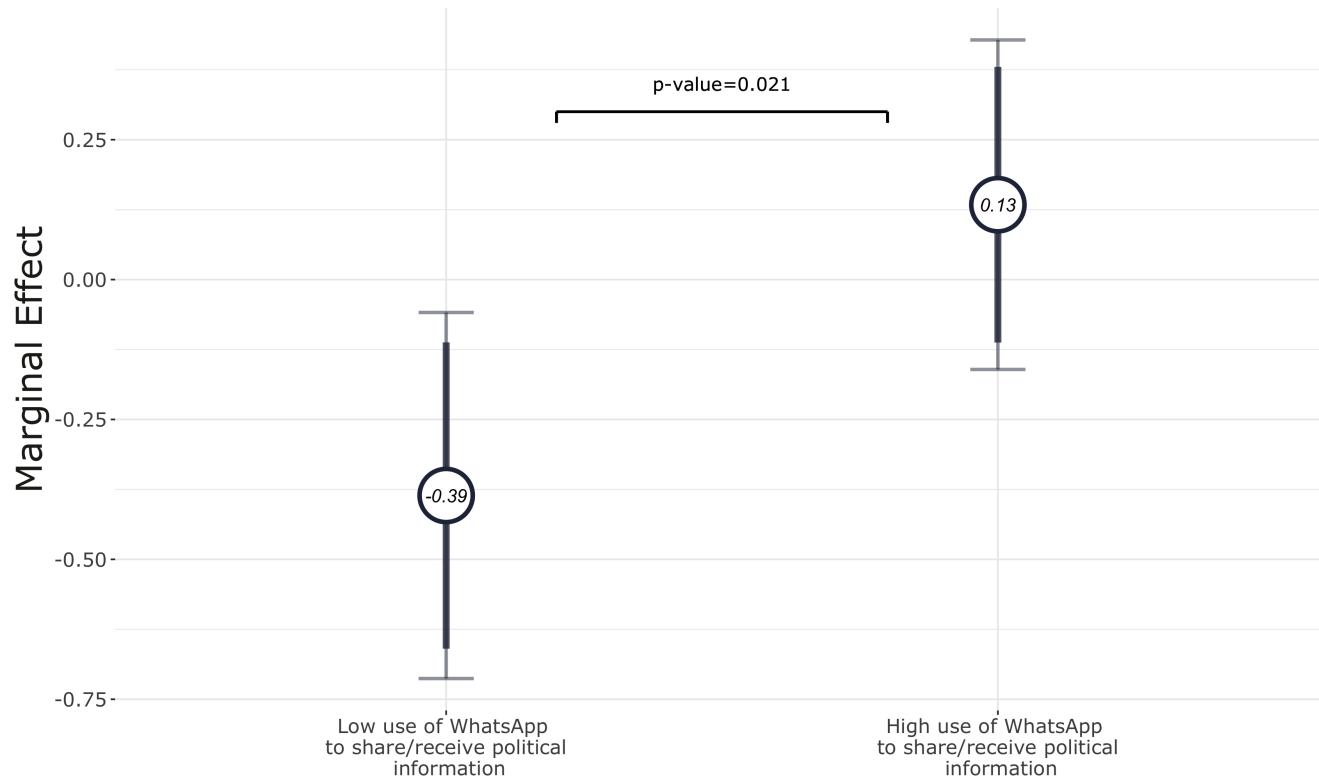
Eligibility Filters:

- + 5min WhatsApp daily
- Only WhatsApp mobile
- Accept to join the study
- >2 min to complete recruitment

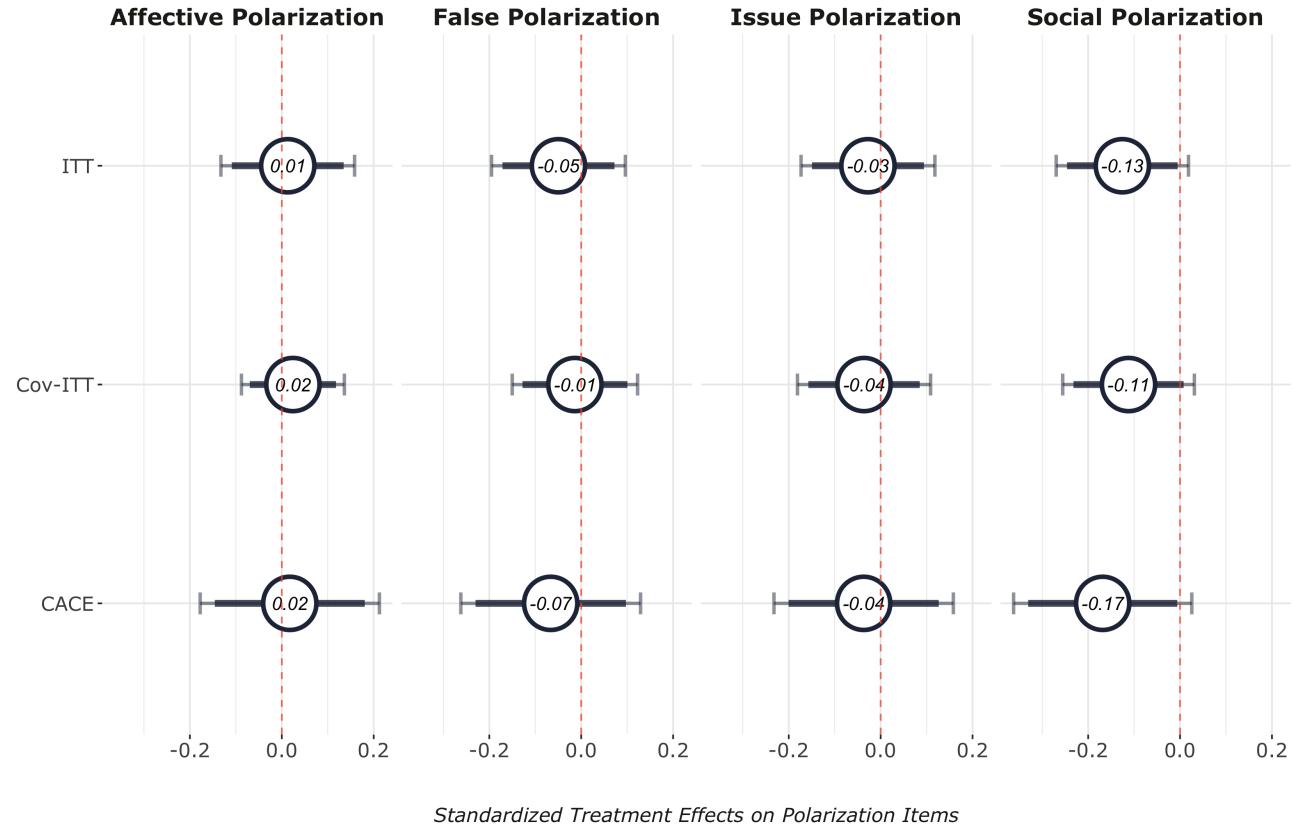
Exposure and Partisanship



Belief Accuracy Conditional on WhatsApp usage for Politics



Polarization Outcomes



Examples of Misinformation Outcomes

False Item:

Only complete votes are counted by the electoral justice. If the voter only votes for the President, and votes blank for all the other races, the vote is considered a partial vote, and will be annulled

True Item:

After consecutive reductions, the current oil price in Brazil is below the global average value