

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

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Battleground state polls are a prominent part of U.S. election news coverage. In this experimental study ( $N = 863$ ), we tested how polling results impact how partisans evaluate the news stories through which the polls are reported. Consistent with the hostile media perception, partisans tended to see articles as biased against their candidate, and perceived bias was amplified when their candidate trailed in the poll. Additionally, we found that a majority of news consumers believed the article would encourage their political copartisans in battleground states to vote, but would not impact the voting behavior of their political opponents.

*Keywords: hostile media perception, election polls, presumed media influence, perceived media effects, 2016 U.S. presidential election*

“The #MSM [mainstream media] uses skewed polling data to keep you home this #Electionday.” That tweet, posted by conservative activist and former television game show host Chuck Woolery (2016) 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. During the 2016 race between Democrat Hillary Clinton and Republican Donald Trump, so-called horse-race polls made up more than 40% of election news coverage (Patterson, 2016). These polls are not distributed evenly across the states, but rather concentrated on a handful of battleground states that have a realistic chance of swinging toward either candidate. Alongside the proliferation of horse-race poll reports is an anxiety among scholars, pundits, and the public regarding how such reports impact potential voters (Young, 2017). Woolery’s 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.

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Scholars may recognize those fears as textbook examples of two prominent perceptual biases in mass media research: the hostile media perception (HMP) 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' decisions 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. In an experiment conducted shortly before the 2016 U.S. presidential election ( $N = 863$ ), we examined how citizens evaluate polling news in the context of battleground state polls, which are a prominent part of election news coverage because of the role of the U.S. Electoral College in determining the winner of the presidency. We tested how polling results, a variable beyond journalists' control, alter perceptions of the vessel delivering those results—the news story. Parting from prior research on perceptions of polling news, which tends to ask voters to evaluate the valence of polling news (i.e., if it is favorable/unfavorable to a candidate), we gauged voters' willingness to assign the label "bias" to poll reports. Our experiment also reports poll results through a news outlet with a nonpartisan reputation, allowing us to untangle source and content effects.

Additionally, we explored news consumers' beliefs about how battleground polling reports impact others' decisions to vote. 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 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 citizens choose to engage in political behavior themselves (see Searles, Ginn, & Nickens, 2016; Toff, 2017).

### **Perceived Bias in Polling News**

In the past three presidential elections, the amount of public opinion polling about forecasted presidential vote choice has exploded (Sides & Vavreck, 2014; Theiss-Morse, Wagner, Flanigan, & Zingale, 2018). Beyond national horse-race 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 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.

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. Often, reports also include reaction from the campaigns, quotes from analysts who place the numbers in context, or a comparison of one poll with other new polls. In other words, poll reports are rather uncomplicated. 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 typically elicit concerns about bias.

But with nearly half of Americans reporting they see “a great deal” of political bias in news coverage (Knight Foundation/Gallup, 2018), and a long line of research revealing how partisan audiences evaluate media messages, even straightforward polling reports may be regarded as biased. HMP studies reveal that opposing partisans evaluating the same, neutral media message frequently sense bias against their side (Hansen & Kim, 2011). These perceptions of bias can be absolute, with both sides sensing that the message favors the other side (e.g., Vallone, Ross, & Lepper, 1985), or relative, where competing partisans agree on the direction of bias, but disagree about the severity of the slant (Gunther & Chia, 2001). In either case, 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 to HMP. Numerous studies have demonstrated that opposing partisans spot hostile bias in election coverage (Beck, 1991; Dalton, Beck, & Huckfeldt, 1998; Hoffner & Toohey, 2007; Hoge & Glynn, 2010).

Considering relatively low levels of trust in news and the wealth of research documenting HMP, it would be unsurprising in the present study to find that voters sense bias in news stories covering preelection poll results—even when those stories adhere to journalistic guidelines of neutrality and balance. Rather, our unique contribution to this line of research is to investigate how perceptions of bias can be amplified when journalists perform the routine task of reporting on the latest poll results in battleground states. When the news itself—the poll result—is undesirable, are partisans willing to assign the label of “biased” to the package containing that unwelcome information?

Many studies have examined voters’ distrust of polls (Price & Stroud, 2005), the antecedents for that distrust (Dran & Hildreth, 1995), and how results affect trust in polling (Tsfati, 2001). Scant research exists that explores how the reporting of poll results impacts audience perceptions of the news media issuing those reports. Indeed, we identified few studies that gauged how poll results affect evaluations of the media through which they are reported (Chia & Chang, 2015; H. Kim, 2016).

When Chia and Chang (2015) asked Taiwanese voters to rate the favorability of polling articles from an in-group or out-group news source, the results showed that voters regarded a news article showing a candidate leading in the polls as more favorable to that candidate, compared with a news article showing the race in a dead heat. Those voters were not wrong, of course: A report showing that Candidate X leading is inherently favorable to Candidate X. Their findings confirm that audiences can correctly identify the valence of news content (though nonfavored partisans tend to exaggerate the article’s favorability to the opposing side, a phenomenon known as the relative hostile media perception; see Gunther, Christen, Liebhart, & Chia, 2001).

Our study builds on this research in two important ways. First, rather than ask voters to evaluate only the valence of polling news, we test voters’ willingness to explicitly assign the label “biased” to such reports. Second, our poll results are reported through a news outlet with a nonpartisan reputation, allowing us to tease out the toll that reporting “bad news” takes on the news outlet delivering that information.

To examine how undesirable information impacts perceptions of the journalism delivering that message, our research design integrates the two major approaches to HMP research. Early HMP research provided competing partisans with an objective, neutral news article and measured their perceptions of bias

(e.g., Vallone et al., 1985). Rival groups each tend to sense bias against their side, hence the term *hostile* media perception. A second approach captures a more nuanced version of the phenomenon, with researchers deliberately altering a news story to favor one side (Brewer, Young, & Jones, 2013; Gunther et al., 2001) or, similarly, manipulating the origin of the story to a “friendly” or “unfriendly” source (Arpan & Raney, 2003; M. Kim, 2015; Reid, 2012). These studies find that even when competing partisans agree on the valence of a particular news story, the side not favored by the slant sees substantially more bias than the side given the favorable treatment.

Our study combines these approaches. Instead of deliberately slanting an article by violating journalistic principles (e.g., only including facts that favor one side, giving one side more attention, inserting opinion/speculation), as previous studies have done, our stimulus news articles are “slanted” only in the sense that they feature polling results that show one candidate ahead. In other words, our design tests how perceptions of bias fluctuate across different versions of a neutral, objective news article. We strictly adhere to journalistic principles of balance, using neutral language, sticking to the dry facts, and presenting poll results via Reuters, a source that is widely regarded as unbiased (Kearney, 2017).

Informed by the body of research on perceptions of polls and the news media that report them, we hypothesize that individuals will perceive that stories about public opinion polls in a battleground state are biased against the trailing candidate. We expect that this perception will be amplified when the individual’s preferred candidate performs worse than the opponent in a public opinion poll.

*H1: Voters will be more likely to see a news article as unfavorably biased when that news article features undesirable poll results.*

### **Presumed Media Influence on Voting**

Beyond the tendency to believe that news coverage is undesirably biased, news consumers also tend to believe that coverage will affect how others think and behave (Gunther, 1998). Particularly pertinent to our investigation, people believe that polls affect their peers (Hoffner & Rehkoff, 2011; M. Kim, 2015; Paek, Pan, Sun, Abisaid, & Houden, 2005, Price & Stroud, 2005; Wei, Chia, & Lo, 2011; Wei, Lo, & Lu, 2011). Studies investigating the presumed influence of polling news typically require respondents to estimate the extent to which others are influenced by polling news (e.g., influenced a little/influenced a lot), with the aim of demonstrating that people believe others are more affected by polls than they are personally (i.e., the third-person perception; see Davison, 1983). These studies uncover a consistent pattern: Citizens believe that polling results—and news coverage of those results—have powerful effects on others’ vote choice (Chia & Chang, 2015; Price & Stroud, 2005; Wei, Lo, & Lu, 2011). This type of perceived influence—perceptions of what actions others will take in response to a media message—is what Jensen and Hurley (2005) term *presumed behavior*.

Building on this research, we explore whether citizens believe that polling reports impact voter turnout. It is easy to see why they might anticipate such an effect. A news consumer may think, “If news 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. Similarly, it is rational for voters

to conclude that close polls have a mobilizing effect on the electorate—indeed, they do (Blais, 2000; Grober & Schram, 2010).

In this study, we examine the perceived impact of news reports about battleground state polls. Importantly, we account for the probability that citizens may anticipate different effects for different groups of “others.” When individuals are asked to estimate a media message’s impact on others, estimates vary according to who the others are (Cohen, Mutz, Price, & Gunther, 1988), whether the message is perceived as relevant to the group (Meirick, 2005; Reid, 2012), and whether those others are an in-group or an out-group (Duck, Terry, & Hogg, 1995). In the context of election polls, researchers have found that citizens believe that polls wield more influence over their political opponents than their political comrades (Hoffner & Rehkopf, 2011; Pan et al., 2005; Wei, Chia, & Lo, 2011a), a pattern consistent with the third-person perception. This perceptual research frequently shows that individuals believe that socially distant others are more affected by undesirable messages than in-group members. That perception is thought to be rooted in the ego-enhancing belief (Eveland & McLeod, 1999) that “me” and “my group members” are savvy enough to resist outside influence, whereas “they” are not.

As Jensen and Hurley (2005) argue, perceptions of media influence vary considerably once the type of influence is specified. For example, respondents may indicate a general belief that out-groups are especially susceptible to polling influence, but they may have answered differently had they been asked to estimate whether a poll would influence out-group members to switch their vote, make a campaign donation, or canvas the trailing candidate. In this study, we ask voters to estimate a specific behavioral response to a media message: the ability of news stories about presidential poll results to motivate their political comrades and rivals in battleground states to vote. Because voting is generally regarded as a socially desirable behavior, prior research suggests that a first-person effect may occur, in which people believe that they (and by extension, their in-group members) are more likely than out-group members to experience positive media effects (Golan & Day, 2008). We anticipate that, after viewing a news article highlighting the close nature of a battleground race, voters will believe that members of their in-group (those supporting the same candidate) will be clever enough to recognize the importance of voting, whereas members of their out-group (those who support the opposing candidate) will be less likely to do so.

*H2: A news article highlighting a close battleground state poll will be seen as more likely to mobilize in-group members than out-group members.*

On the other hand, we anticipate that if voters believe the article would bring about an undesirable effect—diminished turnout—they are more likely to believe that their out-group would undergo that negative behavior. That is, because in-groups are closer in social proximity to the perceiver, the perceiver should view them as somewhat insulated from any negative media effects. Consistent with third-person perception research, we anticipate that because not voting is viewed as an undesirable behavior in response to media exposure, perceivers should expect a demobilizing effect among the out-group more than the in-group.

*H3: A news article highlighting a close battleground state poll will be seen as more likely to diminish turnout among out-group members than in-group members.*

### Method

To test our hypotheses, we conducted an online experiment using a sample of U.S. adults provided by Survey Sampling International (SSI) for the period November 2–6, 2016, the week before the general election vote that took place on November 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 that they planned to vote for either Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton ( $n = 487$ ) or Republican candidate Donald Trump ( $n = 376$ ). The sample is a nonprobability sample, but it is diverse and generally reflects the demographics of Trump and Clinton voters (see Table 1).

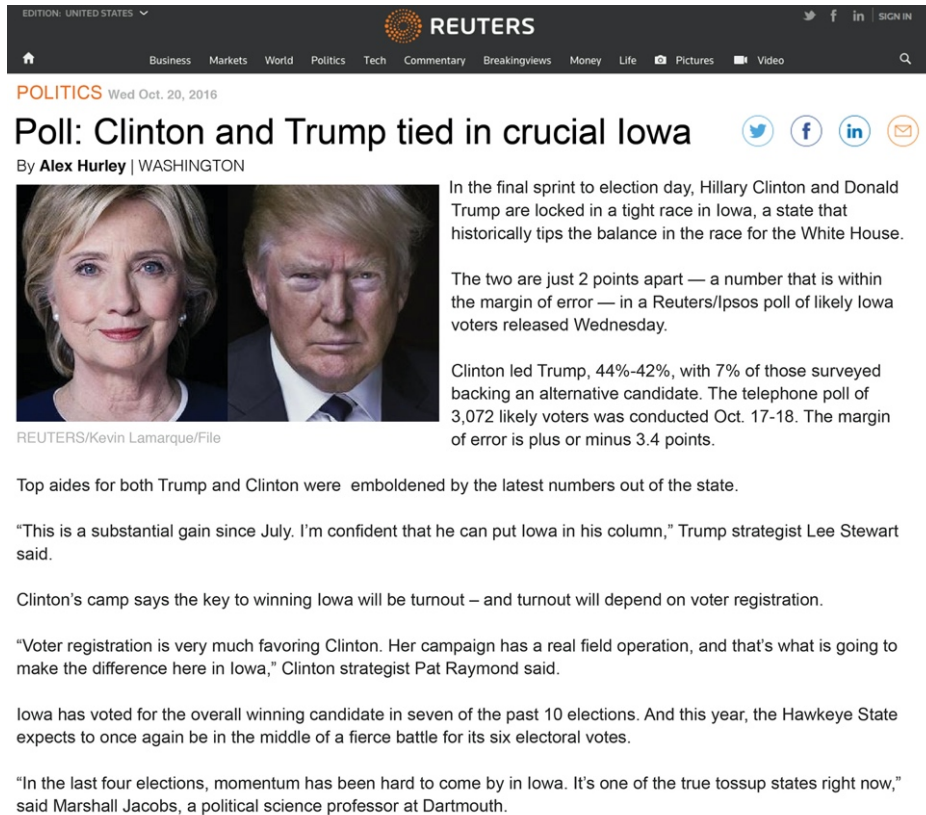
**Table 1. Sample Demographics Compared With Election 2016 National Exit Poll Data.**

Variable	Sample	Exit Polls
Gender		
Women	60	53
Men	40	47
Age		
18–29	13	19
30–49	32	36
50–64	28	30
65+	26	16
Race		
White	90	71
Hispanic/Latino	4	11
Black/African American	6	12
Education		
College grad	41	50
Some college	17	32
HS or less	41	18
Income		
Under \$30k	28	17
\$30,001–\$100k	55	49
\$100,001+	17	34

*Note.* Electorate demographics are from exit polls conducted by Edison Research. Sample data consist of 863 U.S. adults collected November 2–6, 2016.

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 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 is ahead by 5%,

Trump is ahead by 5%), and interchanging the partisanship of the quoted sources depending on how the race was depicted. Because respondents may have been familiar with battleground polling data available at the time, we chose polling results consistent with actual state-level polling data.



The image shows a screenshot of a Reuters news article. The header includes the Reuters logo and navigation links for Business, Markets, World, Politics, Tech, Commentary, Breakingviews, Money, Life, Pictures, and Video. The article is dated Wednesday, October 20, 2016, and is in the Politics section. The title is "Poll: Clinton and Trump tied in crucial Iowa" by Alex Hurley from Washington. The article features a side-by-side portrait of Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump. The text of the article states that in the final sprint to election day, Clinton and Trump are locked in a tight race in Iowa, a state that historically tips the balance in the race for the White House. The two candidates are just 2 points apart, which is within the margin of error of a Reuters/Ipsos poll of likely Iowa voters released Wednesday. Clinton led Trump, 44%-42%, with 7% of those surveyed backing an alternative candidate. The telephone poll of 3,072 likely voters was conducted October 17-18. The margin of error is plus or minus 3.4 points. The article also includes quotes from Trump strategist Lee Stewart, Clinton strategist Pat Raymond, and political science professor Marshall Jacobs, all of whom note the tight race and the importance of voter turnout in Iowa.

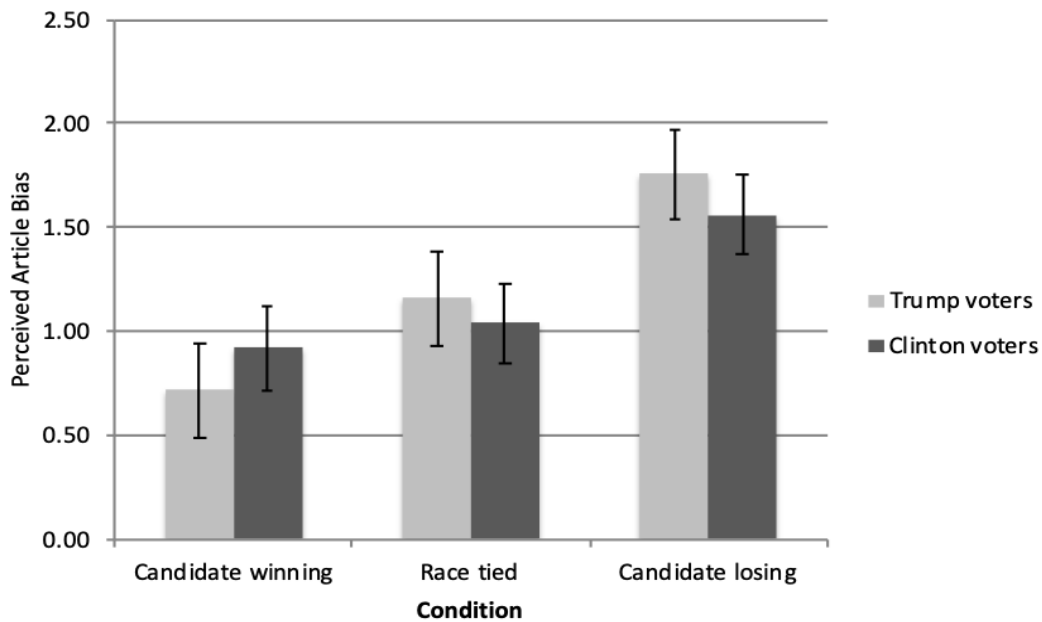
**Figure 1. "Candidates tied" version of mock Reuters news article.**

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 recoded into variables representing presumed article effect on in-group members (i.e., Trump voters' predictions about other Trump voters, Clinton voters' predictions about other Clinton voters) and presumed article effect on out-group 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 with the value representing no perceived bias (zero). More than 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 =  $t(371) = 17.08$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = 0.89$ . Regardless of which article they read, a majority of voters from both sides of the aisle tended to regard the battleground state polling story as biased against their candidate. Because perceptions of media bias tend to flourish in highly partisan environments, the ubiquitous perceptions of bias observed in these data reflect the heightened sense of partisanship in the lead-up to the election.

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 in which 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)  $\times$  3 (polling story: candidate winning, losing, tied) analysis of variance.

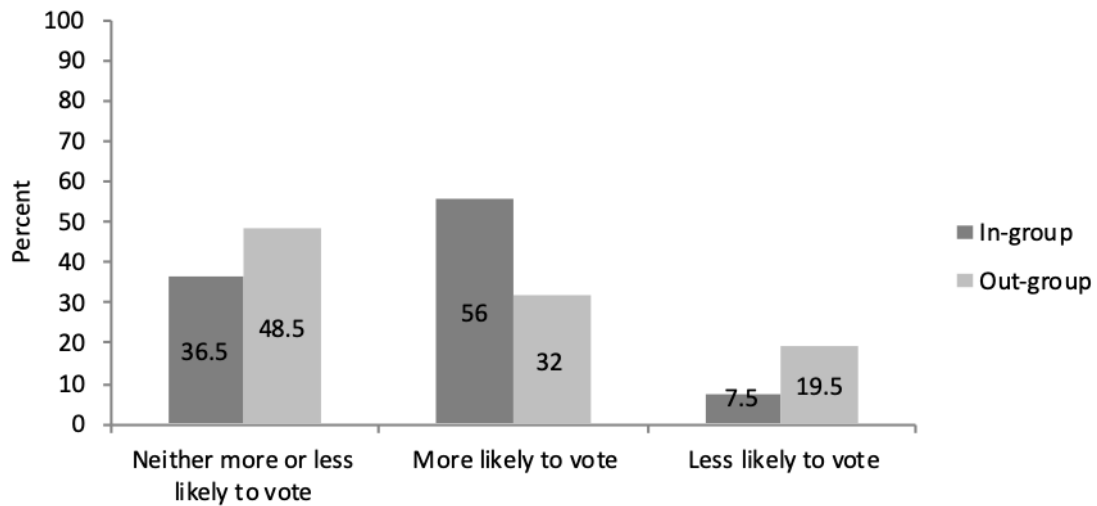


**Figure 2. Perceived article bias among Trump and Clinton voters. Note. Responses are from Clinton ( $n = 486$ ) and Trump ( $n = 375$ ) voters. Data collected November 2–6, 2016. Values range from 0 (no bias) to 4 (a lot of bias). Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals.**



There was no main effect for candidate preference,  $F(1, 852) = 0.13, p = .718, \eta^2_{\text{partial}} = .00$ , meaning that Trump and Clinton voters perceived roughly the same amount of bias against their respective candidates. Consistent with our expectations, there was a main effect for polling article condition,  $F(2, 852) = 28.33, p < .001, \eta^2_{\text{partial}} = .06$ . As Figure 2 illustrates, voters saw the most bias when they read an article that featured a poll in which their candidate was losing, a bit less bias when the poll indicated that the race was tied, and the least amount of bias when the article highlighted a poll that showed their candidate ahead, supporting H1. Planned contrasts revealed significant mean differences between the losing candidate condition and both the candidates-tied and candidate-winning conditions (both  $p < .001$ ); however there was only a marginally significant difference between the candidate-tied and the candidate-winning conditions ( $p = .08$ ). As can be seen in Figure 2, Clinton voters in the candidate-winning condition saw about as much bias as their political copartisans in the candidates-tied condition. Pairwise comparisons show that, among Clinton voters, there was not a significant difference ( $p = .45$ ) in perceived bias between her supporters who read an article in which she was depicted as winning ( $M = 0.92, SD = 1.24$ ) and those who read a story in which the poll said the race was tied ( $M = 1.04, SD = 1.35$ ), though the difference was in the expected direction. Perceptions of bias against her were significantly ( $p < .001$ ) heightened only in the condition in which Clinton was depicted as losing ( $M = 1.56, SD = 1.46$ ). Among Trump voters, perceptions of bias also followed the expected pattern, though the differences were slightly more pronounced. 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 that Trump was behind ( $M = 1.76, SD = 1.42$ ). Among his supporters, the difference between the candidate-winning and candidate-tied conditions was significant ( $p = .012$ ), though less so than the differences between other conditions (all  $p < .001$ ). Overall, Trump and Clinton voters' perceptions of bias fluctuated similarly across article conditions, and the interaction term was not significant,  $F(2, 852) = 1.75, p = .175, \eta^2_{\text{partial}} = .004$ . Perceptions of bias increased with worsening poll performance.

Our second hypothesis predicted the sorts of effects that voters would anticipate the news article would have on their in-group and out-group. To start, we tested whether voters perceived different effects when evaluating the in-group or the out-group by evaluating 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 multiple categorical response options (Hoffman, 2015). 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 in-group and out-group in different ways. The pattern of responses across conditions was consistent and can be seen in Figure 3.



**Figure 3. Perceived effect of polling article on behavior of in- and out-group.**

We predicted that respondents would be more likely to think the article motivated their in-group members to vote, compared with out-group members (H2). From the descriptive data, this appears to be the case, with a majority of voters predicting such an effect on their in-group, but less than a third presuming such behavior from their out-group. To test whether this difference was statistically significant, we performed a McNemar test comparing the proportion of respondents who anticipated a mobilizing effect on their in-group with the proportion of respondents who anticipated that effect for their out-group. Using an adjusted  $p$  value (Bonferroni) to account for the multiple comparisons in these post hoc tests, the McNemar value is significant ( $p < .001$ ). Voters were more likely to believe that the article would have a mobilizing effect on their in-group members as compared with their out-group members, supporting H2.

We also expected that if voters were to assume the article would discourage others from voting, they would be more likely to assume such a behavior from their out-group than from their in-group. Another McNemar test, again using an adjusted threshold for significance, reveals this to be the case ( $p < .001$ ). Substantively, voters seldom said that the article would make others less likely to vote. However, it is notable that they did so twice as often when estimating the article's effect on the out-group, supporting our third hypothesis.

### 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 alter their voting behavior in response to polling reports. The results of this experiment highlight two important assessments that audiences make about news articles that report election polls. First, partisans are likely to perceive bias against the candidates 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 in-group and out-group members' decisions to vote, respondents tended to believe that the article they read would encourage in-group voting, but would either have a neutral or discouraging effect on out-group voting.

### ***Bad News Polls and Perceived Bias***

Voters generally believed that the articles they read deviated from neutral. Given a long history of findings on perceptions of media bias, this finding is unsurprising. Indeed, a contentious election undoubtedly provided a strong sense of involvement among opposing partisans—an ideal context for perceptions of media bias to fester. What stands out in our experiment is not that voters spotted bias in the news article, but rather 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, and they were more likely to do so after seeing a poll showing their candidate losing (with 69% reporting bias) as compared with 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, our results show that audiences may believe that 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 that the bias stems from reporting the results in the first place; in the eyes of the public, “bad news” for their side may inherently have less news value. Alternatively, some of the perceived bias observed among voters may be attributed to general distrust in news. For example, more than 40% of both Trump and Clinton voters described a polling article in which their candidate was winning as biased. But if general media distrust were the only factor affecting perceptions of article bias, we would not see those perceptions increase as polling performance declines. Rather, the increased perceptions of news bias after being exposed to unpleasant poll results suggest a triggering of the defensive processing thought to underlie HMP.

These findings suggest that many members of the public are not untangling the information in the news from the vessel that delivers that information. The descriptor “biased”—once a serious accusation—seems to be synonymous with “the delivery of information that reflects poorly on my in-group.” This is precisely why we explicitly asked respondents to assess the article for bias, rather than use traditional HMP measures that ask respondents to indicate whether the article was favorable/unfavorable to one side or another. If respondents were asked to assess whether the article favored a candidate, the present results could be interpreted as voters recognizing that polling results do favor one candidate or another. By asking readers to explicitly assess bias, a term that implies an unfairness in the way the polling results were

reported, the results suggest that 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, is perceived as biased.

On the other hand, growing public cynicism over “game frame” news coverage itself could be a good thing. For decades, scholars have shown how game frames breed distrust for political institutions (Young, 2017). Our analyses suggest that the mildest form of game frame coverage—the sharing of poll results conducted by another source—is biased journalism in the eyes of partisans in the electorate. Beyond the reporting of who is ahead and who is behind, game frame coverage also tends to prioritize “insider access” journalism, whereas media scholar Jay Rosen (2018) has forcefully argued that “outside in” coverage would be of greater service to the citizenry. If journalists and their bosses come to believe that the reporting of poll results is no longer viewed as unbiased journalism, the opportunity exists for them to experiment with different models of campaign coverage to appeal to wider audiences. Of course, in the hyperpolarized environment that exists in contemporary American politics, scholars ought to expect that most innovations in news coverage will be met with skepticism by partisans (Wagner, Wells, Friedland, Cramer, & Shah, 2014).

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 postelection. After taking office, Trump continued his public battle with both news media and polls, even claiming that “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 *presumed behavior* that these messages are thought to cause. How do voters believe poll reports affect the voting behavior of others? And do those perceived effects differ depending on who those others are?

Our results show that voters tend to think horse-race 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. Consistent with a *first-person effect*, voters are optimistic about how their political copartisans respond to news stories highlighting close battleground polls. On the other hand, voters tended to predict that battleground polling articles would not impact the out-group’s voting behavior, with almost half of respondents saying the polling article would have “no effect” on their political adversaries’ decision to vote. This finding seemingly contradicts research indicating that people typically believe that 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 out-group 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 horse-race polls, they did not believe their political opponents would do the same. Consistent with in-group bias, when there

was a positive effect offered, voters assumed that their in-group was more likely than the out-group to experience it. Had we 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 mobilization among in-group and out-group members. When examining how audiences believe mass media messages influence other people, it is important for researchers to specify—influence whom and influence how?

### ***Limitations and Future Directions***

As with any research design, our data have 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 in-group and out-group 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 such as conventions, debates, and, most important, 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.

Although we made every effort to ensure that 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; however, it is possible, although unlikely, that participants think about and respond to Ohio poll results differently than they do North Carolina, for example. We should also note that our “tied” condition featured a poll showing a 44–42 race in Clinton’s favor. 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 (see Figure 1), but voters may have seen this poll result as slightly advantageous to Clinton.

Across conditions, the race was depicted as close enough that the trailing candidate was still within striking distance. This makes our findings regarding perceived media bias especially interesting because it demonstrates how sensitive these perceptions are to even slight variations in news content. But the closeness of the polls also warrants some caution when interpreting our presumed behavior findings. We can imagine that presumed behavior of in-group and out-group members could easily fluctuate with poll results. If voters encounter an article showing a battleground poll where their preferred candidate leads by 15 points, for example, would they still assume it would motivate their in-group to vote? A secondary analysis (available in the Appendix) provides some insight into the relationship between poll closeness and presumed behavior: Our data show that voters were slightly more likely to expect an article to mobilize in-group members when it featured a poll in which their candidate trailed. How perceptions of media impact change as a fluctuation of poll closeness is an avenue for future exploration.

Future research might also probe “bias” as a descriptor. Has the term become synonymous with undesirable information? And, if so, for whom? 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. It is possible, for example, that respondents assessed the poll report as biased because they felt that a news organization elected to write a story about this poll to the exclusion of other readily available poll results. In this sense, respondents may not necessarily disagree with the reported numbers in any particular poll, yet still assess bias in the story because of the news values used to select it relative to other available options. Further assessments 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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### Appendix

As a secondary analysis, we tested a model to examine which factors might be helpful in determining the sorts of presumed behavior voters might expect in response to the experimental manipulation. First, we explored which factors helped predict how voters believed the article would affect their in-group members, performing multinomial regression with the three presumed behavior options (article would have no effect/make in-group members more likely to vote/make in-group 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,  $\chi^2(16) = 104.63, p < .001$ , Nagelkerke pseudo  $R^2 = .14$ . Significant, unique contributions were made by education,  $\chi^2(2) = 6.65, p < .05$ ; gender,  $\chi^2(2) = 9.46, p < .01$ ; HMP,  $\chi^2(2) = 31.70, p < .001$ ; and article condition,  $\chi^2(4) = 18.68, p < .01$ . 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 effect that respondent believes an article would have on in-group others.

**Table A1. Multinomial Regression Models Predicting Perceived Article Effect on the In-Group.**  
*No effect versus less likely to vote*

Parameter	B (SE)	95% CI for Odds Ratio		
		Lower	Odds Ratio	Upper
Intercept	−3.49 (0.85)***			
Age	−0.02 (0.01)	.96	1.00	1.01
Men	0.93 (0.34)**	1.30	2.53	4.92
Non-White	−0.28 (0.67)	.21	.76	2.74
Education	0.27 (0.11)*	1.06	1.31	1.61
Clinton voter	−0.13 (0.34)	.46	.88	1.70
Winning poll	0.94 (0.38)*	1.22	2.55	5.37
Losing poll	0.37 (0.40)	.66	1.45	3.20

HMP	0.54 (0.11)***	1.39	1.72	2.14
<i>No effect versus more likely to vote</i>				
Intercept	0.53 (0.38)			
Age	-0.01 (0.01)	.98	.99	1.00
Men	-0.06 (0.16)	.92	1.02	1.14
Non-White	0.19 (0.26)	.73	1.21	1.99
Education	0.02 (0.05)	.92	1.02	1.14
Clinton voter	0.24 (0.16)	.93	1.27	1.74
Winning poll	0.21 (0.18)	.71	1.02	1.46
Losing poll	0.53 (0.19)**	1.18	1.70	2.45
HMP	-0.03 (0.06)	.86	.97	1.09

Note.  $R^2 = .12$  (Cox & Snell),  $.14$  (Nagelkerke). Model  $\chi^2(16) = 104.63$ ,  $p < .001$ . Reference group for polling condition is Race is Tied.

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

The parameter estimates in Table A1 show how these variables helped predict whether a respondent thought the polling article would have no effect or that it would make their in-group members more or less likely to vote. We will first address the top portion of Table A2, which compares the response category "article will have no effect on in-group members" to "article will make in-group members less likely to vote." First, it is important to note that few respondents (7%) believed the article would discourage their in-group 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 copartisans 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 in-group. Additionally, compared with those who read an article in which the race was depicted as tied, those reading an article in which 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 A1, the predictors are less helpful in determining whether a respondent believed the article would have no effect on in-group members (36% of respondents predicted "no effect") or whether they believed the article would make in-group members more likely to vote (56% of respondents predicted such an effect). Compared with 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 that the article would encourage their in-group members to vote, Wald  $\chi^2(1) = 8.20$ ,  $p < .01$ .

**Table A2. Multinomial Regression Models Predicting Perceived Article Effect on the Out-Group.**  
*No effect versus less likely to vote*

Parameter	B (SE)	95% CI for Odds Ratio		
		Lower	Odds Ratio	Upper
Intercept	-0.91(0.49)			
Age	-0.02(0.01)**	.97	.98	.99
Men	0.56(0.21)**	1.16	1.75	2.62
Non-White	0.02(0.32)	.54	1.02	1.91
Education	0.07(0.07)	.94	1.07	1.22
Clinton voter	0.31(0.22)	.90	1.37	2.08
Winning poll	0.16(0.24)	.73	1.17	1.89
Losing poll	-0.35(0.24)	.63	1.38	3.04
HMP	0.28 (0.07)***	1.16	1.33	1.53
<i>No effect versus more likely to vote</i>				
Intercept	-0.75 (0.41)			
Age	0.00 (0.01)	.99	1.00	1.01
Men	-0.17 (0.17)	.60	.84	1.19
Non-White	0.10 (0.26)	.66	1.10	1.84
Education	0.04 (0.06)	.93	1.04	1.16
Clinton voter	0.26 (0.17)	.93	1.30	1.82
Winning poll	0.35 (0.20)	.96	1.42	2.10
Losing poll	-0.10 (0.20)	.61	.91	1.34
HMP	0.05 (0.06)	.93	1.05	1.19

Note.  $R^2 = .09$  (Cox & Snell),  $.10$  (Nagelkerke). Model  $\chi^2(16) = 78.99$ ,  $p < .001$ . Reference group for polling condition is Race is Tied.

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

Central to this investigation, the polling information within an article influenced how respondents anticipated in-group members would react to a news article. Respondents were more likely to assume that the article would boost in-group 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 that bad news would be a motivating factor.

We next repeated the analysis with presumed behavior of out-group 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 A2, 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 out-group. Higher levels of HMP were associated with the belief that news about battleground polls would have a suppressor effect.

Unlike what we observed in the model predicting presumed behavior for in-group members, knowing which article a respondent saw was not helpful in predicting how they believed out-group members would react. Regardless of whether a voter viewed a poll showing his or her candidate winning, losing, or tied, the voter was still most likely to believe the article would have no effect on out-group members.

In summary, we discovered that candidate choice did not have an impact on presumed article influence—that is, 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 in-group members. Specifically, respondents were more likely to believe that an article would increase turnout among their in-group when they were exposed to polling information that showed their candidate behind; respondents were more likely to predict depressed in-group 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 in-group turnout.

The former finding is more interesting, demonstrating voters' belief that a "bad news" poll—at least in a tight race—will motivate copartisans. Whereas 51% of those in the candidate winning condition and 54% in the candidates tied condition thought the article would increase in-group 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 we can say that voters believe that their team is more likely to turn out after seeing a polling news article showing their candidate behind.