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Attitudinal and Behavioral Consequences of Published Opinion Polls

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It is a truism to speak of the key normative role that public opinion polls play in contemporary democratic societies. Theorists and practitioners long have extolled how polls inextricably link citizens to their elected officials. Indeed, public opinion polls not only offer citizens a mechanism with which to express their sentiment on key issues of the day, but also provide policymakers with information about what their constituents might or might not desire. Citizens may be able to express their views on a particular issue through individual acts such as donating money to a cause or writing a letter to the editor of a local newspaper, but along with voting, polls are one of the few opportunities that offer the mass public equal voice. Moreover, the role that polls play in the citizen-policymaker relationship hinges upon their dissemination by the mass media.

This chapter explores the attitudinal and behavioral consequences of public opinion polls portrayed in the media. We focus not on how policymakers respond to poll results, but on how the consumption of content from published polls can influence citizens. We begin with a review of the types of information imparted by published opinion polls and discuss their effects both within and outside the voting context. In doing so, we discuss two theories of influence – the spiral of silence and impersonal influence – and articulate the mechanisms of influence that may be at play.

Media portrayals of polls

Media portrayals of public opinion travel in many guises, none more explicit than straightforward statements about how a representative sample of citizens stands on an issue. Polling organizations often take snapshots of opinion on a controversial issue, and these results are disseminated to the larger public by the news media. The almost guaranteed publication of polls is facilitated by the symbiotic relationship between polling organizations and the news media (Traugott, 2008): polling organizations need the media to promote their work, and the news media need content that is timely, deals with conflict, and is generally newsworthy. This symbiotic relationship has morphed over the years such that news organizations have built or expanded their own polling operations by pooling resources (e.g., CBS News and the *New York Times*) or entered into partnerships with research companies (e.g., *The Guardian* and ICM in the United Kingdom).

In election campaigns, polls constitute a significantly larger portion of news media coverage termed horse-race coverage. Scholars, pundits, and citizens alike have expressed concern over this type of media content, which focuses on which candidates are winning, losing, and doing better than expected (Bartels, 1988). These portrayals prioritize candidates' relative popularity over their policy issue stances, and depict politics as a game involving a series of elaborate strategies. Although the advent of television brought with it a focus on image, this norm of campaign coverage existed among newspapers for a century prior to the broadcast medium's appearance on the media landscape (Sigelman and Bullock, 1991), though levels of horse-race coverage vary depending on cultural and institutional contexts (Strömbäck & Kaid, 2008). Moreover, this norm of coverage is dictated by journalists, not the candidates or parties; in fact, in the U.S. context, national media have been shown to be relatively unreceptive to covering substantive messages (Flowers, Haynes, and Crespin, 2003).

Three types of election polls provide much of the fodder for horse-race coverage (Asher, 2007). Cross-sectional surveys often include a *trial-heat question*, which asks respondents the candidate or party for whom they would vote if the election were held today. Despite its being a single poll, media coverage of trial heat survey results typically reference how the candidates or parties fared relative to other recent polls. More formal comparisons often are made in *tracking polls*, which utilize rolling averages of consecutive days' worth of interviews with slightly smaller samples (Traugott and Lavrakas, 2007). *Exit polls* are surveys conducted with voters as they depart from their balloting location, and are used by the news media to project election outcomes as well as to explain why citizens cast their vote a particular way.

As we illustrate later, horse-race coverage, as represented by public opinion polls, has serious implications for how citizens think and act regarding politics. But the concern is not merely academic. Governments around the globe are apprehensive about the ramifications of the publication of pre-election poll results. Data collected in 2002 from 66 countries indicated that just under half (46%) had embargoes on the publication of pre-election poll findings (Spangenberg, 2003). These embargo periods ranged from one day in countries such as Argentina, France, and Israel, to 30 days in the case of Luxembourg. Most of the restrictions involve questions regarding vote intention, and the top reason cited for these restrictions was the need to protect the dignity of the democratic process. In over two-thirds of the countries studied, media organizations could publish exit polls only after all polls had closed.

The assumption that undergirds this set of popular and academic concerns as well as the governmental measures against the publication of poll results is that poll data help constitute part of citizens' information environment. And certainly, the nature of the environment, which includes mediated information, interpersonally communicated information, as well as first-hand

experience, is a major factor in determining how individuals respond to the world around them (Shamir & Shamir, 1997). Against this backdrop, we now turn to the effects of published opinion polls within and outside the electoral context.

Effects of published opinion polls

Effects on voting

One of the most frequently researched areas of poll effects is their impact on citizens' political voting decisions. Preoccupation with understanding these voting effects dates back to the earliest days of scientific public opinion polling, when concerns loomed over a possible "bandwagon effect" of such information, that is, a tendency of polls to boost support for the political option (candidate, party or policy) shown to be favored by a majority of people (e.g., Robinson, 1937). There were heated debates about the possibility of such a phenomenon early on (e.g., Gallup, 1965; Gallup & Rae, 1940), which continue until this day, with the aforementioned media bans motivated by such concerns. The classic works in this area revolved mostly around conceptualizing and measuring the bandwagon assumption (e.g., Baumol, 1957; Henshel & Johnston, 1987; Simon, 1954; Zech, 1975). From these works emerged the development of formal models of poll effects to more accurately predict voting behavior (e.g., Henshel, 1995; Simon, 1997).

Today, voting-related research of poll effects can be broadly categorized by the criterion variable of interest – namely, whether the scholar is interested in the effects of published polls on *turnout* (i.e., whether to vote, a behavioral effect) or on *voting preferences* (the question of what or whom to vote for, which can be an attitudinal and/or behavioral effect). We briefly address both domains of research in turn.

Effects on turnout. Effects of published polls on turnout among citizens can be classified simply as either mobilizing or demobilizing. Based on Downs' (1957) theoretical position that individuals are rational beings and engage in cost-benefit analyses, both types of effects turn on two key factors – their assessment of the situation and their sense of political efficacy. Specifically, will citizens' expectations about the likely outcome of a referendum or election change due to the information retrieved from published polls? And, given the perceived closeness of the race, what do citizens believe to be the electoral utility of voting?

The literature provides evidence for both possible consequences. Studies investigating the demobilizing effects of polls on turnout often focus on the consequences of media coverage of exit polls, since these are believed to lower one's propensity to turn out. Despite some evidence of such effects (e.g., Delli Carpini, 1984), a research summary by Sudman (1986) indicates that these are likely to be small and occur only if the polls show a clear winner of an election that previously has been shown to be close. In addition, some studies find similar effects of pre-election polls (e.g., de Bock, 1976).

On the flip side, a slightly larger body of work has produced findings showing the mobilizing effects of published opinion surveys. These studies typically assume that the closeness of an election is positively related to the perceived utility of casting one's ballot and thus the magnitude of turnout. Though there are studies that do not find support for this hypothesis (e.g., Kunce, 2001; Matsusaka, 1993; Matsusaka & Palda, 1999), recent findings from a large-scale meta-analysis of empirical studies (Geys, 2006), formal election modeling (Taylor & Yildirim, 2010), and natural (Indridason, 2008) and participation game experiments (Großer & Schram, 2010) consistently point to a strong positive effect of election closeness on voter turnout. It is important to note that turnout studies often assume that citizens are aware of

the closeness of an election as indicated by pre-election polls. But this assumption is by no means self-evident and in need of further investigation, especially in light of some null findings in the published literature (e.g., Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1994) and the contradictory results of a meta-analysis of poll effect studies conducted by Hardmeier and Roth (2003, p. 175). For example, politically predisposed citizens might engage in “wishful thinking” thereby diminishing the effects of poll exposure on election predictions (e.g., Babad, 1995, 1997; Granberg & Brent, 1983). However, to the extent that polls are received by citizens and shape their perception of election closeness, the available evidence suggests that they have an independent influence on the size of election turnouts.

Effects on voting preferences. Three types of poll effects on voting intention can be broadly distinguished from one another: the *bandwagon effect* mentioned above, sometimes also referred to as the *contagion effect* (Blais, Gidengil, & Nevitte, 2006); its converse, the *underdog effect*, in which polls lead people to support a trailing party, candidate or policy position; and *strategic voting*, which includes the possibility to vote for a viable “second-best” solution if one’s preferred candidate or party has little chance of success in the election or referendum.

Similar to the turnout effects of polls, studies on the bandwagon effects of poll information draw from a distinct strand of research on rational choice theory, resulting in the development of predictive ‘bandwagon curve’ models of voting behavior (e.g., Gartner, 1976; McKelvey & Ordeshook, 1985; Meirowitz, 2005; Straffin, 1977). Moreover, evidence of bandwagon effects has emerged in a number of experimental (e.g., Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1994; de Bock, 1976; Mehrabian, 1998) and survey studies (e.g., Abramowitz, 1987; Nadeau, Cloutier, & Guay, 1993; Skalaban, 1988), mostly in the US but also in European countries (e.g., McAllister & Studlar, 1991; Schmitt-Beck, 1996), in primary (e.g., Kenney & Rice, 1994) and

presidential (e.g., Gimpel & Harvey, 1997) election contexts, and in the context of general multi-party elections (e.g., Faas, Mackenrodt, & Schmitt-Beck, 2008) and referendum campaigns (e.g., Tyran, 2004).

Regardless of the contexts in which bandwagon effects have been shown to occur, studies show either aggregate or individual-level effects of polls in the opposing direction of an increase of support given to a party, candidate, or policy position trailing in published pre-election/referendum polls. For example, Lavrakas, Holley, and Miller (1991) find, in their survey experiment, underdog effects of polls three times as large as bandwagon effects. Similarly, in her early review of the poll effects literature, Marsh (1984) concludes that there is a persistent suggestion of possible underdog effects but no support for the bandwagon hypothesis. Despite its breadth, the extant literature can hardly conclude whether it is bandwagon or underdog effects of polls that are *generally* more widespread and stronger. The inability to do so stems primarily from theoretical and operational inconsistencies: researchers not only study different contexts, but also emphasize different processes underlying these effects. Yet, a relatively recent meta-analysis by Hardmeier and Roth (2003) yielded a seeming preponderance of a medium bandwagon effect. However, this finding should not be accepted at face value as it is impossible to control whether it is due to imbalances within the sample of studies conducted (e.g., the vast majority of studies focused on U.S. contexts). At this point, we must note that more process-oriented, cumulative research rather than premature generalizations about relative frequencies and sizes of these two effect forms are in order.

The third voting preference effect, strategic voting, is concerned with whether voters use pre-election poll information to inform their voting behavior in such a way so as to maximize the utility of their vote in producing a favorable election outcome. Research in this domain has

surged as scholars study poll effects in multi-party or -candidate elections where such voting behavior is particularly relevant. Consuming information from published polls can be particularly effective in improving election forecasts of politically unaware citizens (Andersson, Gschwend, Meffert, & Schmidt, 2006; Meffert & Gschwend, forthcoming). It is important to note that the promotion of strategic voting by published polls represents an influence on behavioral voting preferences, but not on the attitudes of citizens (Blais, Gidengil, & Nevitte, 2006; Forsythe, Myerson, Rietz, & Weber, 1993).

Non-electoral effects

The attitudinal and behavioral effects of published opinion polls outside the electoral realm are no less significant than those related to voting. Undergirded by normative assumptions that a healthy populace is one in which citizens are engaged in political discussion with each other, exchange ideas, and be exposed to differing viewpoints, a spate of political communication and public opinion studies have shown that perceptions of public opinion can shape individual attitudes and behaviors. This section presents research related to how published polls can foster political distrust, increase political engagement, and constrain opinion expression.

Effects on political trust. The ubiquity of published polls during an election campaign makes them virtually impossible to ignore. As noted earlier, media coverage of polls contributes much to the culture of horse-race journalism, and as Patterson (1993) noted, “the game schema dominates the journalist’s outlook” (p. 60). This game schema, or strategy coverage, is characterized, among other things, by language related to games, war, and conflict, with voters seen as audience members and candidates/parties as performers; a focus on candidates’ or parties’ standings in the polls; and a central concern with winning and losing (Jamieson, 1992).

Extrapolating from the election to controversies in general, published polls often reflect at least two competing sides, whether they are Republicans and Democrats, or those who favor military intervention overseas vs. those who are less hawkish, or supporters and opponents of a local proposed bill.

In strategic coverage, this focus on competing sides can activate cynicism or political mistrust (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997). The literature on framing helps to shed light on how polls and horse-race coverage in general shape political trust. First, because framing involves deciding which aspects to highlight over others and how to communicate those aspects (Entman, 1993), specific frames can divert audience members from basic information about an issue (Valkenburg, Semetko, & de Vreese, 1999). Second, episodically framed stories, as shown by Iyengar (1987), tend to have two effects. These stories not only make particular characteristics of particular individuals more accessible, but also have repercussions on how audience members assign blame and attribute responsibility to the solution of the problem (Iyengar, 1987). Thus an individual exposed to strategy frames in poll-related stories will recall the parties' or candidates' strategic behaviors that in turn will activate cynical attributions. Indeed, Cappella and Jamieson (1997) found that exposure to a single strategically framed news story is sufficient to activate cynical attributions; sustained exposure consistently activates cynical responses.

The presence of polls on today's political landscape can exert an influence on citizens' levels of trust more subtly as well. The conflict embodied in a published poll typically is accompanied and often exacerbated by negative discourse, both in political circles and in the media. In their touchstone study of print coverage of democratic institutions, Miller, Goldenberg, and Erbring (1979) found that over half of all front-page articles related to confidence in government contained a critical reference. Of significance was the fact the criticisms were

directed primarily at the president – not the presidency – and that criticisms directed at Congress that appeared were utterances by the president. The media negativity that appeared decades ago remains, leading Patterson (1993, p. 19) to conclude that “the antipolitics bias of the press that came out of the closet two decades ago has stayed out.” Content analyses and surveys provide evidence of varying levels of media negativity toward democratic institutions and lowered trust as a consequence of exposure to that negativity (Moy & Pfau, 2000).

Effects on political engagement. The pessimistic view espoused by those who believe that horse-race coverage has trivialized the substance of politics can be offset by those who perceive polls to invigorate the electorate. On the one hand, scholars like Patterson (1993, 2002) believed that horse-race coverage is a primary reason for the decline in citizen engagement. Yet Bartels (1988) found that although nearly two-thirds of news media coverage went to the primary winner of the week, when prospective voters were asked to recall stories from a given week, four out of five stories dealt with horse-race coverage – which, at a minimum, points to cognitive engagement on part of the audience. Bartels attributed heightened recall and reported political knowledge to the dramatic unity that is represented in published polls. His view concurs with that of Popkin (1991, p. 75), who describes people’s tendency to act as clinicians instead of statisticians when it comes to generating judgments about candidates. That is, voters are predisposed to check candidates (or parties, for that matter) ‘clinically’ for fit with their mental models of what an agreeable office-holder looks like; they do so by drawing on vivid narrative information more than on dull statistics and figures.

The potential ramifications of sparking interest in an issue – such as that raised by a front-page story accompanied by an opinion poll – are great. Interest can spur discussion, motivate one to engage in information-seeking behaviors from a wide variety of media, and

potentially gain knowledge of that issue (McLeod, Scheufele, & Moy, 1999) and perhaps make it easier for someone to become more politically engaged (Vedlitz & Veblen, 1980).

The intervening variables that mediate the relationship between published polls and political engagement can also include political trust. After all, if published polls can suppress or depress levels of political trust, they ultimately may have an impact on levels of political engagement. Indeed, there is some evidence that increased political cynicism can lead to political disengagement (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997), though others have not replicated this empirical relationship (de Vreese, 2005).

Effects on opinion expression. The spiral of silence (Noelle-Neumann, 1974, 1993) is a longstanding theory that treats opinion expression as a function of perceptions of opinion. Focusing less on public opinion as a democratic tool, Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann (1995) equated public opinion with social control, believing that public opinion fostered social integration and helped ensure a sufficient level of consensus such that actions could be taken and decisions made. If public opinion is reflected in agreement about values and goals, then public opinion is those “opinions on controversial issues that one *can* express in public without isolating oneself” (Noelle-Neumann, 1993, pp. 62-63).

Given this outlook, the spiral of silence theory is based on several key assumptions. Specifically, citizens are driven by a fear of isolation from society, and therefore are motivated to scan their environment to gauge the climate of opinion. Endowed with a “quasi-statistical sense,” they discern what public opinion is on an issue, and it is these perceptions that will determine their likelihood of expressing their views on that issue. In particular, if individuals perceive the prevailing climate of opinion to align with their own views, they will be more likely to share

their opinions. However, in an opinion environment perceived to be hostile to their views, individuals will opt to remain silent.

These social-psychological processes engendered by the spiral of silence involve only the fears, thoughts, and behaviors of disparate individuals. How then does the *spiral* of silence occur? If people's willingness to speak out on a controversial issue hinges on what they perceive to be the dominant view, "the tendency of the one to speak up and the other to be silent starts off a spiraling process which increasingly establishes one opinion as the prevailing one" (Noelle-Neumann, 1974, p. 44). This dynamic process relies on the mass media, which portray public opinion through various types of content, including published polls.

Intuitively appealing, the spiral of silence theory has found support in many discussion domains – e.g., the Persian Gulf War (Eveland, McLeod, & Signorielli, 1995), biotechnology (Priest, 2006; Scheufele, Shanahan, & Lee, 2001), and the O.J. Simpson trial (Jeffres, Neuendorf, & Atkin, 1999) – and in a broad array of countries including Israel (Shamir, 1997), Singapore (Willnat, Lee, & Detenber, 2002) and Mexico (Neuwirth, 2000). One commonality across these topics that has facilitated the processes outlined in the spiral of silence theory is the fact that the issues have a strong moral component, and these value-laden issues make it possible for one to isolate oneself in public (Noelle-Neumann, 1993).

The spiral of silence theory, however, is not without its shortcomings (see Scheufele & Moy, 2000 for a review). Most of the criticisms lodged against the theory have focused on how individuals may refrain from expressing minority views because of some force other than fear of isolation (or conversely, speak out because they share the majority view). As Neuwirth, Frederick, and Mayo (2007) contend, fear of isolation "is not limited to a unique situation or set of circumstances, but neither does it apply to all situations" (p. 452). Noelle-Neumann (1993)

identified hardcores and avant-gardes as individuals who would speak out in the face of majority opposition, and research has begun to identify alternative motivations. Scholars have found that concern and strength of opinion (Salmon & Neuwirth, 1990) and attitude certainty (Matthes, Morrison, & Schemer, 2010) predicted speaking out, as did personal interest (Kim et al., 2004) and perceived issue importance (Moy, Domke, & Stamm, 2001). Others have suggested that being on the “winning side” also can explain such conformist behavior (Glynn & McLeod, 1985).

Also, is it really society per se from which individuals fear isolation? Grounding her theory in Asch’s (1955) and Milgram’s (1961) conformity experiments, Noelle-Neumann (1993) defined society as all those individuals participating in the study. Given how conformity rates dropped significantly when one other person dissented, Salmon and Kline (1985) raised the possibility that individuals would feel isolated from their reference groups, and not society at large. Indeed, Moy, Domke, and Stamm (2001) found that opinion climates within one’s reference groups, or “micro-climates,” held more sway than the perceived climate of opinion of the larger community.

It is clear that the spiral of silence theory inextricably links mediated portrayals of public opinion to the likelihood of individuals expressing their opinions. Despite the prevalence of public opinion polls in today’s news media, the explanatory power of the original formulation of the spiral of silence theory has begun to decline as scholars begin to fill in the theoretical gaps. For example, research on the effects of exemplification indicates that in attempting to infer reality, audience members rely more on “case-study” individuals than on base-rate information provided in polls (Daschmann, 2000). This suggests that citizens are not processing published opinion poll data as much as they are attending to one or two individuals the journalist had

sought to provide an interesting quote. In addition, system-wide changes in media have meant that the mechanisms that elevated the spiral of silence to be a theory of powerful media effects no longer exist. The consonance that Noelle-Neumann (1974) found in the German media system of the 1960s has long disappeared. In its place (and in media systems around the world) is a plurality of outlets that run the ideological gamut and oftentimes frame the same controversy quite differently. The vast array of choices available to the media consumer of the 21st millennium means that selectivity processes may be work, and that citizens are choosing content that aligns with their dispositions, rather than monitoring their behaviors so as to remain part of the group.

Impersonal influence: A general framework

By assuming an interplay between media content and one's social environment, in which the former shaped the latter, the spiral of silence theory differed greatly from early perspectives of public opinion and media effects, which juxtaposed the media against the influence of friends and family. Katz and Lazarsfeld's (1955) seminal study within this limited effects paradigm identified the presence of opinion leaders, individuals who exercised leadership within the smallest social systems – groups of friends, for example – and within the context of everyday, mundane settings. Termed “personal influence,” this type of power emanated from the direct social ties that one had.

Decades later, Diana Mutz (1992, 1998) coined the term “impersonal influence” to denote an influence that stands in stark contrast to Katz and Lazarsfeld's notion of personal influence. Impersonal influence originates from representations of collective conditions, including collective opinions:

“This type of influence is deemed ‘impersonal’ because it is brought about by information about the attitudes, beliefs or experiences of collectives outside of an individual’s personal life space. In other words, impersonal influence is not about the direct persuasive influence of media messages that attempt to promote one viewpoint over another; it is strictly concerned with the capacity for presentations of collective opinion or experience to trigger social influence processes” (Mutz, 1998, p. 4).

While Mutz conceives of impersonal influence as a larger theoretical framework (and one that includes the spiral of silence), it stands to reason that effects of publicized polls are at the core of this theoretical enterprise given that they provide maybe the most straightforward representation of collective opinion possible. After all, polling information is part and parcel of a larger pseudo-environment created by the media – and one to which citizens need to react under conditions of a large-scale polity that extends beyond their immediate social environment. As such, the media play an important role in generating perceptions of the broader collective opinion climate (e.g., Mutz & Soss, 1997). Indeed, there is evidence that opinion polls present information that is particularly capable of influencing such perceptions (e.g., Sonck & Loosveldt, 2010). Still, impersonal influence exerted by polling information would be rather negligible if it was found that perceptions of collective conditions and opinion remained inconsequential for the most part. However, this does not seem to be the case in many contexts. One widely researched example of this is the phenomenon that people tend to base their “economic vote” more on an assessment of how the economy as a whole is doing (sociotropic considerations) than of how they themselves are faring economically (pocketbook considerations) (e.g., Kinder & Kiewiet, 1979; Markus, 1988). Impersonal influence, Mutz (1998) argues, is a necessary condition for societal integration and democratic governance in the context of large-scale societies where much of

people's larger social environment evades their immediate experience, which makes them reliant on representations of that environment in the media. This seems to be particularly true when it comes to information about others' opinions on political issues, candidates, and parties provided by polls, the impact of which can be conceptualized as an instance of impersonal influence.

At first glance, the ideas behind impersonal influence suggest that polling information should contribute to a wider process of societal integration and thus generally lead to a convergence of public opinion towards political issues or actors by means of providing points of reference for social co-orientation. While this expectation ties in well with common accounts of polling effects as being based on conformity and social pressures (see, for example, Marsh, 1984, and the original spiral of silence literature cited above), the mechanisms through which published polls exercise impersonal influence have been shown to be more diverse and complex, thus prohibiting any sweeping generalizations of uniform effects across the citizenry. The most comprehensive account of the processes underlying the impersonal social influence of publicized opinion is presented by Mutz (1994, 1998) who focuses on three mechanisms.

First, polling information may exert impersonal influence to the extent that it informs citizens about the likelihood of success of different candidates, parties or policies (e.g., in referendum contexts) and leads them to rely on this information in a utility-maximizing manner once they are called to the ballot box. In this view, *strategic voting* is assumed to occur primarily among those that are highly involved with and informed about the issues at hand due to the cognitive demands of making the informed choices necessary to allot one's political support in a strategic fashion. Obviously, this type of impersonal influence of published polls is relevant mostly in electoral contexts of some sort.

Two points are particularly noteworthy about strategic voting. First, it is a possibility only in electoral contexts in which a person has more than two options available and is able to rank them by preference. Second, it suggests that the effects of published polls can be bidirectional: While strategic considerations may induce people to support their preferred candidate or party only as long as the polls indicate realistic chances of success (i.e., *viability*), thus leading to decreased support for trailing candidates or parties, they also may lead them to increase support for their favorite option on the ballot once polls indicate it is having trouble garnering sufficient public support. The obvious moderating factor regulating citizens' use of these strategic considerations is the strength with which they favor one option over the next best, so that a pronounced preference for a candidate or party should lead to increased support, rather than quick defection in the face of undesirable polling results. While Mutz (1998, p. 259) suggests that strategic voting does not occur for many people, this assumption has become increasingly tenuous with more recent research showing otherwise (e.g., Meffert & Gschwend, forthcoming, see below).

The second mechanism through which polls can have an impersonal influence on people is the use of an *audience response* (Axson, Yates, & Chaiken, 1987) or, more generally, a *consensus heuristic* (Giner-Sorolla & Chaiken, 1997). A consensus heuristic is in use when information indicating the preferences of a collective of reference (e.g., polling data) cues people into assuming that the more popular option in the collective is the better option for no reason beyond its popularity. In a series of experiments, Mutz (1992, 1998) finds evidence of impersonal influence of popularity cues implicating the consensus heuristic, but only in cases where information about the candidates or issues in question is unnaturally low. These findings suggest that the effects of published polls based on this process are likely only in rare situations

such as low-profile elections in which citizens have access to poll data but virtually no information on the candidates, parties or issues on the ballot.

Finally, the third mechanism through which polls might come to bear impersonal influence is what Mutz (1998) terms the *cognitive response mechanism*. The proposition here is that people who are exposed to information about levels of support for a candidate, party or policy are led to think about reasons for and against the position of the mass collective (Mutz, 1997). In other words, exposure to a poll primes in people's minds reasons others could have for supporting or rejecting a candidate, a party or a policy. Rehearsing these arguments, in turn, influences their own opinion towards the respective voting option – in either possible direction. In this process, the effects of poll information are mediated by the cognitive responses of the audience which depend on personal characteristics (such as level of information and involvement) and characteristics of the wider information environment (such as the valence and quality of arguments circulating for and against any of the candidates, parties, or policies at hand). Mutz observes this mechanism to be the most common among the three, since it is based on moderate levels of involvement and information that are typical for most people most of the time.

All in all, work on the impersonal influence of published opinion polls shows that polls generally are a far cry from leading citizens to low-information acquiescence into majority opinion. On the contrary, the corpus of literature suggests that one of its major “impersonal influences” is to induce people to ponder reasons for adopting a certain political position. These reasons are typically derived from the media discourse surrounding the publication of any particular poll, making impersonal influences of polls contingent on their wider information environment. While in a diverse information environment polls might motivate people to reflect

on a variety of aspects of a political issue or competition, a more narrow media diet characterized by partisan selectivity might thwart these deliberative benefits of published polls and instead lead them to promote political polarization in the electorate.

Final thoughts

The mechanisms underlying impersonal influence (Mutz, 1998), similar to those outlined by Hardmeier (2008), outline various scenarios in which citizens may find themselves, some of which are more realistic than others. The processes by which published opinion polls can exert attitudinal or behavioral effects are grounded in the assumption that public opinion – whether in the form of voting or speaking out – involves a social system that somehow interacts with one’s media content system. Both systems help shape citizens’ definition of social reality and what constitutes acceptable, desirable, or odious. Though some mechanisms like contagion, or the simple affective tendency to follow the crowd (e.g., Bartels, 1988), do not demand much cognitive effort, the cognitive response mechanism allows for a more optimistic picture of the populace. This perspective recognizes that individuals are not merely lemmings in a political and social world, but they attend to, seek out, and perhaps refute arguments for a particular side of an issue.

The effects of published polls ultimately are a function of how that information gets processed, and in a continuously shifting media landscape, these effects are somewhat of a moving target. If the internet provides increased possibilities of exposing oneself to like-minded points of view (e.g., Bimber & Davis, 2003; Stroud, 2008), the conducive effects of the “cognitive response” Mutz describes can become dubious. If citizens are aware, first and foremost, of arguments supporting their preferred political option and opposing the others, the internal deliberative processes initiated by polls may well be supplanted by “enclave

deliberation” (Sunstein, 2007) in citizens, which consists of a rehearsal of these arguments, leading to increased anger with and alienation from segments of the population opposing one’s own view as they are represented in the polls. In this scenario, the possibilities for partisan selectivity afforded by the new media landscape change the nature of the average poll effects we can expect. In such a scenario, they might turn out to promote political polarization rather than measured political judgment.

Consequently, a fuller understanding of the information environment is crucial for assessing the effects of polling information on citizens. It is important to note that poll effects are, by means of the mechanism underlying them, particularly contingent on the political and media context in which the information has been conveyed. For instance, how do state-press relationships vary across countries and how do these relationships shape the publication of opinion polls? Are the media sufficiently autonomous to publish what editors and managers perceive to be newsworthy? How pluralistic is the set of media outlets to which a person turns for news? Understanding these contexts provides both challenges and opportunities for communication researchers. On one hand, we are far from reaching any conclusive theory that can sufficiently explain the effects of the full information environment; on the other hand, the effects of public opinion polls will be hard to pinpoint given macro-level changes, and therefore continue to present opportunities for theory-building and scholarly debate.

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