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### **PUBLIC UNDERSTANDING OF POLITICAL POLLING RESULTS**

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#### Abstract

This thesis is aimed at examining possible means of improving lay understanding of political polling results, focused specifically on how text summaries of political polls can be used to increase levels of agreement with the results. To discover means of improvement, an online survey was designed and conducted among registered voters in the United States with four experimental modules, each with different text summaries of a hypothetical poll. The results indicate the clear impact of differences in coverage of political polls, indicating that more detailed descriptions do not necessarily increase trust in polling results but do decrease disbelief in polling results. Results examined by party affiliation further indicated significant differences between perceptions of polling results depending on the nature of the results summary.

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## I. Introduction

Prior to 1935, political polling was mainly qualitative in nature, or focused on pen-and-paper surveys processed by hand (Rothman). The prevalence of political polling and its communication began with George Gallup, the founder of Gallup Polls. In founding Gallup Polls and in an effort to communicate polling results with the average American, Gallup established a powerful precedent for the use of political polls in traditional media (Newport). He communicated closely with the public, penning a number of columns in the *New York Times* throughout the 1930s and 1940s that presented national polling results and explained their implications, or simply reasons to trust the results themselves. Nearly 100 years later, however, the media presentation of survey science has changed significantly, perhaps at the cost of public trust or understanding of survey and poll results. This thesis explores the reasons behind that loss, and is aimed at discovering a means to improve the trust and understanding of political polling results—hinged on the hypothesis that increased information given in polling coverage increases voter understanding and trust.

Today, few pollsters communicate directly with the public, and media coverage relies on treating elections like horse races.<sup>1</sup> Leading up to elections, most polling is communicated in a few sentences or less as a piece of larger work. Take, for example, an article by Matt Canham of *The Salt Lake Tribune*, writing on the 2018 Congressional election in Utah’s District 4. He writes, “a late August poll by Dan Jones & Associates for UtahPolicy.com...had Love at 49 percent and McAdams at 46 percent” (Canham). This is the only mention of polling in the piece, a lengthy work that relies on these numbers but does not attempt to explain or conceptualize them. Note here the lack of discussion of the sampling, the acceptance of the accuracy of the polls without questioning for biases, and the missing voice of the pollsters themselves. It is because of Gallup’s work that polling results are generally accepted, but modern readers would absolutely benefit from a closer relationship with researchers and polling methodology. George Gallup strove to understand and communicate “the will of the people” with the people themselves, but in the absence of a strong connection between laymen and pollsters, what is the general understanding of political polling?

Lohr and Singer look to the so-called “polling disaster” of the 2016 American presidential election, examining the many election models that reported Clinton’s chance of victory at 70% or higher and the baffling eventual result of a Trump victory (Lohr). The authors suggest a general fallibility of political polling based on that outcome, and scrutinize the sampling, historical modeling, and the failure of local polls used to predict the election outcome (Lohr). The piece seems to suggest that polling or “big data” will never be truly accurate—that human fallibility cripples the industry in a way that deems it significantly untrustworthy if not entirely irrelevant.

Nate Silver, statistician and founder of FiveThirtyEight, discusses this idea in “The Polls are All Right.” Referencing a study done by Jennings and Wlezien, Silver writes,

“polling accuracy has been fairly consistent over the past several decades in a variety of democratic countries...The media narrative that polling accuracy has taken a

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<sup>1</sup> Horse-race election coverage, referred to throughout this paper, is defined by Broh’s writing on the subject. He writes, “A horse is judged not by its absolute speed or skill but in comparison to the speed of other horses, and especially by its wins and losses. Similarly, [in horse-race election coverage] candidates are pushed to discuss other candidates; events are understood in a context of competition; and picking the winner becomes an important topic. The race—not the winner—is the story” (Broh 515). More generally, horse-race election coverage is characterized by a focus on where candidates rank in relation to others, rather than election issues or more general concerns.

nosedive is mostly bullshit...Polls were never as good as the media assumed they were before 2016 — and they aren't nearly as bad as the media seems to assume they are now" (Silver).

Empirical analysis asserts that polling is as accurate as it has been since 1972 on the presidential level (Silver). Media coverage following the 2016 election, however, has toed the line between hypercriticism of polling results (especially on a national scale) and unthinking acceptance of polling results that eventually contributes to public confusion—for example, Matt Canham's coverage of the 2018 Utah congressional race between Mia Love and Ben McAdams, which did not discuss sampling, margin of error, or methodology, and instead reported horse race predictions in the weeks leading up to election day. Lohr discusses this, writing that what contributed to the failure of the polls in 2016 as well as public distrust of the science moving forward was "a combination of the shortcomings of polling, analysis and interpretation, perhaps both in how the numbers were presented and how they were understood by the public" (Lohr). Here, an adage from columnist Jeffrey Simpson seems relevant— "just as love is wasted on the young, so polls are often wasted on the media" (Kay).

Polling is not an exact science, as Silver is quick to admit— but media coverage of polling varies widely depending on the news cycle in question. He writes about a pro-Republican bias in coverage of polling results in 2012 and in early coverage of 2018 midterm elections—biases that exist while polling science has, over time, shown little preference toward either major party in the United States (Silver). These biases can influence public trust of results, and make election polling seem partisan or significantly more variable than it is. This inhibits public understanding of the science—why endeavor to understand or trust a science that is seemingly so varied and untrustworthy?

Political polling provides campaigns with valuable insights on likely voters and influences campaign strategy. Moreover, we cannot relegate polling only to "experts" who can use the results—if data exists on the public, the public should have access to those results. The works referenced here point out a clear issue in media coverage of polling results: the public does not understand polls and is not given the tools to understand them. The media at times even exacerbates public misunderstanding by mischaracterizing polling results in an effort to achieve a snappier story or a catchier headline. Silver points to a story on the 2016 Irish referendum on legalizing abortion, in which *The Guardian* characterized the race as "close" when polling showed the "yes" vote as ahead by 11 to 29 points (Silver).

If media coverage is lacking, and attempts by media outlets to outguess polling are fundamentally lacking, as Silver extensively discusses in an analysis of the 2017 French presidential election<sup>2</sup>, a means to improve public understanding of political polling results is of utmost importance. Experiments to study and test methods to increase public understanding of polling, so that it is a more effective tool for campaigns, political operatives, and general understanding of the current state of affairs, is a necessary pursuit. A return to Gallup's close

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<sup>2</sup> In "Conventional Wisdom May Be Contaminating Polls," Silver discusses the mainstream media's proclivity to "indulge the possibility" of a long shot or a statistical improbability (Silver). Specifically, he focuses on the 2017 French presidential election, in which the probability of a win by populist candidate Marine Le Pen was drastically over explored by the media. Here, media outlets, as well as financial firms, relied on "conventional wisdom," following a Trump victory in the United States only six months earlier, to project Le Pen's chance of winning at around 40%, when the most conservative conventional pollsters had her probability of victory resting at approximately 3% (Silver). In an attempt by media outlets to beat the pollsters, they ignored a consistent 20-25 point lead by Emmanuel Macron and eventually were proven wrong by French voters, who elected Macron with 66% of the vote (Silver).

relationship with the American public is not out of reach, but may not be required if public understanding of polling results can be improved.

An abundance of horse race polling coverage ignores the nuances of the science as well as the nuances of the public. Failure to understand the limitations of polling inevitably leads to a distrust of polling results. Rosen in *The Observer* writes, “In a horse race world, polls are a baseline reality...They can tell you who’s ahead but not why. And they are mute on a favorite horse race question: how things are going to ‘play out from here,’” (Jarvis). Because media coverage relies principally on “horse race” results, media consumers lose the intricacies of results. It is possible, however, that media coverage could be improved to increase understanding of or trust in polling results.

This is what this thesis intends to test and explore—lay understanding and trust of polling results as well as potential tactics to improve understanding. This is accomplished through a survey of a representative sample of 1,000 registered voters in the US, employing a survey with four experimental modules and analysis of the results.

Specifically, the survey experiment tests a few hypotheses. First, that media coverage of political polling results can affect a voter’s perception of political polling by increasing or decreasing trust of coverage in both specific political races and political race coverage more broadly. Second, that different groups will respond to different types of coverage in distinct ways, specifically across party lines. Most importantly, I test the hypothesis that registered voters respond more positively to political polling results when provided with more detailed descriptions of the polling results.

## II. Survey Methodology and Text

The survey employed is comprised of four sections from the perspective of the participant: an introductory block meant to screen out unqualified participants (those younger than 18 and those not registered to vote in the United States); a background block meant to gauge voter history, gender, and level of education; an experimental block, of which each participant viewed one of four options (explained in more detail below); and a closing block focused on party affiliation, ethnicity and race. Each participant was asked to respond to 12 or 13 questions, and the average survey response time was slightly under four minutes. Each respondent was presented with a consent letter about the nature of the research before beginning the survey, available to read in Appendix 1.

The construction and ordering of the survey questions relies on widely accepted political and election survey methodology. For example, question order principles as discussed by McDermott and Frankovic in *Horseshoe Polling and Survey Method Effects* on the most effective questioning styles to construct a political public opinion poll. Specifically the idea is that respondents may need to “‘warm up’ before being asked complicated political evaluation questions” (McDermott 246). I employ this in my survey design while attempting to avoid the question order effect of “direction,” in which prior questions influence upcoming answers in the survey, especially when partisan questions are asked of the respondent (McDermott 246). In an ideal scenario, I aim to achieve similar results to Siegelman, who found in 1981 that

“respondents were more willing, or more able, to give substantive answers to presidential approval questions if they had first been asked other political attitude questions. Specifically, “don't know” responses to a presidential job approval question were 8 percentage points lower when respondents were given other political attitude questions to answer first” (McDermott 246).

Ideally, the number of “don’t know” responses is as low as possible.

In question text, the use of open questions<sup>3</sup> is nearly unavoidable due to the nature of the research, though McDermott postulates that they increase “don’t know” or “unsure” responses. McDermott advises also that a survey author exclude open-ended questions (where the respondents write short responses to questions) for the same reason, though I am interested in the candid responses of the respondents (McDermott 253). The number of open-ended questions is limited, however, as the respondents are only asked to respond to two completely open-ended questions which request their opinion on beliefs on polling bias and the typical respondent of political polls. The survey instrument is included in Appendix 1 in its entirety.

Respondents were randomly assigned to one of four experimental blocks to test the key hypotheses above, and are labeled in analysis Modules 1 through 4. They are differentiated by slight variations in an introductory statement on the polling results in a hypothetical congressional election. Each of the text statements, written to imitate potential media coverage of political polling results, are listed below.

Module 1: “Congressional District A has two candidates running for the House of Representatives seat this year. A recently released political poll shows Candidate M. Jackson 1.9 points ahead of Candidate A. Swift two weeks before election day.”

Module 2: “Congressional District A has two candidates running for the House of Representatives seat this year. A recently released political poll shows Candidate M. Jackson 1.9 percentage points ahead of Candidate A. Swift two weeks before election day.”

Module 3: “Congressional District A has two candidates running for the House of Representatives seat this year. A recently released political poll shows Candidate M. Jackson ahead of Candidate A. Swift 48% to 46% two weeks before election day.”

Module 4: “Congressional District A has two candidates running for the House of Representatives seat this year. A recently released political poll shows Candidate M. Jackson 1.9 percentage points ahead of Candidate A. Swift, 48% to 46%, two weeks before election day.”

The statements above were constructed to exclude partisan and gender identifiers, and also to avoid any potential association with a current lawmaker or candidate that a participant would recognize. The second sentence in each includes variation in how the polling results are described in ways that may alter the reactions of respondents to the questions that follow: their level of agreement with the polling numbers, and whether they trust the polling numbers, or find them biased. Analysis focuses on the two questions that immediately follow the polling result summary, Q[Module]Points and Q[Module]Trust, shared below.

Q[Module]Points: Do you agree or disagree with this statement based on the text above?  
"Candidate M. Jackson is leading Candidate A. Swift by 1.9 percentage points."

Q[Module]Trust: Do you agree or disagree with this statement based on the text above?  
"I believe this political poll to be an accurate reflection of upcoming election day results."

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<sup>3</sup> I define “open question” as an intentionally vague question intended to draw on a respondent’s existing knowledge or opinion without prompts. For example, a question about preference for political candidates without sharing the party that the candidate is representing, with the goal of achieving results as close to eventual election day results as possible.

The respondents were asked to select “Strongly agree,” “Agree,” “Somewhat agree,” “Neither agree nor disagree,” “Somewhat disagree,” “Disagree,” or “Strongly disagree” in response to the statements in the questions. The full survey text is available in Appendix 1.

The survey experiment was approved by the University of Utah Institutional Review Board (IRB) on March 4, 2019 and was fielded March 6-7 2019, through an established panel of US residents on Amazon Mechanical Turk (mTurk). Each respondent was compensated \$0.20 for a completed survey response, judged by the respondents adherence to the screening criteria and completed answer to each question. Overall, there were 1,000 accepted survey responses leveraged in analysis.

A brief note about the use of Amazon Mechanical Turk (mTurk) as a means to procure sample. After exploring the options to obtain sample, mTurk was deemed to be the most successful, cost effective, and efficient way to gather sample. However, mTurk cannot be considered a perfect representation of the general population. Paolacci et al., cautioning against relying too heavily on sample from mTurk, write that

“workers tend to be younger (about 30 years old), overeducated, underemployed, less religious, and more liberal than the general population... Within the United States, Asians are overrepresented and Blacks and Hispanics are underrepresented relative to the population as a whole... It should not be treated as representative of the general population” (Paolacci).

While not a perfect match to the general population, mTurk has been found to be at least as diverse as the typical internet sample. Buhrmeister writes, following analysis of 3,006 mTurk workers, that “MTurk participants are at least as diverse and more representative of noncollege populations than those of typical Internet and traditional samples” (Buhrmeister 5). Thus, for the purposes of this experiment, reliance on sample from mTurk is not only necessary but probably the best means of obtaining sample within the constraints of this project. A detailed topline report sharing the demographic information of the sampled participants can be found in Appendix 2.

### III. Analysis Methodology

The findings were exported to R and analyzed through the creation of a set of frequencies tables summarizing the response results, once incomplete or unqualified respondents (those under 18 or those not registered to vote) were removed from the results.

Potential shortcomings of this analysis lie mainly in the way the experiment was conducted. Principally, the population sampled on Amazon Mechanical Turk cannot be considered truly representative of the larger population because of its left-leaning bias, higher education level, and lower level of ethnic and racial diversity, as Paolacci writes. Further, it is possible that respondents could have been influenced by social desirability bias, or the influence to choose a societally-deemed “acceptable” answer rather than an honest personal answer (Phillips 923). While possible, this is unlikely due to the neutral nature of the survey questions and the anonymous nature of the survey. Finally, a level of self-selection bias may have skewed the results as well. Because the survey experiment was labeled as a “Political Polling Opinion” survey on both mTurk and the Qualtrics platform, it is possible that respondents self-selected to respond because of an existing interest in politics or an existing opinion about political polling (Bethlehem).

Despite these possible sample biases, it was assumed that the survey sample accurately represented the population of registered voters in the United States. Using an experimental

approach, the representativeness of the sample is less important than it would be in an observational study. The experimental treatment used here allows for significant conclusions about how changes in wording causes change in responses. Weights were not applied to respondents based on demographic breakdowns of the voting population. Further, the margin of error assumed in this analysis is  $\pm 3.1$  and the confidence interval selected was 95%.

#### IV. Summary of Results and Implications

A number of conclusions can be drawn based on the results of the survey experiment. The remainder of the paper focuses on the results and their implications in two chief subject areas. First, the overall trust or distrust of the polling results conveyed by respondents across the different modules (without consideration for demographic breaks of the participants). Second, noticeable differences based on self-identified party affiliation. Other results and conclusions, while relevant, can be drawn based on the frequencies shared in the appendix but are not explored in the text.

The experiment revealed differences in trust of polling results based on how those results were presented in the text, though not on a significant macro level. Each of the four modules, which can be found in Section II, yielded between 52% and 53% agreement with the statement “I believe this political poll to be an accurate reflection of upcoming election day results,” as seen in Table 1.1.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> The percentage of “agreement” or “belief in accuracy” referenced here originates from a sum of the respondents who selected “Somewhat agree,” “Agree,” or “Strongly Agree.” Similarly, a percentage of “disbelief” or “distrust” would originate from a sum of the respondents who selected “Somewhat disagree,” “Disagree,” or “Strongly Disagree.”

Table 1.1 Comparison of Agreement and Disagreement Scores by Module - Trust in Future Accuracy

Experimental Module	Score Type	Score
Module 1	Agreement score	54%
	Neutral	18%
	Disagreement score	28%
Module 2	Agreement score	52%
	Neutral	26%
	Disagreement score	22%
Module 3	Agreement score	53%
	Neutral	22%
	Disagreement score	25%
Module 4	Agreement score	55%
	Neutral	24%
	Disagreement score	21%

In contrast, the level of disagreement with accuracy of the polling results varies much more widely between modules. 28% of respondents expressed disagreement with the poll's future accuracy when presented with the text prompt from Module 1, while only 21% of respondents expressed disagreement with the statement when presented with Module 4, which synthesizes the reporting components of the other three modules, and is the most holistic of the text statements. This suggests that while variations in text such as the phrase "percentage" or an inclusion of the vote share proportions of each candidate are not significantly impactful in improving belief that a poll is an accurate reflection of election day results, more concrete information along those lines in political polling coverage decreases overt disbelief in or disagreement with polling accuracy.

Examined further, respondents are less likely to have a concrete belief about accuracy or inaccuracy of polling results when presented with more information, as demonstrated in the variance between frequencies of "Neither agree nor disagree" responses. "Neither agree nor disagree" selection increases when a respondent is presented with more information—modules with the phrase "percentage points" (Modules 2 and 4) have a higher share of these "neutral" responses by between 6% and 8% when compared to Module 1, which has no mention of

“percentage points” or a note on candidate vote share, as Module 3 does. Those who viewed Module 3 selected “Neither agree nor disagree” 4% more than those who viewed Module 1, which, though a smaller difference, is still significant.

This, when paired with the findings on response levels of agreement or disagreement suggests that respondents who are presented with concrete and quantitative information about political polling results at least do not disagree as openly with their accuracy as when presented with less information. Information about candidate vote share and the arithmetic difference between the vote shares does not necessarily improve belief in results, but does decrease disbelief.

This is supported by scores quantifying the agreement with the current accuracy of the polls. Respondents were asked if they agreed or disagreed with the statement “Candidate M. Jackson is leading Candidate A. Swift by 1.9 percentage points” after being prompted by text.

Table 1.2 Comparison of Agreement and Disagreement Scores by Module - Trust in Current Accuracy

Experimental Module	Score Type	Score
Module 1	Agreement Score	81%
	Neutral	14%
	Disagreement Score	6%
Module 2	Agreement Score	84%
	Neutral	9%
	Disagreement Score	8%
Module 3	Agreement Score	68%
	Neutral	15%
	Disagreement Score	17%
Module 4	Agreement Score	86%
	Neutral	10%
	Disagreement Score	3%

86% of respondents from Module 4 and 84% of respondents from Module 2 agreed with this statement, while only 81% of respondents who viewed Module 1 agreed with this statement. The differences between Module 2 and Module 1 are exceptionally interesting here, as the only variations between the two modules is the word “percentage,” and yet there is a difference of 3% in the frequency of agreement with the given statement. Of course, this difference cannot be found to be extremely statistically significant, especially with a margin of error of  $\pm 3.1$ , but still the difference stands. Again, the module that provides the respondent with the most information overall (Module 4) inspires the most agreement amongst respondents, and the lowest frequency of disagreement, at only 3% when compared to a relative high of 8% in Module 2 (setting Module 3 aside, for reasons explained below).

The analysis of this question among respondents who viewed Module 3 confounds these results. Only 68% of respondents in Module 3 indicated agreement with the statement, and 17% expressed disagreement with the statement, a significant departure from the results of the other 3 texts. This may be because the text in Module 3 can be thought to be at odds with the statement the respondent was asked to evaluate. Specifically, the text in Module 3 reads “A...political poll shows Candidate M. Jackson ahead of Candidate A. Swift 48% to 46%.” The differences in vote

share when extrapolated from the text prompt were 2%, while the evaluation statement implied a difference of 1.9%. Based on the stark differences in the question results when compared to the other modules, it is clear that respondents were aware of the disparity and that it significantly decreased their trust in the results. Because this effect was not seen in analysis of the other Modules, the evaluation of the current accuracy of the poll by Module 3 respondents is necessarily removed from the other analysis in this question.

Looking to the differences between current accuracy agreement scores and future accuracy agreement scores overall, frequencies suggest that respondents are generally comfortable with political poll results as an accurate measure of the current state of affairs, but are less comfortable with making predictions about the future based on the results of a political poll. Agreement scores are significantly lower when respondents are asked to evaluate the statement “I believe this political poll to be an accurate reflection of upcoming election day results” than when respondents are asked to evaluate the statement “Candidate M. Jackson is leading Candidate A. Swift by 1.9 percentage points.” This is clearly seen in the table below (Table 1.3). The disparity between the average agreement score between the two statements is approximately 26%, without accounting for demographic differences.

Table 1.3 Comparison of Agreement by Experimental Module and Agreement Type

	Module 1	Module 2	Module 3	Module 4	Average Agreement Score
Current Accuracy Agreement	81%	84%	68%	86%	80%
Future Accuracy Agreement	54%	52%	53%	55%	54%

#### V. Differences by Party Affiliation

When agreement with future accuracy and current accuracy are examined by the party of the respondent, it becomes clear that trust and opinion of political polling results is influenced significantly by political party. When averaged between modules, it can be clearly stated that those who identify as members of the Democratic Party trust and believe polling results more than any other group, followed by those who identify as Republicans and distantly by self-identified Independents. On average, Democrats agree with the statements “I believe this political poll to be an accurate reflection of upcoming election day results” and “Candidate M. Jackson is leading Candidate A. Swift by 1.9 percentage points” 60% and 66% of the time respectively, as seen in Table 1.3.<sup>5</sup> Republicans, in contrast, agree 52% of the time with the future accuracy of the poll and 63% of the time with the current accuracy of the poll, and Independents fall even lower at 41% and 55% respectively.

<sup>5</sup> This score is made by averaging the “Agreement” score (the sum of the frequency of “Somewhat agree,” “Agree,” and “Strongly agree”) in each module by party.

Table 1.4 - Agreement Score by Experimental Module and Party Affiliation

	Module 1	Module 2	Module 3	Module 4	Overall
Democrat Current Agreement Score	77%	75%	41%	74%	66%
Democrat Future Agreement Score	57%	62%	57%	64%	60%
Independent Current Agreement Score	48%	67%	28%	77%	55%
Independent Future Agreement Score	37%	34%	41%	52%	41%
Republican Current Agreement Score	61%	73%	48%	70%	63%
Republican Future Agreement Score	62%	51%	56%	42%	52%

A note on self-identified Independents before moving into analysis. An abundance of polls suggest that “true” Independents are fewer in number than those who identify as Independents. Data from Pew Research Center suggests that most Independents are simply “partisans who are disillusioned with the two major parties” and that only 7 percent of the 38 percent of Americans who identify as Independents truly have no party affiliation (Bump). In my sample, 37% of respondents identified as “true” independents. While this proportion of “true” independents to moderate partisans does not reflect the proportions of Pew’s research, it is important to remember the nature of Independent responses in this experiment, especially in drawing broad conclusions.

Looking more closely at differences between responses by module and party, a few interesting data points emerge. The measure of both Independent and Democratic agreement with the statements given increases when respondents are given more information. Democrats respond positively to “percentage points” phrasing, looking to agreement with the future accuracy of the poll—expressing agreement with the statement “I believe this political poll to be an accurate reflection of upcoming election day results” between 5% and 7% more frequently when the phrase is included in the political poll summary. Without the “percentage points” phrasing, self-identified Democrats trust the summary about equally, 57% of the time after exposure to either Modules 1 and 3. The most trusting group overall, Democrats show a clear preference for “percentage points” phrasing when compared to other groups.

Independents, the group most dubious of future accuracy of the poll, are most willing to agree under circumstances where they are presented with the most information possible. The summary most trusted by this group is Module 4, which includes the phrase “percentage points,” as well as the vote share comparison of the candidates. 52% of self-identified Independents

expressed agreement with this statement after exposure to Module 4, an 11% increase from the next most trusted module, Module 3, which 41% of Independents expressed agreement with. Both Module 1 and 2 were greeted with much more suspicion, earning only 37% and 34% agreement respectively. Looking to the phrasing of the respective summaries, the most notable difference is the inclusion of the hypothetical vote share of the candidates “48% to 46%.” Given the significant increase in Independent support with the inclusion of this phrase, we can conclude that Independents are more likely to agree that polling results will be reflective of election-day results when a phrase on proportion of the supposed vote is included. More generally, Independents respond positively to an increase in information, as Module 4 contains notes on both vote share and the phrase “percentage points” and stands apart from the modules with an agreement score of 52%, 11% higher than the next-closest agreement score in Module 3.

Self-identified Republicans, while generally more trusting than the Independent group (referring to the “Agreement averages” of the groups), contradict the trends of the other two groups. Republicans do not respond well to an abundance of information given, and seem more willing to agree with the future accuracy of the poll when the political poll summary is sparse and does not include the phrase “percentage points” or estimated vote share between candidates. By far, Republicans prefer Module 1, with 62% agreement. The next preferred summary is Module 3, with 56% agreement. Republican agreement with the phrase “I believe this political poll to be an accurate reflection of upcoming election day results” falls to just 42% in Module 4, which the two other groups support the most overall.

In analysis of agreement with current accuracy of the poll, this finding is the opposite, as Republicans express more agreement with the statement “Candidate M. Jackson is leading Candidate A. Swift by 1.9 percentage points” after being exposed to poll summaries or results that contain the phrase “percentage points” or offer additional information. Republicans express the highest level of agreement with Modules 2 and 4 when posed with a question on the current accuracy of the poll—between 73% and 70% respectively. The other two modules, though most trusted to be an accurate prediction of election results in reference to future accuracy, have low agreement scores comparatively (Module 1 with 61% and Module 3 with just 48%).

The low agreement score of Module 3 can be partially explained by the issue mentioned in Section IV, in which respondents noted the disparity between 1.9% and 2% and therefore disagreed with the statement given about current accuracy of the poll. Democratic trust also drops off for Module 3 significantly, with 41% agreement for Module 3 and 74% agreement for Module 4, the module with the next-lowest Democratic agreement score. An already generally-low level of Independent trust for the statement drops to 28% when a respondent is exposed to Module 3. Notable, however, is the fact that of the three groups exposed to Module 3, Republicans trust it the most of the political parties (48% agreement among Republicans, 41% among Democrats, and 28% among Independents).

It is unclear why this disparity in trends exists between belief in current poll accuracy and future poll accuracy results amongst Republicans. One possible theory is that while Republicans are more dubious of phrases like “percentage points” and vote share information in predicting future outcomes, they are comfortable with those phrases in expressing a current measurement of how a given political race stands. More generally, an explanation for this trend could be articulated as an avoidance by Republicans to make definitive statements about future election outcomes, paired with a general trust of political polls to accurately measure current election standing.

Independent and Democratic responses reflect this theory, though not on the same scale. The average level of agreement with the statement “I believe this political poll to be an accurate reflection of upcoming election day results,” a measure of future accuracy, is lower than the average level of agreement of all parties with the statement "Candidate M. Jackson is leading Candidate A. Swift by 1.9 percentage points," a measure of current accuracy, as seen in Table 1.3. Respondents are less willing to make statements about the future than they are about the current state of a race, but Republicans display this proclivity the most strongly, and it is paired with a general distrust for information about political polls.

## VI. Final Implications

After a review of the results, a few conclusions emerge. First, that an increase in information about political polling results generally increases trust in the results at the current moment and trust that the results will reflect the outcome on election day. The most effective way to improve trust in political polling, however marginally, is to include the phrase “percentage points,” or that phrase in conjunction with the current vote share of each of the candidates. Further, small inconsistencies in reporting of poll results significantly affects perception of the political poll’s accuracy, as seen in respondent unwillingness to agree with the statement of current accuracy after respondent exposure to Module 3.

A significant conclusion that the data reveals is the varied response to political poll summaries or reports based on political party. Self-identified Democrats are the most trusting of political polling results overall, with a clear preference for summaries that include the phrase “percentage points,” or that phrase and a note on vote share of the candidates. Independents, while on-average the least trusting or willing to agree of all three groups, follow the same trend. Republicans stand out in this data, displaying a preference for the most simple summary of polling results available, and a secondary preference for summaries that include the vote share of the candidates.

Reviewing the results, it is clear that coverage of a political poll does affect how readers view the accuracy of the poll and its implications. To improve understanding amongst readers, journalists should at the very least provide their readers with a strong summary of the results when they are mentioned, which improves trust in results and could be as simple as adding the word “percentage” to a sentence. It is not necessary for polling to be inaccessible, or difficult to understand. While it may not be realistic to re-establish a close relationship between pollsters and the American reader, as George Gallup once maintained, it is possible to significantly improve agreement with polling results through the adjustment of discussions surrounding those results. Rather than relying principally on horse-race coverage, it is important to reexamine the rhetoric used in political coverage moving forward.

Appendix 1: Public Poll Trust and Understanding Experiment  
Start of Block: Intro block

QINTRO

Consent Cover Letter

Public Perception of Political Polling Coverage

The purpose of this study is to examine and understand public attitudes toward political polling and its coverage in news media amongst registered voters in the United States. It is written and fielded by a student researcher at the University of Utah.

If you agree to participate, you will complete a 10 minute survey about your perception of political polling coverage. Your participation is completely voluntary. You may choose not to answer a question or are free to withdraw consent and discontinue participation in the interview at any time for any reason without penalty.

You will receive \$0.20 for a completed survey response. Your responses may help us learn more about public attitudes toward political polling coverage among United States voters.

There are no known risks involved in participating in this study other than those encountered in day-to-day life.

Your survey answers stored in a password protected electronic format. The survey does not record your name, email address, or other identifying information. Therefore, your responses will remain anonymous. No one will be able to identify you or your answers, and you will not be identified in any publications.

If you have questions at any time about the study or the procedures, you may contact the researcher, Isabella Fregoso, at [u1067689@utah.edu](mailto:u1067689@utah.edu).

Contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB) if you have questions regarding your rights as a research participant. Also, contact the IRB if you have questions, complaints or concerns which you do not feel you can discuss with the investigator. The University of Utah IRB may be reached by phone at (801) 581-3655 or by e-mail at [irb@hsc.utah.edu](mailto:irb@hsc.utah.edu).

By completing the survey, you are giving your consent to participate in this research and to have your anonymous response recorded. Thank you for your willingness to participate!



University of Utah  
Institutional Review Board  
Exemption 3/4/2019  
IRB\_00119504

Page Break

QAGE How old are you?

- Under 18 (1)
- 18 - 24 (2)
- 25 - 34 (3)

- 35 - 44 (4)
- 45 - 54 (5)
- 55 - 64 (6)
- 65 - 74 (7)
- 75 - 84 (8)
- 85 or older (9)

Page Break

QREGISTERED Are you registered to vote in the United States?

- Yes, registered. (1)
- No, not registered. (2)

Page Break

End of Block: Intro block

Start of Block: Background block

Page Break

Q42 Please enter your 5-digit United States Zip Code

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Q43 What is your sex?

- Male (1)
- Female (2)
- Trans Male (3)
- Trans Female (4)
- Nonbinary (5)
- Other/Prefer not to respond (6)

Page Break

Q44 What is the highest level of education you have completed?

- High school graduate (1)
- Some college (2)
- Associate's degree (3)
- Bachelor's degree (4)
- Master's degree (5)
- Doctoral or professional degree (6)

Page Break

Q45 In most general elections, which answer best describes how you voted?

- Straight Democratic (1)
- Mostly Democratic (2)
- A few more Democrats than Republicans (3)
- About equally for both parties (4)
- A few more Republicans than Democrats (5)
- Mostly Republican (6)
- Straight Republican (7)
- Other/Unsure (8)

End of Block: Background block

## Start of Block: EXP\_Control (Module 1)

QCONTROLTEXT Please read the text below carefully and answer the questions that follow.  
 “Congressional District A has two candidates running for the House of Representatives seat this year. A recently released political poll shows Candidate M. Jackson 1.9 points ahead of Candidate A. Swift two weeks before election day.”

QControlPOINTS Do you agree or disagree with this statement based on the text above?  
 "Candidate M. Jackson is leading Candidate A. Swift by 1.9 percentage points."

- Strongly agree (1)
- Agree (2)
- Somewhat agree (3)
- Neither agree nor disagree (4)
- Somewhat disagree (5)
- Disagree (6)
- Strongly disagree (7)

QControlTRUST Do you agree or disagree with this statement based on the text above?  
 "I believe this political poll to be an accurate reflection of upcoming election day results."

- Strongly agree (1)
- Agree (2)
- Somewhat agree (3)
- Neither agree nor disagree (4)
- Somewhat disagree (5)
- Disagree (6)
- Strongly disagree (7)

Page Break

Q12 These upcoming questions request a short answer response. Please be thorough. Your responses will not be associated with your name or any other identifying information.

Page Break

QControlSAMPLE In your opinion, who is the typical respondent of a political poll?

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Page Break

QControlBIAS In your opinion, is political polling biased? If so, how?

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End of Block: EXP\_Control

## Start of Block: EXP\_Percentage (Module 2)

QPERCENTAGETEXT Please read the text below carefully and answer the questions that follow.

“Congressional District A has two candidates running for the House of Representatives seat this year. A recently released political poll shows Candidate M. Jackson 1.9 percentage points ahead of Candidate A. Swift two weeks before election day.”

QPercentagePOINTS Do you agree or disagree with this statement based on the text above?

"Candidate M. Jackson is leading Candidate A. Swift by 1.9 percentage points."

- Strongly agree (1)
- Agree (2)
- Somewhat agree (3)
- Neither agree nor disagree (4)
- Somewhat disagree (5)
- Disagree (6)
- Strongly disagree (7)

QPercentageTRUST Do you agree or disagree with this statement based on the text above?

"I believe this political poll to be an accurate reflection of upcoming election day results."

- Strongly agree (1)
- Agree (2)
- Somewhat agree (3)
- Neither agree nor disagree (4)
- Somewhat disagree (5)
- Disagree (6)
- Strongly disagree (7)

Page Break

Q24 These upcoming questions request a short answer response. Please be thorough. Your responses will not be associated with your name or any other identifying information.

Page Break

QPercentageSAMPLE In your opinion, who is the typical respondent of a political poll?

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Page Break

QPercentageBIAS In your opinion, is political polling biased? If so, how?

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End of Block: EXP\_Percentage

## Start of Block: EXP\_Voteshare (Module 3)

QVOTESHARETEXT Please read the text below carefully and answer the questions that follow. "Congressional District A has two candidates running for the House of Representatives seat this year. A recently released political poll shows Candidate M. Jackson ahead of Candidate A. Swift 48% to 46% two weeks before election day."

QVotesharePOINTS Do you agree or disagree with this statement based on the text above? "Candidate M. Jackson is leading Candidate A. Swift by 1.9 percentage points."

- Strongly agree (1)
- Agree (2)
- Somewhat agree (3)
- Neither agree nor disagree (4)
- Somewhat disagree (5)
- Disagree (6)
- Strongly disagree (7)

QVoteshareTRUST Do you agree or disagree with this statement based on the text above? "I believe this political poll to be an accurate reflection of upcoming election day results."

- Strongly agree (1)
- Agree (2)
- Somewhat agree (3)
- Neither agree nor disagree (4)
- Somewhat disagree (5)
- Disagree (6)
- Strongly disagree (7)

Page Break

Q18 These upcoming questions request a short answer response. Please be thorough. Your responses will not be associated with your name or any other identifying information.

Page Break

QVoteshareSAMPLE In your opinion, who is the typical respondent of a political poll?

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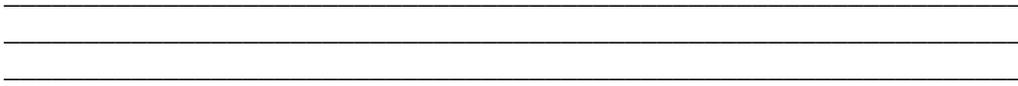
Page Break

QVoteshareBIAS In your opinion, is political polling biased? If so, how?

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End of Block: EXP\_Voteshare

## Start of Block: EXP\_All (Module 4)

QALLTEXT Please read the text below carefully and answer the questions that follow.

“Congressional District A has two candidates running for the House of Representatives seat this year. A recently released political poll shows Candidate M. Jackson 1.9 percentage points ahead of Candidate A. Swift, 48% to 46%, two weeks before election day.”

QAllPOINTS Do you agree or disagree with this statement based on the text above?

"Candidate M. Jackson is leading Candidate A. Swift by 1.9 percentage points."

- Strongly agree (1)
- Agree (2)
- Somewhat agree (3)
- Neither agree nor disagree (4)
- Somewhat disagree (5)
- Disagree (6)
- Strongly disagree (7)

QAllTRUST Do you agree or disagree with this statement based on the text above?

"I believe this political poll to be an accurate reflection of upcoming election day results."

- Strongly agree (1)
- Agree (2)
- Somewhat agree (3)
- Neither agree nor disagree (4)
- Somewhat disagree (5)
- Disagree (6)
- Strongly disagree (7)

Page Break

Q30 These upcoming questions request a short answer response. Please be thorough. Your responses will not be associated with your name or any other identifying information.

Page Break

QAllSAMPLE In your opinion, who is the typical respondent of a political poll?

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Page Break

QAllBIAS In your opinion, is political polling biased? If so, how?

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End of Block: EXP\_All

Start of Block: Close block

Q36 Now there are just a few more questions for background and statistical purposes only.

QPARTYID Do you consider yourself a Republican, a Democrat, an Independent, or something else?

- Republican (1)
- Democrat (2)
- Independent/something else (3)

Display This Question:

If Do you consider yourself a Republican, a Democrat, an Independent, or something else? = Republican

And Do you consider yourself a Republican, a Democrat, an Independent, or something else? = Democrat

QPARTY\_INTENSITY Would you call yourself a strong `#{QPARTYID/ChoiceGroup/SelectedChoices}` or a not very strong `#{QPARTYID/ChoiceGroup/SelectedChoices}`?

- Strong (1)
- Not very strong (2)

Display This Question:

If Do you consider yourself a Republican, a Democrat, an Independent, or something else? = Independent/something else

QPARTY\_LEAN Do you think of yourself as closer to the Republican or Democratic Party?

- Republican (1)
- Democratic (2)
- Neither (3)

Page Break

QRACE Is your racial or ethnic heritage white, Black or African American, Hispanic or Latin American, American Indian, Asian, Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, or something else?

- American Indian or Alaska Native (1)
- Asian (2)
- Black or African American (3)
- Hispanic or Latin American (4)
- Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander (5)
- White (6)
- Other (7)

End of Block: Close block

## Appendix 2: Public Understanding of Political Polling Results - Topline Report

QAGE.	How old are you? (n = 1000)	
	Under 18 (TERMINATED)	*
	18 - 24	9%
	25 - 34	39
	35 - 44	22
	45 - 54	15
	55 - 64	9
	65 - 74	5
	75 - 84	<1
	85 or older	*
QREGISTERED.	Are you registered to vote in the United States? (n = 1000)	
	Yes, registered.	100%
	Not, not registered. (TERMINATED)	*
Q43.	What is your sex? (n = 1000)	
	Male	50%
	Female	50
	Trans Male	*
	Trans Female	*
	Nonbinary	<1
	Other/Prefer not to respond	<1

Q44.	What is the highest level of education you have completed? (n = 1000)	
	High school graduate	8%
	Some college	18
	Associate's degree	8
	Bachelor's degree	47
	Master's degree	16
	Doctoral or professional degree	4
Q45.	In most general elections, which answer best describes how you voted? (n = 1000)	
	Straight Democratic	26%
	Most Democratic	24
	A few more Democrats than Republicans	6
	About equally for both parties	8
	A few more Republicans than Democrats	4
	Mostly Republican	15
	Straight Republican	15
	Other/Unsure	2

(RESPONDENTS RANDOMLY ASSIGNED ONE GROUP)

QTEXT. Please read the text below carefully and answer the questions that follow.

Control: “Congressional District A has two candidates running for the House of Representatives seat this year. A recently released political poll shows Candidate M. Jackson 1.9 points ahead of Candidate A. Swift two weeks before election day.” (n=248)

Percentage: “Congressional District A has two candidates running for the House of Representatives seat this year. A recently released political poll shows Candidate M. Jackson 1.9 points ahead of Candidate A. Swift two weeks before election day.” (n=251)

Voteshare: “Congressional District A has two candidates running for the House of Representatives seat this year. A recently released political poll shows Candidate M. Jackson ahead of Candidate A. Swift 48% to 46% two weeks before election day.” (n=254)

All: “Congressional District A has two candidates running for the House of Representatives seat this year. A recently released political poll shows Candidate M. Jackson 1.9 percentage points ahead of Candidate A. Swift, 48% to 46%, two weeks before election day.” (n=247)

QPOINTS. Do you agree or disagree with this statement based on the text above?

"Candidate M. Jackson is leading Candidate A. Swift by 1.9 percentage points."

	Control (n=248)	Percentage (n=251)	Voteshare (n=254)	All (n=247)
Strongly agree	37%	42%	9%	45%
Agree	29	31	30	28
Somewhat agree	15	11	29	13
Neither agree nor disagree	14	9	15	10
Somewhat disagree	2	3	6	1
Disagree	2	3	7	1

Strongly disagree    2                    2                    4                    1

QTRUST. Do you agree or disagree with this statement based on the text above?

“I believe this political poll to be an accurate reflection of upcoming election day results.”

	Control (n=248)	Percentage (n=251)	Voteshare (n=254)	All (n=247)
Strongly agree	6%	8%	4%	8%
Agree	21	14	18	14
Somewhat agree	27	30	31	33
Neither agree nor disagree	18	26	22	24
Somewhat disagree	15	12	15	11
Disagree	9	7	8	7
Strongly disagree	4	3	2	3

QSAMPLE. In your opinion, who is the typical respondent of a political poll? (OPEN-ENDED REPSONSES VERBATIM IN APPENDIX 3)

QBIAS. In your opinion, is the political polling biased? If so, how? (OPEN-ENDED REPSONSES VERBATIM IN APPENDIX 3)

QPARTYID. Do you consider yourself a Republican, a Democrat, an Independent, or something else? (n = 1000)

Republican	31%
Democrat	45
Independent/something else	24

(If QPARTYID = Independent/something else)

QPARTY\_LEAN. Do you think of yourself as closer to the Republican or Democratic Party?  
(n = 239)

Republican	23%
Democratic	40
Neither	37

QRACE. Is your racial or ethnic heritage white, Black or African American, Hispanic or Latin American, American Indian, Asian, Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, or something else? (n = 1000)

American Indian or Alaska Native	1%
Asian	6
Black or African American	7
Hispanic or Latin American	7
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	<1
White	76
Other	2

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