



## Do parties respond strategically to opinion polls? Evidence from campaign statements

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### ABSTRACT

This article investigates how parties respond to polling results on the campaign trail. I argue that parties use pre-election polls as mobilization and fine-tuning devices. Opinion surveys that exceed expectations can be exploited to mobilize the party base. Disappointing polls, in turn, are publicly downplayed and criticized. However, this information can be used to refine campaign strategies. Parties underperforming in the polls have incentives to emphasize their own policy positions and to attack other parties. These arguments are supported by evidence from 2140 campaign statements by Portuguese party leaders over two elections, combined with polling results. The findings suggest that parties carefully adjust their campaign rhetoric in response to public opinion signals. The study contributes to research on elite behavior and political representation. Moreover, it shows how research on campaign effects can benefit from a closer attention to the supply-side of campaigns.

### 1. Introduction

Opinion polls play a central role in contemporary political campaigns. Updates on the performance of parties receive considerable attention from news outlets, and often serve as the baseline for political commentary on the weeks leading to Election day. We know that learning about the positions of the electorate can shape the behavior of voters (Duffy and Tavits, 2008; Forsythe et al., 1993; Meffert and Gschwend, 2011; Morwitz and Pluzinski, 1996). However, it is less clear how polling shape the strategies of party leaders on the campaign trail.

Understanding how parties respond to opinion polls is relevant for several reasons. The quantification of public opinion has often been criticized for its effects on the perceptions of voters (Ginsberg, 1986; Herbst, 1993), and the emphasis attached to popularity rather than policy issues (Bartels, 1988; Patterson, 2005). This explains that at the turn of the century over thirty democracies around the world had embargoes on the publication of opinion polls close to the election (Chung, 2012). However, to fully understand the role of pre-election polls, we have to account for the supply-side of campaigns: parties and their candidates. This is particularly important in contexts of enhanced polarization, where parties play a growing role in determining which type of information reaches the electorate (Lachat, 2008). How do parties discuss public opinion data on the campaign trail? Do polls distract party leaders from their election programs, or instead lead them to clarify their policy positions? Finally, do polling results help explain negative campaigning?

I argue that party leaders use polls on the campaign trail for two

main purposes: to mobilize voters and to fine-tune their campaign strategies. The success of a campaign is largely contingent on its capacity to ‘spin’ new information in its favor (Hickman, 1991), and the way party leaders respond to polls is an element of this process. By strategically communicating polling results, parties can shape voters’ view of the race, promote grassroots mobilization through bandwagon effects (Morton et al., 2015), and encourage donors. Hence, I expect campaign contenders to react selectively to polling data, offering disproportionate attention to results conveying a positive image of party, while dismissing or criticizing studies with disappointing predictions.

Polling results also offer the opportunity for parties to refine their campaign strategies. In the long-run, parties shift their issue positions in response to public opinion signals (e.g., Adams et al., 2004; Ezrow et al., 2011; Somer-Topcu and Zeynep, 2009). On the campaign trail, I expect a similar refinement process takes place. Although abrupt shifts in policy positions are unlikely due to the electoral costs of pandering (Adams, 2012), parties have room to adjust the attention devoted to different issues (Pereira, *forth.*). At any moment, party leaders may choose whether to talk about their party or other election contenders, and whether to emphasize different policy or valence issues. Voter signals can shape the decisions of party leaders to balance these different components of campaign rhetoric.

Recent scholarship suggests that when a party has a quasi-monopoly on a given policy, the potential gains from further communicating on that issue are limited (Tresch et al., 2013). Building upon these arguments, I argue that leaders from underperforming parties should be more likely to emphasize policy positions when talking about their own party. Moreover, incentives to address issues ‘owned’ by other parties

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may also increase for parties trailing in the polls, as a way to appear in line with the desires of voters (Walgrave et al., 2009). Finally, campaign negativity may also be driven by poll results (Damore, 2002; Elmelund-Præstekær, 2008; Walter et al., 2014). There is a cost to negativity that may be outweighed by the potential of harming opponents, and this cost is a function of the party's current performance on the campaign trail. Hence, the incentives to go negative should increase among underperforming parties. In line with this view, I expect that parties trailing in the polls are more likely to attack their opponents.

These arguments are tested with a new database of over 2000 statements made by Portuguese party leaders on the campaign trail (Debus et al., 2016).<sup>1</sup> Daily newspaper articles published over the course of two campaigns were used to compile data on how parties talk about polling results, about themselves, and about other election contenders. These data were combined with opinion polling published in the same period. The results show that political elites tailor their depictions of the mass public to their own benefit. Parties are more likely to mention their performance in the polls in response to promising results, and less likely to question the credibility of pollsters. Moreover, in response to disappointing polls, parties tend to refocus their campaign rhetoric on policy issues, rather than valence issues. Finally, the propensity for campaign negativity also increases when parties are underperforming.

Relying on pre-election polls to explore how parties shape their campaign rhetoric offers several advantages relative to other measures of public opinion. In the context of an electoral campaign, polls provide a picture of the overall performance of the contending parties, and all parties are focused on maximizing their electoral prospects. This is not necessarily true at other stages of the electoral cycle. For instance, incumbents may be willing to pursue unpopular policies early in the electoral cycle (Lindstädt and Vander Wielen, 2014). Moreover, no other measure of public opinion is available at the same rate over the campaign, offering the opportunity to have a more fine-grained understanding of the dynamic processes that characterize contemporary political campaigns.

These findings have relevant implications for the study of political campaigns, elite behavior, and political representation more broadly. First, they provide an explanation for why campaigns may not 'enlighten' the preferences of voters (Gelman and King, 1993). Party leaders tailor their depictions of the public to their own benefit. Hence, unless voters are exposed to the messages of multiple parties, this process may lead to distorted perceptions of the campaign trail. This concern is particularly relevant in a world of political echo chambers (e.g., Boutyline and Robb, 2017). Second, the patterns uncovered here reveal that a thorough understanding of campaign effects requires endogenizing party strategies. Although election manifestos provide an important baseline to capture the behavior of political elites on the campaign trail, parties are constantly refining their rhetoric in the weeks leading to an election. This process provides an explanation for the disconnect between manifestos and voter perceptions of parties' positions after the election (Adams et al., 2011a, 2014; Fernandez-Vazquez, 2014, 2018).

## 2. Public opinion and party strategies

An extensive body of literature has established a link between public opinion and the behavior of elected representatives. The dominant perspective is that political elites are responsive to public preferences (Geer, 1996; Page and Shapiro, 1983; Stimson et al., 1995;

<sup>1</sup> The project did not restrict the data collection process to statements made by the individual leaders of the different parties. Instead, it included statements by a variety of party members: incumbent MPs, local party leaders, or prior cabinet members. Hence the term *party leaders* should be interpreted broadly to refer to high-ranked party members.

Wleziën, 1996). More recent contributions have explored variability in levels of responsiveness. Researchers have noticed that political parties are more responsive when public preferences move away from the position of the party (Adams et al., 2004; Somer-Topcu and Zeynep, 2009), and close to elections (Arceneaux et al., 2016), particularly in more competitive races (Canes-Wrone and Shotts, 2004; Hobolt and Klemmensen, 2005).

However, most studies explore long-term responsiveness, based on party programs or policy outcomes (e.g., Clark, 2014; Homola, 2017; Klüver and Spoon, 2016). This focus is understandable since the ultimate goal of representation is to shape public policy. On the other hand, existing research has struggled to provide a more fine-grained understanding of how public opinion shapes the behavior of political elites in the short run. At least in the context of political campaigns – where the information available on public opinion and parties' positions significantly increases –, it is reasonable to expect that the incentives of political elites to respond to voter signals are distinct from those observed in the long run.

There are some important exceptions to this pattern, mostly inspired by developments of the issue-ownership theory (Petrocik, 1996).<sup>2</sup> Damore (2004, 2005) has shown that American presidential candidates trailing in the polls are more likely to trespass on their competitor's issues. This perspective was also articulated by Aldrich and Griffin (2003), who argued that "if voters identify certain issues as priorities, we would expect the candidates to speak more and show more advertisements about these issues" (247), regardless of their reputation on the issue. Still, most of this literature is based on bipartisan and personalized races. The extent to which these dynamics extend to other contexts is unclear.

Existing literature on political campaigns also offers some insights on the short-term interactions between public opinion and party strategies. Most studies in this field treat party strategies as fully optimized and static as the election nears, focusing instead on the effects of campaigns on voters (e.g., Farrell, 2006; Jacobson, 2015). However, research on negative campaigning has shown that parties underperforming on the campaign trail, and those facing more competitive opponents, are more likely to attack other election contenders (Damore, 2002; Elmelund-Præstekær, 2008; Walter et al., 2014). These findings suggest that campaign messages can be highly responsive to dynamics of public opinion. In the following section I articulate different ways in which parties can update their strategies on the campaign trail in response to public opinion signals.

## 3. The strategic use of polls on the campaign trail

Public opinion polls are a central feature of contemporary campaigns. I contend that parties use this information (1) to mobilize voters, and (2) to fine-tune their campaign rhetoric.

### 3.1. Poll results as mobilization tools

Contenders to public office cannot fully control the flow of information that reaches the electorate. Still, party elites can shape the salience of different issues and the attention devoted to them (Hickman, 1991; Iyengar and Simon, 2000). As Bauman and Herbst (1994) put it, "[how] candidates choose to react to public polls is a vital part of campaign planning" (134). I argue that parties' reaction to polling results is a function of poll standings and *ex-ante* expectations. When faced with a poll that exceeds expectations, party leaders can exploit this information to mobilize their supporters and provide a self-image of success. In various contexts, it has been shown that voters can be

<sup>2</sup> This argument builds on Budge and Farlie's (1983) saliency theory, according to which parties 'own' certain types of policies around which they center their campaign messages.

galvanized through bandwagon effects (Bartels, 1988; Kenney and Rice, 1994; Morton et al., 2015).<sup>3</sup> A recent field experiment provides causal evidence that polling results shape the behavior of voters (Orkin, n.d.). In a competitive local election in South Africa, voters were randomly assigned to receive results from two opinion polls predicting different front-runners. The study shows that voters who learned that their party was ahead in the polls were 12 percentage points more likely to vote for that party.

Hence, parties have incentives to proactively disseminate the results of promising polls. This effort is particularly important to encourage party activists and local party leaders who are directly in the field reaching out to voters. Public opinion data are a direct measure of the success of their efforts. Therefore, by bringing up the results of promising polls in their campaign events, party leaders are also providing a positive reinforcement to party activists who are key to the success of the organization (Miller and Schofield, 2003). For the same reasons, poll results that fall below expectations should be avoided and downplayed. The inherent uncertainty surrounding estimates of public opinion offers parties the opportunity to question the credibility of any individual poll. I expect that party leaders are more likely to do so after a disappointing poll. Together, these arguments lead to two predictions:

**H1a.** *Parties are more likely to mention recent opinion polls on the campaign trail after surveys with promising results.*

**H1b.** *Parties are less likely to criticize public opinion studies on the campaign trail after surveys with promising results.*

### 3.2. Poll results and campaign rhetoric

Poll results also allow parties to update their campaign strategies. Previous work has shown that parties adjust their programs when public opinion shifts away from them (Adams et al., 2004; Somer-Topcu and Zeynep, 2009). With the prominent role played by opinion polls on public debate and the professionalization of political campaigns, it is reasonable to expect that a similar process takes place on the campaign trail. In the short-term, parties may not have incentives to dramatically shift positions on policy due to risks of being accused of political opportunism, or pandering (Adams, 2012). Still, there is leeway for political elites to change the attention given to different issues or different parties in order to maximize their electoral goals. Previous scholarship has shown that updating the attention devoted to different issues from one election to the next is an effective strategy after disappointing results (Meyer and Wagner, 2013), or in response to changes in economic conditions (Greene, 2016; Hellwig, 2012; Tavits and Potter, 2015).

At any point in the campaign, parties can decide to devote time discussing their own policy positions or valence attributes (Stokes, 1963).<sup>4</sup> I argue that the weight given to these different types of campaign rhetoric is shaped by public opinion signals. Researchers have shown that when a party is seen as the *owner* of a given issue by a majority of the electorate, the potential gains from further communicating on that issue are limited (Tresch et al., 2013). The same is not true for moderately ‘owned’ issues, where an emphasis from the party can help reinforcing perceptions of issue ownership. By focusing

<sup>3</sup> Bandwagon effects are sometimes counterbalanced by the opposite phenomenon – underdog effects – where voters may be inclined to support a party that is underperforming. However, existing literature suggests that the former process tends to prevail (Jacobson, 2015).

<sup>4</sup> Following Adams et al. (2011b), I distinguish strategic valence – e.g., name recognition, or campaign skills – from character valence, defined here as statements about the party or party leader’s competence, performance, integrity, or unity (see also Abney et al., 2013). Both the theoretical arguments and empirical strategic focus specifically on the latter. Hence, throughout the text, valence issues/attributes refer to character valence.

attention on moderately ‘owned’ issues, parties can anchor the support of voters mobilized by these policies.<sup>5</sup>

Opinion polls provide party leaders with a signal of the degree to which their policy proposals are gaining or losing traction among voters. Hence, I expect parties underperforming in the polls to pay special attention to their own policy proposals on the campaign trail. By devoting additional attention to those issues, parties can enhance perceptions of issue ownership (Walgrave et al., 2009). In turn, parties performing well in the campaign can deviate from often complex policy proposals and focus instead on valence issues. The intentional use of valence issues can be an effective way of attracting voters (Curini, 2015; Schofield, 2003), particularly close to elections (Abney et al., 2013). However, mentions to own valence attributes can easily be discounted as empty talk. When backed by promising pre-election polls, campaign rhetoric that focuses on the competence, performance, or unity of the party, can be seen as more credible. Together, these two mechanisms – heightened incentives for underperforming parties to emphasize policy issues, and more credibility attached to character valence statements after promising polls – lead to the following prediction:

**H2.** *Underperforming parties are more likely to emphasize their own policy proposals when talking about themselves.*

Public opinion updates may also shape how parties talk about *other election contenders*. Like before, when leaders mention other parties on the campaign trail, they can focus both on policy or valence issues associated with those parties. I expect that the incentives for ‘issue trespassing’ – to raise issues ‘owned’ by other election contenders – should increase when parties are underperforming in the polls. Parties may opt to trespass in order to appear in line with the desires of voters (Damore, 2004; see also Sides 2006), and to counteract perceptions that a given issue is dominated by another party (Walgrave et al., 2009). This reputation does not necessarily translate into public support (Stubager and Slothuus, 2013). Still, at least for salient issues perceived ownership shapes voting behavior (Blanger and Meguid, 2008).

In turn, parties performing well in the campaign are not expected to engage in this strategy. Issue trespassing may require party leaders to deviate from the messages originally planned for the campaign, with inevitable risks that parties – as conservative organizations (Harmel and Janda, 1994) – would prefer to avoid. Moreover, it should only be effective for salient issues in which parties have little reputation, a scenario more likely among underperforming parties. The following prediction derives from these arguments:

**H3.** *Underperforming parties are more likely to emphasize policy issues when talking about other election contenders.*

Finally, poll results are also likely to shape the propensity of parties to go negative. Negative campaigning is arguably the component of campaign strategies most extensively studied in this literature. The growing consensus among researchers is that attacks on different contenders are often an interactive process (e.g., Lau and Rovner, 2009). That said, different studies have shown that the likelihood of negative campaigning increases as parties trail in the polls (Damore, 2002; Walter et al., 2014). Attacking other election contenders brings the risk of producing lower affect for the attacker (Lau et al., 2007). The concern of backlash effects makes this strategy less attractive for parties that are already doing well in the campaign. Building upon these contributions, I expect that party leaders will be more likely to adopt an

<sup>5</sup> It is important to distinguish ‘owned’ issues from parties’ ‘own policies’ or ‘own policy issues’, as discussed throughout the text. While the former concept refers to the issue-ownership theory, the latter simply qualifies which party endorses a given policy issue. To avoid confusion in the text, references to the issue ownership concept are wrapped in single quotation marks (e.g., ‘owned’ issue).

offensive strategy aimed at targeting other parties after disappointing polls.

**H4.** Underperforming parties are more likely to discuss valence attributes of other election contenders.

#### 4. Empirical strategy

To test my expectations about the sensitivity of campaign rhetoric to public opinion signals, I rely on data from the Comparative Campaign Dynamics Project (Debus et al., 2016; hereafter CCDP). This cross-national project compiled data from the media coverage of election campaigns in ten European countries over the course of two recent elections. For each campaign, CCDP coded data from the two highest circulation daily newspapers in the last weeks before Election Day.<sup>6</sup>

The data collection proceeded in three steps. First, country experts identified *all* election-related articles published in each newspaper during the campaign. Second, all first-page articles and a random selection of 5% of the remaining articles were selected for coding. Finally, each selected article was coded by three research assistants from the respective country, who filled out a questionnaire for each statement made by a party. The coding procedure was based on a comprehensive online survey and posteriorly reviewed for inter-coder reliability.<sup>7</sup>

##### 4.1. Case selection

The analyses reported below are based on the Portuguese segment of CCDP, since Portugal was the only country where statements about pre-election polls were included in the coding scheme. That said, several reasons make Portugal a relevant case. First, the Portuguese multiparty system shares several characteristics with those found in other European countries, with high levels of party cohesion and party leaders concentrating significant powers (Poguntke et al., 2016). Second, the relatively small number of parties makes the task of uncovering patterns of campaign rhetoric based on media content analysis more tractable. For the last two decades, five parties consistently receive over 90% of the votes (Freire, 2010). Although the arguments advanced here are expected to replicate in more pulverized party systems, a larger number of parties would make it harder to identify nuances in campaign rhetoric since media outlets cannot devote the same levels of attention to all election contenders.

Finally, the Portuguese media system also provides an interesting context to study campaign rhetoric based on news coverage. When compared with other European countries, the levels of political bias in Portuguese mainstream media are low (Santana-Pereira and Nina 2016). According to a study of media systems in 33 European countries, Portugal is the second EU-member where the political views of journalists are less discernible to the public (Popescu et al., 2012). This pattern largely results from strict legislation on campaign coverage in place since the democratic transition in the 1970s. During the official campaign period (the same period covered by CCDP), news outlets are required to report daily campaign events of all election contenders.<sup>8</sup> These features of the Portuguese case give me additional confidence regarding the empirical strategy adopted here. Concerns about the generalizability of the findings are discussed in the concluding remarks.

The campaigns covered by CCDP in Portugal took place in 2009 and

<sup>6</sup> Campaign reporting is not neutral (Greene and Lühiste, 2018). Hence, to minimize bias in the selection of newspapers, country experts were asked to select one left-leaning and one right-leaning outlet.

<sup>7</sup> More details on the coding procedure can be found in Baumann and Gross (2016).

<sup>8</sup> The legislation (*Decreto-lei 85-D/75*) went as far as stipulating a minimum threshold of words devoted to each party (2500 for daily newspapers, and 1500 for other media outlets). In 2015, after the elections covered here, this law was replaced by less strict legislation (*Lei 72-A/2015*).

2011. Both elections were fairly competitive, leading to a center-left minority government in 2009 and a center-right coalition government in 2011. While the 2009 campaign followed patterns familiar to Portuguese observers (e.g., Freire, 2010), the 2011 election took place weeks after Portugal signed a bailout agreement with the International Monetary Fund, which inevitably took center stage in the campaign (Magalhães, 2012). To account for any systematic differences in the dynamics of campaign rhetoric across elections, all models reported below include fixed effects for election.

News articles came from *Público* and *Jornal de Notícias*. A total of 240 articles were analyzed: 60 articles per newspaper/election, published during the official campaign period (two weeks before Election Day, excluding the election's eve). From these articles, coders identified 2140 campaign statements made by leaders of all parties with parliamentary seats during this period: the Socialist party (PS), the Social Democratic Party (PSD), the Christian Democrats (CDS), the Communist Party (CDU), and the Left Block (BE).

##### 4.2. Research design

Campaign rhetoric was divided in four main categories: (1) policy statements or (2) valence statements by party leaders regarding their own party; and (3) policy statements or (4) valence statements about other parties in the election.<sup>9</sup> Valence references correspond to general statements about honesty, integrity, competence, unity or charisma of a given party. Additionally, coders identified any statements made by party leaders about their placement and the placement of other parties in recent opinion polls.

Table 1 describes the distribution of statements by type and target. As expected, the majority of statements made by party leaders about their own party regards policy issues (58%). However, when talking about other parties, political elites emphasize policy issues as much as valence considerations (49% and 50%, respectively). Finally, references to recent polls are negligible when party leaders talk about other contenders, but more common when talking about themselves. These data were used to generate the different measures of campaign rhetoric used in the analyses. To facilitate the interpretation of the different quantities produced, I describe them in the respective sections, below.

In turn, the main predictors of interest are based on pre-election polling data published in the media as the campaigns unfolded. The data come from Magalhães et al. (2011) and include all publicly available polls released in the period covered by CCDP. When more than one poll was published on a given day, I took the average estimate for each party.<sup>10</sup> Overall, at least one new poll was published in 59% of the campaign days covered in the study. To create a measure of performance in the polls that is comparable across parties, I took the difference between each individual estimate of voting intentions and the party vote share in the previous general election. Different variations of this variable (*Share Difference*) are detailed in the following sections.

Polls published in the media are not the only measure of public opinion that parties have access to. Nowadays, the vast majority of parties have private pollsters providing information that is not revealed to the public.<sup>11</sup> Private polling may threaten the empirical strategy adopted

<sup>9</sup> The project coded policy positions on 16 different issues: taxes, social policy/public services, inflation, unemployment, other economic performance, centralization vs. regional autonomy, environment, immigration, asylum, justice system, law and order, security, terrorism, national way of life, traditional morality, family values, religion, Europe/EU, internationalism (not EU), foreign intervention, agriculture/rural affairs. For the Portuguese survey, two specific issues were added: corruption, bailout and austerity measures.

<sup>10</sup> In order to make all poll estimates and election results comparable, the voting intentions and election outcomes for all five parties were recalculated to sum to 100%.

<sup>11</sup> But see Druckman and Jacobs (2006) for a rare occasion when researchers had access to private polling data.

**Table 1**  
The distribution of campaign statements by target and type.

Target	Statement type		
	Policy	Valence	Poll Standings
<i>Own party</i>	597 (0.58)	367 (0.36)	62 (0.06)
<i>Other party</i>	544 (0.49)	560 (0.50)	10 (0.01)

Note: Entries are the number of statements coded by CCDP by target (see row labels) and type (see column headers). Row percentages in parenthesis.

here if the measures of public opinion used in the study are either (1) too coarse, or (2) systematically different from the ones produced privately. By itself, the first concern would not bias the results but make the true relationship between public opinion and elite rhetoric harder to uncover. Hence, the present analysis can be seen as a hard test of the arguments advanced. The second issue may actually bias the results. However, it is very unlikely that publicly available polls vary systematically from studies conducted privately. Existing research on the sources of poll accuracy show that there are only small differences in the survey methodologies adopted by different polling companies operating in Portugal, and that the effects of these methodological choices are residual (Magalhães et al., 2011; Pereira, 2011). Finally, the public nature of the polls analyzed here is relevant in itself. The fact that published polls are part of public discourse raises incentives for parties to react to them, even when private information is available.

The main goal of the empirical analyses described below is to uncover how the campaign rhetoric of different parties evolves in response to opinion polls published in the media. Hence, the unit of analysis is party-day. To account for systematic differences across parties and elections in the relationship between polls and the behavior of party leaders, all models include fixed effects for party and year. The analyses, therefore, capture within-party differences in rhetoric over the course of each campaign. To account for differences in the error terms across parties, clustered standard errors were estimated by party. Finally, since polls become more prevalent as elections approach, the models also account for distance to Election day.

## 5. Results

The empirical analyses are presented in two stages. First, I test whether parties use polls as mobilization devices, by emphasizing promising results and downplaying disappointing ones. Next, I explore how parties update their campaign rhetoric in response to published polls.

### 5.1. Polls as mobilization devices

The first prediction derived from the theory is that parties are more likely to bring up recent polling results as part of their campaign activities when a public opinion survey suggests the party is performing well. To capture references to polls, I created a binary outcome variable that takes the value of 1 if a campaign member mentions the party's placement in recent opinion polls, and 0 otherwise.<sup>12</sup>

Since the expected relationship between poll results and mentions to public opinion surveys is non-linear, the baseline measure of campaign performance described above were transformed in two binary indicators. *Positive Share* and *Negative Share* take the value of 1 when a newly released poll suggests a promising or disappointing result for the party, respectively. For days without new polls, both variables take the

<sup>12</sup>The exact wording on the questionnaire filled by the coders was the following: "Does the subject mention its own placement in recent opinion polls?"

value of 0. The expectation is that the probability of party leaders mentioning polls in campaign events increases *only* when the survey presents a promising result for the party.

Table 2 presents the results of three logistic regressions with the probability of party leaders mentioning their own poll standings as the outcome variable.<sup>13</sup> Model 1 only includes a dummy for whether a poll was published on the previous day. As expected, new polls become part of the campaign discourse, as party leaders are more likely to mention their own placement in the survey. Although not theoretically relevant, this result offers some baseline evidence that parties react to opinion polls published in the media, regardless of the private polling data they may have access to.

Model 2, in turn, distinguishes between polls reporting estimates *above and below* the vote share obtained by the party in the previous general election. Again, the baseline category is no poll being published on the previous day. The coefficients for the two indicators are positive. However, only promising polls – those with estimates of voting intentions above the previous vote share – significantly affect the probability of a party referencing them. The model predicts a meaningfully different reaction to polls based on the results of the study. The probability that a party mentions its poll standings goes from 10.6% after a disappointing result, to 32.7% after promising polls. This difference is statistically significant at conventional levels ( $p$ -value of difference in coefficients = 0.04).

Finally, as a robustness check, the third model in Table 2 includes a different specification of polling performance. Here, the results of a given poll are compared with the estimates from the *previous published poll*. Conceptually, this represents a more nuanced measure of shifts in public opinion, and a harder test of the argument. Substantively, the results hold. Only parties moving up in the estimates of voting intentions from one study to the next publicly reference their poll standings on the campaign trail.

Together these results offer some initial evidence that campaign contenders are strategic in their use of new polling results. However, so far the analysis has not taken into account the tone of the references. It is possible that parties are simply criticizing or discrediting polls, regardless of their performance, or reporting them neutrally and favoring instead a campaign driven by policy issues. Such patterns would not be consistent with the argument advanced here. Instead, parties should become more critical about polls when the results of a survey fall below their expectations, and more positive after promising results.

CCDP data allows me to test this implication of the theory. For each statement about recent polls identified in the project, coders were asked to report if the tone of the subject was positive, neutral, or negative. This information was used to generate a new outcome variable that identifies the tone of references: –1 (negative tone), 0 (neutral tone), or 1 (positive tone). The same set of controls is included in the model.

Due to the functional form of the outcome variable, I estimated an ordered logit model. To ease the interpretation of the coefficients, Fig. 1 displays the predicted probabilities for the three levels of the dependent variable – negative, neutral, or positive statement –, as a function of poll results that are above or below the previous vote share.<sup>14</sup> The analysis reveals that different polling results significantly shape the tone of the statements made by party leaders. The probability of a negative mention to polls goes from 32.4% after a disappointing poll, to only 4.9% after a promising result. In turn, the probability of a positive mention to polls is less than one percent after a *Below Share* poll, but raises to 7.7% after an *Above Share* poll. These patterns are in line with the view that political leaders use public opinion surveys instrumentally.

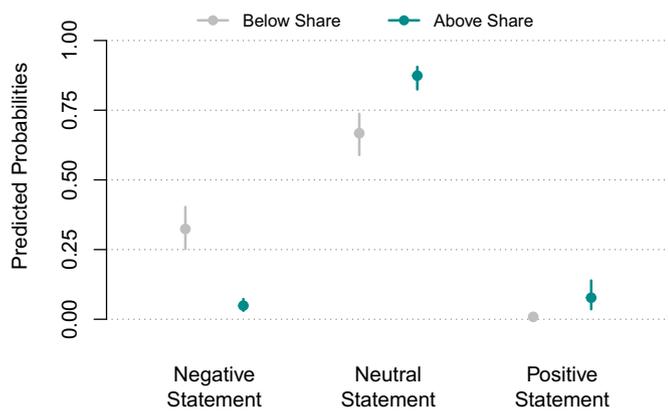
<sup>13</sup>The models described here estimate the probability of references to polls in  $t + 1$ , the day after a survey is published. The results are robust to the inclusion of  $t + 2$  and  $t + 3$ . Table A2 presents these results.

<sup>14</sup>The full model is presented in Table A3.

**Table 2**  
The probability of party leaders referencing polls on the campaign trail, by features of poll results.

	Pr(Mention to Polls <sub>t</sub> )		
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Poll <sub>t-1</sub>	1.03* (0.49)	–	–
Above Share <sub>t-1</sub>	–	1.56** (0.55)	–
Below Share <sub>t-1</sub>	–	0.16 (0.66)	–
Above Estimate <sub>t-1</sub>	–	–	1.24* (0.56)
Below Estimate <sub>t-1</sub>	–	–	0.89 (0.55)
Constant	–0.38 (0.74)	–0.34 (0.77)	1242.25* (487.29)
Election Fixed Effects	Yes	Yes	Yes
Party Fixed Effects	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	150	150	150
Log Likelihood	–70.80	–68.63	–70.57

Note: Entries are coefficients of logistic regressions with mention to polls as the outcome variable (clustered standard errors in parentheses). Full model results in Table A1. \*p < 0.05; \*\*p < 0.01.



**Fig. 1.** Predicted probabilities of the effect of promising and disappointing polls on the type of mentions to the study.

Note: Points are predicted probabilities of negative/neutral/positive references to polls (as described on the horizontal labels) as a function of newly released polls with disappointing results (*Below Share*) or promising results (*Above Share*). Bars represent 95% confidence intervals. Predicted probabilities and confidence intervals estimated from ordered logit (full model in Table A3)

5.2. Polls as fine-tuning devices

The previous section established that parties use public opinion data selectively as part of their campaign strategy. Now, I explore how parties – regardless of their public statements about polls – use this information to inform their policy and valence rhetoric on the campaign trail. In order to test the effects of polls on how parties talk about themselves and about other contenders, I created three outcome variables.

*Own Policy Emphasis* is the share of self-statements made about policy issues, defined for party *p* in period *t* as

$$\text{Own Policy Emphasis}_{p,t} = \frac{\# \text{ Own Policy Statements}_{p,t}}{\# \text{ Own Policy Statements}_{p,t} + \# \text{ Own Valence Statements}_{p,t}} \quad (1)$$

This variable captures the attention devoted by party leaders to the policy positions endorsed by their party. The prediction derived from

theory is that political elites facing disappointing polls will put more emphasis on their own policy issues when talking about themselves.

*Others Policy Emphasis* captures a similar construct – the share of mentions to policy issues – but regarding references to other parties. The variable is calculated as follows:

$$\text{Others Policy Emphasis}_{p,t} = \frac{\# \text{ Others Policy Statements}_{p,t}}{\# \text{ Others Policy Statements}_{p,t} + \# \text{ Others Valence Statements}_{p,t}} \quad (2)$$

This measure captures the emphasis put by party leaders on policy issues *when talking about other parties in the election*. As described above, incentives for issue trespassing are expected to increase for parties underperforming in the polls. Hence, disappointing polls should lead to an enhanced attention to policies endorsed by other parties.

Finally, *Campaign Negativity* is measured as the proportion of valence statements devoted to other parties:

$$\text{Campaign Negativity}_{p,t} = \frac{\# \text{ Others Valence Statements}_{p,t}}{\# \text{ Others Valence Statements}_{p,t} + \# \text{ Own Valence Statements}_{p,t}} \quad (3)$$

The tone of the valence references is not directly captured in this measure. However, 94.1% of all statements about other parties’ valence characteristics were negative in tone, while 85.0% of self-valence statements in the dataset were positive in tone. Hence, I expect a negative relationship between performance in the polls and campaign negativity.<sup>15</sup>

Note: Each panel plots the difference between estimated voting intentions and previous vote share (*Share Difference*) by campaign day, for each party, in 2009 (left panel) and 2011 (right panel).

Polling performance, in turn, is captured as the difference between the voting intentions for a given party and its vote share in the previous election (*Share Difference*). For days without new polls, a linear interpolation was calculated.<sup>16</sup> Fig. 2 plots the measure produced for each of the parties in the 2009 and 2011 campaigns. Although broad trends can be identified, each individual poll provides considerable variation for all five parties.<sup>17</sup> The analyses reported below leverage this variability.

Table 3 presents the results from three linear regressions, where the unit of analysis is party-day. Model 1 has *Own Policy Emphasis* as the outcome variable. The negative coefficient of *Share Difference* suggests that parties are more likely to emphasize their own policy positions in the days following disappointing polls. This result is substantively meaningful. The point estimate suggests that if a party goes from a share difference of +3 to –3, the proportion of self-statements devoted to policy issues increases 18 points (–6\*–0.03 = 0.18). Since the average number of self-statements in a three-day period is 19, the model predicts that this hypothetical shift would lead to 3.4 more statements devoted to policy (0.18 × 19 = 3.42). This finding conforms with the expectation that parties adjust how they talk about themselves on the campaign trail, in response to public opinion signals.

A similar process takes place with respect to references to other

<sup>15</sup> All three outcome variable are measured for three-day periods. The distribution of the different variables can be found in the Figure A1.

<sup>16</sup> For instance, if in *t* = 1 a poll estimate for a given party is 15%, and the next poll came out in *t* = 3 with the estimate of 20%, the estimate associated with day 2 is 17.5%. The results are substantively similar when piecewise constant interpolation is adopted. In this case, the estimated voting intentions on days without new polls remain constant at the level observed in the last survey.

<sup>17</sup> The exception to this pattern is the Communist Party (CDU), which is known for its stable voter base (Magalhães, 2014; Van Biezen, 1998). The fixed effects framework accounts for systematic differences across parties.

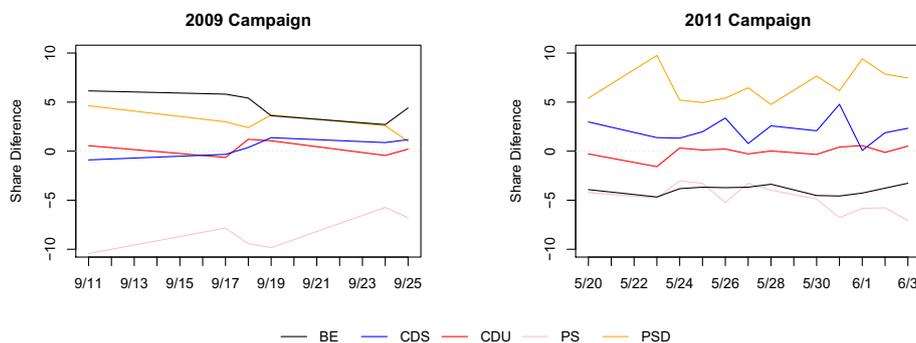


Fig. 2. Campaign performance by party, across the 2009 and 2011 campaigns.

Table 3

The effects of public opinion polling on campaign rhetoric.

	Own	Others	Campaign
	Policy Emphasis	Policy Emphasis	Negativity
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Share Difference	-0.03** (0.01)	-0.02** (0.01)	-0.01† (0.01)
Days to Election	0.02** (0.004)	0.02** (0.004)	-0.01* (0.003)
Constant	0.48** (0.05)	0.36** (0.05)	-0.24** (0.04)
Election Fixed Effects	Yes	Yes	Yes
Party Fixed Effects	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	150	150	150
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.33	0.30	0.29

Note: Entries are OLS coefficients (clustered standard errors in parentheses). Outcome variables in column headers. Full model results in Table A4. †p < 0.10; \*p < 0.05; \*\*p < 0.01.

parties. Model 2 has *Others Policy Emphasis* as the response variable. The model predicts that the better one party is performing in the polls, the less likely it is to talk about the policy positions of other parties. The coefficient of -0.02 suggests that, with the remaining variables held constant, a 6-point increase in *Share Difference* is associated with a 12-points decrease in the proportion of statements referencing the policy positions of other parties (6 × -0.02 = -0.12). This result is in line with the argument that incentives for issue trespassing increase when parties are underperforming in the polls.

Finally, the third column in Table 3 assesses how the parties' propensity for negativity is shaped by polling results. Mentions to the valence characteristics of other parties are a central feature of negative campaigning (Lau and Rovner, 2009). The model predicts that the propensity for negativity increases when parties are underperforming in the polls. The coefficient for the effect of *Share Difference* is -0.01 and marginally reliable at conventional levels (p-value = 0.052). Although smaller in magnitude, the point estimate is still relevant. Returning to the hypothetical example used above, the model predicts that a 6-points decrease in the polls is associated with an identical increase in the share of valence statements devoted to other parties. Since over 94% of references to other parties' valence characteristics are negative in tone, this result suggests that underperforming contenders are more likely to adopt an offensive strategy targeted at other parties.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>18</sup> The results are substantively the same when the measure of campaign negativity excludes non-negative valence statements about other parties (point estimate = 0.012; p-value = 0.04). See Table A5, in the Appendix, for more details.

## 6. Discussion

For decades, research on campaign effects has explored how different party appeals and campaign events shape the attitudes and behavior of voters. We know considerably less about the ways political elites use the ongoing information generated throughout a campaign to inform their behavior. This paper sheds some initial light on this question by exploring how party leaders instrumentally use pre-election polls on the campaign trail.

I argue that parties use public opinion data as tools to mobilize voters and to fine-tune their campaign messages. The study finds evidence in line with this view based on a novel database of campaign statements made by Portuguese parties, combined with public opinion data published during the same period. The results suggest that party leaders use polling information strategically as mobilization tools. By emphasizing results from promising polls while criticizing less optimistic studies, parties can try to shape the perceptions of voters regarding the course of the race. In turn, opinion polling is also used to update campaign strategies. Party leaders are more likely to emphasize their own policy positions and the policy positions of other parties after disappointing polls. I argue that these patterns result from an effort to consolidate perceptions of issue ownership. Previous research shows that party rhetoric can shape perceptions of issue ownership (Walgrave et al., 2009). Still, further analyses are required to isolate the precise mechanisms driving this relationship. Finally, in line with previous work, the analyses reveal that public opinion signals also drive tendencies for negative campaigning. Parties performing well in the polls are less likely to attack their opponents' honesty, integrity, or competence.

The data compiled for the current study has advantages but also limitations that are worth noticing, as they may pave the way for future contributions. First, the analysis is restricted to a single European country raising concerns of generalizability. Although recent scholarship reveals high levels of homogeneity in campaign strategies across European parties (Lilleker et al., 2015), Portuguese campaigns remain less professionalized than in other Western European countries like Germany, Italy, or Sweden (Lisi, 2011). My expectation is that more resourceful and professional campaigns would be even more efficient at responding to voter signals, although this remains an open question. Moreover, the Portuguese party system lacks the same diversity of special-issue or populist parties that are becoming increasingly common across Europe. It is still unclear whether the patterns uncovered here hold for less established and anti-systemic political organizations. Finally, it is possible that the patterns of rhetorical fine-tuning uncovered here are 'noisier' in electoral systems with more personal vote-seeking incentives. Research in countries where the preferential vote system has been strengthened shows that a sizable number of candidates engage in personalized campaigns (Eder et al., 2015). The degree to which the key messages of a party remain discernible in these contexts require further investigation. Still, the arguments advanced here suggest that this should only be a concern when the campaign performance of an

individual party varies considerably across districts. Otherwise, pre-election polls should be providing similar signals to the different candidates of a given party.

Second, although CCDP provides invaluable fine-grained data on daily campaign rhetoric, these data are mediated by journalists who may – inadvertently or not – induce bias in their coverage. All the analyses reported above include fixed effects by party to account for systematic differences in coverage across parties. Still, the study is unable to rule out all sources of bias. A recent survey of European media systems highlights Portugal as one of the countries with lowest levels of political bias in media coverage (Santana-Pereira and Nina 2016), largely due to strict campaign coverage laws. That said, future contributions would benefit from contrasting CCDP data with unfiltered measures of campaign rhetoric, such as party press releases or social media communication.

Finally, the current study is not in a position to make causal claims. The interpretation of the findings was made with this limitation in mind. Future scholarship is needed to further investigate the arguments advanced here, and their underlying mechanisms. A survey experiment with elected officials would be an ideal setting to isolate how political elites respond to different public opinion signals. Moreover, I encourage researchers to further explore the nuances of campaign rhetoric. The focus on policy and valence issues in this study provides an interesting step in this process, but the typology of statements adopted is coarse. Future data collection efforts would benefit from a more detailed analysis of elite rhetoric. Additionally, an interesting question left open in the current study is who do parties discuss when underperforming in the campaign. Do trailing parties focus on the front-runner, on more ideologically proximate competitors, or parties with similar sizes? Answering this question would help us further understand the dynamics of the supply-side of political campaigns.

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## Appendix A. Supplementary data

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