Pre-Election Polls, Italian Voter Preferences, and Their Study Via On-Line Campaign Simulations

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Abstract:

This paper reports a subset of findings drawn from a national research project – entitled "Electoral Choice: Voters' Heuristic Strategies and Information Processing" – aiming to identify the strategies that Italian voters enact in order to combine political information originating from exposure to election campaigns and information processed during social interaction, in the wider context of the Italian political system. Recently new fields of research have focused on socio-cognitive factors that affect voting choices and information search processes enacted to formulate judgments via cognitive shortcuts (or "heuristics"). In particular, this project extends the scope of the innovative voting decision model developed by Richard R. Lau and David P. Redlawsk and adapts it to the Italian context. The voting decision model is operationalised via a "dynamic information board" simulating election campaigns tailored to observe information research strategies in which voters engage. This technique employs a controlled-environment, on-line simulation, endeavouring to reproduce a complex, realistic environment, in which the information that the voter can access changes over time.

This paper, in particular, focuses on voters' perception of pre-election polls and on polls' role as a heuristic influencing voter choice. In the specific study here described, approximately 900 voters were asked to participate in a detailed, simulated election campaign for mayor. The fieldwork was carried out during the year 2011 and concluded in December. Among the heuristics available during the campaign, these voters were given access to pre-election polls (which respondents were free to view or not), which therefore "competed" with other sources of relevant information. A subset of voters was also exposed, during the second half of the campaign, to pre-election polls predicting the final outcome (which was unfavourable, to varying extents, for the respondent's preferred candidate).

On the whole, voters participating in our simulated election campaign displayed somewhat negative attitudes towards pre-election polls: such polls, more often than not, are deemed useless and unreliable. During the actual campaign simulation, pre-election polls were not used extensively as an information source by voters: on average, over 40% of participants ignored the polls. As regards the part of the study in which voters were "forcibly" exposed to polls that reported unfavourable predictions for their preferred candidates, again pre-election polls seemed to enjoy little traction: only one-tenth of voters switched votes, even though doing so would favour a second preferred candidate and in some cases contribute to defeating the least preferred candidate.

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1.   Voting Behaviour, Pre-Election Polls and the "Dynamic Information Board"

In the domain of electoral studies there innovative approaches have been developed to explain voting behaviour. Important contributions are being supplied by social and political psychology, which have ushered in new fields of research on socio-cognitive factors that affect voting choices. In some approaches, political judgment (of which voting behaviour is but a specific manifestation) is seen as a cognitive activity of the same nature of other judgmental processes that occur in complex domains and involve socially relevant stakes. When individuals engage in a process of search for information in order to shape judgments, they do so by resorting to cognitive "shortcuts" (or "heuristics") (Petty and Cacioppo 1986). Research has shown that many citizens manage to make voting choices by resorting to heuristics, even without committing themselves to processing a lot of political information. During an election campaign voters seek information on the basis of both their cognitive capabilities and the complexity of the political environment. The scientific debate has focused more on *how much* information citizens acquire, rather than on *how* that information is acquired (Redlawsk 2004). In this study our theoretical references are the work of Kruglanski *et al.* (1999) as regards judgment processes and Lau and Redlawsk (2006) as regards their model for voting decisions. In both models a crucial role is played by information research strategies. According to Kruglanski *et al.*, in order to formulate a judgment an individual gathers information that she/he feels is pertinent for the task at hand. According to Lau and Redlawsk's voting decision model (2006), the voter's socio-demographic traits, his/her level of sophistication, and characteristics of the election campaign exert influence on information research strategies, which in turn affect evaluations and decision quality.

Lau and Redlawsk developed their innovative voting decision model via a "dynamic information board" (1997; 2006; 2009), inspired by the classic "information board" put forward by behavioural decision theorists for the study of decision-making (Caroll and Johnson 1990). More precisely, the "board" is a computer software tool for simulating election campaigns tailored to observe information research strategies in which voters engage. The virtual environment reproduces the presence of candidates and parties and introduces participants – distributed among groups according to a random criterion – to variable sets of information in order to evaluate their use of different sources. Lau and Redlawsk's instrument is defined "dynamic" since information about candidates and other political (and non-political) issues scroll down a computer screen rather than being in a fixed location. The information board is thus implemented via a "dynamic process-tracing environment" (DPTE). The basic premise of process tracing studies is that it is best to study decision making *while the decision is being made*. In other words, with a dynamic information board the decision-maker can access any information available at a certain time, for information flows continually during the simulated campaign, as it does during a real campaign.

Another focus of this study is pre-election polls. In general, opinion polls produce information flows – originating among citizens and directed to public authorities – that are more extensive, detailed and constant over time than those generated by actual elections (which are comparatively infrequent and feature generic semantic content). Surveys create information flows that are also directed toward citizenry via the diffusion of poll findings by the media. Since mass media are the major source of political information, they contribute to a great extent to the determination of the most salient issues and thus can affect public opinion. This has fed fear and reservations about the role of polls in the political life of contemporary society, in that public opinion is deemed to be superficial, mediocre, and subject to manipulation (Noelle-Neumann 1984; Crespi 1989; Price 1992; Broughton 1995; Ceri 1997; Bishop 2005). Among all polls, a special status is reserved for surveys concerning voting behaviour, especially when they attempt to record voting intentions and predict election results. Pre-election polls perform a legitimate political information function vis-à-vis voters: they convey the election "supply" and make known, within limits, the corresponding demand (preferences and tendencies among the citizenry) (Corbetta and Gasperoni 2007).

Pre-election polls (and in general polls on political issues), when they are shared in a public arena, can comprise an "epistemic authority", providing the foundation for the particular type of heuristics based on the amount of support a candidate appears to enjoy (Lau and Redlaswsk 2001), and influence individual voting behaviour (Donsbach 2001). Does the circulation of pre-election polls influence preference and voting intentions or does it merely record them? Do voters actively seek out such information and allow it to shape their attitudes and behaviour? Such questions have inspired theoretical reflection and empirical research for decades (see, among more recent studies, Henshel and Johnston 1987; Skalaban 1988; McAllister and Studlar 1991; Nadeau *et al.* 1993; Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1994; Morwitz and Pluzinski 1996; Irwin and Van Holsteyn 2002), which suggest that circulation of poll results probably affects voters' behaviour (usually to the advantage of candidates who surveys report as being ahead).

These studies, however, are neither exhaustive nor conclusive, and usually point to the presence of multiple effects. Moreover, it is difficult to plan research designs capable of offering definitive answers, in that the influence of polls must be separated from a thick network of other factors that contribute to shaping individual voting behaviour. One widespread approach – which is simple but fraught with inferential limits – estimates the effects of polls by comparing survey-based forecasts with actual election results. Another approach attempts to observe how political preferences and voting intentions vary in the light of exposure to poll findings in structured, controlled contexts, which allow researchers to distinguish polls from other factors that can affect voting preferences. This paper reports a set of findings that can be placed in this second approach, in that our study is centred on the execution of a large number of simulations in a dynamic process-tracing environment; our study aims to explore the perception of pre-election polls by voters and the role of exposure to poll findings on voting decisions, and their association with other voter characteristics.

2.   Research Design

This paper reports a subset of findings of a research project called "Electoral Choice: Voters' Heuristic Strategies and Information Processing", which was carried out within the framework of the 2008 PRIN initiative (*Programmi di Ricerca Scientifica di Rilevante Interesse Nazionale*, i.e., Scientific Research Programmes of Significant National Interest), funded by the Italian University and Research Ministry. The project[1] aims to empirically study the information search strategies enacted by voters during an election campaign from the standpoint of heuristics, i.e., cognitive shortcuts used by individuals in order to make decisions. The project is innovative in that *a*) it involves the application in a new context – the Italian political and electoral system – of a technique, the dynamic information board described in Section 1, heretofore used only in the United States; *b*) it adopts an unusual approach for the Italian research context on voting behaviour, traditionally based on ecological studies and/or sample surveys.

The project involved the development of an on-line simulation of a mayoral election campaign, via the dynamic process tracing environment (DPTE) mentioned in Section 1. The simulation – developed *ex novo* for this project – begins by describing the election campaign setting, asking the "voter" (we will use this term to designate the participants in the study) to imagine that she/he has moved to a new city that will be electing a new mayor in a few weeks; there are four candidates, about whom the voter knows nothing, and whose ideological profiles range from far left to far right. The four candidates are introduced at the beginning of the campaign by displaying their names and photos.

Figure 1. *An Example of "Flow Items" Crossing the Screen during the Simulated Election Campaign*
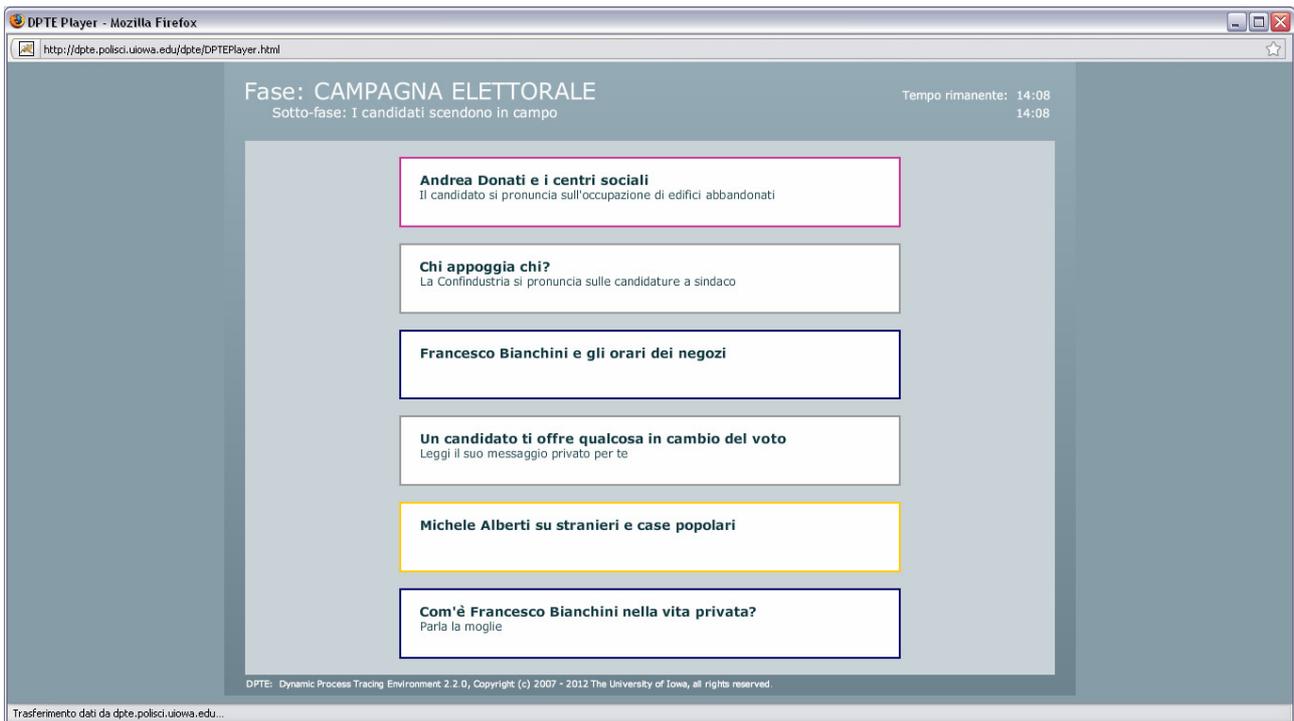
Figure 2. *An Example of a "Flow Item" Accessed by a Voter*
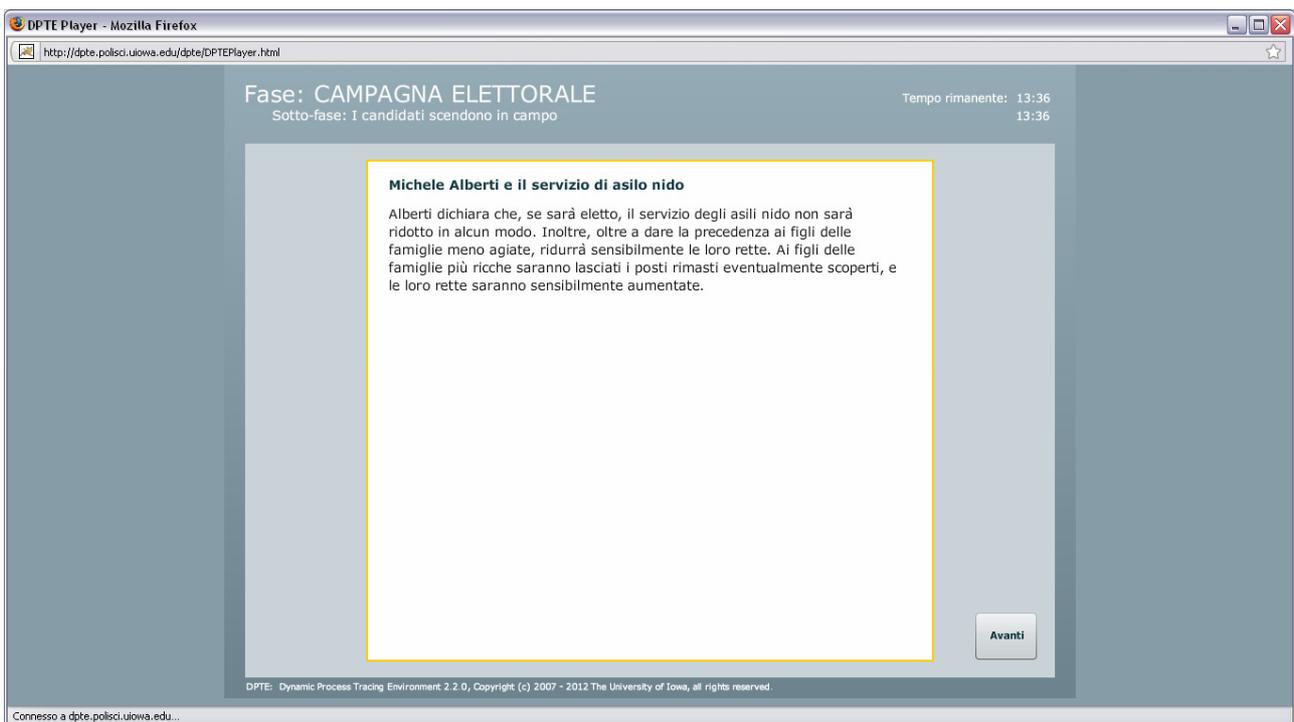
The campaign, more specifically, consists in a set of "news items" scrolling down the computer screen (so-called "flow items") which the voter can choose to open by clicking on them. The initial item boxes comprise a short text, such as those that appear in **Figure 1** (which is an actual snapshot of the simulated campaign). The voter may (or may not) click on any box in order to access more detailed information, such as the text that appears in **Figure 2**; the more detailed box remains open until the voter decides to close it and return to the ongoing "flow". The boxes have

frames that are colour-coded when the corresponding items evidently refer to a specific candidate: each of the candidates is associated with a distinctive (politically neutral) colour. The campaign may be temporarily interrupted by "timed items", i.e., boxes that display information (a video advertisement, for example) independently of the voter's will. The general intention, of course, is to simulate the flow of information to which a typical voter is subject during a real election campaign. The DPTE records which flow items attract the voter's attention (i.e., are actively accessed).

According to the original sampling frame, each of the following subgroups was supposed to be equally represented in the target sample (and the achieved sample closely mirrored this distribution)[2]:

18-45-year-old women, with a low educational level (no university degree)	18-45-year-old men, with a low educational level (no university degree)
18-45-year-old women, with a high educational level (university degree)	18-45-year-old men, with a high educational level (university degree)
46-70-year-old women, with a low educational level (no upper secondary school diploma)	46-70-year-old men, with a low educational level (no upper secondary school diploma)
46-70-year-old women, with a high educational level (upper secondary school diploma)	46-70-year-old men, with a high educational level (upper secondary school diploma)

Obviously, the campaign is defined by the contents of the flow and timed items that are programmed into the simulation; these contents must reflect the types of heuristic we wish to explore. In this study some types of heuristics were available for all voters, whereas others were made available only to subsamples, in an attempt to implement quasi-experimental research designs. The final sample comprises 895 participants, distributed among six different research units. Fieldwork was carried out in the period stretching from March to December 2011.

Within each research unit, participants were randomly assigned – according to pre-established quotas – to one of four groups that were associated with different potential heuristic profiles (**Table 1**). We hereby briefly describe the general heuristic categories[3]. *Personal characteristics* are represented by 32 items (8 for each candidate) concerning candidates' age, family, religious orientation, level of education, occupation, social commitment, personality, and previous political experience. *Party affiliation* is represented by 12 items pertaining to candidates' party membership and being endorsed by two specific parties. *Ideology*, the heuristic that was most widely represented in the simulated campaign, is operationalised via 56 items pertaining to candidates' positions on 14 different issues associated with 7 politically relevant dimensions[4]. *Endorsements* have to do with 8 items expressing endorsements for one of the candidates by non-party organizations (religious associations, trade unions, etc.). *Feasibility* concerns the candidates' self-professed ability to win the elections or to govern the city effectively (8 items). *Epistemic authorities' preferences* correspond to the voting intentions and opinions on candidates' platforms expressed by three of the voter's significant others (6 items). *Exchange voting* deals with personalised election promises addressed to the voter by a specific candidate directly and via a relative of the voter (2 items). The *opinion poll* heuristic is expressed though 4 items announcing the results of a pre-election poll that is *not* focused specifically on voting intentions (see Section 3). Finally, 16 items deal with *irrelevant information* (news stories concerning celebrity gossip, scientific discoveries, disasters, etc.); these items perform a mere "distraction" function and may serve as a benchmark for more pertinent heuristics.

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[2] The use of a different educational credential for older versus younger voters is meant to reflect the shifting boundary distinguishing well-educated versus less-educated individuals across generations.

[3] Most of these heuristic categories described here are those used by Lau and Redlawsk in their studies in the American context, but some were developed specifically to mirror Italian politics (exchange voting) or address new topics (epistemic authorities, pre-election polls).

[4] The dimensions include: more taxes/services versus mess taxes/services; public versus private provision of services; public intervention versus laissez-faire; economic growth versus environmental protection; crime and security; immigration and minority rights; conventionalism regarding unmarried couples and drug use.

Table 1. *Distribution of Actual Participants by Research Unit and Campaign Group (Total N = 895)*

Research unit	Group 0A	Group 0B	Group 1	Group 2
A	35	15	56 Negative campaigning (mudslinging): one of the candidates attacks two opponents on the other side of the political spectrum: personal and issue-centered attacks	54 Negative campaigning (mudslinging): one of the candidates attacks one opponent on the other side of the political spectrum and one on the same side: personal and issue-centered attacks
B	25	20	46 Epistemic authority heuristic *not* implemented	62 Epistemic authority heuristic implemented with significant others' expressing preferences that (unlike Group 0A) are *inconsistent* with voter's perception of their left-right placement.
C	43	12	48 Party affiliation heuristic *not* implemented	57 Party affiliation heuristic implemented *inconsistently*: right-wing candidates hold leftist views and vice versa
D	32	12	55 Exchange voting heuristic *not* implemented	57 Exchange voting heuristic implemented solely via *timed* items: a candidate from the other side of the political spectrum with respect to the voter makes 2 personalized offers.
E	34	18	53 Pre-election polls: the campaign is interrupted in an advanced stage in order to record voter's candidate preferences; after resumption of campaign two separate poll findings are shown (via *timed* items) in which the preferred candidate trails the second preferred candidate (presumptive winner)	57 Pre-election polls: the campaign is interrupted in ad advanced stage in order to record voter's candidate preferences; after resumption of campaign two separate poll findings are shown (via *timed* items) that show the preferred candidate trailing both the second preferred candidate and the least preferred candidate (presumptive winner)
F	0	0	49 Same as E	55 Same as E

Note: Implemented heuristics:
Group 0A = personal characteristics; party affiliation; ideology; endorsements; feasibility; epistemic authorities' preferences; exchange voting; irrelevant information; opinion polls.
Group 0B = same as Group 0A, minus epistemic authorities preferences' and exchange voting.
Groups 1 and 2: same as group 0A, with variations described in table.

The total number of flow items for Group 0A participants is thus 144; each item appears a certain number of times during the campaign (**Table 2**); the order of appearance is strictly random. Since a new flow item appears on the screen every three seconds, a Group 0A campaign (comprising 144 items and 288 distinct "shows") lasts about 14-and-a-half minutes, plus approximately another minute for a set of 4 video ads that are displayed to all voters. Campaigns for other groups have a slightly longer or shorter duration according to the specific heuristic profile employed for them.

The campaign simulation is preceded by a short questionnaire recording a set of voter characteristics and a short (90-second) "practice" campaign aiming to familiarise the voter with how the campaign simulation works. After the end of the simulated campaign, participants are invited to "vote" for one of the four candidates and respond to other questions concerning the candidates' qualities and the simulated campaign.

Table 2. *Heuristic Categories, Number of Items,*
and Number of Appearances during a Typical Simulated Campaign

Heuristic Category	No. of items		Repetitions	Total No. of Appearances
Personal Characteristics	8 per candidate	32	2	64
Party Affiliation	3 per candidate	12	2	24
Ideology	14 per candidate	56	2	112
Endorsements	8	8	3	24
Feasibility	2 per candidate	8	2	16
Epistemic Authorities' Preferences	6	6	3	18
Exchange Voting	2	2	3	6
Opinion Polls	4	4	2	8
Irrelevant Information	16	16	1	16
Total		144		288

Table 3. *Computer Use, Internet Use, and Perception of the Simulated Campaign as "Realistic",*
by Age Cohort (Percentage Values)

	Uses a Computer Daily	Uses the Internet Daily	Considers the Simulation "Fairly" or "Very Realistic"	Considers the Simulation "Very Realistic"	(Min-Max N)
18-30 year-olds	94	91	86	17	(219-220)
31-45 year-olds	88	76	85	12	(233-234)
46-55 year-olds	65	51	89	11	(187-188)
56+ year-olds	41	29	71	8	(247-250)
Total	72	61	82	12	(887-890)

This paper concerns, in particular, the use of the *opinion poll* heuristic and addresses it in two separate ways. On the one hand, it explores the attitude and the actual access to opinion poll flow items among all study participants (N = 895); the pertinent results will be examined in Section 3. On the other, it explores the effects on participants' final voting decisions of "forced" exposition to precisely tailored pre-election polls concerning voting intentions; the pertinent results (which involve only the participants in groups 1 and 2 of units E and F, i.e., the shaded areas in Table 1) will be explored in Section 4, where we will also explain in fuller detail the specific features of the research design for these groups.

Which age groups to involve in the study was a central methodological issue in the initial discussion of the voter recruitment technique. In particular, the research team debated whether or not to confine recruitment of participants to young people: a certain degree of familiarity and comfort with information technology (reading on a screen, use of a mouse for accessing information, etc.) appeared to be a prerequisite for effectively partaking in the campaign, and this attribute is predictably more widespread among younger voters, especially in a country such as Italy in which the digital divide is still relatively marked (Sartori 2006). The final decision was to involve a full spectrum of participants, in terms of age.

The actual findings are ambiguous on this point. Some findings suggest that the research technique may be less effective among older voters: younger participants report a greater frequency of use of computers and Internet and also state to a relatively higher degree that the campaign had appeared to them "realistic" (**Table 3**). On the other hand, even among older voters, a great majority acknowledges that the simulated campaign was at least "fairly" realistic, and the perception of the campaign's verisimilitude is less differentiated than one might expect in the light of the varying levels of digital competency. On the whole, therefore, the participants' opinions regarding the simulation's realism suggest that the technique "works".

3.   Are Survey Results an *Interesting* Source of Information?

In this section we will examine voters' attitudes towards pre-election polls and the actual use of the opinion poll heuristic during the simulated electoral campaign.

As regards attitudes, participants were invited to answer two questions regarding pre-election polls. The first question concerned pre-election polls' *reliability* and asked participants to place themselves on a 7-point scale anchored at the extremes by the following statements: "Pre-election polls, published in the media and aiming to predict the winner of an election, are not very reliable and do not reflect voters' real intentions" and "Pre-election polls almost always accurately predict election results". The second question addresses voters' perceived *usefulness* of pre-election polls and was centred on the following two statements: "Pre-election polls, published in the media and aiming to predict the winner of an election, are useful for citizens, in that everybody, if he/she wants, has more information at his/her disposal in order to decide whom to vote for" and "Pre-election polls falsify election results because they persuade some citizens to vote differently than they otherwise would have". Respondents' answers were scored from 1 to 7 so that 7 corresponded to the statement corresponding to the highest degree of reliability/usefulness and 1 to the lowest.

As far as pre-election poll *reliability* is concerned, voters distribute themselves in a roughly balanced way: 39% feel that polls tend to be unreliable (scores of 1, 2 or 3), 31% feel they are generally reliable (scores of 5, 6, or 7), and the remaining 30% place themselves at the same distance from the two statements. The average score (3.82: the scale's mid-point is 4) verges slightly towards unreliability (**Table 4**)[5]. Similar results are found in relation to polls' *usefulness*: 42% believe they distort election results, 29% feel they are useful, 29% place themselves in the intermediate category; the mean score (3.72) leans towards the unfavourable statement.

Younger people express more unfavourable attitudes towards pre-election polls than older people: there is a monotonic negative relationship between age and perception of polls' reliability and usefulness. The differences between age groups, however, are not statistically significant. Analogously, men hold more unfavourable views than women, but not significantly so.

Level of education seems to discriminate vis-à-vis trust in pre-election polls: perception of reliability is highest among university graduates. However, well-educated voters also believe less than others in polls' usefulness.

Voters who place themselves on the far left of the left-right political continuum believe more than other voters in the predictive power of pre-election polls, and their positive attitude is statistically significant in comparison with voters of centre. Another distinctive trait is interest in politics: in terms of poll reliability, those who express an intermediate degree of interest show a high mean score (3.96), which is also significantly different from that registered among those with low interest (3.63). Similarly, voters who identify at least to some degree with a political coalition perceive polls as being significantly more reliable and useful than voters with no coalition identification. (Identification with a coalition and interest in politics are positively associated with one another.)

It would be reasonable to expect usefulness and reliability to be positively correlated: if a voter believes that polls are reliable he/she should be more likely to consider them useful. By and large, this is true: the correlation coefficient is +.27. The strength of the correlation is particularly high among the youngest voters (+.36 among 18-30 year-olds), and then tapers off among older voters (+.29 among 31-45 year-olds, +.27 among 46-55 year-olds, +.19 among 56+ year-olds). A similar relationship holds in relation to interest in politics: consistency among the two attitudes rises along with the level of interest.

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[5] The view according to which pre-election polls are not reliable is, to some degree, justified: see Gasperoni and Callegaro (2007; 2008); Callegaro and Gasperoni (2008).

Table 4. *Perception of Pre-Election Poll Reliability and Usefulness by Gender, Age, Education, Left-Right Self-Placement, and Interest in Politics (Mean Score on a 1-7 Scale and Standard Deviation)*

	Reliability			Usefulness		
	Mean	Std. Dev.	(N)	Mean	Std. Dev.	(N)
Total	3.82	1.47	(889)	3.72	1.61	(874)
Men	3.78	1.49	(443)	3.64	1.60	(435)
Women	3.85	1.46	(446)	3.80	1.62	(439)
18-30 year-olds	3.67	1.28	(220)	3.57	1.47	(217)
31-45 year-olds	3.71	1.46	(233)	3.68	1.61	(229)
46-55 year-olds	3.91	1.45	(188)	3.86	1.58	(186)
56+ year-olds	3.96	1.63	(246)	3.79	1.75	(241)
Did Not Complete Upper Secondary	3.78	1.58	(261)	**3.98**	1.76	(255)
Upper Secondary School Diploma	**3.66** ••	1.46	(327)	**3.60** •	1.64	(322)
University Degree	**4.02**	1.37	(301)	**3.64** •	1.41	(297)
Left-Right Self-Placement (0-10 Scale)						
Left (0-2)	**4.03** ••	1.44	(317)	3.72	1.60	(308)
Centre-left (3-4)	3.77	1.41	(243)	3.84	1.53	(242)
Centre (5-6)	**3.53**	1.45	(166)	3.61	1.68	(164)
Right (7-10)	3.80	1.54	(140)	3.70	1.66	(138)
No placement	3.52	1.90	(23)	3.46	1.74	(22)
Low Interest in Politics	**3.63**	1.52	(363)	3.75	1.62	(354)
Intermediate Interest	**3.96** ••	1.39	(392)	3.72	1.58	(386)
High Interest	3.91	1.52	(134)	3.66	1.66	(134)
Does Not Identify with a Coalition	**3.53**	1.52	(217)	**3.44**	1.61	(211)
Identifies, but Weakly	3.64	1.43	(128)	3.61	1.56	(127)
Identifies Somewhat	**3.92** ••	1.44	(459)	**3.85** •	1.58	(453)
Identifies Strongly	**4.25** •••	1.47	(85)	3.92	1.76	(83)

Note: Shaded values present statistically significant differences with respect to the category of the shaded value of the same variable not featuring the • symbol. • = $\alpha < 0.05$; •• = $\alpha < 0.01$; ••• = $\alpha < 0.001$.

Combining these two variables in a typology (**Table 5**), we find that over one out of five respondents (22%) are outright "hostile" towards pre-election polls: they consider them neither reliable nor useful. Only 13% of voters consider polls to be both reliable and useful. This is an important finding, for perception of polls' usefulness *and* reliability is arguably a prerequisite for resorting deliberately to pre-election polls as a heuristic during an election campaign; and this prerequisite is *widely lacking*. The requisite is even less widespread among 18-30 year-olds (10%), who are also more likely to be "hostile" (28%).

Table 5. *Typology of Voters Based on Their Perception of Pre-Election Polls' Reliability and Usefulness (Percentage Values; N = 871)*

	Polls Are Unreliable	Neither Reliable Nor Unreliable	Polls Are Reliable	Total
Polls Are Useless (or Dangerous)	22	7	10	39
Neither Useless Nor Useful	10	14	6	30
Polls Are Useful	10	8	13	31
Total	42	29	29	100

Table 6. *Number of Pre-Election Poll "Flow Items" Accessed by Voters During the Simulated Election Campaign and Their Percentage with respect to the Total Number of Flow Items Accessed by Gender, Age, Education, Left-Right Self-Placement, Interest in Politics, Degree of Identification with a Coalition, and Attitudes towards Polls (Mean and Standard Deviation)*

	No. of Pre-Election Polls Items Accessed			% of Items Accessed That Involve Pre-Election Polls		
	Mean	Std. Dev.	(N)	Mean	Std. Dev.	(N)
Total	1.03	1.16	(895)	2.12	2.37	(895)
Males	**1.19**	1.25	(446)	**2.33**	2.32	(446)
Females	**0.88** •••	1.05	(449)	**1.92** ••	2.41	(449)
18-30 year-olds	0.96	1.18	(220)	**1.75** ••	2.01	(220)
31-45 year-olds	1.18	1.25	(234)	2.16	2.15	(234)
46-55 year-olds	0.99	1.09	(189)	2.12	2.31	(189)
56+ year-olds	1.00	1.12	(250)	**2.43**	2.84	(250)
Did Not Complete Upper Secondary	**0.86**	1.09	(264)	2.04	2.57	(264)
Upper Secondary School Diploma	**1.07** •	1.23	(328)	2.06	2.28	(328)
University Degree	**1.15** •	1.15	(303)	2.26	2.29	(303)
Left-Right Self-Placement (0-10 Scale)						
Left (0-2)	1.04	1.13	(319)	2.18	2.35	(319)
Centre-left (3-4)	**1.26**	1.20	(243)	**2.48**	2.33	(243)
Centre (5-6)	**0.84** ••	1.15	(169)	**1.77** •	2.34	(169)
Right (7-10)	**0.89** •	1.12	(141)	1.82	2.37	(141)
No placement	0.96	1.40	(23)	2.05	2.84	(23)
Low Interest in Politics	**0.86** •••	1.05	(366)	**1.74**	2.21	(366)
Intermediate Interest	**1.07** ••	1.15	(395)	**2.26** ••	2.42	(395)
High Interest	**1.41**	1.39	(134)	**2.75** •••	2.49	(134)
Does Not Identify with a Coalition	1.00	1.18	(218)	1.91	2.19	(218)
Identifies, but Weakly	0.91	1.19	(129)	1.90	2.34	(129)
Identifies Somewhat	1.05	1.15	(463)	2.21	2.44	(463)
Identifies Strongly	1.21	1.20	(85)	2.54	2.45	(85)
"Hostile" to Polls	0.87	1.19	(192)	**1.63**	2.06	(192)
Favourable towards Polls	1.18	1.10	(112)	**2.59** ••	2.54	(112)
Supporters of "Sincere" Voting	1.16	1.22	(86)	**2.54** •	3.03	(86)
"Shrewd" Voters	0.95	1.06	(85)	2.01	2.16	(85)
Others	1.09	1.19	(396)	**2.22** •	2.34	(396)

Note: Shaded values present statistically significant differences with respect to the category of the shaded value of the same variable not featuring the • symbol. • = $\alpha < 0.05$; •• = $\alpha < 0.01$; ••• = $\alpha < 0.001$.

The typology also highlights two groups, each comprising one-tenth of respondents, with apparently *inconsistent* views, linking reliability and uselessness (or even dangerousness) on the one hand, unreliability and usefulness on the other. Perhaps the first group is made up of believers in "sincere" voting: citizens should choose the candidate or party they most believe in, regardless of their chances of success. The second group is harder to interpret: perhaps they are "shrewd" voters, who may think that poll results can be used to influence the electorate's outlook and thus its behaviour (but in this case the polls are *not* useful from the *individual* voter's standpoint).

What happen when the campaign simulation starts? As mentioned in Section 2, the opinion poll heuristic was represented by 4 flow items announcing the results of a pre-election poll (that, however, did not concern voting *intentions*, although this fact could not be inferred from the unopened box). Each item appeared twice during the campaign, and each participant could click on it as many times as he/she wanted (up to a maximum of 8 times, of course).

More than two out of five participants (43%) never opened any of the opinion poll item boxes; less than one out of three (28%) opened just one of them; almost one-third (29%) opened two or more flow items pertaining to a pre-election poll. In general, it would seem that voters are somewhat insensitive towards opinion polls during the campaign.

The intensity of use of the opinion poll heuristic can be operationalised in different ways; here we will examine two options. Firstly, one may simply observe the number of times that one of the poll-related flow items was accessed: the ensuing variable may have a value between 0 and 8 (0 when none of the 4 pertinent flow items is ever clicked; 8 when each one of them is clicked *twice*, i.e., in each appearance). Secondly, one may calculate the ratio between the number of poll-related items that have been accessed and the total number of clicked flow items, pertaining to *any* information category (in Table 6 we report the ratio × 100). We may consider these two options, respectively, as *absolute* and *relative* indicators of usage.

Table 6 suggests that males, voters highly interested in politics and centre-left voters are more engaged by pre-election poll findings, regardless of the type of operational definition adopted. Coalition identification shows no appreciable association with use of the poll heuristic. Voters with at least an upper secondary school diploma resort more often to opinion polls, at least when the "absolute" indicator is employed. Older voters behave the in the same manner, according to the "relative" usage indicator.

Use of the opinion poll heuristic is positively correlated with the perception of such polls' reliability and usefulness, but only weakly and insignificantly so (+.10 and +.04 for the absolute indicator, +0.15 and +0.07 for the relative one). As one might have expected, opinion polls were accessed more frequently by voters "primed" to do so (i.e., voters who believe polls are both useful and reliable: 1.18 clicks, on average, according to the absolute indicator; 2.6% on the relative indicator), as well as supporters of "sincere" voting (who believe polls are reliable but useless/dangerous: 1.16 clicks; 2.5%), whereas subjects who are "hostile" to polls (deemed both unreliable and useless/dangerous) did so less often (0.87 clicks; 1.6%).

4.   **Do Survey Results *Influence* Voting Decisions?**

Two subsets of study participants, as mentioned in Section 2, were subject to a simulated election campaign with significant variants with regard to its "normal" version. For members of both subsets (Groups 1 and 2 in the shaded areas of Table 1) the campaign was interrupted after nine minutes in order to ask the participant to indicate which candidate she/he would most likely vote for, which was the second preferred candidate and which of the four candidates was the least likely to receive his/her vote. The campaign flow items them resumed. After another two minutes a "timed item" would appear on the screen, and after another two minutes another "timed item" would appear. The content of these timed items was determined by the voter's candidate preferences.

In Group 1, both timed items reported the findings of a pre-election poll that predicted the voter's second preferred candidate beating the most preferred candidate (by 4 or 5 percentage points); the other two candidates were declared out of the running. In theory, this news provided the participant with a good reason to transfer her/his preference to the second candidate, thus "jumping on the bandwagon" without violating to too great an extent his/her preference profile. In Group 2, both timed items reported the findings of a pre-election poll according to which the voter's least preferred candidate was ahead, beating the second preferred candidate (by 4 or 5 percentage points), who in turn was ahead of the voter's most preferred candidate (by another 4 or 5 percentage points). Again, the situation provides the voter with a good reason to transfer his/her preference to the second preferred candidate, in that doing so would mean voting for an "acceptable" candidate in order to help prevent the worst possible outcome (victory of the least preferred candidate); this is a typical example of "preventative tactical voting" (Donsbach 2001).

At the end of the campaign the great majority of voters (161 out of 188, i.e., 86%) confirmed

their initial preference, voting for a candidate that two pre-election polls predicted would lose[6]. Another 8 voters switched their preference, but *not* in favour of the second preferred candidate; it would be difficult to interpret these transfers as an effect of exposure to the pre-election poll findings. The remaining 19 voters (10% of the total) voted for the second preferred candidate; their behaviour *may* be plausibly attributed to knowledge of the pre-election polls (although of course other factors may have played a role, namely the other information accessed during the latter phase of the campaign which took place after recording the voter's candidate preferences). Of the 188 valid cases, 90 belonged to Group 1 (potential bandwagon effect) and 98 to Group 2 (potential preventative tactic effect); 8 and 11 voters, respectively (i.e., 9 and 11%) voted for the initially second preferred candidate; the difference between the two groups is too small to justify any conclusion concerning the greater strength of one of the two effects (bandwagon and preventative tactics).

In **Table 7** the results for Groups 1 and 2 are pooled, underlining the percentage of voters enacting a vote change compatible with an effect due to pre-election poll exposure. This effect would seem to be linked with age (younger voters more likely to switch), level of education (well-educated voters more likely to switch), extreme ideological orientation (voters on the far left or on the right more likely to switch), interest in politics (high-interest voters more likely to switch), and degree of identification with a political coalition (strongly identified voters more likely to switch). Surprisingly, voters who are "hostile" towards polls (i.e., who feel that they are neither reliable nor useful), who should thus be substantially *less* receptive to their effects, were the most likely to yield to them. Supporters of "sincere" voting were, consistently, less prone to violating their initial preferences. These results, especially to the degree that they are counter-intuitive, are confirmed by the specific attitudes towards poll reliability and usefulness displayed by switching voters versus non-switchers. Switchers deem pre-election polls to be comparatively less reliable (3.84 on the 7-point scale, versus 4.06 among non-switchers) and less useful (3.47 versus 3.71). None of the differences commented here, however, is statistically significant.

After the end of the simulation voters were asked, after having expressed their final vote for one the candidates, to indicate how "resolute" they were in their decision and how "difficult" it was. In regard to these variables, we may compare not only switchers with non-switchers, but also each of these subsamples with voters belonging to Groups 0A and 0B (see Paragraph 2 and Table 1), who were not subject to particular stimuli during the simulated campaign. One might expect switchers to be, with respect to Groups 0A and 0B, *less resolute* in their final choice (in that they are *not* voting for their preferred candidate) and confess to encountering a *greater difficulty* in making their choice. Similarly, non-switchers might also be expected to be, with respect to Groups 0A and 0B, less resolute in their final choice (in that they are voting for a candidate who is predicted to lose) and confess to encountering a greater difficulty in making their choice. It is more arduous to express a persuasive hypothesis as regards the comparison between switchers and non-switchers.

Table 8 shows these expectations effectively hold as regards switchers, i.e., voters who were influenced by pre-election polls that were negative for their preferred candidate: such voters are less resolute and more prone to confessing to difficulty in their decision-making. Non-switchers, on the other hand, defy expectations, expressing relatively high degrees of resoluteness and low levels of difficulty. Within the subset of non-switchers, one might expect members of Group 2 (who decide *not* to transfer their vote to their second preferred candidate, even though this helps the least preferred candidate to win) to be more conflicted than non-switchers in Group 1 (whose non-switching has no particularly negative consequence beyond the victory of the second preferred candidate). But the two non-switcher subsets display the same level of resoluteness, and the Group 2 non-switchers are less prone than their Group 1 equivalents to decision-making difficulty (22% versus 41%).

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[6] The analysis is based on 188 cases, in that some participants did not supply a complete candidate preference profile or preferred note to vote for any candidate.

Table 7. *Incidence of Voters Who Transferred Their Vote from the Most Preferred to the Second Preferred Candidate After Exposure to Pre-Election Polls Unfavourable towards the Former. by Gender, Age, Education, Left-Right Self-Placement, Interest in Politics and Attitudes towards Polls (Percentage Values)*

Total	10	(188)	Low Interest in Politics	6	(70)
			Intermediate Interest	12	(93)
Men	9	(97)	High Interest	16	(25)
Women	11	(91)			
			Does Not Identify with a Coalition	6	(34)
18-30 year-olds	11	(45)	Identifies, but Weakly	9	(23)
31-45 year-olds	12	(51)	Identifies Somewhat	11	(108)
46-55 year-olds	7	(42)	Identifies Strongly	13	(23)
56+ year-olds	8	(48)			
			"Hostile" to Polls	12	(43)
Did Not Complete Upper Secondary	7	(60)	Favourable towards Polls	10	(29)
Upper Secondary School Diploma	11	(66)	Supporters of "Sincere" Voting	6	(17)
University Degree	13	(62)	"Shrewd" Voters	0	(10)
			Others	12	(84)
Left-Right Self-Placement (0-10 Scale)					
Left (0-2)	12	(93)			
Centre-left (3-4)	7	(42)			
Centre (5-6)	8	(26)			
Right (7-10)	14	(22)			
No placement	0	(5)			

Table 8. *Incidence of Voters Who Are Resolute in Their Final Voting Decision and Who Confess That the Choice Was Difficult (Percentage Values)*

	Non-switchers	Switchers	Groups 0A and 0B
Resolute Voters	61	17	47
(N)	(161)	(18)	(237)
Voters Encountering Difficulty	31	58	34
(N)	(161)	(19)	(237)

5.   Concluding Remarks

On the whole, voters participating in our simulated election campaign displayed somewhat negative attitudes towards pre-election polls: such polls, more often than not, are deemed useless (if not dangerous) and unreliable. This appears to be more the case among young people, who also have more consistent attitudes (linking reliability and usefulness). During the actual campaign simulation, pre-election polls were not used extensively as an information source by voters: on average, only one flow item out of four was accessed; over 40% of participants ignored the polls; participants with higher levels of education and interest in politics resorted to this heuristic more than others. Absolute and relative indicators of poll usage produced similar, but not identical, results.

As regards the part of the study in which voters were "forcibly" exposed to polls that reported unfavourable predictions for their preferred candidates, again pre-election polls seemed to enjoy little traction: only one-tenth of voters switched votes, even though doing so would favour a second preferred candidate and in some cases contribute to defeating the least preferred candidate. In addition, vote-switching appeared to be more widespread among groups of voters who should have been – in light of their reported attitudes towards them – comparatively *less* receptive to pre-election polls. Switchers and non-switchers perceive their final voting decisions in appreciably different ways; namely, the latter are more resolute in their choices and confess to encountering lower degrees of difficulty.

It is possible that voters' tendency to switch could be "encouraged" by increasing the margin separating predicted winners and voters' preferred candidates (from the 4-5 percentage points used in this study to, say, 10 points). Since the great majority of participants (especially among younger voters) judged the simulated campaign to be realistic, our findings should nevertheless be taken seriously: pre-election polls are *not* an important heuristic for Italian voters.

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