Unreliable yet influential? Political Elites and Interest Groups as Source Cues

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Abstract

The persuasion models of influence on the political decision-making process suggest that interest groups provide information to convince politicians to change or maintain their positions on a policy. In this paper, I argue that to correctly assess the models' claim, we have to understand how politicians perceive interest groups as information sources and whether their perceived credibility affects how persuasive they are. Politicians, unlike average citizens, should hold high levels of awareness about groups seeking to influence the policy-making process and their intentions. By applying a preregistered survey experiment among Chilean politicians, I show that while they are more skeptical about interest groups as sources of information, this does not translate into a lower influence of the information provided by these groups. In line with previous research on citizens, advocacy groups appear to be a source like any other. These findings have implications for our understanding of the roles interest groups play in the decision-making process.

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Political science scholarship has devoted considerable effort to understanding how interest groups shape policymaking. According to persuasion models, lobbyists sway politicians by supplying policy-relevant information that nudges them toward the lobbyists' preferred positions (De Bruycker, 2015; Dür, 2019; Awad, 2020). Because they focus on a narrow set of issues and have strong incentives to advance their agendas, interest groups often possess greater knowledge on certain policies. This informational advantage makes them natural suppliers of policy expertise –an asset that persuasion models identify as central to altering or preserving institutional arrangements in the groups' favor. Unsurprisingly, many lobbying strategies therefore revolve around information provision (Hardin and Truman, 1951).

Yet information is persuasive only when its source is deemed credible. A recipient's assessment of source credibility can amplify –or undercut– the impact of an argument (Pornpitakpan, 2004). In this article I focus on politicians' perceptions of interest groups as sources of information as a key mechanism conditioning how persuasive those groups can be. Sources act as cognitive shortcuts. People learn to follow, or avoid, the positions signaled by particular messengers. Because interest-group tactics rely heavily on persuasive communication, the credibility they enjoy should be integral to their influence. While prior work documents this link among the public (Dür, 2019; Jungherr et al., 2021), the evidence may not travel to elected officials. Politicians are likely more attuned than citizens to groups' objectives and more capable of judging their credibility. Yet the literature still lacks systematic evidence on how politicians evaluate source credibility, and crucially, on whether these evaluations moderate the persuasive force of interest-group messages.

This paper therefore asks two questions. First, do politicians perceive the credibility of interest groups differently from other information sources? Second, do these perceptions temper how persuasive interest-group messages are? I argue that politicians use source cues to discount information they suspect is tainted by private interests. Consequently, they should approach interest groups with greater skepticism and be less moved by group-supplied information. To test these claims, I field a preregistered series of survey experiments among Chilean elites (N = 300).

Empirically, the study proceeds in two steps. The first measures politicians' credibility judgments for a range of sources, including several interest groups. The second evaluates whether messages attributed to interest groups are less persuasive than identical messages attributed to alternative sources. Combining these steps reveals how perceived credibility moderates persuasion. The results show that politicians, as expected, trust sources that do not represent private interests –such as academic experts– more than groups with self-evident agendas. Respondents rate interest groups as sources almost 1.5 scale-points lower (on a 7-point scale) than other sources. Credibility assessments also vary with respondents' ideological leanings. Crucially, and contrary to expectations, skepticism toward interest groups does not diminish the persuasive impact of their arguments, regardless of ideology. These findings illuminate how elites process policy information and help explain systematic biases in their perceptions.

By probing the *how*, rather than the *if* of interest-group influence, this research advances our understanding of lobbying's psychological foundations. Although the mechanism is not fully resolved, the results helps clarifying when, and why, politicians attend to interest-group information and point toward relevant directions for future work.

Interest Groups as Source Cues

Given the breadth of issues they must address, representatives cannot afford to master every policy area in depth. Instead, they rely on intermediaries that deliver pre-processed information. Interest groups are particularly attractive in this role because they can supply timely, detailed expertise on the niches they monitor (Hall and Deardorff, 2006). Owing to their superior human and financial resources, and their privileged access to decision makers, at the same time these groups routinely approach politicians with information crafted to advance their own agendas (Bouwen, 2004; Dür, 2019). Politicians, however, are unlikely to be oblivious to such strategic motives. Understanding how they handle interest-group information vis-à-vis alternative sources is therefore crucial.

The persuasion model posits that groups sway legislators primarily by providing information. Yet persuasion hinges not only on *what* is said but also on *who* says it. A rich literature shows that a source's credibility, expertise, or attractiveness can amplify or undercut the impact of its arguments (see Pornpitakpan 2004). Source cues allow busy decision makers to adopt positions without gathering full information themselves. People routinely follow messengers they deem knowledgeable and trustworthy, a mechanism observed in domains ranging from product evaluations (Ratneshwar and Chaiken, 1991) and media choice (Winter and Krämer, 2014) to political attitudes (Bond et al., 2016; Mondak, 1993).

Political scientists too have long emphasized the value of cues under conditions of limited information (Downs, 1957; Zaller, 1992). Elite endorsements shape citizens' policy preferences (Gilens and Murakawa 2002) and voting behavior (McDermott, 1997; Dusso, 2015; Deng, Yi and Lu, 2020; Druckman, Peterson and Slothuus, 2013). Cues can also operate negatively: messages from distrusted or ideologically distant sources are discounted or counter-argued, like when voters dismiss arguments advanced by the opposing party (Kam, 2005). Source credibility therefore conditions the influence of political information.

The persuasive power of interest groups should thus depend on how credible they are judged to be. Perceptions vary widely: some organizations enjoy near-universal name recognition (e.g. Greenpeace), whereas others are obscure. Even minimal cues, such as a group's name, can signal its likely agenda. Ultimately, however, the impact of any group's message hinges on audience beliefs about its trustworthiness.

Empirical evidence from citizens is mixed (Arceneaux and Kolodny, 2009; Neddenriep and Nownes, 2012; Dür, 2019; Jungherr et al., 2021). Early studies reported strong cue effects from interest-group endorsements (Arceneaux and Kolodny 2009; Neddenriep and Nownes 2012), but later work showed these findings conflated source with argument quality. Recent experiments reveal that groups can indeed persuade, yet their perceived credibility seldom moderates this impact (Dür 2018; Jungherr et al. 2021), perhaps because ordinary citizens lack the knowledge needed to evaluate group trustworthiness (Jungherr et al., 2021).

Whether the same pattern holds among elites is unclear. Legislators encounter lobbyists daily and therefore likely possess richer knowledge about organizational goals and tactics. The stakes are higher, and politicians know that most groups pursue particularistic interests. According to the concept of *trained heuristics* (Vis, 2019), they may use source cues more strategically both to identify useful expertise and to discount self-serving information.

Despite extensive research on lobbying, we know surprisingly little about how legislators evaluate groups as information providers. What distinguishes interest groups from academic or governmental sources –also widely used by decision makers (Willems, Maes and Walgrave, 2024)– is their pursuit of private interests. Because office holders probably assume that any group approaching them seeks to benefit its particular constituency, they should regard such organizations with greater skepticism than typically neutral sources. This expectation holds even when politicians lack prior knowledge about a specific group, as they should expect these organizations to represent narrow interests.

(1) Hypothesis 1: Politicians will trust interest groups as information sources less than academic or governmental sources, even when they do not have prior knowledge about the group.

How elected officials perceive interest groups as sources should then affect the persuasiveness of the information these organizations provide. Existing research has shown perceived credibility to be particularly important in how persuasive (or not) a source and its information is (Powell, 1965; Kim and Choi, 2012; Flanagin and Metzger, 2014). To be an effective cue, a source must be perceived as credible. Source cues allow recipients of information to assess the credibility and relevancy of a message, the more positively is a source evaluated the more persuasive it should be. As this effects is bi-directional, information from sources perceived as less credible should be less influential (Imhoff, Lamberty and Klein, 2018). The credibility of sources matters for how effective claims of political corruption affect candidates (Botero et al., 2015) and political campaigns effectiveness (Iyengar and Valentino, 2000; Weber, Dunaway and Johnson, 2011; Housholder and

LaMarre, 2014). Along these lines, credibility has been found relevant from the effect of court rulings (Mondak, 1990), online information (Knobloch-Westerwick et al., 2015) and the role of experts in public opinion (Lachapelle, Montpetit and Gauvin, 2014). At the same time, information from parties have been shown to influence party supporters but ineffective to, or even negatively affecting, those that oppose the party (Arceneaux, 2007; Li and Wagner, 2020).

It follows from my previous outlined hypothesis that if political elites actually perceive interest groups to be less credible than academic or governmental sources, then they should also be less persuaded by the information they provide. Consequently, politicians will be less swayed by information originating from interest groups.

(2) Hypothesis 2: Information from interest groups will have a smaller influence on politicians' policy assessments than identical information attributed to academic or governmental sources.

Not only that, but differences in officials' attitudes towards interest groups should also predict different levels of influences from those interest groups. A central characteristic that predicts such a difference is ideology. From early understandings of political cues, ideology played a central role. Whether from the *perceptual balance* (Smith et al., 1961) or the rational choice (Downs, 1957) approaches to understanding cues, ideological positions matter a lot in how effective the cue effect can be (Conover, 1981).

In this case, politicians' ideological stances are likely a significant factor in their decision-making process as is one of the connections they can have to interest groups. Also called attitudinal ties, interest groups' policy preferences may match those of representatives (Otjes and Rasmussen, 2016; De Bruycker and Rasmussen, 2021), potentially making them a cognitive shortcut for credibility, interest and usefulness. As a result, politicians' trust in certain sources will be closely linked to their ideological position. Politicians will place greater trust in interest groups with shared ideologies and, increasing the impact of the information provided by those groups.

(3) Hypothesis 3.1: Politicians will trust more information from interest groups they are ideologically aligned with.

(4) Hypothesis 3.2: The influence information from interest groups has on politicians' assessment of a policy will depend on their ideological affinity.

Empirical Setting and Design

To test the hypotheses outlined above, a series of pre-registered vignette experiments was applied in a survey conducted among elected officials in Chile. The target group includes members of local governments (mayors and local councilors), regional governments (governors and regional councilors), and the National Congress. As elections were held at the time the survey started, both outgoing and incoming congresspeople were included in the sample. Members of the Constitutional Convention were also included given that the process was ongoing during the fielding of the survey. The target population totaled approximately 3400 representatives.

The study was conducted online. The representatives received an email invitation to participate in the survey. As no previous systematization of their emails existed, a team of four research assistants had the task of compiling the contact information from different websites. The same team was used to call representatives both as a follow-up to the invitation and, more importantly, to update the database with the contacts, since the online information found was outdated in many cases. The survey was fielded between the 15th of March and the 15th of May 2022. Of the 3400 representatives, about 2700 were contacted. This is partly because some could not be reached on account of insufficient or outdated information, as well as because 400 of the emails sent failed to arrive at their intended destination. The number of usable responses was approximately 300, amounting to a total response rate of around 13% (see Table A.2 in appendix).

The study unfolded in two stages. First, the survey asked respondents to rate the credibility

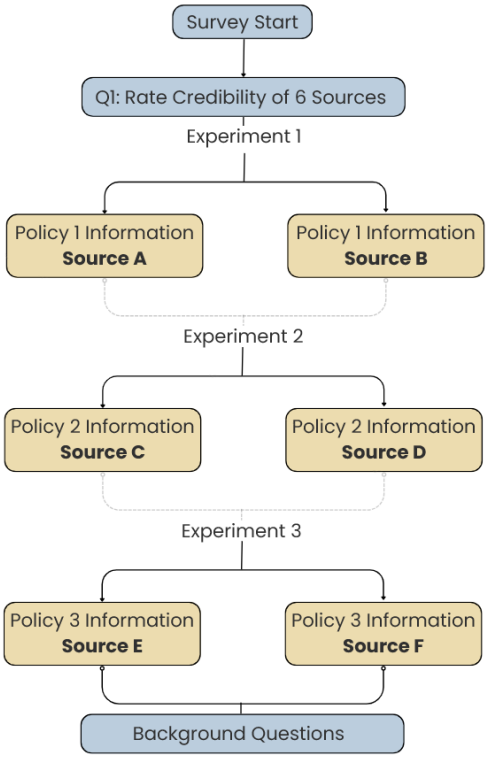


Figure 1: Survey Flow. Respondents first rate the sources and then are randomized for each experiment. The survey also includes a series of background questions.

of several information providers—interest groups, academic experts, and government agencies. These ratings test whether office-holders, on average, place less trust in interest groups than in academic or governmental sources. Second, the survey embedded three vignette experiments. Each vignette presented a brief policy description that was identical across conditions except for the attributed source. After reading the brief, respondents indicated their level of support for the policy; this assessment constitutes the main outcome, allowing me to observe whether prior beliefs about the source translate into different levels of persuasion. All policy descriptions were fictionalized adaptations of real proposals crafted specifically for this study, thereby limiting the influence of respondents' past experiences or knowledge. Figure 1 summarizes the survey flow.

Perceptions of Source Credibility

The article's first objective is to evaluate whether political elites place less credibility to interest groups than to academic or governmental sources (Hypothesis 1). Although the theoretical arguments outlined before suggest that office-holders should view interest groups with greater skepticism, this expectation is ultimately empirical. Politicians might, for example, judge some groups to be uniquely valuable representatives of specific constituencies. Measuring how decision makers assess different messengers is therefore a necessary first step toward understanding interest-group influence.

Because credibility judgments are fundamentally assessments of *trustworthiness*, respondents were invited to evaluate six information providers. Directly eliciting personal opinions, however, risks social-desirability bias: politicians may suspect that observers expect them to be wary of private interests and may accordingly temper their stated views. To mitigate this concern, the survey employed a projection technique: respondents were asked to imagine a politician "similar to yourself" and indicate how, *in their opinion*, that colleague would rate each source's credibility (see table A.3 in Appendix) Such projection tasks have been shown to reduce social-desirability distortions (Fisher, 1993).

The six sources comprise two providers typically present in the information of the political decision-making process: an academic from a top Chilean university and a government environmental agency. Crucially, these sources, despite having resources and expertise about specific issues, do not represent narrow interests. Four interest groups are also included: (i) a trade union typically associated with the left, (ii) a business association linked to right-wing parties, (iii) a well-known NGO without an overt ideological profile, and (iv) a fictional organization. The ideologically tinged groups permit a test of partisan selectivity, while the fictional group gauges baseline skepticism toward unknown lobbies.

This step is descriptive in nature. I report overall differences between interest groups and the two benchmark sources, along with mean credibility scores for each actor. In line with Hypothesis 1, I expect academics and government agencies to be rated more credible than all four interest

groups—the union of bank workers, the association of private banks, the NGO Oceana, and the fictional Association for Affordable Housing.

Similarly, following hypothesis 3.1 I expect politicians' assessments of specific interest groups' trustworthiness will be influenced by their ideological positions. As a typically left-leaning interest group (union) and one with closer ties to right-wing parties (bank association) were featured in that list the differences in their assessment between left- and right-leaning respondents can be estimated using the question of ideological self-positioning included in the survey. If hypothesis 3.1 is correct, left-wing representatives (those who ideologically identify with values equal or minor to five) should trust more bank unions as sources, whereas right-wing representatives (those with values higher three an six) should trust private bank associations more.

Results

I begin by comparing respondents' credibility ratings of interest groups with those of the academic and governmental sources. As illustrated in Figure 2, the average trust score for interest groups is markedly lower than that for the other two sources (4.3 versus 5.5 on a seven-point scale, $p < .01$). These data indicate that politicians place significantly greater trust in information coming from academics and government agencies than from interest groups.

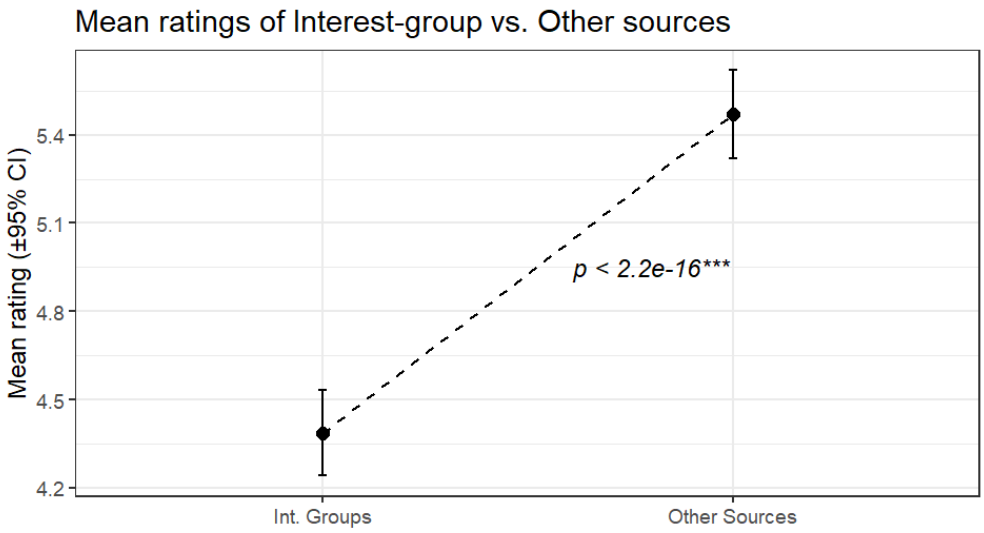


Figure 2: Differences in respondents' trust evaluation to interest groups and other sources. Brackets show 95% CI.

More concretely, respondents trust academic sources more than any other (mean 5.9, $p < .05$). Similarly, the governmental agency (Environmental Evaluation Service - SEA) was rated higher than any of the other recognizable interest groups (mean 5.2, $p < .05$). Only the fictional interest organization deviated from the norm. Its average rate was lower than that of the governmental body, but the difference was not statistically significant (mean 5.0 $p = 0.24$). This is most likely due to the fact that they are unfamiliar with this specific interest group, indicating that they may not always be suspicious of them *a priory*. Finally, it is worth noting that respondents assigned especially low trust to the bank association (3.6 vs 4.4 of the next lowest rated, Oceana, $p < .01$). These results suggest that there is *skepticism* towards interest groups as sources of information, specifically towards those known by respondents. These findings are summarized in Figure 3, and are in line with the expectations of hypothesis 1.

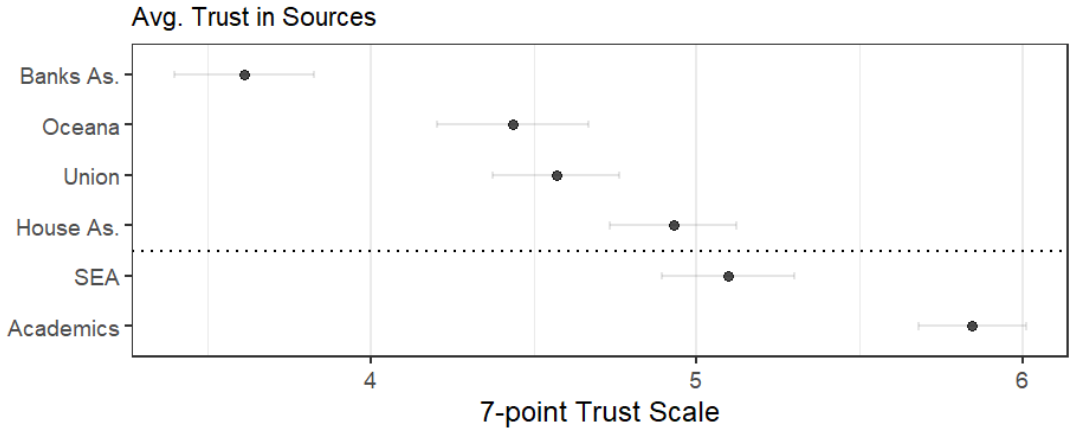


Figure 3: Differences in respondents' trust evaluation to each source. Brackets show 95% CI. Of the presented sources: SEA is a government agency, House As. a fictional interest group and Oceana a known interest group.

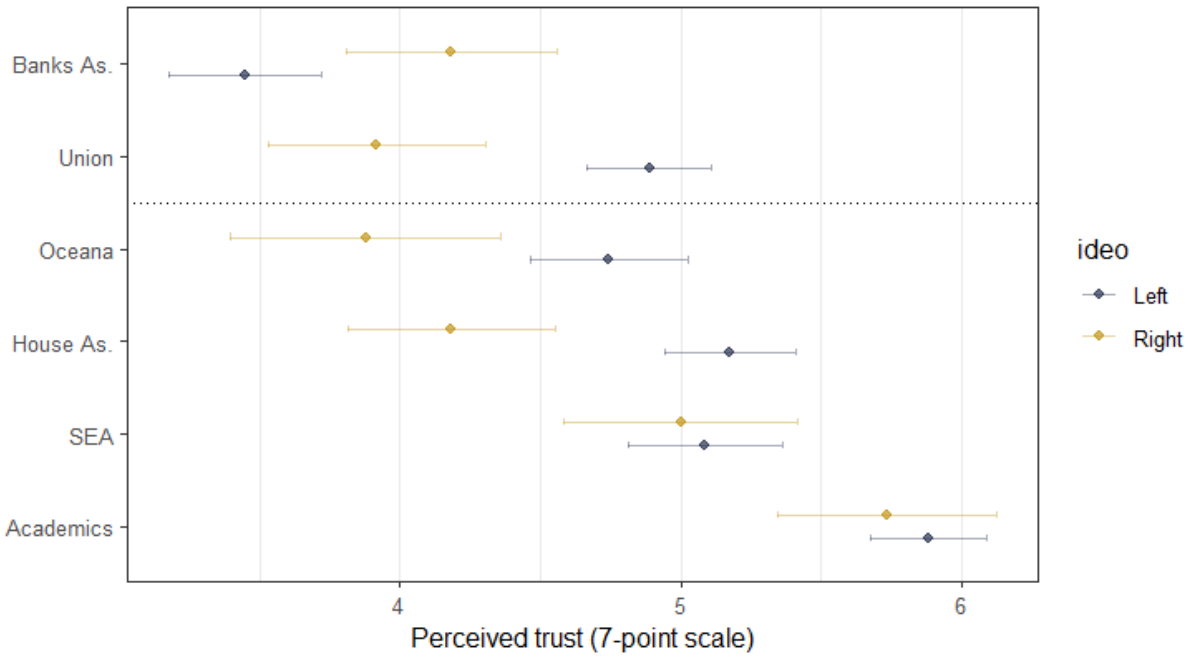
The Role of Ideology in Politicians' Perceptions

As anticipated in Hypothesis 3.1, ideology systematically shapes politicians' perceptions of source credibility. Panel (a) of Figure 4 compares ratings provided by self-identified left- and right-wing respondents (based on a 0–10 ideology scale). Groups with clear partisan profiles elicit the starkest divides. The bankers' association is deemed substantially more credible by right-leaning than by left-leaning office-holders (mean 4.2 vs.3.45, p <.05). The gap widens for the trade-union cue: left-wing respondents rate the union's credibility at 4.9, whereas their right-wing counterparts assign 3.9 ($p < .01$). These patterns align closely with the expectations derived from Hypothesis 3.1.

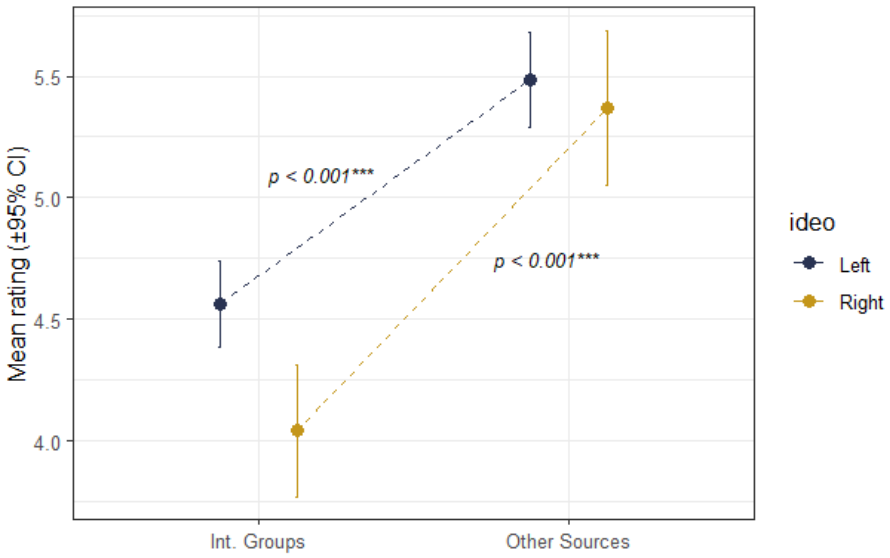
Two further observations are noteworthy. First, except for the bankers' association, left-wing politicians generally award higher credibility scores to interest groups than do right-wing politicians, bringing them almost level with the governmental source. This may reflect the perception that environmental advocacy, exemplified here by Oceana, is more consonant with progressive

agendas. Second, the fictitious housing organization produces an unexpected divergence: right-wing respondents rate this unfamiliar group in line with the skepticism predicted by Hypothesis 1, whereas left-wing respondents place it on a par with the governmental agency. Housing is not traditionally owned by the left, suggesting other factors may color credibility judgments.

Panel (b) of Figure 4 confirms that still, on average, both ideological blocs still trust interest groups less than the neutral benchmarks. Left-wing representatives assign interest groups a mean credibility of 4.6 on the seven-point scale—almost one full point below academics and the SEA (5.5 $p < .01$). Among right-wing politicians the deficit is larger still (4.04 vs. 5.4; $p < .001$). Together, these results support Hypothesis 3.1: ideological proximity boosts a group's credibility, yet even favorable alignments do not close the credibility gap between interest groups and more neutral sources.



(a) **Panel A: Ideology and trust in specific sources**



(b) **Panel B: Ideology and trust in interest groups vs other sources**

Figure 4: Differences in reported trust towards sources by ideological self-position

Taken together, the credibility patterns identified above lay the groundwork for testing the second set of expectations. If credibility indeed functions as a cue, then information attributed to more trusted messengers should shift policy evaluations more strongly than identical information

attributed to less trusted ones (as described in Hypotheses 2 and 3.2). Accordingly, I anticipate that the persuasive impact of a message will be contingent on the source's perceived credibility.

The effect of interest groups as information sources

Building on the credibility patterns reported above, I now move to examine whether those perceptions translate into different persuasive effects. Consistent with Hypothesis 2, I expect information attributed to interest groups to be less persuasive than otherwise identical information attributed to academic or governmental sources because politicians discount messages from less credible messengers.

Ideally, one would randomly assign real lobbyists, scholars, and agencies to deliver near-identical policy briefs to legislators and then trace the downstream consequences for roll-call votes, amendments, or budget allocations. Such a design would maximize ecological validity while holding content constant. In practice, however, it is unattainable: interest groups employ heterogeneous lobbying tactics, legislators compare notes with colleagues (contaminating treatment arms), and institutional outcomes are influenced by a host of concurrent pressures.

To approximate this ideal while remaining feasible, I embed three vignette experiments in the elite survey (see Table 1). In them, respondents are asked to evaluate three policy proposals on a seven-point scale after reading a short brief that lists both benefits and costs. Across respondents, the source of the negative information is randomly varied. The policies address (i) housing-density regulations, (ii) nuclear-energy expansion, and (iii) labor standards in the banking sector. Importantly, the policies where chosen because of their relevance to both national and local politicians. Local governments design zoning that is key for housing policies and mediate community approval for energy projects, central for the second policy. At the same time while national legislators craft the statutory frameworks that local authorities must implement (see treatments in Table A.4 in Appendix).

Because each policy brief presents both benefits and costs, the only element that is manip-

Table 1: Overview of survey experiments

Exp.	Policy	Treatments (sources)	Outcome question
1	Housing policy	Academic / (Fictional) group	Based on the information you just read, on a scale of 1 to 10 where 1 is "Very bad" and 10 is "Very good", how would you evaluate the outcome of the policy?
2	Nuclear energy	Gov. agency / Environmental group	
3	Bank regulations	Business association / Union	

ulated across experimental conditions is *who* voices the negative argument. Thus, while the informational content remains identical, respondents are randomly assigned one of the sources introduced in the credibility module. Each vignette pits two plausibly connected messengers against one another. In the housing-density scenario, the critique comes either from a university academic or from the fictitious Housing Association. The nuclear-energy scenario contrasts the National Environmental Service (SEA) with the environmental NGO *Oceana*. The banking-regulation scenario tests ideological selectivity by pairing the Association of Private Banks (typically right-leaning) with the Bank Workers' Union (typically left-leaning). Table 1 summarizes the design.

Admittedly, these pairings do not maximize the raw credibility gap. The most dramatic contrast would match the highly trusted academic with the least trusted banker lobby. Several considerations, however, suggested against that choice. First, when the project was fielded no evidence existed on how Chilean officeholders viewed these actors, I did not anticipate such a pronounced credibility divide and, indeed, expected business associations to sit nearer unions. Second, even the chosen housing comparison yields a sizeable, statistically significant gap –almost a full scale point (5.84 vs. 4.92, $p < .01$), comparable to the differences involving the other interest groups. Third, source–policy plausibility constrained the menu: housing associations routinely lobby on zoning rules, whereas academics frequently research urban planning; by contrast, it would have stretched credulity to cast a banking lobby as an authority on residential land use. These practical considerations led to the present, issue-matched pairings while still preserving meaningful

variation in perceived credibility.

The last two points are also relevant for the second pair of sources being compared. Both the governmental agency chosen and the interest group work directly with environmental policies. Importantly, the agency has a technical focus and is not politically appointed (at least not completely), which is reflected in the results of the previous section. Moreover, the difference between the perceived trust of Oceana (environmental interest group) and SEA (governmental agency) is statistically and substantially significant (4.4 vs 5.1, p < 0.005).

Despite these constraints, the design still provides a good test of source-cue effects among elected elites. By holding argument content, length, and valence constant while randomly varying the messenger, the experiment isolates the causal impact of *who* speaks. Any observed differences in policy evaluations can thus be attributed to source cues rather than to information quality or topic relevance.

Results

I first examine the pooled data by regressing policy evaluations (10-point scale) on each respondent's credibility rating of the source named in the vignette (OLS with FE at issue level). Because the treatment randomizes only *who* reports the policy's downside, Hypothesis 2 predicts a negative slope: the more credible the messenger, the more weight respondents should give to the negative information, and the lower their overall assessment of the proposal. Figure 5 plots the fitted relationship. Although governmental and academic sources cluster on the right of the credibility axis (yellow dots), confirming their reputational advantage, this credibility premium does not translate into harsher policy judgments. The estimated slope is positive but statistically indistinguishable from zero ($\beta = 0.06, p = 0.3$), indicating that perceived credibility does not predict stronger persuasive effects in the aggregate.

Figure 6 disaggregates the analysis across the three experiments. In the housing vignette (left panel), respondents exposed to the academic source rate the proposal at 5.5, while those exposed to the fictitious Housing Association give it 5.4 (p = 0.9), despite trusting academics far more (5.9

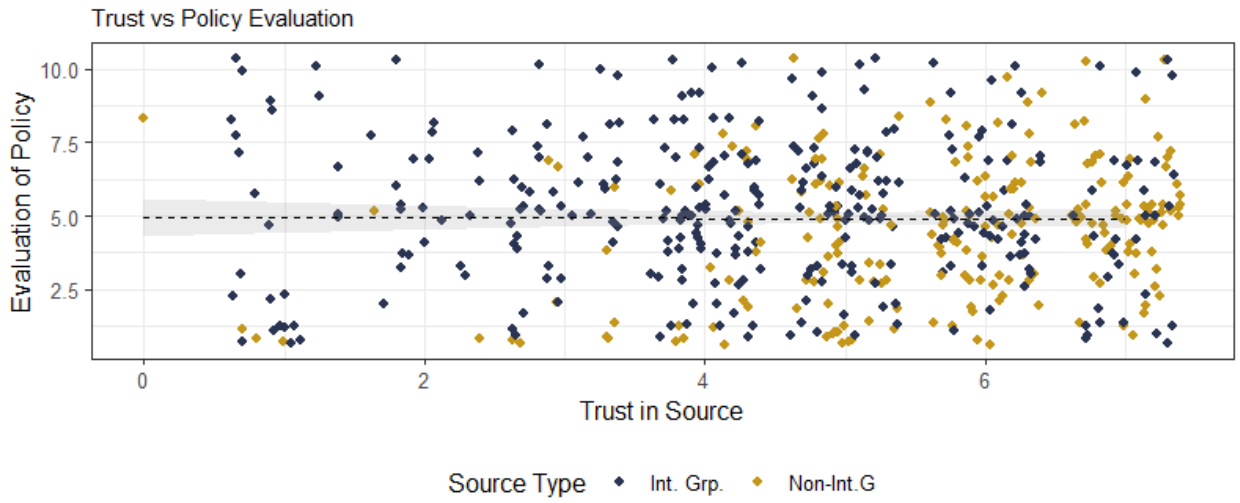


Figure 5: Relationship between trust and policy evaluation

vs 5.2 on the 7-point credibility scale, $p < .05$). The nuclear-energy vignette (center panel) shows a similar pattern: information attributed to Oceana yields a mean evaluation of 4.3, whereas the same brief attributed to the SEA produces 3.8; the difference is not significant ($p = .1$), even though the SEA enjoys a clear credibility edge (5.169 vs 4.654, $p < .01$). Finally, in the banking-regulation vignette (right panel) the policy scores 6.2 when the messenger is the Bank Association and 5.8 when the messenger is the Bank Workers' Union ($p = .2$), the opposite of what the credibility gap would suggest (3.6 vs 4.6, $p < .05$).

The second experiment follows a somewhat similar pattern (see Figure 6, central panel) While the results shows that there are minor changes in the means in the expected direction for the policy evaluation, these differences are not statistically significant. On a scale of one to ten, representatives treated with information from Oceana (environmental interest group) gave the policy a mean score of 4.3, while those who received a governmental agency (SEA) as a source gave it a mean score of 3.8. Even though respondents trust governmental services much more than the environmental interest group (5.169 vs. 4.654, $p < .01$), the differences between treatments is minor and statistically insignificant ($p = .1$).

Taken together, these results offer no support for Hypothesis 2: interest-group messages are no less persuasive than messages from highly trusted academic or governmental sources. Persua-

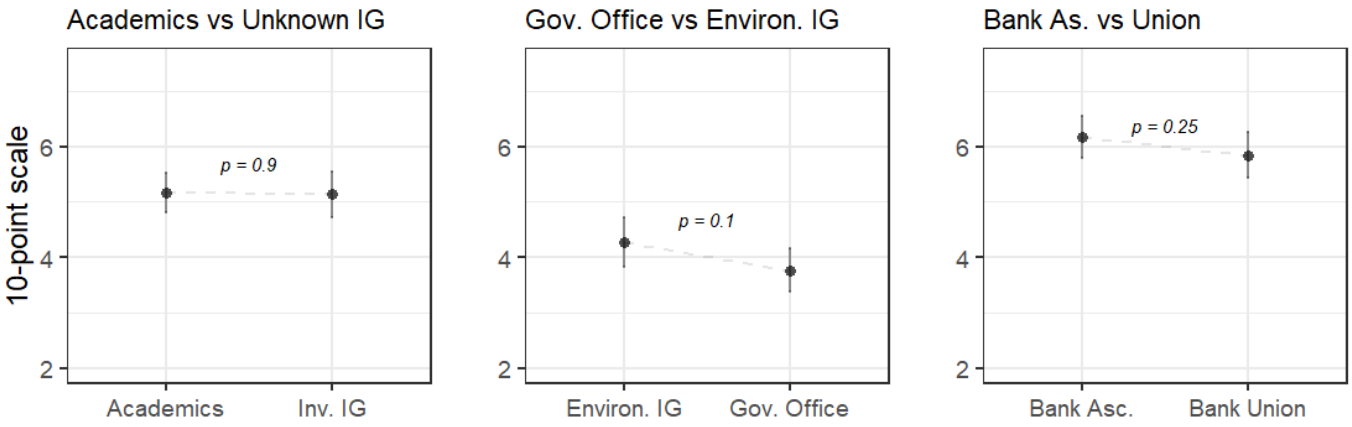


Figure 6: Differences in means of a policy outcome evaluation between treatments. Left panel: academic source vs fictitious interest group, t-test p = .9. Center panel: interest group vs governmental agency, t-test p = .1. Right panel: business group vs unions, t-test p = .25.

sive effect of a message should increase with the source's perceived credibility. The null finding is robust to the inclusion of covariates such as age, gender, level of education, chamber, and committee assignment (see tables A.5 to A.7). Additional heterogeneity tests show no systematic differences between novice legislators (fewer than four years in office) and veterans (more than four years). Complete results appear in Table A.8 and Figures **??**.

Ideological affinity and the effect of Interest Groups' information

Ideology shapes how legislators judge source credibility, but does it also condition persuasion? Hypothesis 3.2 posits that information attributed to an ideologically proximate group should carry more weight than the same message attributed to an ideologically distant group. Figure 7 recasts the three experiments, splitting respondents by self-placement on the 0–10 left–right scale.

The results show that, despite the differences in perceptions between left and right-wing respondents, there is not statistically significant difference in how influential the information was. The housing vignette (left panel) illustrates these findings. Right-wing legislators regard the Housing Association as markedly less credible than do their left-wing colleagues (4.2 vs 5.2, $p < 0.01$), and they also rank it well below the academic source (4.2 vs 5.8, $p < 0.01$). Yet the source

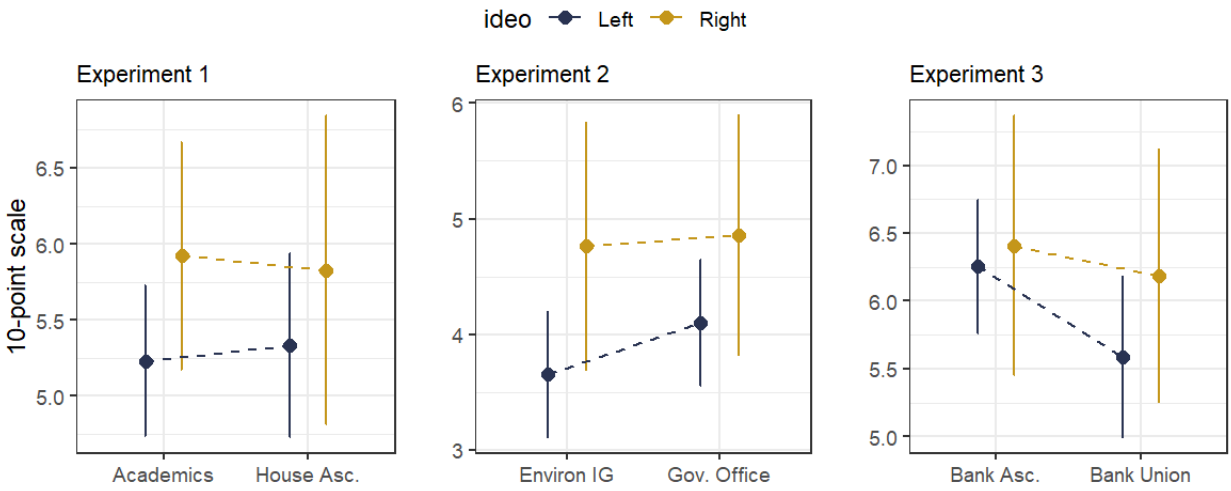


Figure 7: Effect of sources in perceptions of policy evaluation. Differences between left and right-wing politicians.

manipulation leaves policy evaluations unchanged: treatment effects are indistinguishable from 0 for both ideological blocs, and the left–right difference in treatment effects is itself insignificant ($p = 0.8$). The nuclear-energy vignette (center panel) replicates this pattern: sizable credibility gaps, but no persuasive payoff.

Even where ideological cues are most explicit –banks for the right, unions for the left– the expected affinity effect fails to appear. In the labor-regulation vignette (right panel), left-leaning deputies actually rate the proposal *lower* when the critique is voiced by the bankers' association than when it comes from the union (6.3 vs 5.6, $p = 0.08$). Among right-leaning legislators, the direction of the contrast reverses, but the difference is statistically negligible (6.4 vs 6.1, $p = 0.7$). All results remain unchanged after controlling for demographic and institutional covariates (Table A.8 in appendix). In short, ideological affinity alters credibility perceptions but does not translate into differential persuasion. The data therefore provide no support for Hypothesis 3.2.

Discussion and Conclusion

The literature on lobbying has made impressive progress in identifying *if* interest groups sway political elites, but it has shed far less light on *how* that influence might operate. This study tackles that gap by comparing interest-group messages with information attributed to the two sources that Chilean legislators judge most credible: academics and a technocratic government agency. The survey results confirm that politicians consciously discount the trustworthiness of lobbies: every interest group, including a fictitious one, scores lower on the credibility scale than either benchmark source. Yet, in the experiments, this skepticism does not translate into weaker persuasive effects. Across three policy areas and two ideological subsamples, exposure to an advocacy group is no less—nor more—persuasive than exposure to an academic or a governmental messenger.

Normatively, the results are sobering. If politicians do not adjust their policy views when information comes from actors that they trust less, they risk being influenced by information they redeem less trust-worthy. Moreover, as interest groups are sources that openly advance narrow interests, representation may tilt toward well-organized groups even when legislators recognize the possibility of bias. Substantively, the findings align with recent citizen-level studies showing that message content often eclipses source cues in shaping opinion (Dür 2018; Jungherr et al. 2021), and with evidence that elites rely on heuristics much like ordinary voters do (Sheffer et al., 2018; Stolwijk and Vis, 2021; Walgrave et al., 2018; Linde and Vis, 2017).

Several caveats, however, counsel caution when interpreting the implications of the results. First, the vignettes may have delivered cues that were too subtle (or too brief) to override respondents' prior positions. If the informational "treatment dose" was weak, null effects are unsurprising. Second, source and content could interact in ways the design cannot capture. An unexpected stance –for instance, a business lobby backing higher taxes on its own sector– might well trigger stronger cue effects than the balanced briefs used here. Third, repeated or competitive lobbying, common in real legislatures, might accumulate or cancel out cue effects over time. Finally, the study's focus on stated evaluations rather than observable behaviour restricts external validity.

Future work should therefore probe the mechanisms uncovered here more deeply. Stronger manipulations of credibility (e.g. endorsements from multiple congruent sources), repeated exposures, and designs that track actual legislative actions could reveal conditions under which source cues *do* matter. Field experiments in which lobbyists themselves vary messenger identity, or panel surveys that follow the same legislators across a session, would further illuminate whether –and when–politicians translate distrust of interest groups into concrete resistance to their policy claims. Only by unpacking these mechanisms can scholars fully adjudicate the debate over lobby influence in contemporary democracies.

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Online Appendix for

"Unrealiable yet influential? Political Elites and Interest Groups as Source Cues"

A. Survey Details

A1. Sample

The target population consists of elected officials. This includes members of local governments (majors and councils), regional governments (governors and regional councils), and the National Congress. As elections were held at the time the survey started, both outgoing and incoming congresspeople were included in the sample. Members of the Constitutional Convention were also included given that the process was ongoing during the fielding of the survey. The target population totaled approx. 3400 representatives. The representatives received an email invitation to participate in the survey. As no previous systematization of their emails existed, a team of four research assistants had the task of compiling the contact information from different websites. The same team was used for calling representatives both as a follow-up to the invitation and, more importantly, as a process to update the database with the contacts, as in many cases the online information found was outdated. The survey was applied between the 15th of March and the 15th of May. Of the 3400 representatives, about 2700 were contacted. This is because for some of them there was no way to reach them, and about 400 of the sent emails failed. The number of usable responses for my project was approximately 300, which means that the total response rate considering those contacted was about 13%. The response distribution with comparison to the population can be seen in Table A.2.

Table A.2: Elites sample v. population. Resp rate: 353

		Population	Contacted	Sample
Position	Local	85.9%	79.6%	93.1%
	National	14.1%	13.3%	6.9%
Party Ideology	Left	38.3%	37.9%	45.4%
	Right	25%	24.6%	22.3%
	Indep.	36.6%	37.5%	32.3%
Gender	Female	31.9%	32.6%	44.0%

		Population	Contacted	Sample
	Male	68.1%	67.4%	56.0%
Total		3359	2700	13%

A2. Question and Treatments

Survey respondents where asked to rate a series of information sources. As described in the article, the question was structured based on "projection exercises" to avoid social desirability bias. Concretely, the question asked and sources rated are summarized in the table below (Table A3)

Table A.3: Survey question and information sources

Question	**Source type**	**Used source**
A politician in a position similar to yours needs to be informed about different policies in a short period of time. Various organizations provide detailed information about them. On a scale of 1 to 7, where 1 means "Not at all" and 7 means "A lot", how much do you think *this politician* would trust the information if it were provided by:	Academic	Academics from the University of Chile
	Government service	Environmental Evaluation Service (SEA)
	(Fictional) group	Association for Affordable Housing
	Environmental group	Oceana
	Business group	Association of Private Banks
	Union	Union of Bank Workers

In the subsequent experiments, survey respondents were asked to rate policies based only on the text provided. Table A4 showcase the short texts regarding the policies.

Table A.4: Treatments

Experiment 1	**Experiment 2**	**Experiment 3**
The new law regulating and limiting the construction of new buildings in urban areas has successfully reduced population density in saturated areas and, consequently, pollution, improving well-being in these areas. However, new research from the *University of Chile* / *Association for Affordable Housing* shows a worrying effect on housing prices, making it difficult for new buyers to access housing.	Investing in nuclear energy has increased energy production, lowered prices, and reduced dependence on coal-fired plants and other polluting sources. A study by the *National Environmental Evaluation Service* / *Oceana* has detected negative effects on flora and fauna near the plant.	Increasing bank opening hours has helped thousands of previously excluded users access services they could not before. However, the *Association of Banks* / *Union of Bank Workers* claims that the new regulation harms bank operations and jeopardizes employees' well-being.

B. Balance Test

The next three plots show the results of the randomization on observables. They demostrate that the randomization work and that the treatment groups formed, at least in the variables captured in the survey are balanced.

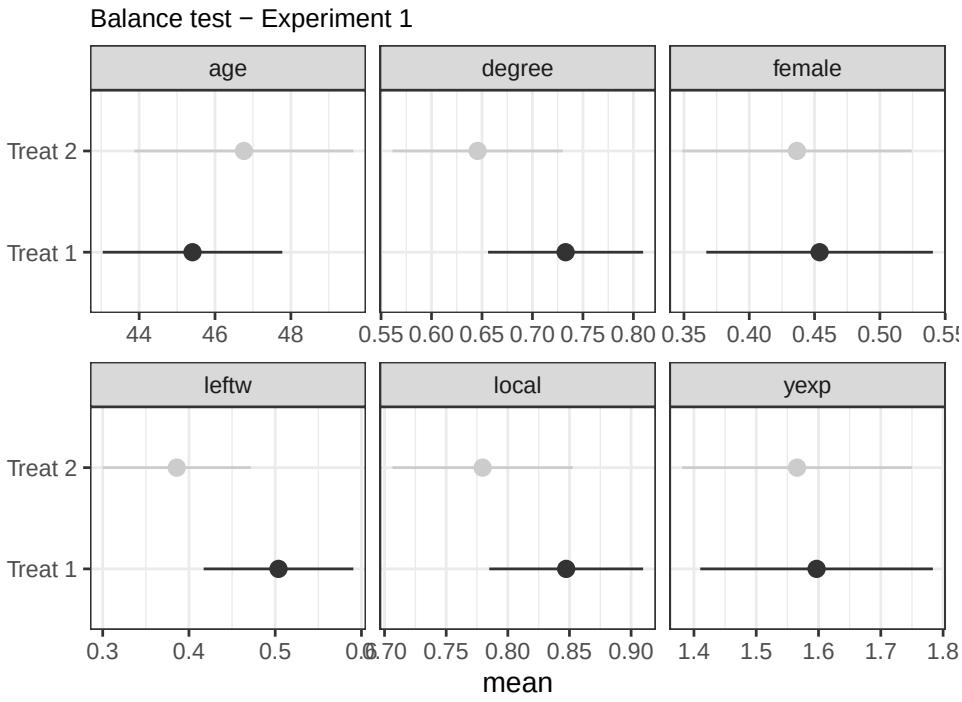

Figure A.2: Balance: Experiment 1

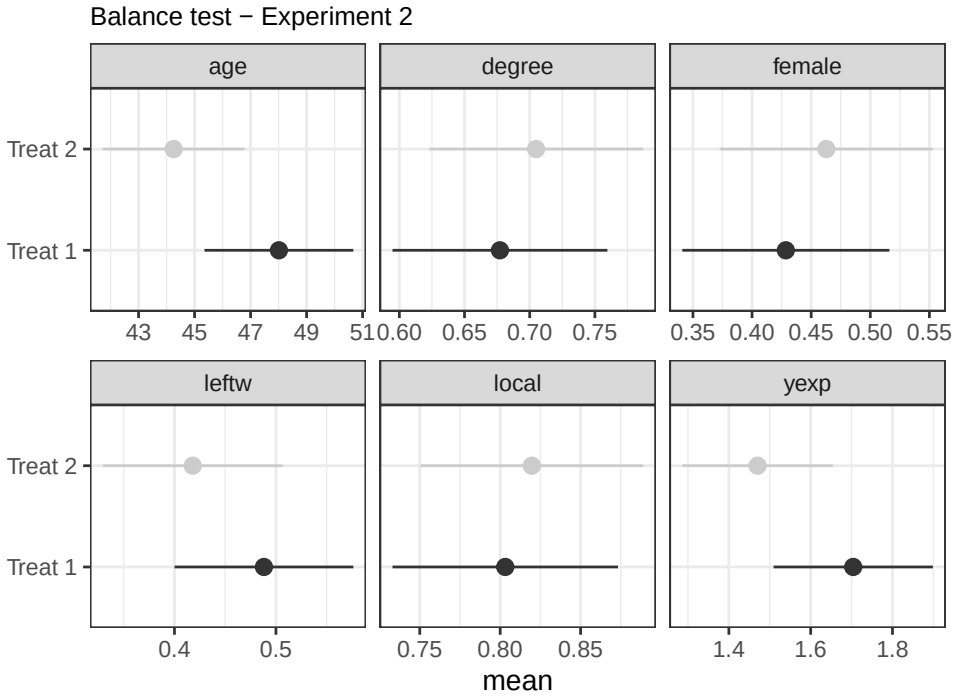

Figure A.3: Balance: Experiment 2

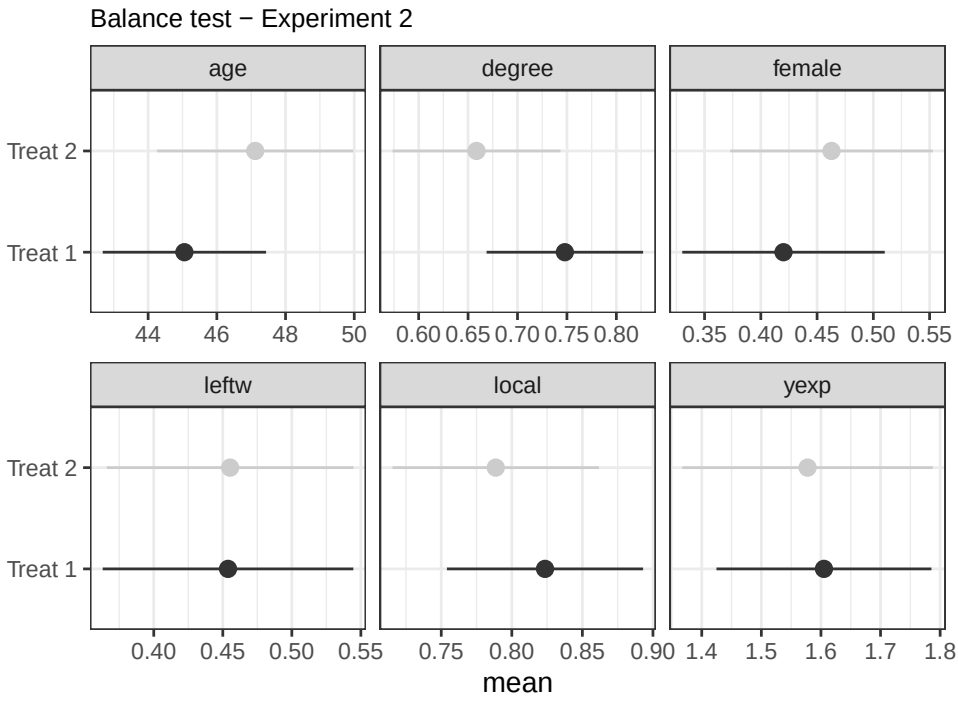

Figure A.4: Balance: Experiment 3

C. Models and Robustness

Figures A.5 shows the heterogeneity in the effects by experience level. In it, office holders with less than one term of experience are compared to those with more than one re-election. The results depict no difference between these groups, suggesting that is not inexperinced politicians driving the effects.

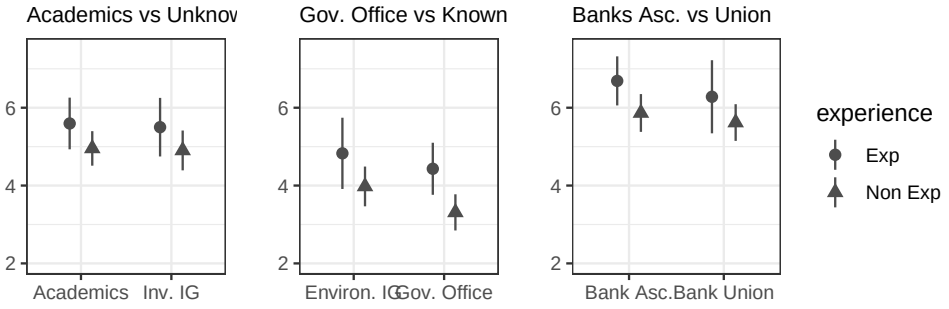

Figure A.5: Experienced vs In-experienced Politicians

Tables A.5 to A.9 show the results of the models including controls for covariate. The results are robust to these different specifications.

Table A.5: Results with Covariates - Exp 1

	Dependent variable:			
	Pol3			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Constant	4.94***	4.90***	3.91***	5.05***
	(0.29)	(0.35)	(0.56)	(0.87)
treat.ig	−0.06	−0.07	0.01	0.04
	(0.28)	(0.28)	(0.28)	(0.32)
yearsexp_num	0.14	0.13	0.10	−0.01
	(0.13)	(0.14)	(0.13)	(0.16)
ideoLeft		−0.07	−0.21	−0.70*
		(0.33)	(0.32)	(0.39)
ideoRight		0.34	0.08	−0.18
		(0.38)	(0.37)	(0.45)
educEducación media			1.26	
			(0.81)	
educSuperior no universitaria			0.03	−0.87
			(0.58)	(0.76)
educSuperior universitaria			1.52***	0.54
			(0.50)	(0.67)
genderMasculino				0.63*
				(0.32)
genderOtro				0.75
				(2.16)
age				0.003
				(0.01)
Observations	251	251	251	175
R^2	0.005	0.01	0.09	0.10
Adjusted R^2	−0.003	−0.01	0.06	0.05
Note:	*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01			

Table A.6: Results with Covariates - Exp 2

	Dependent variable:			
	Pol4			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Constant	3.07***	2.57***	2.09***	2.51***
	(0.31)	(0.37)	(0.60)	(0.94)
treat.ig	0.52*	0.54*	0.49*	0.47
	(0.30)	(0.29)	(0.29)	(0.34)
yearsexp_num	0.41***	0.37***	0.34**	0.44***
	(0.14)	(0.14)	(0.14)	(0.17)
ideoLeft		0.54	0.45	0.19
		(0.34)	(0.34)	(0.41)
ideoRight		1.38***	1.25***	1.20**
		(0.39)	(0.39)	(0.47)
educEducación media			0.51	
			(0.86)	
educSuperior no universitaria			0.08	−0.31
			(0.63)	(0.80)
educSuperior universitaria			0.79	0.32
			(0.56)	(0.70)
genderMasculino				0.29
				(0.34)
genderOtro				−2.07
				(2.26)
age				−0.002
				(0.02)
Observations	242	242	242	175
R^2	0.04	0.09	0.11	0.14
Adjusted R^2	0.03	0.07	0.08	0.09
Note:	*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01			

Table A.7: Results with Covariates - Exp 3

	Dependent variable:			
	Pol5			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Constant	5.56***	5.70***	5.08***	4.69***
	(0.29)	(0.36)	(0.67)	(0.88)
treat.ig	−0.36	−0.37	−0.33	−0.46
	(0.28)	(0.29)	(0.29)	(0.32)
yearsexp_num	0.38***	0.39***	0.37***	0.28*
	(0.13)	(0.13)	(0.13)	(0.16)
ideoLeft		−0.40	−0.48	−0.64
		(0.33)	(0.33)	(0.39)
ideoRight		0.10	0.04	0.25
		(0.39)	(0.39)	(0.45)
educEducación media			−0.17	
			(0.88)	
educSuperior no universitaria			0.44	0.51
			(0.68)	(0.77)
educSuperior universitaria			0.86	1.11*
			(0.61)	(0.67)
genderMasculino				0.37
				(0.33)
genderOtro				0.39
				(2.18)
age				0.004
				(0.01)
Observations	235	235	235	175
R^2	0.04	0.05	0.07	0.10
Adjusted R^2	0.03	0.03	0.04	0.05
Note:	*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01			

Table A.8: Results with Covariates - Exp 3 with Interactions

	Dependent variable:				
	Pol5				
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Constant	6.12***	5.59***	5.59***	4.93***	4.33***
	(0.39)	(0.42)	(0.42)	(0.72)	(0.93)
treat.ig	−0.12	−0.17	−0.17	−0.07	0.08
	(0.51)	(0.51)	(0.51)	(0.51)	(0.59)
ideoLeft	−0.05	−0.17	−0.17	−0.21	−0.11
	(0.49)	(0.49)	(0.49)	(0.48)	(0.55)
ideoRight	0.29	0.15	0.15	0.12	0.41
	(0.55)	(0.55)	(0.55)	(0.54)	(0.62)
yearsexp_num		0.39***	0.39***	0.36***	0.27*
		(0.13)	(0.13)	(0.14)	(0.16)
educEducación media				−0.17	
				(0.88)	
educSuperior no universitaria				0.44	0.51
				(0.68)	(0.77)
educSuperior universitaria				0.88	1.13*
				(0.61)	(0.67)
genderMasculino					0.42
					(0.33)
genderOtro					0.74
					(2.20)
age					0.01
					(0.01)
treat.ig:ideoLeft	−0.36	−0.43	−0.43	−0.52	−1.05
	(0.67)	(0.67)	(0.67)	(0.67)	(0.76)
treat.ig:ideoRight	−0.12	−0.03	−0.03	−0.10	−0.23
	(0.79)	(0.78)	(0.78)	(0.78)	(0.89)
Observations	242	235	235	235	175
R^2	0.01	0.05	0.05	0.07	0.11
Adjusted R^2	−0.01	0.03	0.03	0.04	0.05
Note:	*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01				