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Opinion Polls, Voters' Intentions and Expectations in the 2011 Croatian Parliamentary Elections

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Abstract

Decades of research still providing no clear answer to the question of pre-election poll influence on voter decision making, some authors have proposed the shift in focus to be made from research of "poll effects" to research of "preconditions for poll effects". It is hypothesized that, for poll results to have any direct influence on the voters, voters must attend to published pre-election polls, they must accurately retain the results, and trust the credibility of such forecasts. Using data collected during the 2011 parliamentary election campaign in Croatia, this paper examines to what extent these preconditions are satisfied among the Croatian voters, and how they relate to certain aspects of voting behaviour, in particular, voters' intentions and expectations. Findings presented in this study demonstrate that the preconditions for poll effects are satisfied for, at most, one-third of the Croatian electorate. Additional analyses provide evidence for the presence of substantial effects of media polls on voters' expectations in the 2011 election run-up. However, with regard to voters' intentions, findings are more ambiguous, suggesting factors other than those analysed to be responsible for the observed differences in the intended electoral turnout and vote choice.

Keywords: pre-election polls; electoral behaviour; voters' expectations; preconditions for poll influence

1. Introduction

Since their inception in the early twentieth century, public opinion polls – especially surveys of vote intentions – have become an integral part of media coverage of election campaigns. Their growing prevalence, however, has led to some controversy: those conducting election polls have often been criticized for using imperfect data gathering methods, results are said to be open to manipulation, and

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crucially, election polls are believed to interfere with democratic integrity by influencing voter decision making either by altering voters' candidate preferences or their willingness to cast a ballot (Donsbach, 2001; Boudreau and McCubbins, 2010). The various hypothesized manifestations of the said influence can be split into two groups: bandwagon/underdog effects, and strategic (tactical) voting (Lang and Lang, 1984; Henshel and Johnston, 1987; Ansolabehere and Iyengar, 1994). Bandwagon and underdog effects refer to reactions that some voters have to the dissemination of information about voting intentions from pre-election polls. Based upon the indication that one candidate (or party) is leading and the other trailing, a bandwagon effect implies the tendency for some potential voters with low involvement in election campaign to be attracted to the leader, while the underdog effect refers to the tendency for other potential voters to be attracted to the trailing candidate (party). The notion of strategic or tactical voting, on the other hand, is based on the idea that voters view the act of voting as a means of selecting a government. Thus they will sometimes refrain from choosing their candidate or party of first preference, if they perceive it to be only weakly supported by the others, and cast their vote to another, less-preferred, candidate from strategic considerations.

A great deal of research over the past 30 years has been conducted examining the relationship between published reports of election poll data and the potential impact of poll results on voting behaviour. In some cases evidence has been found that suggests bandwagon effects are present (Marsh, 1985; Skalaban, 1988; McAllister and Studlar, 1991; Ansolabehere and Iyengar, 1994; Cotter and Stovall, 1994; Mehrabian, 1998); others have found evidence of an underdog effect (Fleitas, 1971; Ceci and Kain, 1982; Lavrakas et al., 1991); while third have shown differentiated (mixed) effects of polls on groups of voters, or have claimed no effect of polls on public opinion whatsoever (Navazio, 1977; Donsbach, 2001). Hence, in spite of decades of research, the question of "poll effects" on voter decision making remains an open one (Morwitz and Pluzinski, 1996; Blais et al., 2006).

Recently, however, a shift in focus has been proposed by some authors, from research of "poll effects" to research of the "preconditions for poll effects" (Lamza Posavec and Rihtar, 2007; Cutler et al., 2008). That is, rather than asking if polls matter, a primary question has been rephrased to whether the necessary preconditions for polls to have effect on voters exist, and to what extent (if any) are they satisfied in a mass electorate. Building on general conclusions regarding processes of social and political influence (for example, Zaller, 1992; Chong and Druckman, 2007), three conditions were hypothesized as necessary for the published pre-election poll results to have any direct influence on the voters. First, voters must attend to poll results. Second, voters must form reasonably accurate perceptions of the poll results they attend. Third, voters must have confidence in poll results – that is, they must find the polls credible. Within such framework, Lamza Posavec and Rihtar (2007) have conducted an empirical evaluation of plausibility of various claims regarding poll effects, using the original survey data collected during the 2003 parliamentary and 2005 presidential election in Croatia. Their results suggest that even the theoretical influence of published polls at the time was relatively small, as reflected in relatively low percentages of potential voters who satisfied all three preconditions – attended the polls, trusted the results and were able to reproduce them correctly.

An opportunity to re-examine the hypothesized preconditions for poll effects, and the extent to which they are satisfied in the Croatian electorate, presented itself in the 2011 Croatian parliamentary election campaign. It bears noting that Croatia is a relatively young democracy with a fairly short history of pre-election polls and surveys of vote intentions. First parliamentary multi-party election in Croatia was held in 1990, after 45 years of Communist rule. Since 1990, six parliamentary elections have been held (latest being in December 2011). Croatia has a proportional electoral system based on party-list proportional

representation¹, and although there are more than thirty political parties running in each election, for over a decade past the Croatian political scene has practically been dichotomized with the two major parties interchanging the leadership position: the Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) and Social Democratic Party (SDP).

Regarding the 2011 Croatian parliamentary election campaign, two elements were of importance to this study. First, the number of published pre-election polls in Croatian media was highest yet: twelve generic national polls (conducted to indicate overall party rating and provide a trend indicator) and seven seat projections (split according to electoral districts) were published in a four-month period prior to the election². These were carried out by several research agencies (Ipsos Puls, GfK, Henda, Prizma, Promocija Plus, and Mediana Fides) for various media outlets: three main national television stations (HRT, Nova TV, and RTL), two main newspapers with national coverage (Večernji list, Jutarnji list) and political parties running the campaign. Second, all of the published pre-election polls systematically predicted the centre-left coalition led by Social Democratic Party (later officially named the Kukuriku coalition³) to be in the lead, and Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) trailing. Simply put, the pre-election polls were rather difficult to avoid, and their results all pointed to the same outcome.

Within such a context, this study examines to what extent the preconditions for poll effects were satisfied among the Croatian voters, and how they related to certain aspects of voting behaviour, in particular, voters' intentions and expectations in the 2011 Croatian parliamentary election.

2. Method, Data and Variables

This study uses poll data collected during the Croatian parliamentary election campaign in November 2011, roughly two weeks prior to the election. The survey was fielded on a nationally representative sample of potential voters (N=967). Apart from the standard set of questions regarding the general voting intentions, party preference and expectations for the outcome of the election, the survey questionnaire incorporated instrumentation concerning pre-election polls, including measures of familiarity with the published pre-election polls, knowledge of the results and trust in their credibility, as well as self-reports by respondents about the influences of published poll results on their voting decision. It should be noted that the question formulations, as well as the methods of data analysis, used in this study were identical to those used by Lamza Posavec and Rihtar (2007) in the surveys conducted prior to the 2003 parliamentary and 2005 presidential election in Croatia.

Namely, familiarity with the polls or "attention to polls", as the first hypothesized precondition, was measured through a rather straightforward question: "Have you, thus far, read or heard about results of pre-election polls in this parliamentary election campaign?" followed by a multiple choice question: "Where have you read or heard about poll results?". The second precondition, "knowledge of the results", was

¹ Croatian elections have been characterized by frequent changes of electoral laws and electoral systems by which the elections have been conducted: a double ballot majority system had been used, followed by a mixed plurality-proportional system, and finally – since 1999 – a proportional system based on party-list proportional representation.

² Detailed information on the opinion polling for the Croatian parliamentary election 2011, including overall party ratings and seat projections in chronological order is available at:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Opinion_polling_for_the_Croatian_parliamentary_election,_2011

³ Political alliance of four centre-left and centrist parties in Croatia: Social Democratic Party of Croatia (SDP; at the time, the major opposition party), Croatian people's Party – Liberal Democrats (HNS), Istrian Democratic Assembly (IDS), and Croatian Party of Pensioners (HSU). This electoral coalition was formed in 2010 under the name Alliance for Change, and was officially renamed Kukuriku coalition in 2011.

tapped into using two questions: “According to the poll results, which party has the best chance of winning the most votes in the upcoming election?” and “Which party would, according to the polls, come in second?”; the correct answers to these questions being Kukuriku and HDZ respectively. Although the respondents ability to accurately recall the parties’ standings (by asking for the parties’ percentages of decided voters as reported in the recent polls) might be a more precise measure of “knowledge of the results”, we decided upon using the simplest inference from polls which concerns the identity of the party that is most likely to win, and the second-placed party for two reasons. First, the published pre-election polls differed somewhat in the reported figures, and second, some of the polls aimed not at indicating overall party ratings but rather seat projections which resulted in additional discrepancies. However, what the published pre-election polls and seat projections did not differ in, was the predicted relative order of the two major parties – hence our assessment of “knowledge of the results” rested upon the accurate reproduction of that information. The third hypothesized precondition, the confidence in poll results or “trust in poll credibility” was measured by directly asking the respondents to what extent do they believe in accuracy of the results of the pre-election polls.

Based on this information, the respondents were in the analysis further divided into four groups according to the number of satisfied preconditions for poll effects on voting behaviour. First group (named “0 preconditions”) was composed of the respondents who have not read or heard about any pre-election polls, in other words, those who were not familiar with any poll results – and therefore could not reproduce or express trust in information they were not exposed to. Second group (“1 precondition”) included the respondents who have read or heard about poll results but could not accurately recall the predicted winner and the first runner-up. Third group of respondents (“2 preconditions”) was formed of those who were familiar with poll results and could reproduce them correctly, but did not find them credible. Lastly, the fourth group (named “3 preconditions”) comprised the respondents who satisfied all of the hypothesized preconditions – they were familiar with the polls, could recall correctly the poll results, and found them to be credible.

These groups were then compared on a series of dependent variables (the intention to participate in the election, vote choice, expectations about the outcome of election, and the expected winner) in order to explore if the observed differences in intended electoral turnout and voting preferences could be linked to the hypothesized indicators of possible pre-election poll influence. To that end, Chi-square tests of independence were used, followed by a logistic regression where – in addition to the number of preconditions satisfied – three demographic variables (gender, age, and education) were entered as potentially relevant predictors of political choice and voting behaviour, as suggested by previous research (Lamza Posavec, 1995; Lamza Posavec and Rihtar, 2007).

3. Results and Discussion

We begin the presentation of the results by describing the nature of voters’ responsiveness to poll information (**Table 1**).

Nearly two-thirds of respondents (63.1%) stated to have read or heard about results of pre-election polls, mostly through media (newspapers, television, radio, Internet) or informal communication (conversations at home or at work, with friends or neighbours). A considerably lower percentage (46.6%) was also able to correctly identify the party that according to the polls was most likely to win, along with the second-placed party. Introducing yet the third precondition – trust in the credibility of poll results – the

percentage plunges to 29.8% of respondents, these actually being the only cluster of potential voters susceptible to the presumed poll influence.

Table 1. Voters' responsiveness to poll information in the 2011 Croatian parliamentary election campaign

| | Percentage of respondents |
|--|---------------------------|
| Familiarity with the pre-election polls, knowledge of the results, and belief in their credibility: | |
| Have heard / read about the pre-election polls (in the media – newspapers, TV, radio, Internet; or informal communication) | 63.1 |
| Have heard / read about the pre-election polls & able to correctly rank two major parties | 46.6 |
| Have heard / read about the pre-election polls & able to correctly rank two major parties & believe in the credibility of poll results | 29.8 |
| Respondents' self-reports on the influence of pre-election polls: | |
| Influenced a decision to participate in the election (a lot or somewhat) | 11.5 |
| Influenced a decision which party / coalition to vote for (a lot or somewhat) | 12.7 |
| In what way: | |
| encouraged a change of the initial preference | 1.1 |
| strengthened the initial preference | 6.2 |
| encouraged the undecided voters to think about their vote choice | 5.4 |

(N = 967)

This portion of voters who attended the polls, trusted the results and were able to reproduce them correctly, however, is still substantially higher than observed in the 2003 parliament and 2005 presidential elections in Croatia: 11.3% and 19.2% respectively (as reported by Lamza Posavec and Rihtar, 2007). Such findings would indicate that greater exposure to poll information is taking place (due to an increase in pre-election poll incidence and coverage in media) but also that voters' responsiveness to, and trust in, published pre-election poll results is continually growing in Croatia.

As for the indicators of electoral turnout and voting intentions in the 2011 election, results reveal a relatively high percentage of respondents who expressed their intention to participate in the election (84.5%)⁴, followed by a somewhat lower portion of those who were ready to state their vote choice (69.6%). Additionally, 53.1% of all respondents declared having clear expectations concerning the outcome of the election – Kukuriku coalition being seen the most likely winner (42.1%), as in fact was predicted in all published pre-election polls.

⁴ As it usually is the case, the here noted percentage of respondents who had expressed their intention to participate in the election (84.5%) was significantly higher than the percentage of voters who actually did participate in the 2011 Croatian parliamentary election (61.95%). Lamza Posavec (2004) states that such discrepancies might be due to a high correlation between the interest in the election and readiness to participate in pre-election surveys.

However, self-report measures reveal only a smaller percentage of respondents admitting to be influenced by the published pre-election poll results. Namely, 11.5% of respondents said that their decision to participate in the election, and 12.7% said their decision which party or coalition to vote for was (at least somewhat) influenced by the polls. Out of that number, 6.2% said that reading or hearing about the pre-election poll results has in fact strengthened their initial voting preference, 5.4% admit being previously undecided and hence encouraged to think about their vote choice, and only 1.1% of the respondents said that they actually changed their vote choice as a result of the pre-election poll data. In comparison, in the 2003 parliament and 2005 presidential election (as reported by Lamza Posavec and Rihtar, 2007) the percentages of respondents admitting to be influenced by published pre-election poll results were significantly lower (primarily due to a generally weaker exposure to poll information) but the distribution of the results was the same as the one noted here. In both cases, percentages of respondents who stated to have strengthened their initial voting preference, or were encouraged to think about voting, were higher than of those who actually have changed their vote choice due to the pre-election poll data exposure. Self-reports, though, usually tend to be weak proof of effects, because people usually are not in a position to objectively recognize the causes of their own way of thinking and acting (Donsbach, 2001). Still, such results are an interesting indicator, if not of effects, than at least of the perception and significance of election polls.

First step in our analysis of electoral behaviour in regards to the exposure to pre-election polls is presented in **Table 2**, where chi-square tests were used to explore if the observed differences in voters' intentions and expectations could be linked to the number of satisfied preconditions for pre-election poll influence. Statistically significant chi-square values in all cases but one (variable "vote choice – other") indicate that voting intentions and expectations regarding the outcome of election are in fact dependent on the number of preconditions satisfied.

Potential electoral abstainers, with no clear intention to cast a vote, and those without expectations whatsoever for the outcome of election, were for the most part unfamiliar with any pre-election polls, hence did not satisfy any of the hypothesized preconditions – and could generally be described as "uninterested in the election". On the other hand, a majority of the respondents who have formed clear expectations regarding the outcome of election, those who saw the Kukuriku coalition as the most probable electoral victor, and would vote for Kukuriku, satisfied all three postulated preconditions: they attended to the poll results, expressed confidence in them, and could reproduce them accurately. In fact, strongest associations (as indicated by Cramer's V values, in **Table 2**) were found between exposure to polls and two variables of voter expectations named "have expectations about the outcome of election" and "expected winner Kukuriku" (0.83 and 0.69 respectively). Given the fact that Kukuriku led in the polls throughout the campaign, such results come as no surprise.

Alternatively, respondents who expected the electoral victory of HDZ were, for the most part, among those familiar with poll results but expressing a disbelief in accuracy of such forecasts. However, a significant portion of those expecting HDZ winning the election were also among the well-informed ones who trusted the polls to be reliable. These findings are in line with previous research which indicate that election forecasts are often perceived selectively in favour of one's own opinion (Donsbach, 2001), and that voters tend to over-estimate the chance of their candidate winning (Morwitz and Pluzinski, 1996; Miljan, 2005)⁵.

⁵ A parallel could also be drawn here with Mastropaolo's (2009; 2012) distinction of the "estranged" (or "remote"), the "detached," and the "involved" citizens – with regards to their familiarity with politics and capacities to react and make judgements about it. The "estranged" ("remote") type, as Mastropaolo describes it, corresponds to those who have extremely vague understandings of

Table 2. Voters' intentions and expectations by number of satisfied preconditions for possible pre-election poll influence. Chi-square tests of independence (column percentages).

| | Intend to participate in the election | | Vote choice HDZ | | Vote choice Kukuriku | | Vote choice other | | Have expectations on election's outcome | | Expected winner HDZ | | Expected winner Kukuriku | | Expected winner other | |
|---|---------------------------------------|------|-----------------|------|----------------------|------|-------------------|------|---|------|---------------------|------|--------------------------|------|-----------------------|------|
| | YES | NO | YES | NO | YES | NO | YES | NO | YES | NO | YES | NO | YES | NO | YES | NO |
| 0 preconditions (not familiar with poll results) | 33.8 | 54.1 | 42.1 | 35.9 | 28.4 | 39.7 | 33.5 | 38.2 | 0.0 | 78.7 | 0.0 | 40.6 | 0.0 | 63.7 | 0.0 | 37.6 |
| 1 precondition (familiar with poll results, but not able to reproduce them correctly) | 16.2 | 18.5 | 11.6 | 17.5 | 15.9 | 16.7 | 16.5 | 16.4 | 22.4 | 9.7 | 26.7 | 15.5 | 19.6 | 14.1 | 61.1 | 15.6 |
| 2 preconditions (familiar with poll results, able to reproduce them, but do not find them credible) | 17.2 | 14.4 | 22.6 | 15.6 | 13.4 | 17.9 | 16.5 | 17.0 | 26.0 | 6.6 | 40.7 | 14.4 | 22.7 | 12.6 | 27.8 | 16.6 |
| 3 preconditions (familiar with poll results, able to reproduce them, and find them credible) | 32.9 | 13.0 | 23.8 | 31.1 | 42.2 | 25.7 | 33.5 | 28.4 | 51.6 | 5.0 | 32.6 | 29.5 | 57.7 | 9.5 | 11.1 | 30.2 |
| Chi-square | 31.17 ** | | 10.68 * | | 24.13 ** | | 2.79 | | 640.65 ** | | 73.49 ** | | 449.96 ** | | 32.50 ** | |
| Cramer's V | 0.18 ** | | 0.11 * | | 0.16 ** | | 0.05 | | 0.83 ** | | 0.28 ** | | 0.69 ** | | 0.19 ** | |
| N | 830 | 137 | 153 | 814 | 245 | 722 | 282 | 685 | 545 | 422 | 79 | 888 | 449 | 518 | 17 | 950 |
| ** p ≤ 0.01 ; * p ≤ 0.05 | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |

political matters and are mostly uninformed about politics, those who withdraw from expressing any opinions, and are most likely to abstain from voting. Such a description would fit well our first group of respondents who did not satisfy any of the hypothesized preconditions, and were generally labelled as "uninterested in the election". The "involved" type in Mastropaolo's classification represents those who are quite well informed politically; who keep abreast of political developments, read newspapers and watch current affairs broadcasts on television. They are able to articulate their attitudes and judgements, consistently turn out to vote, and engage with ease in political issues. This type would correspond to a group of respondents who satisfied all three postulated preconditions in our research and who, consequently, had clear expectations regarding the outcome of the election, saw the Kukuriku coalition as the most probable victor, and would vote for Kukuriku. Finally, the "detached" type represents the politically informed citizens, who are able to make judgements (often corroborated by their own personal experience), but often feel they have better things to do than to concern themselves with politics. These would, to a degree, relate to a group of our respondents who were familiar with but had no trust in the pre-election polls, and who were for the most part expecting the electoral victory of HDZ (corroborated, most likely by party's past performance).

A closer look at voters' perceptions of the victor is given in **Table 3**, revealing partisan wishful thinking overriding poll information, even when such information is perceived as a valid representation of the distribution of political preferences in society.

As can be seen in **Table 3**, respondents who intended to vote for HDZ were more likely to predict that HDZ would win in the riding 62.8% of the time. Focusing on a sub-sample of respondents who satisfied all three preconditions for poll influence: attended to the polls, were able to accurately recall the results and found them credible (hence, the only portion of likely voters theoretically susceptible to poll influence), figures change slightly although still showing almost a half of HDZ voters trusting the party of their preference to win the election.

Table 3. Likely voters who expected each party to win the election (row percentages).

| Stated party preference (total sample; N=680) | Expected winner HDZ | Expected winner Kukuriku | Expected winner other |
|--|------------------------------------|---|--------------------------------------|
| Vote choice HDZ | 62.8 | 36.0 | 1.2 |
| Vote choice Kukuriku | 2.5 | 93.1 | 4.4 |
| Vote choice other | 7.7 | 87.1 | 5.2 |
| Stated party preference (familiar with poll results, able to reproduce them, and find them credible; N=249) | Expected winner HDZ | Expected winner Kukuriku | Expected winner other |
| Vote choice HDZ | 48.6 | 51.4 | 0.0 |
| Vote choice Kukuriku | 1.0 | 99.0 | 0.0 |
| Vote choice other | 3.7 | 93.9 | 2.4 |

Previous research shows that, depending on the strength of pre-existing attitudes, partisans may engage in wishful thinking – inflating reports of their party's standings or over-estimating its chance at victory – either because of a positivity bias in the processing of poll information, or a tendency to be optimistic to encourage oneself to persevere with goal-directed behaviour, such as voting (Miljan, 2005; Cutler et al., 2008). On the other hand, there are other forms of collective feedback which may compete with polls as information sources, one of them being the “burden of the past”, or simply put: citizens' awareness of results of previous elections which they may extrapolate to the future (Irwin and van Holsteyn, 2002). Whether or not the “partisan effect” observed in the 2011 Croatian parliamentary election among the HDZ voters can be attributed to the information actually drawn from the polls (reinforcing the existing beliefs through dissonance-reducing selective attention and perception) or possibly from other sources such as inference from the past, is a question these data cannot answer with precision. It bears noting, however, that HDZ had been the ruling party in Croatia for two consecutive mandates, winning the 2003 and 2007 elections. Moreover, in the 2007 election campaign most pre-election polls, as well as the

exit polls, predicted – quite erroneously – a tight victory of SDP (the major opposition party at the time) over HDZ.

Given such facts, expectations of HDZ voters might be more in line with the party's past performance than the "cognitive response" triggered by the unwelcome poll results.

To better understand the observed relationship between variables of electoral behaviour and level of poll information exposure and retention, logistic regression analysis was used. To that end, separate analyses were carried out for each of the dependent variables (intention to participate in the election, voting preferences, and expectations regarding the outcome of the election), with the indicators of possible pre-election poll influence, and demographic variables (gender, age, education) used as predictors.⁶ Building the regression equation we used the Forward (LR) method, entering predictor variables one at a time, using likelihood ratio estimates to determine which variable will add the most to the regression equation. **Table 4** presents B values for predictor variables in the final regression equation for each of the criterion variables, along with the Nagelkerke R² values indicating which percentage of the dependent variable may be accounted for by all included predictor variables.

Table 4. Voters' intentions and expectations by number of satisfied preconditions for poll influence and demographic characteristics – results of logistic regression analyses (model Forward LR; given are B values for predictor variables in the final regression equation for each of the dependents).

| Predictors | Dependent variables | | | | | | | |
|--|-----------------------------------|-------------------|-----------------------|-------------------|--|---------------------|--------------------------|-----------------------|
| | Intend to participate in election | Vote choice HDZ | Vote choice Kuku-riku | Vote choice other | Have expectation on election's outcome | Expected winner HDZ | Expected winner Kukuriku | Expected winner other |
| 0 precondition.(not familiar with poll results) | | | | | -11.245 | -9.615 | -10.751 | |
| 1 precondition.(familiar with poll results, but not able to reproduce them correctly) | | | | | | | | 1.581** |
| 2 precondition.(familiar with poll results, able to reproduce them, but do not find them credible) | | 0.344** | | | | 0.343** | | 1.037* |
| 3 precondition.(familiar with poll results, able to reproduce them, and find them credible) | 0.556** | | 0.316** | | 0.539** | | 0.590** | |
| Gender | | | | | | | | |
| Age | 0.136* | 0.127* | 0.155** | -0.139** | | | | |
| Education | 0.184** | -0.184** | 0.141** | | 0.145* | -0.262** | 0.229** | |
| Nagelkerke R ² | 0.075 | 0.065 | 0.060 | 0.016 | 0.766 | 0.212 | 0.637 | 0.165 |
| N | Yes=830 No=137 | Yes=153 No=814 | Yes=245 No=722 | Yes=282 No=685 | Yes=545 No = 422 | Yes=79 No=888 | Yes=449 No=518 | Yes=17 No=950 |

* $p \leq 0.05$; ** $p \leq 0.01$

⁶ All the dependent variables were coded yes=1; gender variable was coded men=1; age was originally measured in years and for the purpose of the analysis grouped into 6 intervals; and level of education was measured on an 11-point scale.

Results of these analyses reveal indicators of possible pre-election poll influence, as well as two of the demographic variables – level of education, and age – to have a rather significant impact on several observed variables of electoral behaviour. However, whilst education seems to be a good predictor of both voters' intentions and expectations, age of the respondent happened to have impacted intentions to participate and vote choice but not the expectations for the outcome of the election. Gender, on the other hand, had no impact whatsoever on any of the dependent variables in the analyses.

In regards to voters' intentions, more likely to participate in the election, and vote for Kukuriku, were the older and the better educated respondents, who closely attended and trusted the poll results. Alternatively, a probability of conveying HDZ as a party of choice was higher among those with lower levels of education, who – although familiar with the forecasts – did not find them credible; while voting for a party or a coalition other than HDZ or Kukuriku presented an attractive option mostly for the young. However, regression models for each of the dependent variables of voting intentions and vote choice had very low predictive ability with R^2 values ranging from 0.016 to 0.075 – indicating factors other than those analysed to be responsible for the observed differences in the intended electoral turnout and voting preferences. Same findings were noted by Lamza Posavec and Rihtar (2007) in their analysis of the 2003 parliamentary and 2005 presidential pre-election surveys in Croatia.

Voters' expectations, by contrast, could for the most part be explained by the predictors entered in the analyses. Respondents who had clear expectations regarding the outcome of the election and those who believed Kukuriku had the best chance of winning, were predominantly among the better educated, who satisfy all three preconditions for poll influence, ergo were familiar with the polls, expressed confidence in them and were able to accurately recall the results. Strength of such predictions ranged from 0.637 to 0.766 (R^2).

The less educated respondents and those sceptical of the pre-election poll results were more likely to expect electoral victor to be HDZ; whereas those who anticipated the winner of the election to be a party other than HDZ or Kukuriku for the most part could not recall the poll results they have claimed to have seen or heard, or doubted the trustworthiness of the pre-election polls altogether. In these cases, however, the predictive strength of regression models was much lower – with R^2 values of 0.212 and 0.165 for the variables “expected winner HDZ” and the “expected winner other”, respectively.

4. Conclusion

In many countries over the past decades, pre-election polls and surveys of vote intentions have become an integral part of the media coverage of electoral campaigns, Croatia being no exception to such trend. The aim of this study was to explore if a level of pre-election poll information exposure and retention could be a good predictor of one's voting intentions and expectations in the context of the 2011 Croatian parliamentary election.

Several important findings were presented. First, in regards to the nature of voters' responsiveness to poll information, when compared to the results obtained during the 2003 parliament and 2005 presidential election campaigns, our data indicate that a greater exposure to poll information is taking place (primarily due to an increase in pre-election poll incidence and coverage in media) but also that voters' responsiveness to, and trust in, published pre-election poll results is continually growing in Croatia –

preconditions for poll effects being satisfied for nearly one-third of the Croatian electorate in the 2011 parliamentary election.

Second, although self-report measures revealed only a smaller percentage of respondents admitting to be influenced by the published pre-election poll results, the observed differences in voters' intentions and expectations were found to be significantly linked to the level of attention to and retention of poll information (defined as the number of satisfied preconditions for poll influence). Namely, a majority of those who had formed clear expectations regarding the outcome of the election, those who saw the Kukuriku coalition as the most probable electoral victor (as in fact predicted by all of the published pre-election polls), and would vote for Kukuriku, satisfied all three postulated preconditions: attended to the poll results, expressed confidence in them, and could reproduce them accurately. On the other hand, those who did not trust the pre-election polls to accurately portray the political currents, were for the most part expecting the electoral victory of HDZ (the predicted second-place party), revealing partisan wishful thinking more in line with party's past performance than the "cognitive response" triggered by the unwanted poll results.

Finally, logistic regression analyses provided evidence for the presence of substantial effects of media polls on voters' expectations in the 2011 election run-up. However, with regard to voters' intentions, findings were more ambiguous, suggesting factors other than those analysed to be responsible for the observed differences in the intended electoral turnout and vote choice – as also was noted by Lamza Posavec and Rihtar (2007) in their analysis of the 2003 parliamentary and 2005 presidential pre-election surveys in Croatia.

What this data, regrettably, could not provide is an insight into how voters' intentions and expectations developed and whether they changed throughout the campaign. Undoubtedly, voter decision making is a process that by election day becomes more stable, hence "time" should be an important variable in exploring the possible influence of published pre-election poll results on different aspects of voting behaviour. As Lang and Lang argue, early polls might have potentially greater impact because people are less familiar with the issues or candidates, and opinions have not yet firmed (Lang and Lang, 1984). On the other hand, some studies show that people, in general, start acquiring information about campaign issues and candidates the closer to an election day (Miljan, 2005), and that preconditions for poll effects become more closely satisfied as the election approaches (Cutler et al., 2008). Future research of electoral behaviour in Croatia, especially with regard to potential pre-election poll influence, could therefore benefit from analyses sensitive to the possibility that the preconditions for poll effects may evolve over time. Some recent studies (Irwin and van Holsteyn, 2002; Blais et al., 2006; Cutler et al., 2008; Faas et al., 2008) suggest that rolling cross-sectional surveys (RCS) offer such a research design which, allowing considerations of campaign dynamics, helps explore effects of pre-election polls on voters' perceptions and beliefs as they develop during the campaign. Taking advantage of an RCS survey that is supplemented with published results from pre-election polls, and merging both types of data on a day-by-day basis, future analyses might provide a more precise answer to whether and to what extent voters' intentions and expectations are affected by the publication of data from pre-election polls.

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