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Research Paper

Disinformation and the Victory of Ferdinand Marcos Jr. in the 2022 Philippine Presidential Election

Panel 1
Political Manipulation, Election Interference, and Disinformation Campaigns

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Abstract

Increasingly, disinformation, a type of fake news with malicious or manipulative intentions, has become common in elections worldwide. However, a few survey-based studies have been conducted to understand how disinformation influences voter attitudes. We address this question in the case of the 2022 Philip- pine presidential election, where disinformation was rampant during the campaign. Allegedly, various types of disinformation contributed to the victory of Ferdinand "Bongbong" Marcos Jr. (hereafter BBM). In this study, we conducted two studies on the disinformation about BBM's father, the late dictator Ferdinand Marcos Sr. Study 1 examined the association between BBM support and belief in disinformation about Marcos Sr., and we find they are highly correlated. Study 2 tested the direction of causality by an experimental survey. Contrary to our expectations, those exposed to disinformation reduced support for BBM. At the same time, Study 2 showed that fact checks help correct respondents' evaluation of disinformation. We conclude that although disinformation played a role in the 2022 presidential election, more research is needed to understand how exactly they are related.

Keywords: *Philippines, Ferdinand Marcos Jr., election-related disinformation, fact-checking, survey experiments*

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Introduction

Disinformation–intentionally spreading false information to deceive people, has become a global concern recently. Among its many undesirable consequences, it undermined democracy. Theoretically, voters are supposed to form their opinions about politics based on unbiased information, and disinformation impedes this fundamental premise of democracy. At the same time, a handful of studies found that disinformation can influence voters' decisions to choose more extremist parties, thereby polarizing politics.

This paper is an empirical addition to the literature on disinformation and democracy by focusing on the case of the 2022 Philippine presidential election. Many analysts have pointed out that disinformation worked in favor of the victory of Ferdinand "Bongbobg" Marcos Jr., or BBM as he is commonly called (Arugay and Baquisal, 2022; Ong et al., 2022; Fallorina et al., 2023). Furthermore, the fact that BBM won puzzled many because he is the son of the former dictator Ferdinand Marcos Sr. BBM's father was known for kleptocracy. He was kicked out of the country in the 1986 "People Power Revolution." Especially for those who have first-hand knowledge of the Marcos dictatorship, BBM's victory was difficult to fathom.

Given these circumstances, we conducted two surveys to study the relationships between disinformation about Ferdinand Marcos Sr. and Filipino voter attitudes. Study 1 employed face-to-face and online surveys and studied the extent of disinformation exposure and belief, and our results show that a substantive portion of Filipino voters is exposed to and in the be- lief of disinformation about Marcos Sr. Further, we found strong correlations between those who support BBM and those who are exposed to and believe in disinformation. Study 2 is intended to disentangle the direction of causality behind the correlations we found in Study 1. We conducted an online survey experiment to examine if being exposed to disinformation boosts the support for Marcos Sr. and BBM and if fact-checking reduces the support. Our results did not support our hypotheses that disinformation influenced enhanced support for BBM and his father. Combining our results in Studies 1 and 2, we maintain that disinformation about Marcos Sr. is so entrenched among Filipino voters that a one-shot experiment cannot disentangle their relationship.

This paper contributes to the following strand of literature. First, this study is one of the first to examine the role of disinformation on voter attitudes in the case of the Philip- pines. Existing studies on this topic are overwhelmingly on the US and European countries where democratic institutions, particularly party politics, are relatively well-established (Allcott and Gentzkow, 2017; Zimmermann and Kohring, 2020). Our study on the Philippines is the case that examines disinformation where partisan identity is almost nonexistent and where the use of social media is rapidly replacing traditional mass media. Second, our study addresses the effects of fact-checking (Coppock et al., 2022). We found that exposure to fact-checking information reduces the belief in disinformation among Filipino voters, although

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it does not change their voting intention. This finding suggests scholars explore further how to provide effective fact-checking to counter disinformation operations expected to worsen in future elections.

Research Contexts

Existing studies on disinformation and elections

The study of disinformation became a cottage industry during the last decade, along with the increasing use of social media (Tucker et al., 2018; Van Der Linden, 2022). Scholars have studied who spreads the disinformation (Ong and Cabañes, 2018), the modes of spreading disinformation (Hameleers et al., 2020), and how to detect it (Stitini, Kaloun and Bencharef, 2022).

A handful of studies focused on the relationship between disinformation and elections. Among those that studied developed democracies, Allcott and Gentzkow (2017) analyzed the 2016 US presidential election and found that voters are more likely to believe disinformation that favors their preferred candidate. In the case of Germany, Zimmermann and Kohring (2020) found that believing disinformation online can lead voters to switch their vote from the main governing party to right-wing populists. Baptista and Gradim (2022) studied the 2019 Portugees election and found that disinformation is more likely to be shared than real news, although its reach is relatively minor.

Recently, disinformation studies have emerged in developing county contexts. In a study on India, Das and Schroeder (2021) interviewed 25 Indians and found that their awareness of disinformation in the 2019 election was very high. Studying Indonesia's gubernatorial election in 2016-2017, Parahita (2018) analyzed the survey conducted among 190 respondents and found that partisanship significantly correlated with the belief in disinformation.

One of the issues that scholars debate is the extent of disinformation's influence on voter behavior. For example, in the realm of foreign policy, Lanoszka (2019) argues that the effects of disinformation are exaggerated. Others maintain that disinformation threatens democracy (Schünemann, 2022). This debate appears to be irreconcilable unless we have evidence-based analyses. In the dearth of such studies, this paper attempts to examine the role that disinformation played in the case of the 2022 Philippine presidential election.

BBM's Victory and Disinformation about Marcos Sr.

The victory of BBM surprised many observers of Philippine politics, if not the voters. This surprise mainly comes from his father being a failed kind of dictator. Ferdinand Marcos Sr. was a Guinness World Record in 1995 recognized for "The greatest robbery of a government"

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(Patag, 2022). According to the international human rights NGO Amnesty International, 3,000 were killed, 30,000 were tortured, and 70,000 were imprisoned due to political opposition against the Marcos regime (Amnesty International, 2022). Marcos's claim of economic development did not materialize, but the poverty rate increased from 40% to 60% at the end of his reign (Martial Law Museum, 2022). However, the dictator's son won by a landslide with 57% of the votes cast.

Existing analyses about his victory point to several factors (McCargo, 2022; Dulay et al., 2023). Frequently mentioned factors include the ethnolinguistic support from BBM's regional base (Ilocos region), his alliance with the popular vice presidential candidate Sara Duterte, and the de facto endorsement from the sitting president Rodrigo Duterte after their alliance was forged. Disinformation was another often-mentioned reason why BBM won. The Philippines's disinformation environment became aggravated since 2016, not only with the spread of social media but also due to the rise of online trolls. President Duterte weaponized trolls to silence his opponents and critics. At the same time, online disinformation became an organized business that moneyed politicians can seek services (Ong and Caban˜es, 2018).

Several types of disinformation worked in his favor. According to the Tsek.ph, a con- solidation site of the fact-check results by a dozen NGOs in the Philippines[1], positive kind of disinformation about BBM was the most prevalent type during the 6-months presidential campaign period. The second most frequently found disinformation was about BBM's rival candidate Leni Robredo, and disinformation related to her was primarily hostile. The third most widespread type of disinformation was about BBM's father, Marcos Sr., and it was primarily positive.

This paper focuses on disinformation about Marcos Sr. We focus on this type of disinformation because it also addresses the issue of historical distortion. As discussed, the Mar- cos dictatorship was a dark period in Philippine history as far as the record says. However, disinformation about Marcos Sr. typically portrays his regime as positive and his family as benevolent celebrities (Coronel, 2022). At the same time, studies have shown that the Marcos family, starting in the 1960s by Ferdinand Marcos Sr. himself spread disinformation in their favor.[2] In these regards, our focus is not only on the effects of election-related disinformation but also a study on the extent of historical revisionist attitudes among Filipinos.

Against these backdrops, we investigate two questions. First, to what extent did voters believe disinformation about Marcos Sr.? Second, did disinformation about Marcos Sr. enhance support for BBM?

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[1] https://www.tsek.ph/
[2] See the series of studies conducted by the University of the Philippines Third World Studies Center project at https://iskomunidad.upd.edu.ph/index.php/Marcos Regime Research

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Research Design

Survey and Experimental Design

To answer the above research questions, we conducted two public opinion surveys (Study 1) and an online survey experiment (Study 2) with Filipino voters before the presidential election on May 10, 2022. Study 1 addresses our first question, the exposure and belief in disinformation. Study 2 is to examine whether disinformation influenced the support for BBM. Table 1 summarizes the technical details of the surveys we conducted.

Table 1: Summary of Survey Details

	Study 1		Study 2
Field Dates	April 18–27	April 19–26	April 29–May 7
Survey Company/	Social Weather Stations	Lucid	Lucid
Respondent Recruitment Platform	(SWS)		
Sampling Method	Multi-stage probability sampling	Convenience sample	Convenience sample
Survey mode	Face-to-face	Web	Web
# of Respondents	1,400	2,800	2,744

For Studies 1 and 2, we employed the top three types of disinformation about Marcos Sr., according to the Tsek.ph database. The first is about the "golden era" story. A typical story goes that the Philippines was the wealthiest country in Asia after Japan during the administration of former President Marcos Sr. The second type concerns human rights violations during the Marcos period. The disinformation message is that there was no human rights violation under Marcos. The third type is the so-called "Marcos gold" story. This has many variants, but the bottom line is that the Marcos family is endowed with a vast amount of gold. Social media content with these messages has been spread via Facebook posts and YouTube videos (Tesk.PH, 2022).

Figure 1 shows the examples of disinformation vignettes used in Study 1 and 2 and the fact-check vignettes used in Study 2. For study 1, we asked two questions after having respondents read these disinformation vignettes. First, we asked if they had heard about it before or not. The answer categories were "have heard it before" or "heard it only now." The second question we asked was about their belief in disinformation. The question was: "Whether you have heard of this before or only now, do you think this is. . . ", and the answer categories were "certainly false," "perhaps false," "difficult to say," "perhaps true," "certainly true."

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> **"Golden Era"**
> Some people say that the Philippines was the richest country in Asia after Japan during the administration of former President Marcos Sr.
>
> According to the University of the Philippines economists, the Philippines was never richest even in Southeast Asia.
>
> **"Human Rights"**
> Juan Ponce Enrile, the former Defense Secretary during the martial law era, said there was no arrest of Marcos' political critics during martial law rule.
>
> According to New York Times, three opposition senators (Aquino, Mitra, Dio- kno) were arrested on the day after Marcos declared martial law in 1972.
>
> **"Marcos Gold"**
> Some people say that former President Marcos Sr. lent gold to the central banks in more than 100 countries in the 1940s.
>
> According to the IMF/WB document, gold was never used as collateral to borrow money from the IMF and World Bank.
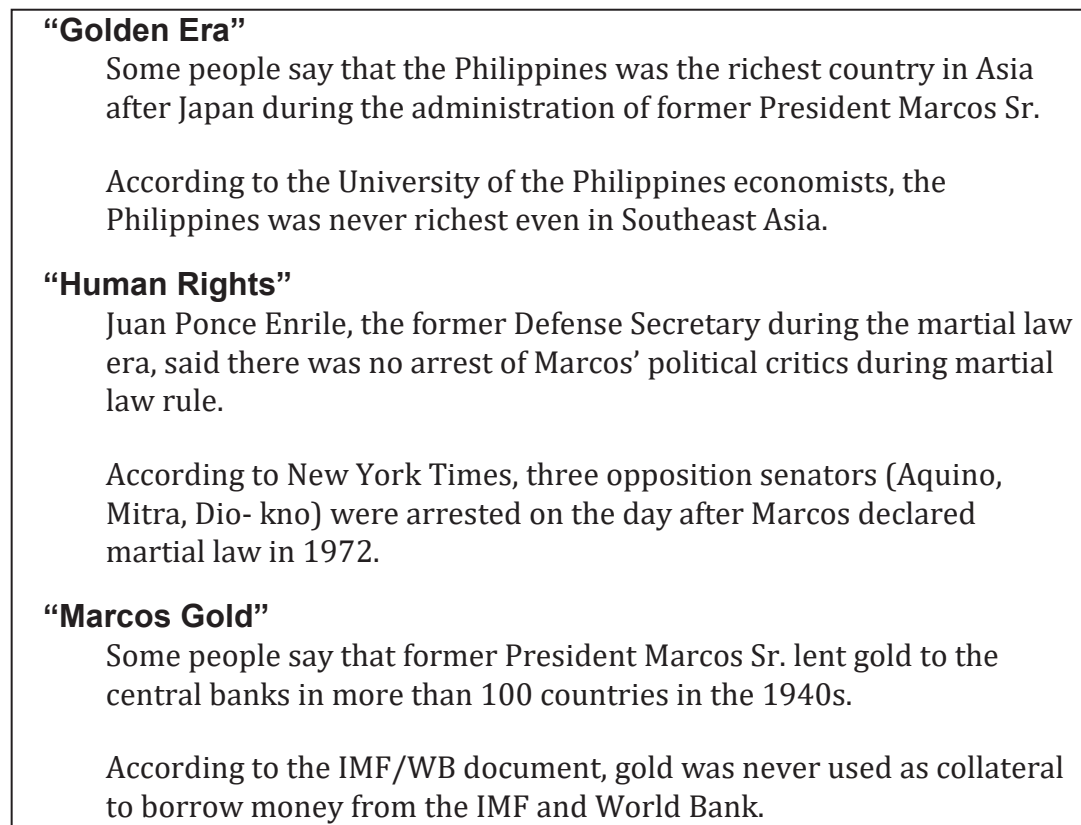
Figure 1: Disinformation and Fact-check Vignettes in Study 1 and 2

Study 2 employed an experimental design. As the pre-treatment question, we used a feeling thermometer to ask how warm the given respondent felt toward BBM. We divided the respondents into three groups. The first group is the control group which does not read any disinformation vignette but reads a sentence unrelated to disinformation. The second group is treatment group 1 (T1). This group read the same disinformation vignettes as in Study 1. The third group, or treatment group 2 (T2), read the disinformation and fact-checking vignettes.

We focus on four outcomes in Study 2. The first is a binary measure of respondents' vote intention for BBM. The second is a feeling thermometer score (0 to 100) for BBM. The third is the respondents' feelings toward the Marcos Sr. presidency measured with a 5-point ordinal scale ranging from "very unfavorable," "somewhat unfavorable," "undecided if favorable or unfavorable," "somewhat favorable," to "very favorable." The fourth is how respondents believed in the disinformation described in the experiment vignettes. This one was only asked for those participants assigned to the "disinformation" or "fact check" treatments and measured with a 4-point ordinal scale of "certainly false," "perhaps false," "perhaps true," and "certainly true."

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If the disinformation regarding Marcos Sr.'s dictatorship drives the voting behavior of the Filipino electorates by making them feel favorable toward the Marcos family, the "disinformation" treatment (T1) in our experiment should have a positive impact on the first three outcomes. If the fact check is an effective tool to counter disinformation in the Philippines, respondents in the "fact check" groups (T2) should be less likely to believe in the disinformation described in the vignette than those of the "disinformation" treatment. In addition, if fact-checking can also correct people's of politicians who spread the corresponding disinformation, we can expect that respondents in the fact-check treatment (T2) were less willing to vote for and less favorable toward BBM than those assigned to the "disinformation" groups.

Results and Discussion

Study 1

Figure 2 summarizes the percentages of respondents who had previously been exposed to (black) and believed in (gray) each of the disinformation in question from the face-to-face (left pane) and the online (right panel) surveys. Here, respondents who answered the disinformation under question were either "perhaps true" or "certainly true" are regarded as those who believed in the corresponding statement. The figure indicates that disinformation regarding Marcos Sr.'s dictatorship is widespread among Filipino voters.

Based on the face- to-face survey, whose respondents were considered more representative of the Philippines' population than the online version, around 40% of the respondents reported prior exposure to each disinformation. Although not as many respondents believed in such disinformation statements as those who had previously heard about them, the figure suggests that substantial portions of voters consider fake stories glorifying Marcos Sr.'s era as "true." Among the three disinformation types, the one on economic development is the most popular, as 40% of the SWS respondents believed in this kind of disinformation.

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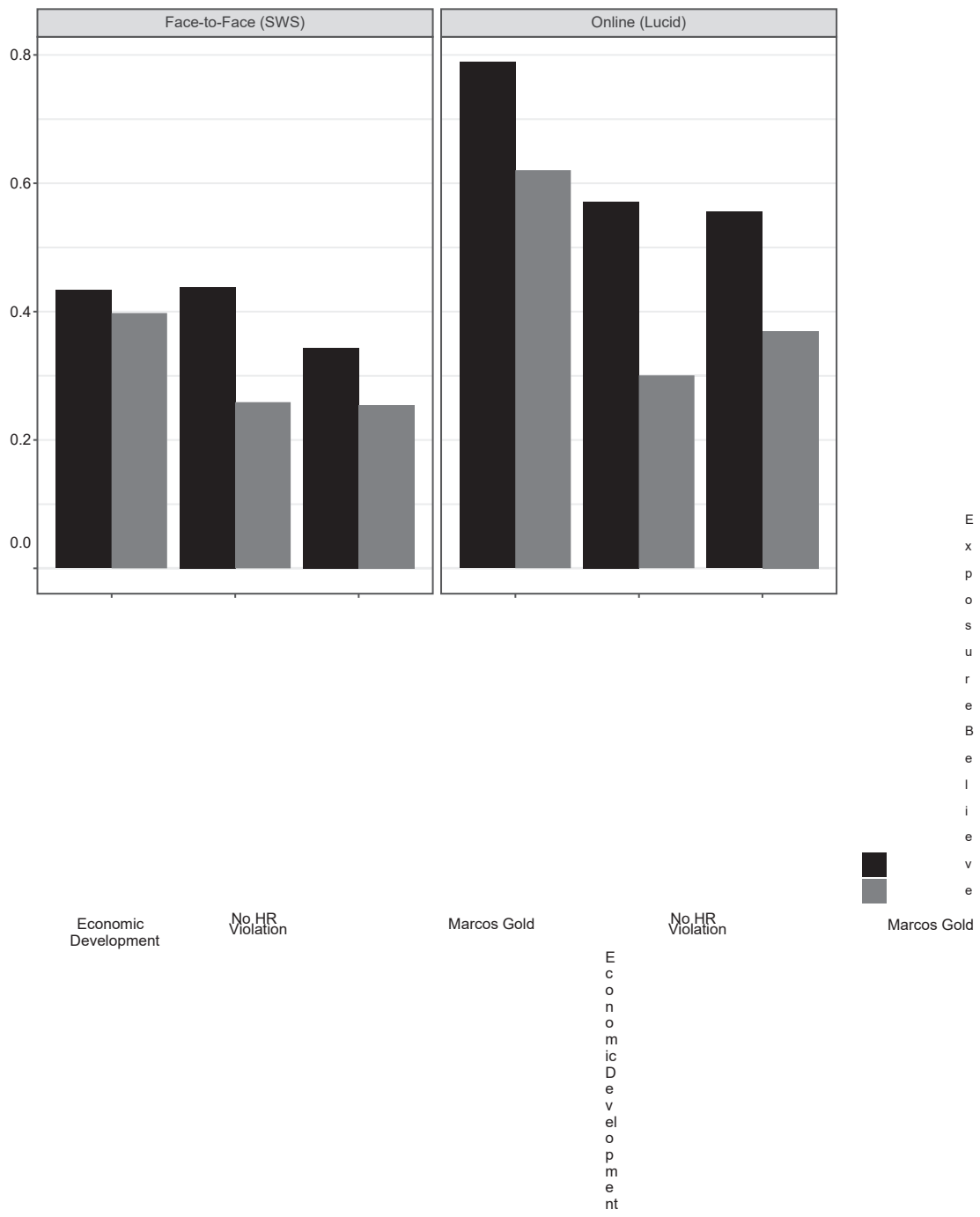Jakarta, 17-18 January 2024 | kisip.csis.or.id

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Figure 2: Exposure to/Belief in Disinformation on Marcos Sr. Presidency

Do people who previously heard about or believed in disinformation feel more favorably toward Marcos Sr. and BBM? To see whether such relationships exist, we conducted regression analyses of respondents' feelings toward Marcos Sr. and vote intention for BBM on their exposure to and belief in disinformation. Analyses are conducted for each disinformation type separately, and we used the linear regression models for the former outcome and the logistic regression models for the latter. To alleviate concerns of biases due to omitted variables, we employed the following variables as controls; respondents' sex, age, education, economic class (face-to-face survey only) or monthly income (online survey only), region of residence, language group (online survey only), and the main information source to get news on the presidential election.

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Exposure to/Belief in Disinformation and Attitudes toward Marcos
Sr./BBM Outcome: Feeling toward Marcos Sr. Presidency
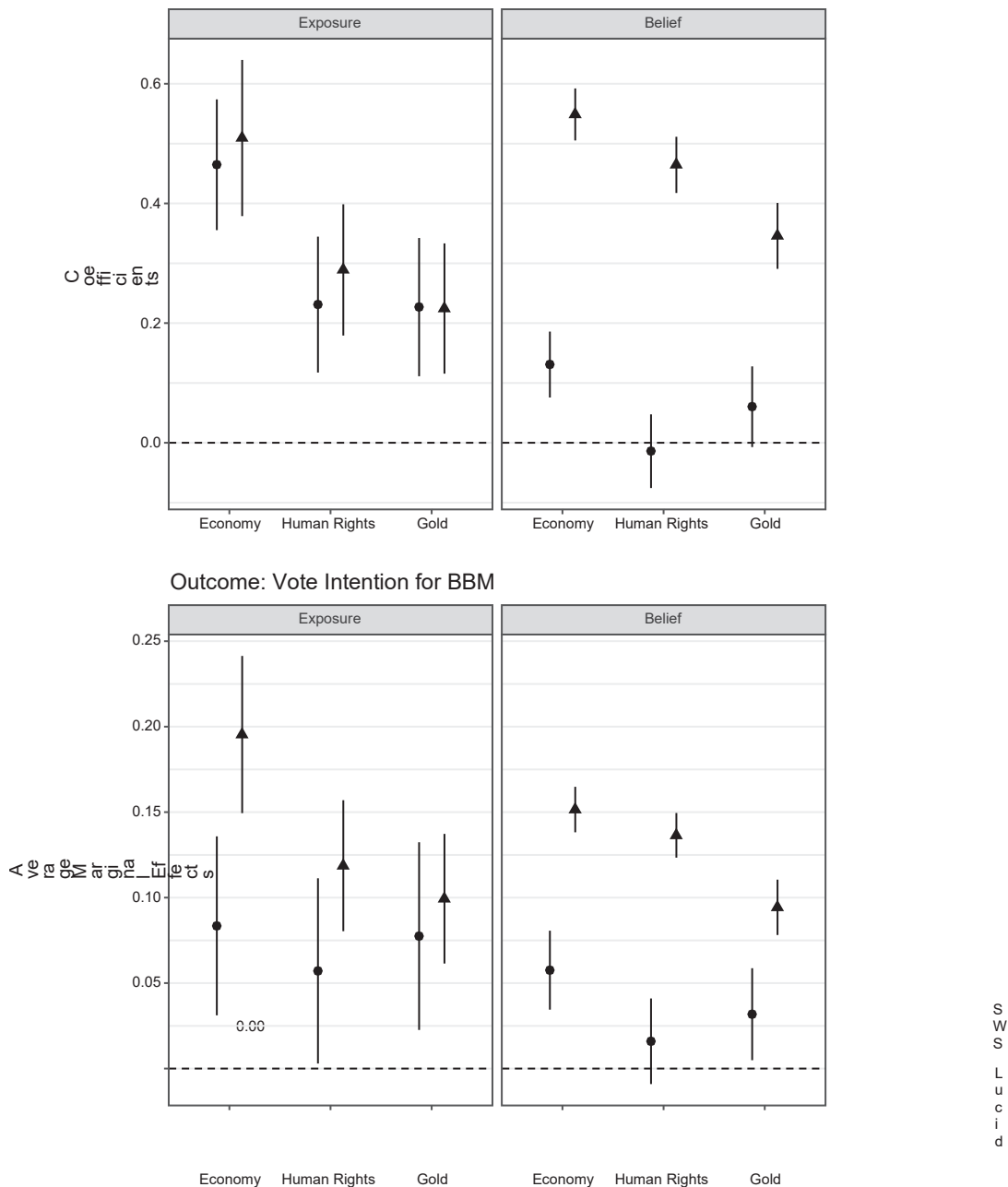

Outcome: Vote Intention for BBM

Figure 3: Association b/w Disinformation and Attitudes toward Marcos Sr./BBM

We summarized the regression analysis results in Figure 3. The figure depicts the coefficient estimates (for linear regression models) or the average marginal effects (for logistic regression models) of exposure to (left) and belief in (right) disinformation. Solid dots (circles for the SWS survey and triangles for the Lucid one) represent point estimates, and the vertical segments stand for the corresponding 95% confidence intervals. We can see from the figure that people who have previously been exposed to or those who believe in disinformation are, on average, more likely to feel favorable toward Marcos Sr. and vote for BBM.

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Although there are some exceptions, the key independent variables are positively associated with the outcomes, and the relationship is statistically distinguishable from 0 at the 5% level. Among the three disinformation types, the one on economic development is the most consistently and strongly related to attitudes toward Marcos Sr. and BBM. Detailed results appear in Online Appendix 1.1 and 1.2.

Study 2

Study 1 revealed that disinformation regarding Marcos Sr.'s dictatorship is widespread among Filipino voters and that exposure to and belief in such disinformation are positively associated with their attitudes toward Marcos Sr. and BBM. Then, can we say that this relationship is causal? That is, do Filipino electorates feel favorable toward Marcos Sr. and thus support BBM because of the disinformation?

Figure 4 summarizes the results of the survey experiment on this point. This figure plots the mean values of the four outcome variables of interest among respondents assigned to each treatment. We can see from the figure that, contrary to the conventional explanations of the 2022 presidential election, "disinformation" treatment not only had no impact on the feeling thermometer scores for BBM (panel b) but, in fact, decreased vote intention for BBM and, favorability toward Marcos Sr. presidency (panels a and c; both $p < 0.05$). The figure also indicates that, although fact-check information reduced the degree to which respondents believed in disinformation (panel d; $p < 0.05$), such factual corrections, on average, did not affect the other three outcomes (panels a-c).
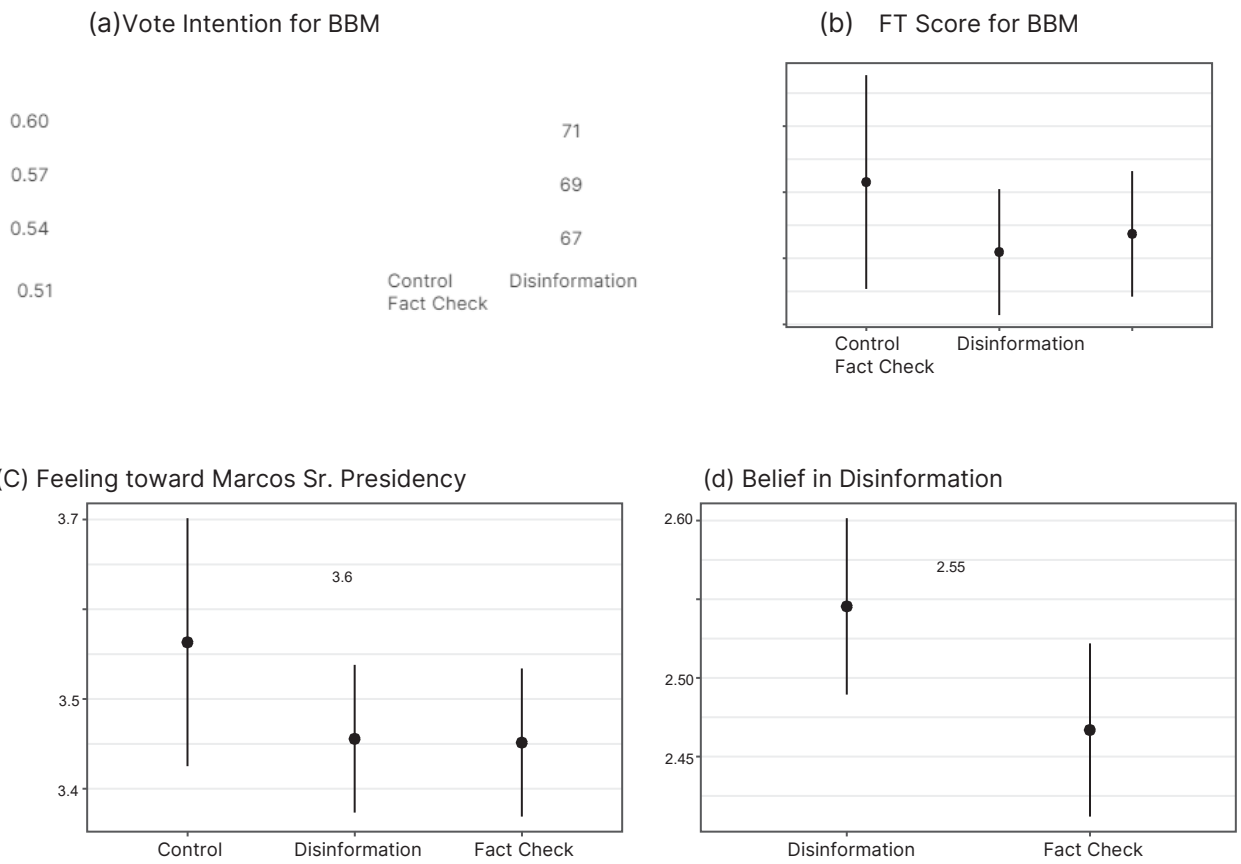
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(a) Vote Intention for BBM

(b) FT Score for BBM

(C) Feeling toward Marcos Sr. Presidency

(d) Belief in Disinformation

Figure 4: Descriptive Summary of Experimental Results (By Pre-treatment BBM Support)

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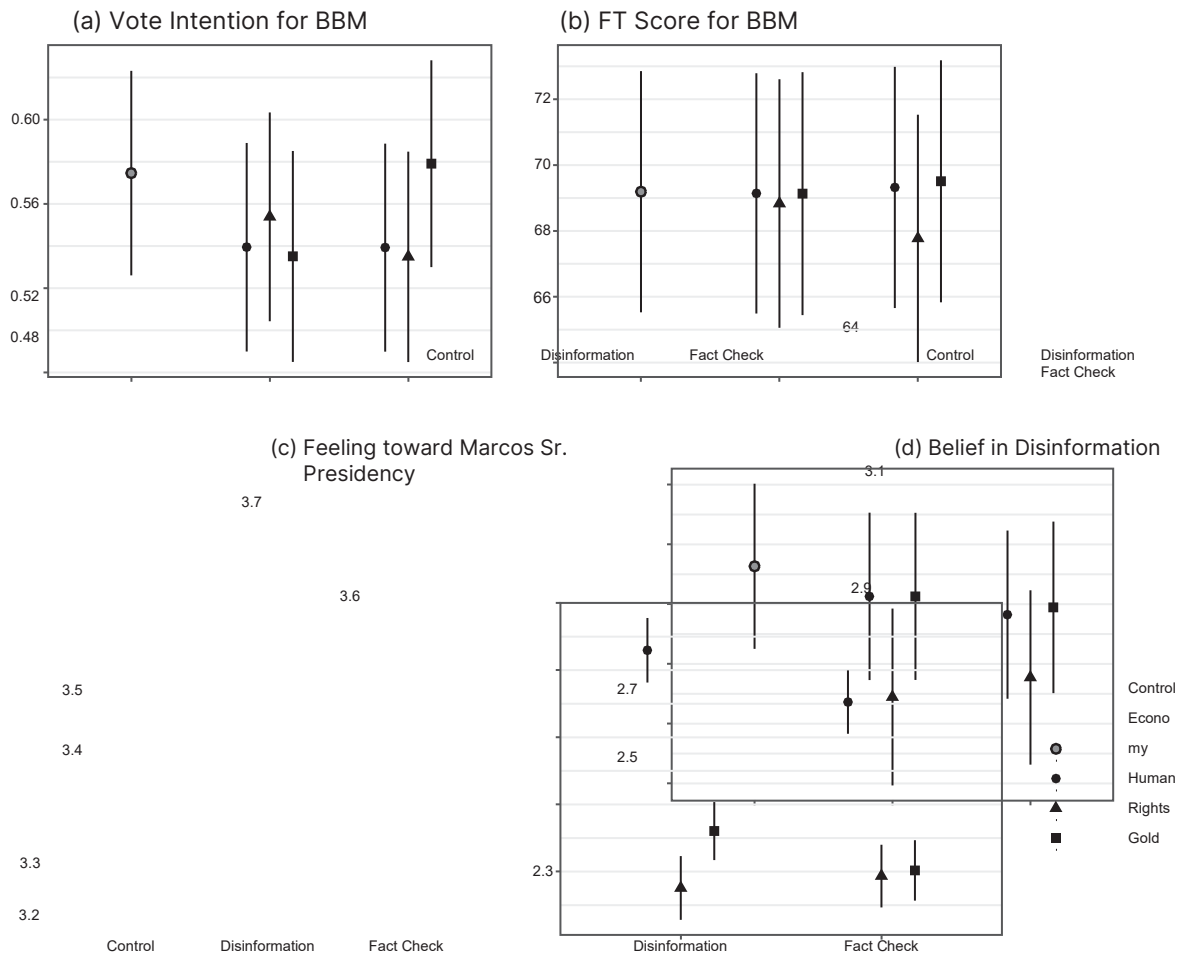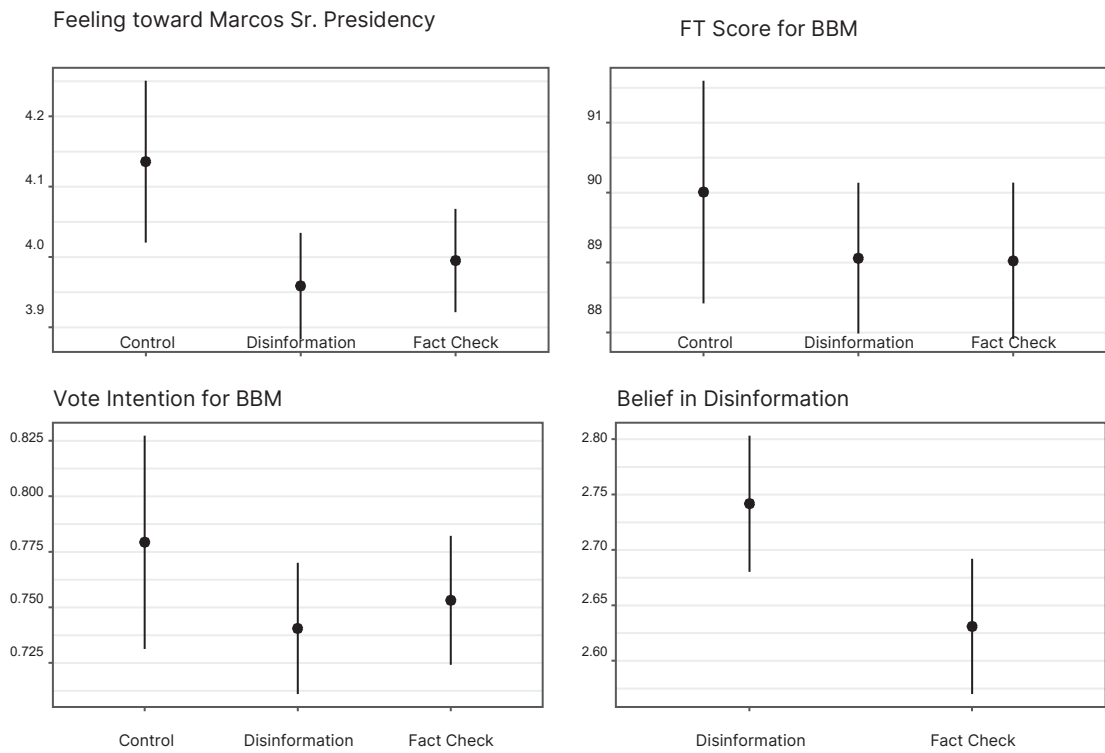Jakarta, 17-18 January 2024 | kisip.csis.or.id

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Figure 5: Descriptive Summary of Experimental Results

To investigate the heterogeneity of the effect of disinformation and fact-checking, we also conduct the analyses by subsetting data by (i) the type of disinformation and (ii) respondents' baseline (i.e., pre-treatment) feeling thermometer scores for BBM. The results of these analyses are illustrated in Figure 5 and 6, respectively. Figure 5 shows that none of the dis- information statements we employed in this study positively affected respondents' attitudes toward Marcos Sr. or BBM; they either had negligible impacts or, in some cases, worked against the Marcos family. In addition, although fact-checks could, to some degree, correct participants' beliefs in disinformation about economic development and Marcos gold, they did not exert statistically significant impacts on respondents' attitudes toward Marcos Sr. and BBM.

Turning our eyes to Figure 6, we can see that disinformation treatment had no or negative impacts on respondents' attitudes toward Marcos Sr. and BBM. However, the experimental exposure to disinformation statements had more significant effects among BBM supporters (i.e., individuals whose pre-treatment feeling thermometer scores for BBM were higher than 50; the upper pane of the figure) than among non-BBM supporters (i.e., those with base- line feeling thermometer scores for BBM less than or equal to 50; lower pane). Similarly, fact-checking could reduce respondents' beliefs in disinformation regarding Marcos Sr.'s dictatorship only among BBM supporters, although it did not change their attitudes toward the Marcos family. We conjecture that this is because non-BBM (see the y-axes of the plots in the lower pane) even in the control conditions; thus, our experimental treatments could not have any influence on their responses.

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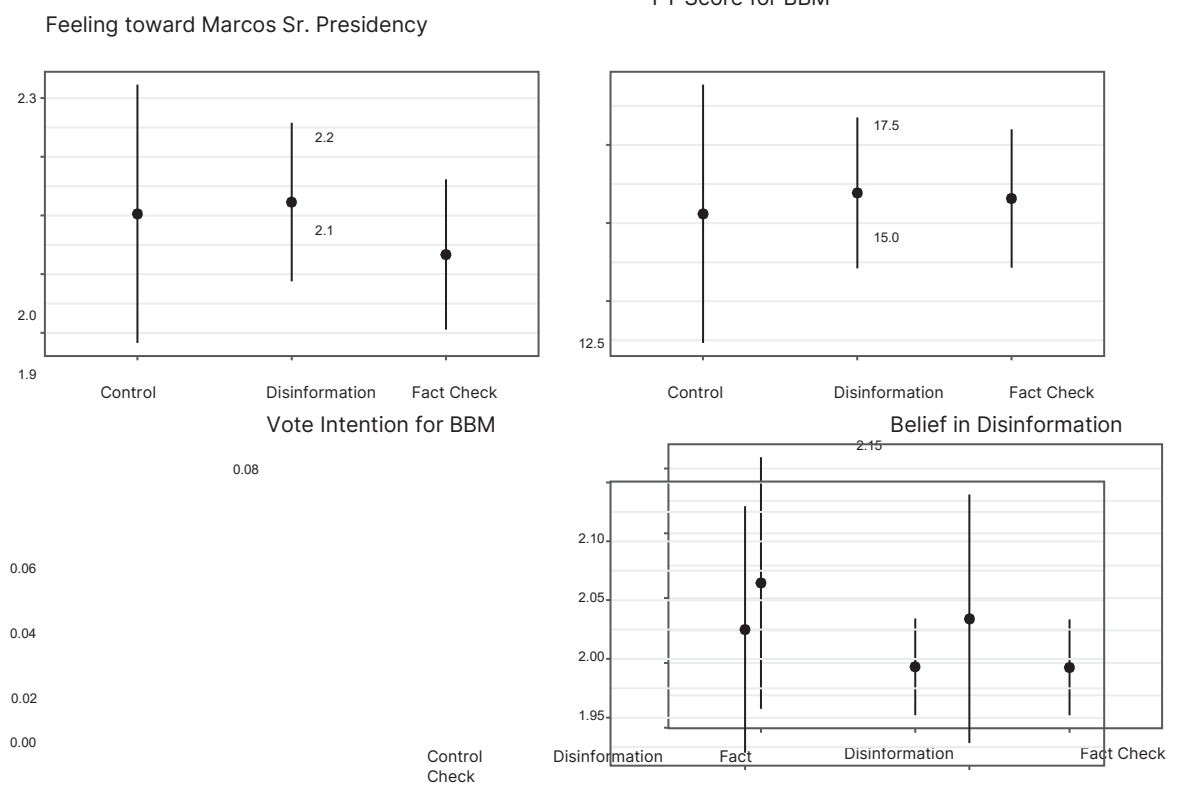
Figure 6: Descriptive Summary of Experimental Results (By Pre-treatment BBM Support)

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To examine how the effect of disinformation treatment differs across respondents' demographic and social characteristics, we employed the ensemble of machine learning methods proposed by Grimmer, Messing and Westwood (2017). Specifically, we examine the treatment effect heterogeneity on vote intention for BBM by respondents' gender (male or female), age (18-25, 26-30, 31-35, or 36-44), education (college graduate or below), monthly income (less than 10,000 PHP, 10,001-50,000 PHP, or over 50,000 PHP), source of political information (social media or not), and the region of residence (National Capital Region (NCR), rest of Luzon, Visayas, or Mindanao). The ensemble was composed of LASSO, elastic nets (mixing parameter = 0.25 and 0.5), Bayesian GLM, Bayesian Additive Regression Trees (BART), Random Forest, Kernel Regularized Least Squares (KRLS), and a Support Vector Machine (SVM).

Table 2: Weight Attached to Methods

Method	Weight
Lasso	0.66
Elastic Net (α = 0.5)	0.00
Elastic Net (α = 0.25)	0.00
BayesGLM	0.12
BART	0.00
Random Forest	0.10
KRLS	0.13
SVM-SMO	0.00

Table 2 summarizes the weights attached to each of the methods in the ensemble. The weight for the LASSO is by far the largest (0.66), suggesting that the effect of disinformation on vote choice was not much affected by respondents' demographic and social traits. To see the pattern more clearly, we computed the average predicted treatment effects for respondents with each demographic/social feature, which we depicted in Figure 7. Following Grimmer, Messing and Westwood (2017), the size of each dot is proportional to the number of respondents with each feature to represent the estimation uncertainty. The figure shows that the effect of disinformation treatment was estimated to be negative on average for all strata except those living in NCR. In addition, the mean predicted values are close to the average treatment effect (-0.034). These results indicate that there was only small heterogeneity in the effect of disinformation treatment by demographic and social characteristics, suggesting that these traits do not seem to explain why disinformation on Marcos Sr.'s regime negatively affected vote intention for BBM in our experiment.

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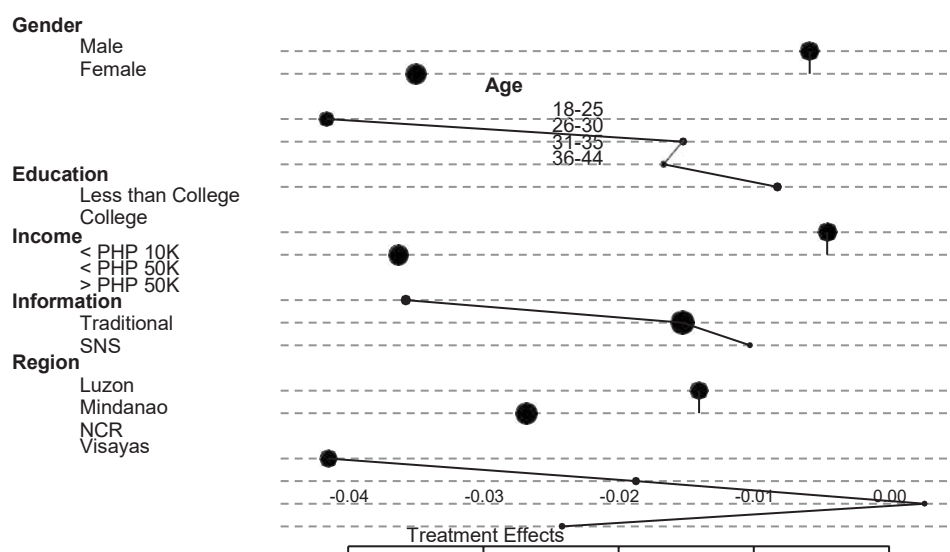Jakarta, 17-18 January 2024 | kisip.csis.or.id

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Figure 7: Predicted Mean Treatment Effects by Respondent Characteristics

One potential explanation for the absence of subgroup differences may be that the disinformation we examined had already become deeply ingrained in the minds of many Filipinos, owing to the multi-decade information campaigns spearheaded by the Marcos family (Ong et al., 2022). Interestingly, our findings stand in stark contrast to a similar study conducted in Indonesia (Mujani and Kuipers, 2020), in which the authors identified significant subgroup disparities in the acceptance of misinformation related to presidential candidates during the 2019 election. In that case, younger, better educated, and wealthier voters were more susceptible to believing the disinformation. It is worth noting that the Indonesian presidential campaign disinformation was the result of a relatively short-term, targeted operation, while the Philippine counterpart, particularly the aspect concerning the Marcos family, had accumulated over several decades through various channels, encompassing not only social media but also magazines, school textbooks, movies, and more.

Conclusion

This paper examined two questions concerning the role of disinformation in the 2022 Philippine presidential election. The first question asked to what extent Filipino voters believe disinformation about Marcos Sr. Our answer is: to a substantial degree. Depending on the disinformation type, between 25 and 40% of voters are exposed to and believe in disinformation. This finding implies that the "rebranding" efforts of the Marcos family on Ferdinand Marcos's legacy were successful, confirming the views held by many analyses. Put differently, many Filipinos possess a distorted understanding of Philippine history.

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Our second inquiry was whether disinformation about Marcos Sr. booted support for BBM. On this question, our investigation did not yield a definitive answer. Although we found a strong positive association between the belief in disinformation and BBM support, our experimental study could not disentangle what does behind this association. We surmise that years of disinformation operations created an entrenched bidirectional relationship between "misperception" and BBM support. Another possible reason for not being able to dis- entangle the association's causal direction can be that our one-shot nature of treatment was not adequate for the purpose.

Our empirical findings provide several theoretical implications. First, one of the democratic principles that voters must have access to accurate and unbiased information to make informed decisions (e.g. Dahl, 1971) was compromised due to a significant presence of disinformed and misperceived voters. This is a case to call for a revision of democracy theory to address "freedom from disinformation" as one of the conditions for being a democracy. Existing theories often uphold the importance of freedom of speech and multiple sources of information. However, under the current information surrounding voters, as in the case of the Philippines, having an environment with accurate information should be considered.

We end this paper by discussing future research avenues. Since the disinformation "industry" will likely thrive in future elections in the Philippines, scholars should tackle this issue more extensively. One of the aspects that this study could not address was the impact of negative disinformation, as our focus was on the positive kind of disinformation about Marcos Sr. Future research should compare how positive and negative kinds of disinformation differ in their spread and influence over voters. Another important question is how we can reduce voters' susceptibility to disinformation. Our study found that fact-checking among Filipino voters effectively corrects people's incorrect understanding of certain information. Effective fact-checking entails efforts at the levels of platform technology, disinformation detection activities, and message frames, among others. Concerted efforts involving many stakeholders are needed for future elections in the Philippines and beyond.

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