The Cost of Opposition: Harming Our Own Rather Than Helping An Opponent

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Summary

Across polarized causes (political party, abortion access, gun control), participants (N = 1,717) consistently choose to harm their own side over helping the opposing side, even when this choice is not harm-minimizing, according to their own beliefs.

Attitude strength moderates this behavior: those who feel more strongly about an issue are more likely to harm their own group rather than provide equivalent help to the opposition.
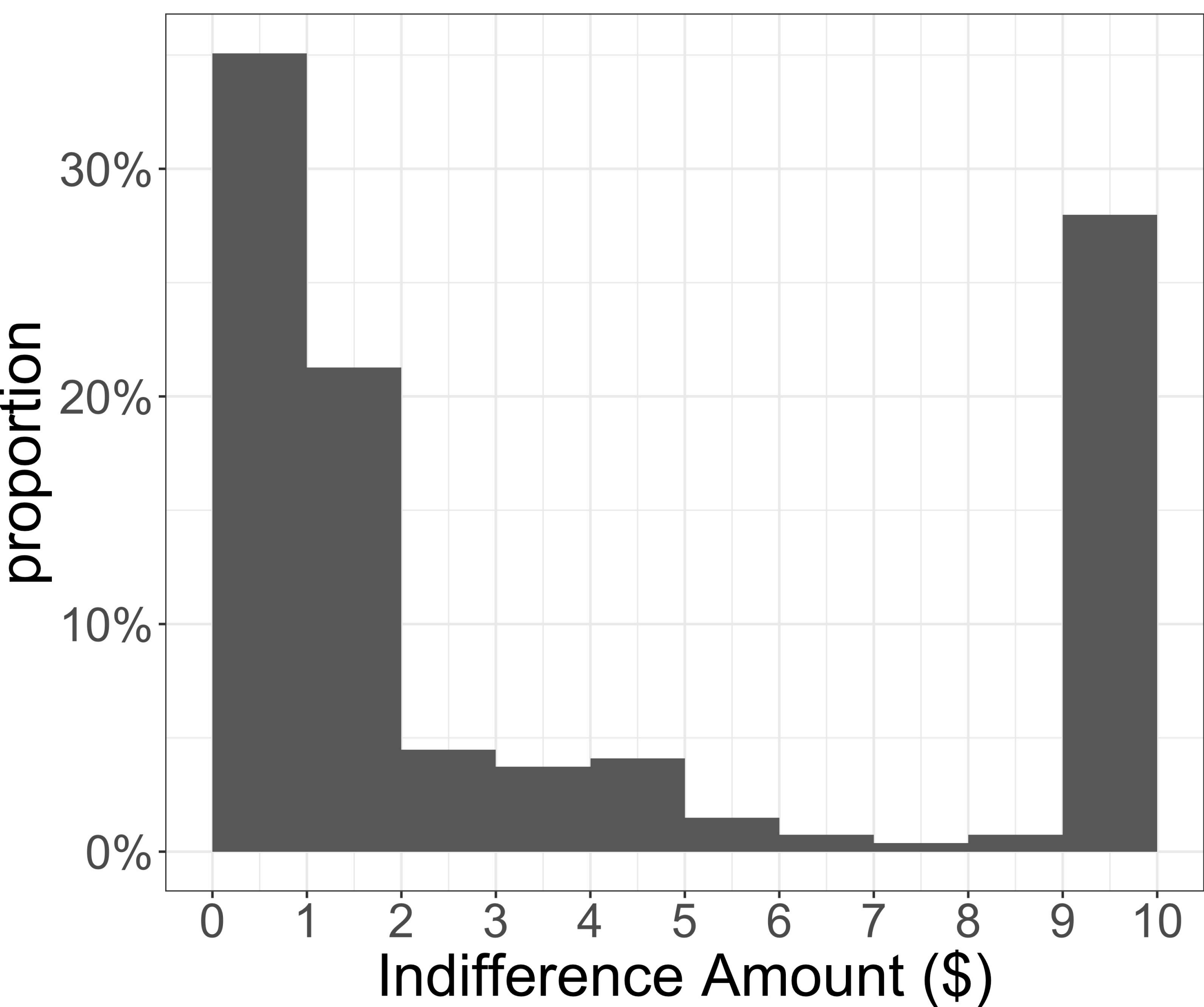
We propose that these decisions are informed by perceived group norms, and shifting perceived norms leads to corresponding changes in individuals' behavior.

METHODS

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Study 1: Aversion to Helping the Opposition

- Participants reported the extent to which they support or oppose abortion access (N = 300)
- Informed participants that we would make two $10 donations, one to a pro-life and another to a pro-choice organization
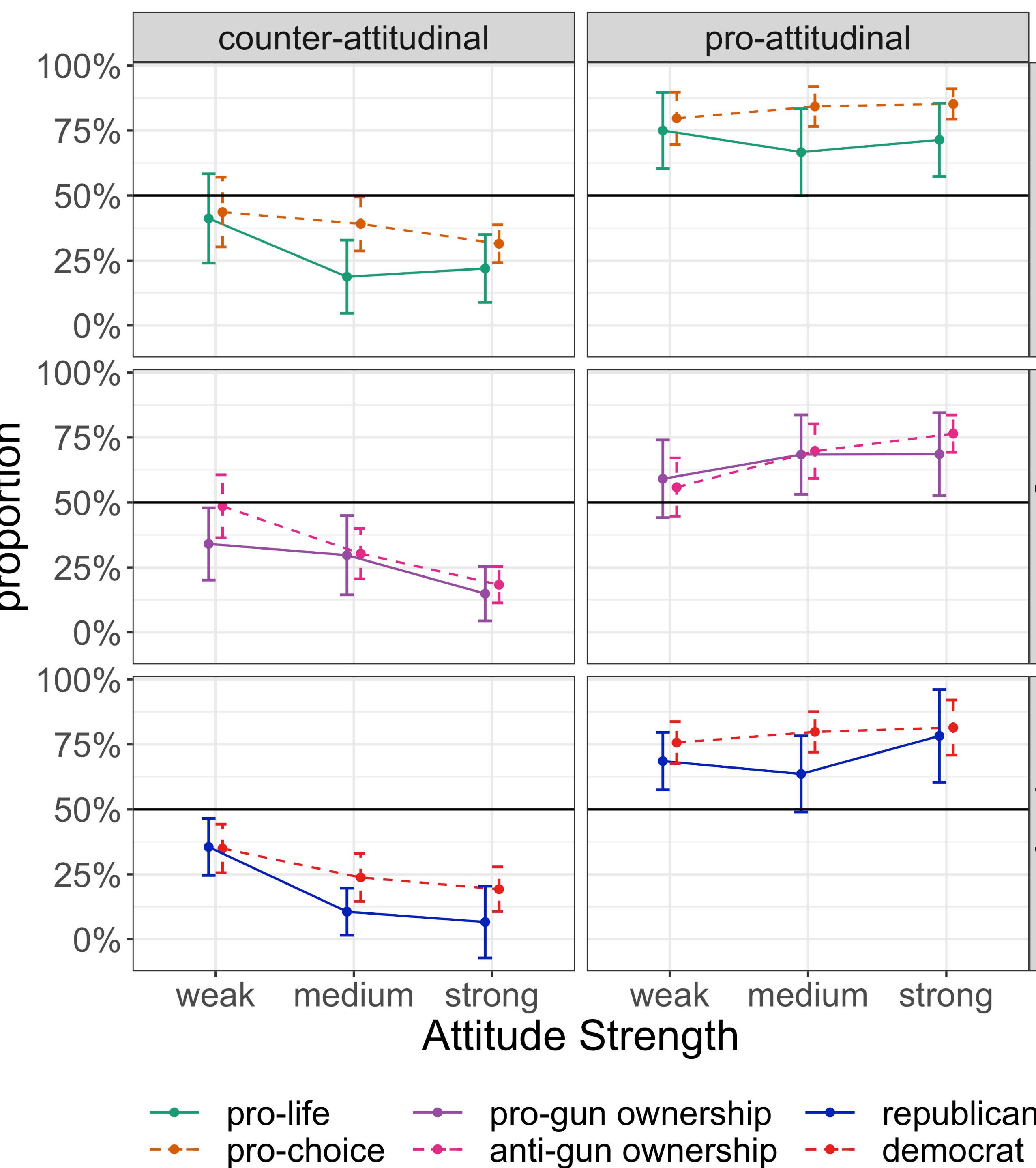- Participants were asked to choose how to alter the donation amount

Distribution of participants' indifference amount – the amount they would be willing to subtract from their side to be indifferent toward adding $1 to the opposing side.

- Individuals are so averse to giving resources to an opposing group that they will even inflict greater harm to their own group to avoid it
- Participants required M = $3.85 (SD = $4.10) subtracted from the donation going to their organization to be indifferent towards $1 being added to the opposing side (p < .001, d = .70)
- But, on average, participants on both sides believed that organizations on their side of a cause were more effective with funds
- Participants' indifference amounts were moderated by their attitude strength

Study 2: Asymmetry in the Choice to Help or Harm

- Tested various polarized contexts: abortion access, gun control, political party (N = 814)
- <u>Counter-attitudinal condition</u>: Subtract $1 from the organization on your side or add $1 to the organization on the opposing side
- <u>Pro-attitudinal condition</u>: Add $1 to the organization on your side or subtract $1 from the organization on the opposing side
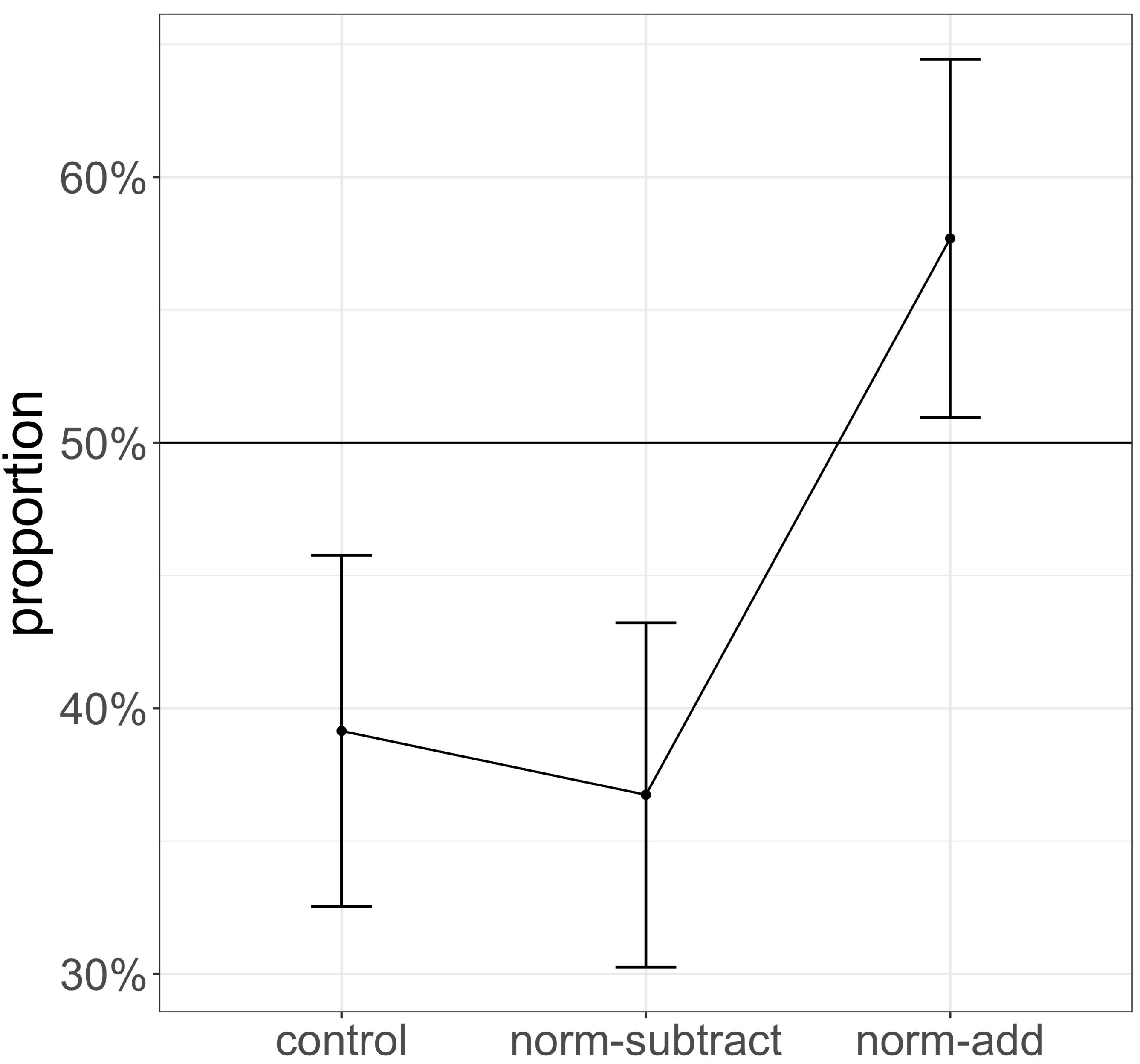

Choice share for add in each condition for all three causes by attitude strength. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

- For all three polarized issues, participants preferred to harm their own side rather than help an opposing side
- When given a pro-attitudinal choice, participants chose to help their own cause rather than harm the opposition

Study 3: Moderation by Group Norms

- Participants reported their position on abortion access (N = 653)
- <u>Control</u>: Participants chose how to alter $15 donation – add $1 to the opposing side, or subtract $1 from their side
- <u>Norm-add</u>: Told participants that *"in a previous study, 70% of MTurkers who shared their view chose to add to the opposing side rather than subtract from their own"*
- <u>Norm-subtract</u>: Told participants that *"in a previous study, 70% of MTurkers who shared their view chose to subtract from their own group rather than add to the opposing group"*

Choice share for add by condition. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

- Participants' prior for the group norm is to harm one's side rather than help the opposing side
- When told that the norm is to help the opposing side, a greater proportion of participants chose to help compared to the control condition

Additional Evidence

- Participants believed that most others on their side would make the same choice that they made
- Increasing stakes to $10 or $100 produced a similar pattern

Key Takeaways

- Psychological barriers can impede advancement of important causes
- Social influence is powerful
- Shifting norms can allow for greater compromise and bipartisan cooperation

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