

# Friend or Foe? The Adaptability of Frame Selection and Frame-based Inferences

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## Abstract

Prior research on attribute framing has shown that speakers convey implicit reference point information to listeners through their frame selection. While this is well-adapted to the typical cooperative environment, it is less clear whether speakers and listeners can appropriately adjust their behaviors in uncooperative settings. We manipulated the alignment of interests to test whether speakers can render their frame selection uninformative and whether listeners can discount the usually accurate inferences they draw. We found that when interests were misaligned, speakers no longer chose frames consistently, and listeners no longer drew systematically different inferences.

## Introduction

- Attribute framing effects occur when logically equivalent descriptions lead to different judgments (Levin, Schneider, & Gaeth, 1998)
- For example, ground beef is rated as better tasting when described as “75% lean” than “25% fat” (Levin & Gaeth, 1988)
- In the typical cooperative setting, a speaker’s choice of frame can “leak” implicit reference point information to listeners (McKenzie & Nelson, 2003; Leong et al., 2017)

**Research Question:** Are frame selection and frame-based inferences adaptable to different incentive structures?

**Hypothesis:** We predict that under misaligned interests, speakers will not consistently select frames based on reference points and listeners will not systematically draw different inferences from frames.

### References

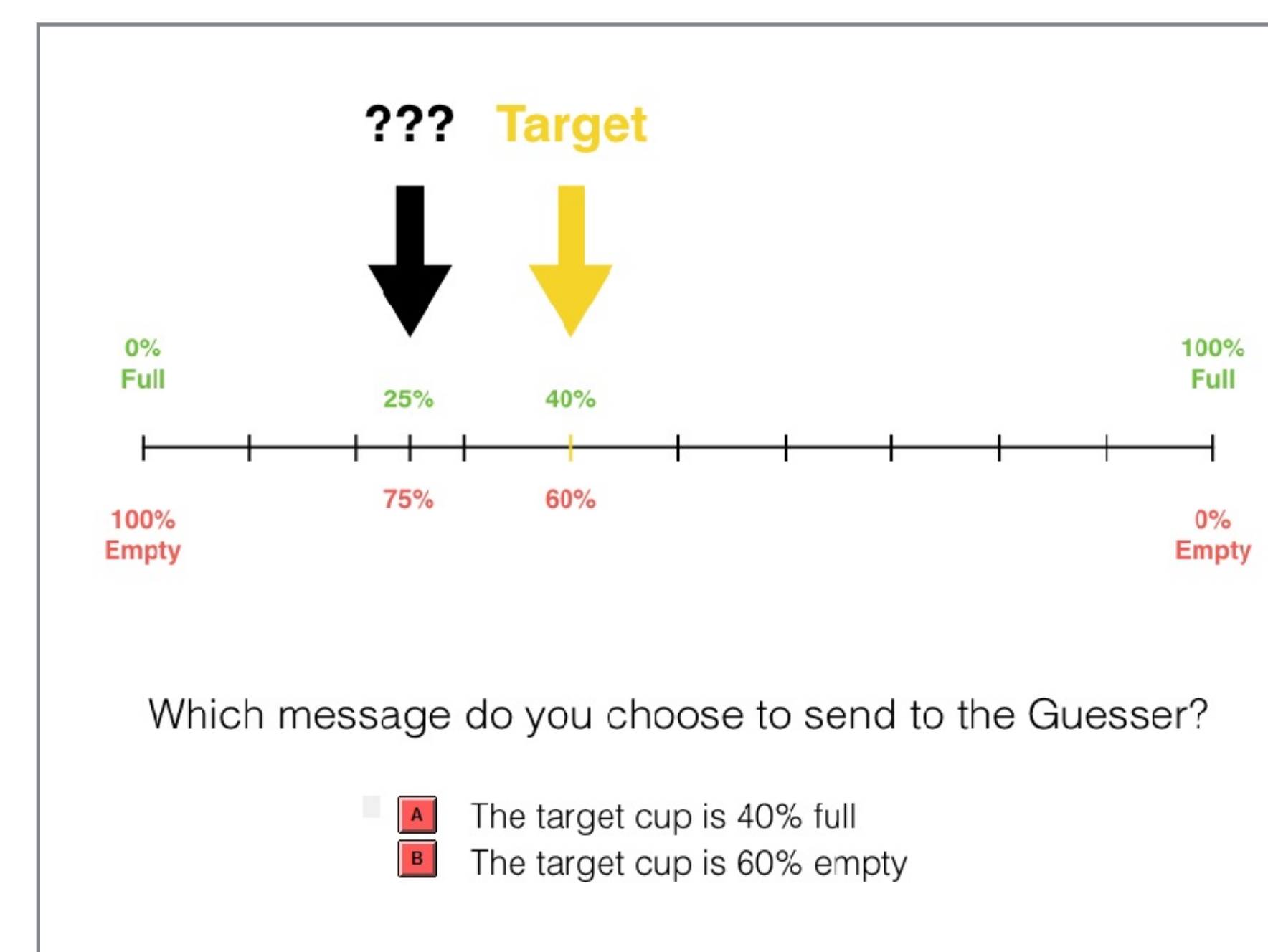
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## Methods

Participants were 146 UCSD undergraduates randomly assigned to be either “Messenger” or “Guesser” (73 pairs)

### Example Trial

#### 1. Messenger Screen



#### 2. Guesser Screen

From the MESSENGER...  
The target cup is 40% full

Your guess is that...  
The target cup is \_\_\_\_\_ than the hidden cup.

#### 3. Feedback Screen

Message: 40% full  
Guess: fuller  
Feedback: RIGHT

Messenger: +1  
Guesser: +1

**Total Points**  
Messenger: 1  
Guesser: 1

### Block 1: Cooperation Condition

Trials 1-16 (8 high & 8 low reference points)

Scoring:

	Messenger	Guesser
Correct	“+1”	“+1”
Incorrect	“+0”	“+0”

### Block 2: Competition Condition

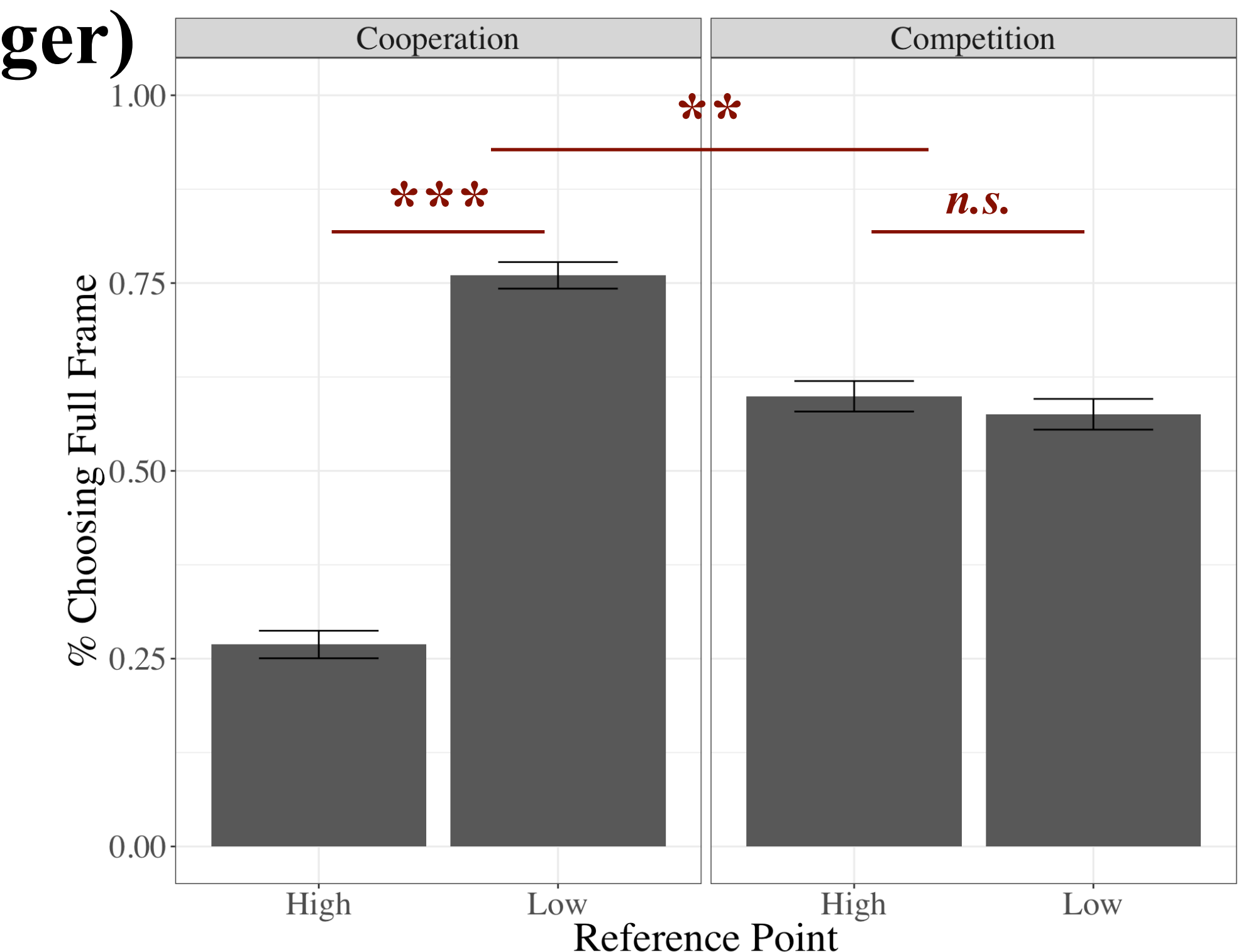
Trials 17-32 (8 high & 8 low reference points)

Scoring:

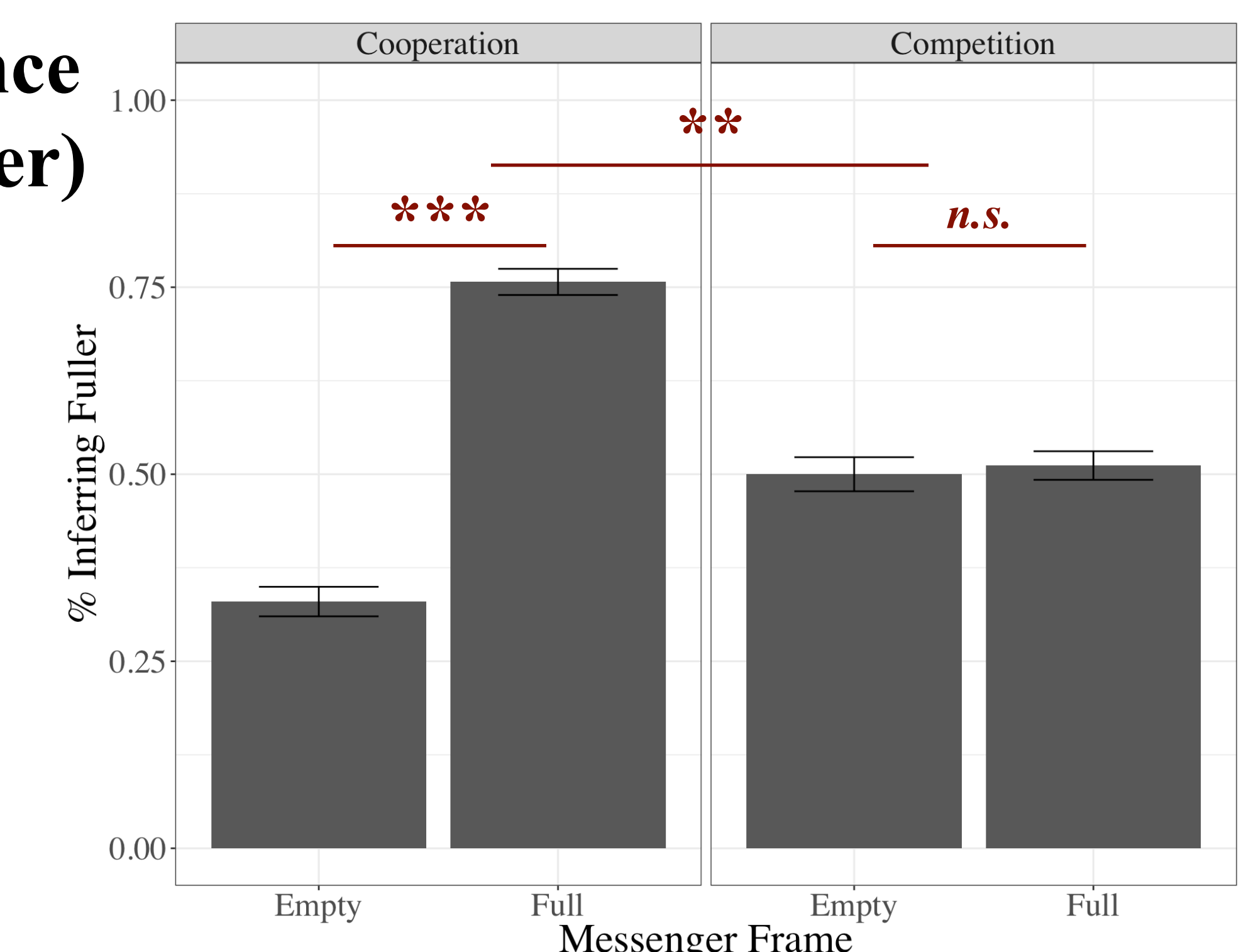
	Messenger	Guesser
Correct	“+0”	“+1”
Incorrect	“+1”	“+0”

## Results

### Frame Selection (Messenger)



### Inference (Listener)



## Discussion

- In the Cooperation Condition, speakers selected informative frames, and listeners drew choice-relevant inferences from these frames
- More importantly, in the Competition Condition, speakers no longer select frames based on reference points, and listeners no longer draw different inferences from frames
- We provide evidence that framing can be an implicit form of communication, and that people can intelligently adapt their behaviors in different environments
- Behavioral policy interventions based on framing may be ineffective when the policymakers’ and the decision maker’s incentives are misaligned