

How Incentives Help Us Do Hard Things

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Introduction

- When people must complete a difficult task and an easy task, do they have a preference for the completion order?
- Does an incentive for task completion change this?

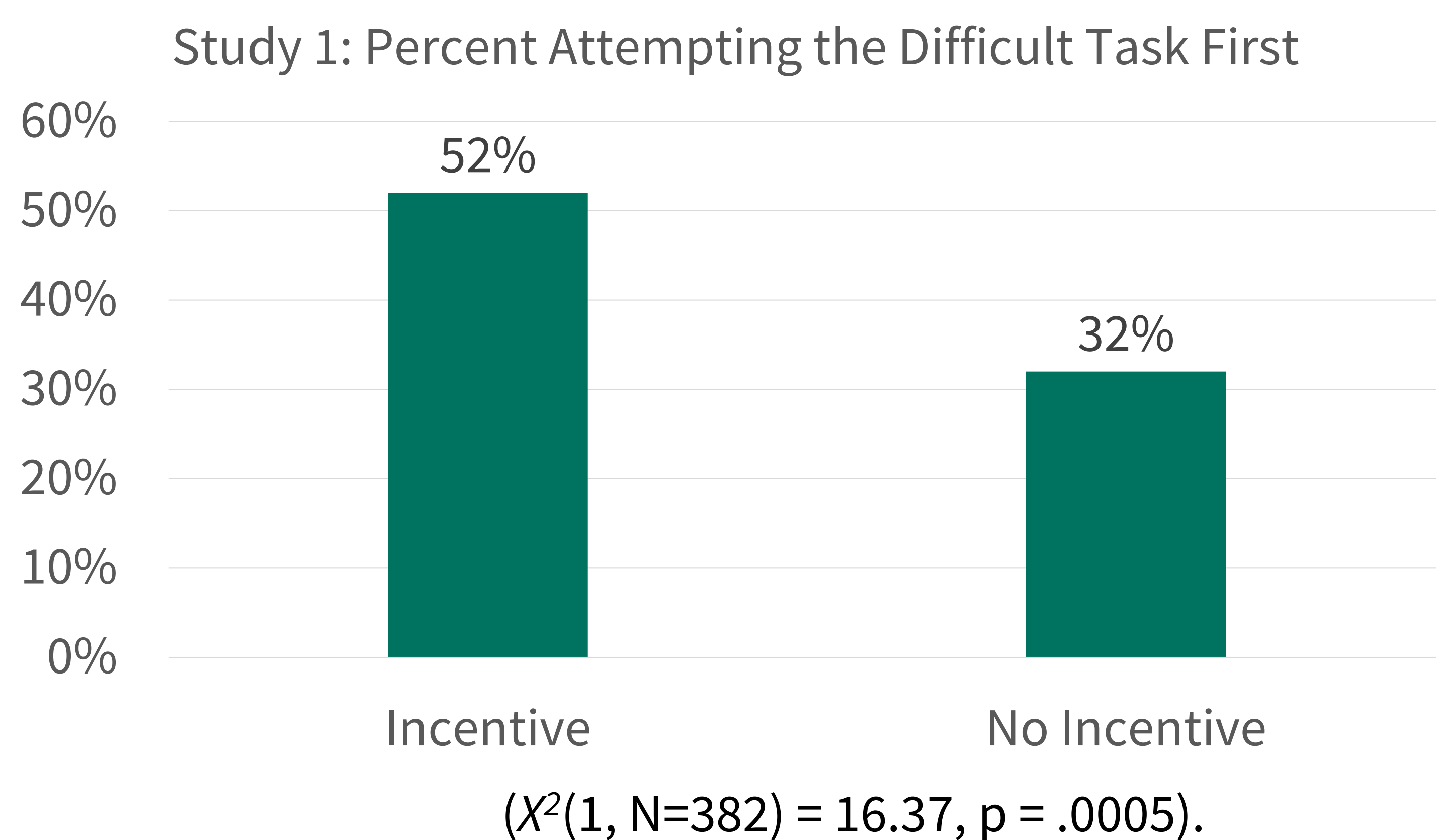
Study 1

When given an incentive for completing two tasks (one hard, one easy), people are more likely to attempt the difficult task first, compared to when there is no incentive.

Design: Participants (N = 382) imagined that a family member wanted them to complete two tasks: one difficult, one easy. Participants in the incentive condition were also told the family member would give them \$50 if they successfully completed both tasks.

Measure: Order choice: Which task would you attempt first?

Results: People were more likely to attempt the difficult task first when there was an incentive, compared to when there was not.

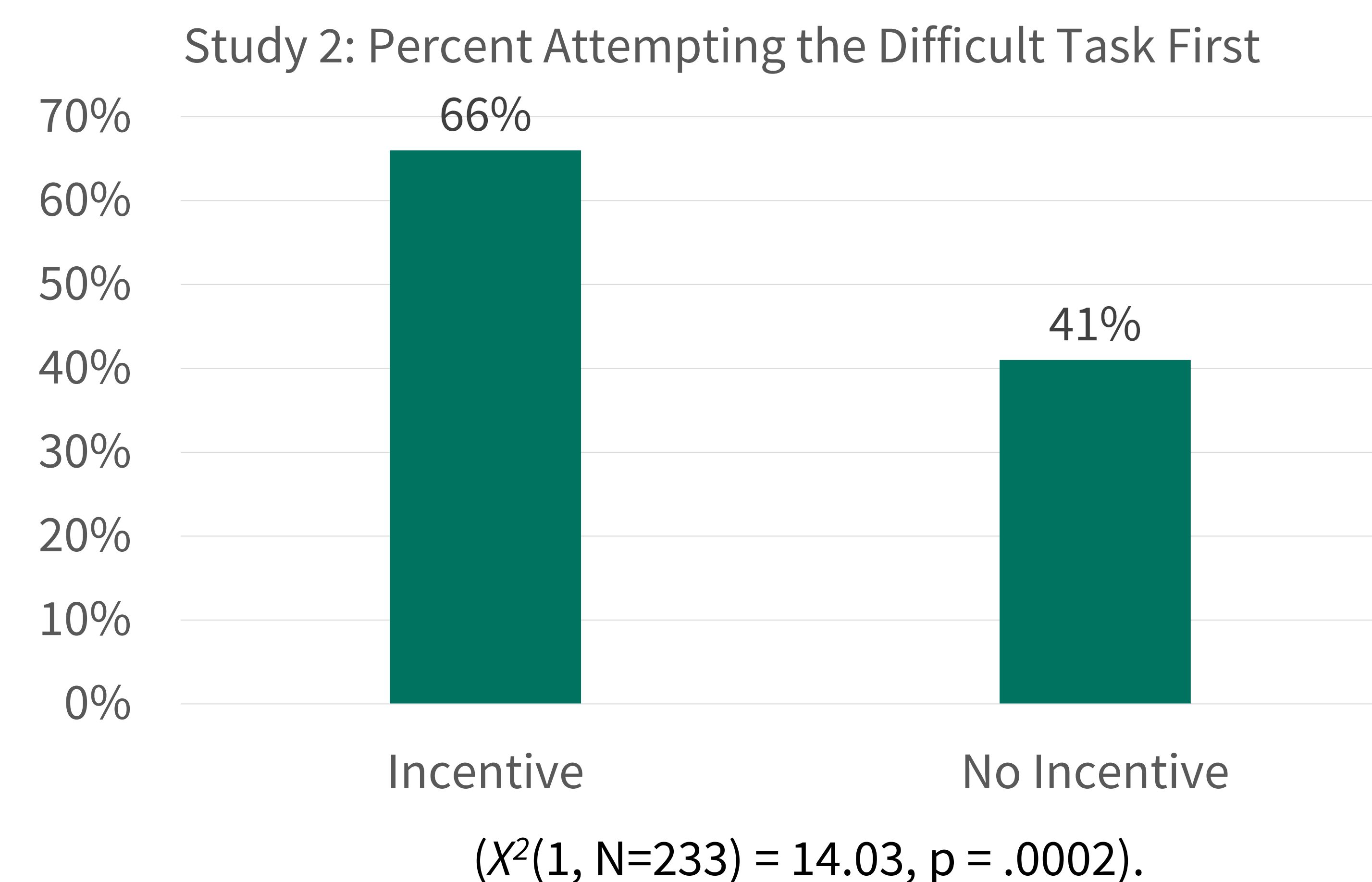


Study 2

Design: Participants (N = 233) imagined that their boss wanted them to complete two tasks: one difficult, one easy. Participants in the incentive condition were also told their boss would give them a bonus if they successfully completed both tasks.

Measure: Order choice: Which task would you attempt first?

Results: People were more likely to attempt the difficult task first when there was an incentive, compared to when there was not.



Study 3

Incentives increase motivation to complete the difficult task, and this mediates the effect of the incentives on order choice.

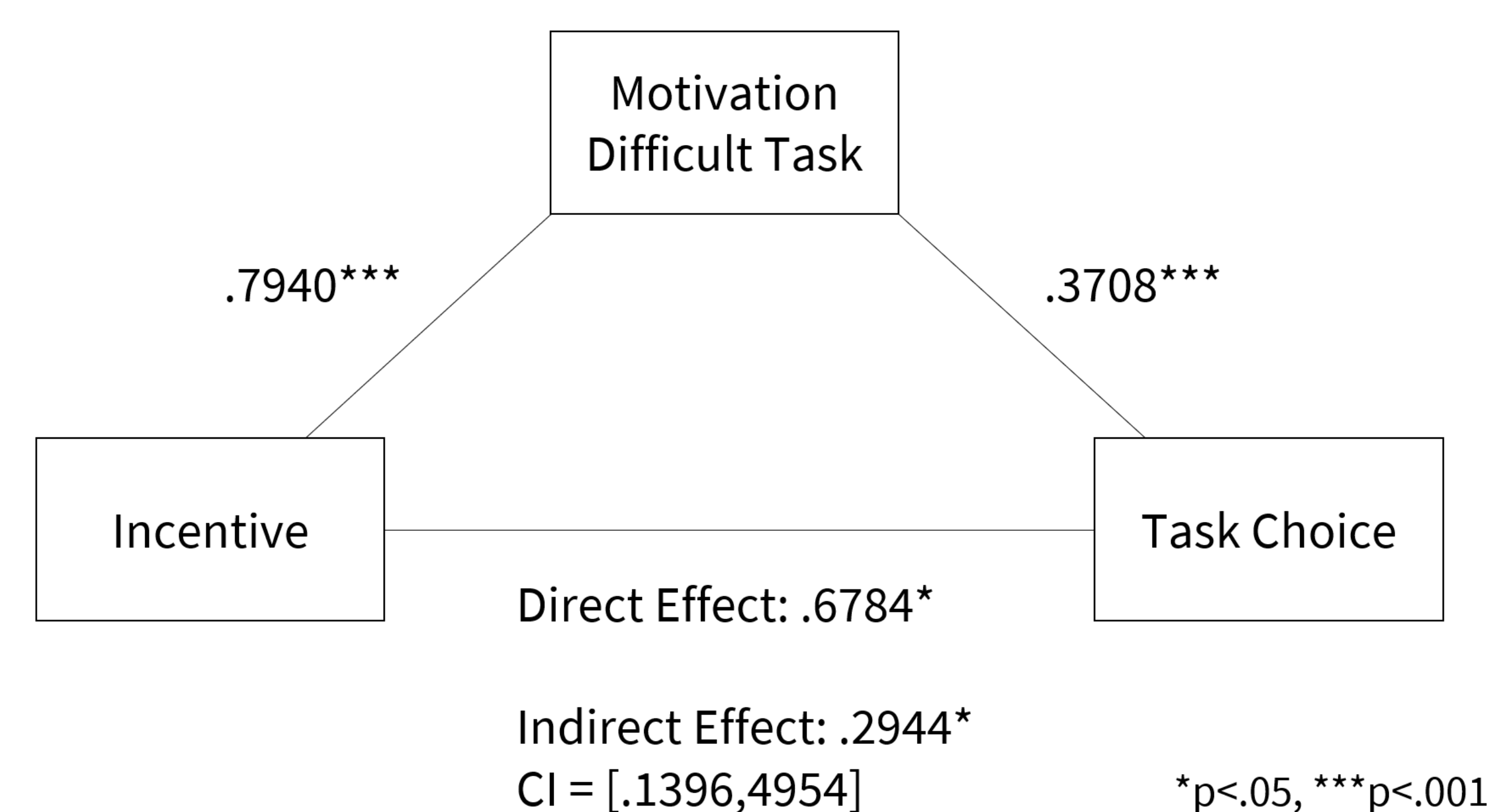
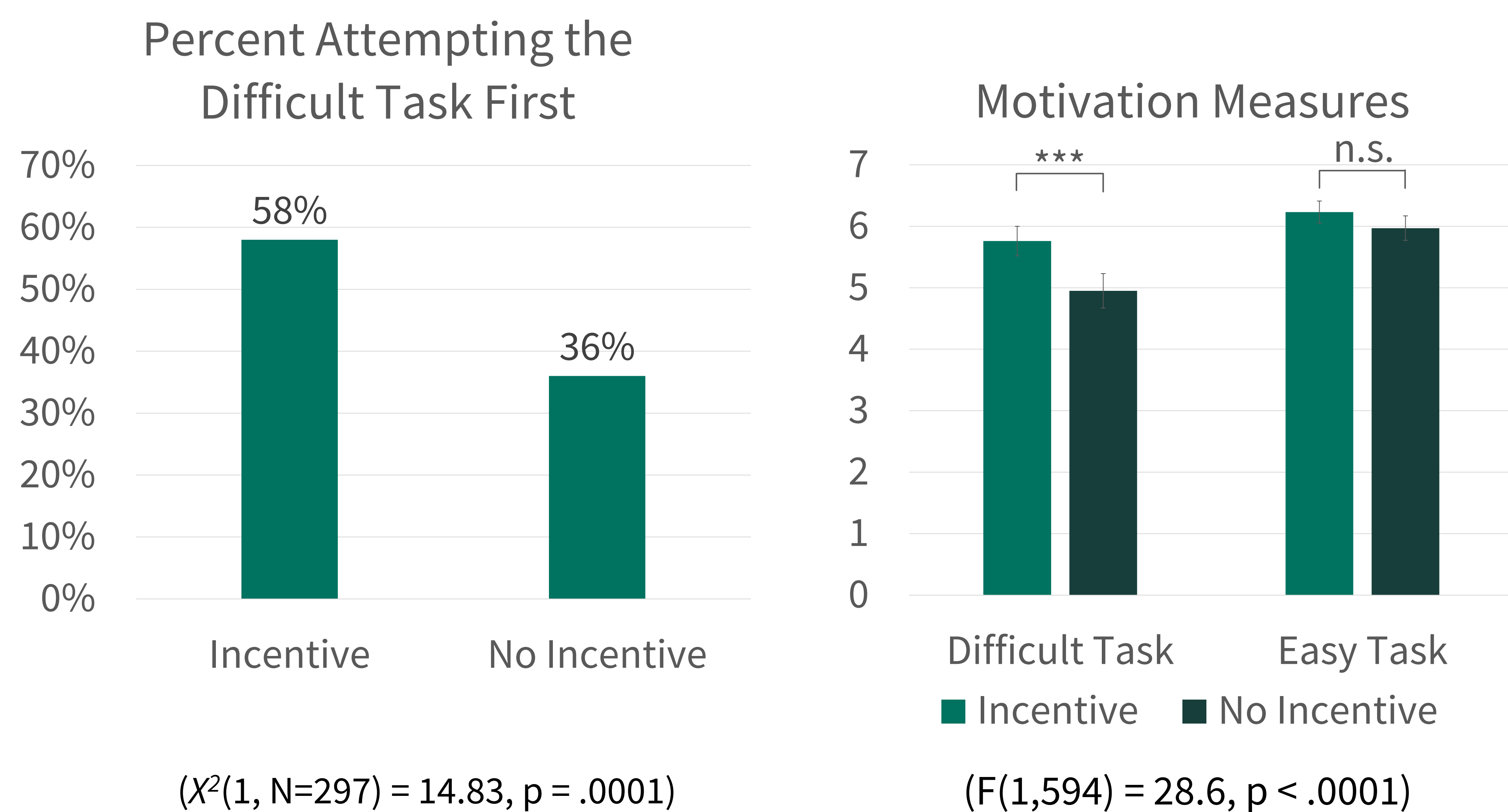
Design: Participants (N = 297) imagined that a family member wanted them to complete two tasks: one difficult, one easy. Participants in the incentive condition were also told the family member would give them \$50 if they successfully completed both tasks.

Measures: Order choice: Which task would you complete first?

Motivation measures: motivation to complete the difficult task, the easy task, and both tasks.

Results: People were more likely to attempt the difficult task first when there was an incentive, compared to when there was not.

Motivation to complete the difficult task mediated the effect of incentive on order choice.



Discussion

- People are more apt to tackle a difficult task before an easy one when they have an incentive to complete both than when they do not.
- This effect may arise in part because incentives increase the motivation to complete the difficult task, but not the easy one.