

# Selective Exposure as a Signal of Group Membership

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**ZOOM LINK:**

[https://harvard.zoom.us/](https://harvard.zoom.us/j/9111111111)

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## Abstract

Decision theory dictates that individuals should seek diverse information to maximize judgment accuracy. Yet, individuals frequently engage in selective exposure by preferentially seeking out information that aligns with their prior beliefs. It is possible that selective exposure confers social benefits by signaling strength of group membership. In two pre-registered, incentivized experiments, we test whether observation moderates selective exposure (Experiment 1) and, subsequently, whether observers reward decision makers for this behavior (Experiment 2). Our results support a more nuanced version of the social signaling hypothesis than previously proposed.

## Background

Prior research has investigated *intrapersonal* drivers of selective exposure (for review, see Hart et al., 2009, Dorison, Minson, & Rogers, 2019). More recent work has theorized that *interpersonal* drivers may play a key role in driving such choices (Hart et al 2019, Kahan 2016). Specifically, researchers have suggested that selective exposure occurs because it is rewarded by members of one's ingroup. However, empirical tests of this hypothesis have been very limited.

## Experiment 1

### Experiment 1 Methods

Experiment 1 (N = 630) tested whether observation drives selective exposure. Decision makers chose which information to consume in a policy-relevant judgment task under one of three conditions:

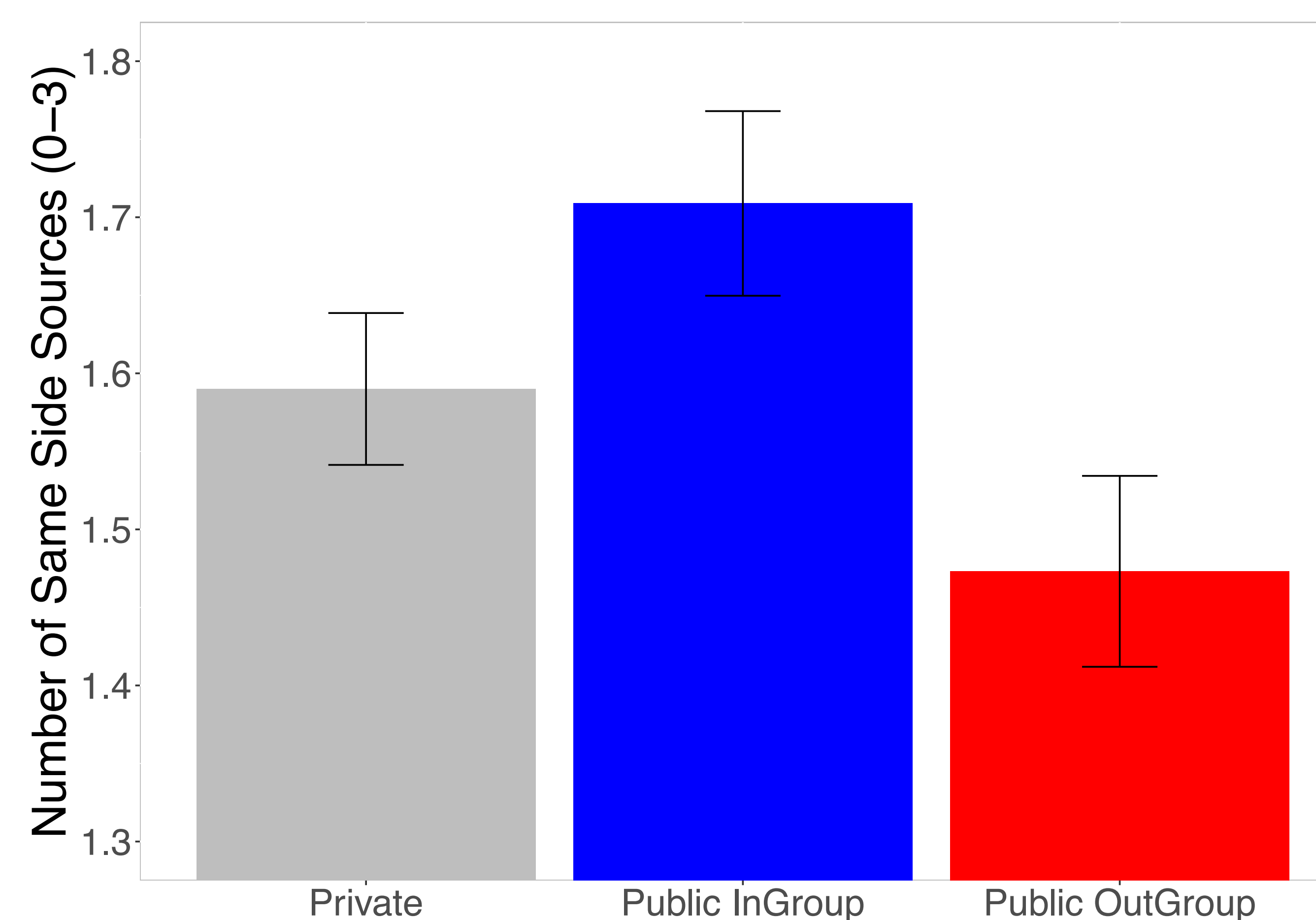
- *Private*: incentives for judgment accuracy only.
- *Public In-Group*: members of political ingroup would award an additional bonus based on information consumption choices.
- *Public Out-Group*: members of political outgroup would award an additional bonus based on information consumption choices.

## References

Dorison, C., Minson, J., & Rogers, T. (2019). Selective exposure partly relies on faulty affective forecasts. *Cognition*.  
Hart, W., Eagly, A., Lindberg, M., Albarracín, D., Brechan, I., & Merrill, L. (2009). Feeling Validated Versus Being Correct: A Meta-Analysis of Selective Exposure to Information. *Psychological Bulletin*.  
Hart, W., Richardson, K., Tortoriello, G.K. and Earl, A. (2020). 'You Are What You Read': Is selective exposure a way people tell us who they are?. *Br J Psychol*, 111: 417-442.  
Kahan, D. (2016). The Politically Motivated Reasoning Paradigm. *Emerging Trends in Social & Behavioral Sciences*.

## Experiment 1 Results

Decision makers who expected to be observed by an ingroup (outgroup) member chose to view 1.27 (0.80) times more information sources from ingroup members than those in a private control condition ( $p = .046$ ,  $p = .064$ ).



## Experiment 2

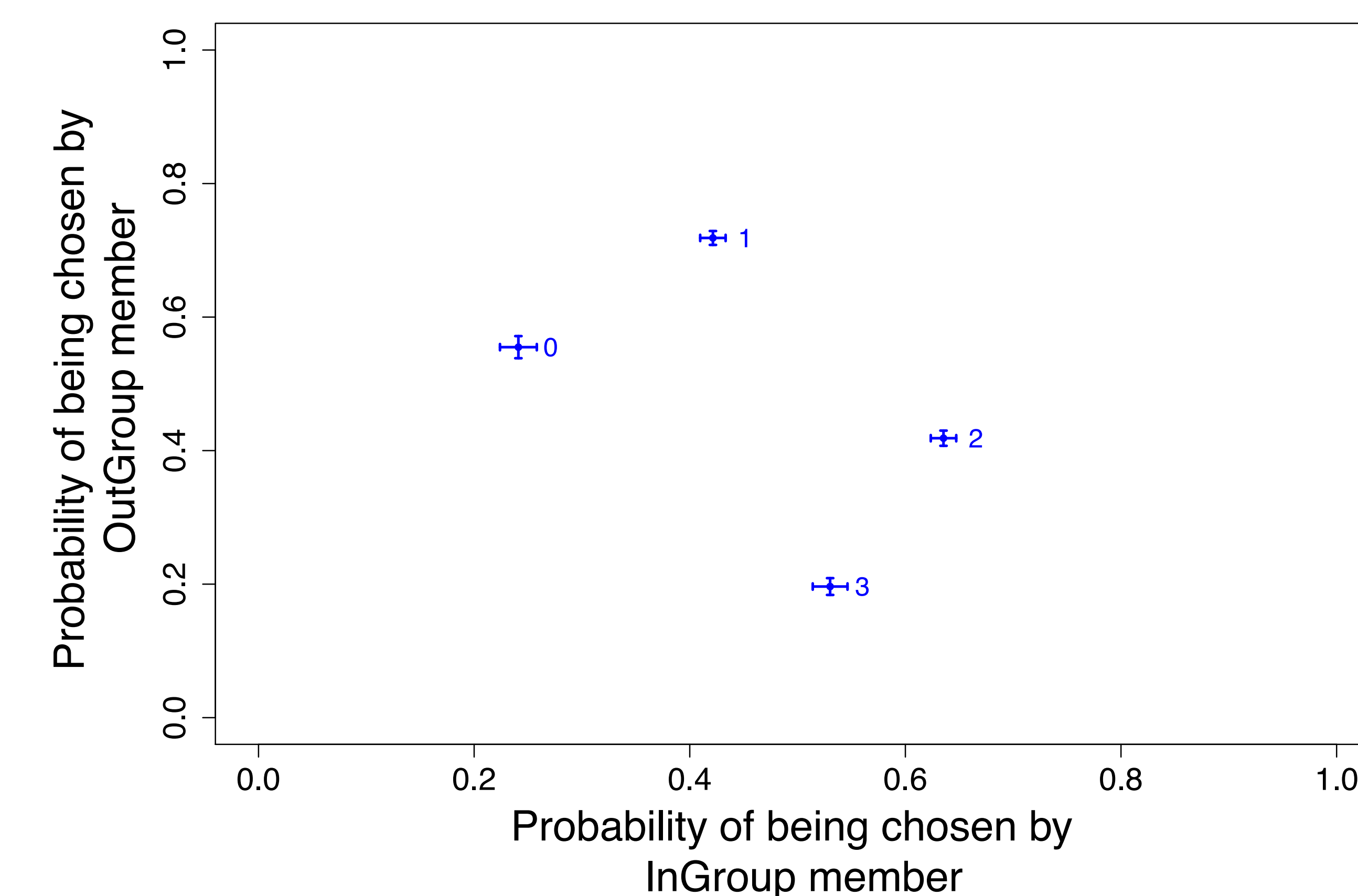
### Experiment 2 Methods

Experiment 2 (N = 983) tested whether engaging in selective exposure actually confers reputational benefits. Observers chose a partner for a future task from among two randomly-selected decision makers from Study 1 based on the decision maker's earlier information consumption choices. Observers were randomly assigned to one of four between-subjects conditions in a 2x2 design. We manipulated whether observers and decision makers shared a political party and whether the task that they expected to perform together relied on trust or estimation accuracy.

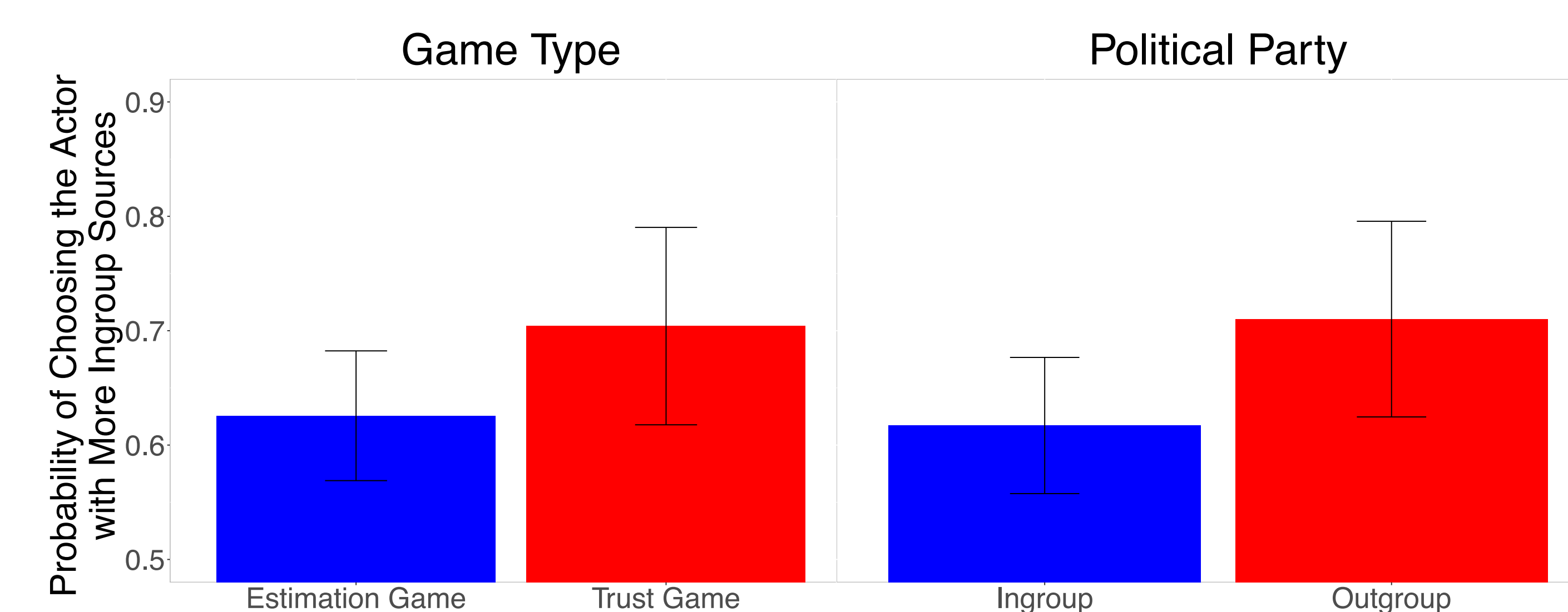
### Experiment 2 Results

Observers were 1.98 times more likely to reward a decision maker who chose more information sources from the Observer's ingroup ( $p < .001$ ). However, this effect was primarily driven by a preference for decision makers who chose varied information sources, rather than decision makers who made completely partisan selections (chi squared = 86.6,  $p < .001$ ).

### Decision Maker's InGroup Sources Chosen



Additionally, the tendency to select the decision maker who chose more ingroup sources was substantially more pronounced when selecting a partner for a Trust Game rather than an Estimation Game (log odds = .35,  $p < .001$ ) and when selecting a decision maker from the opposite political party (log odds = .42,  $p < .001$ ).



## Conclusion

While we find some support for the hypothesis that selective exposure is driven by the desire for ingroup favor, the story is more nuanced. Ingroup observation increases selective exposure, but only modestly. By contrast, observers seem to appreciate the benefits of consuming diverse information and select cooperation partners who appear willing to step out of the echo chamber.