

The social signaling value of selective exposure

Molly Moore*, Charles Dorison** & Julia Minson*

*Harvard Kennedy School, ** Northwestern University

Abstract

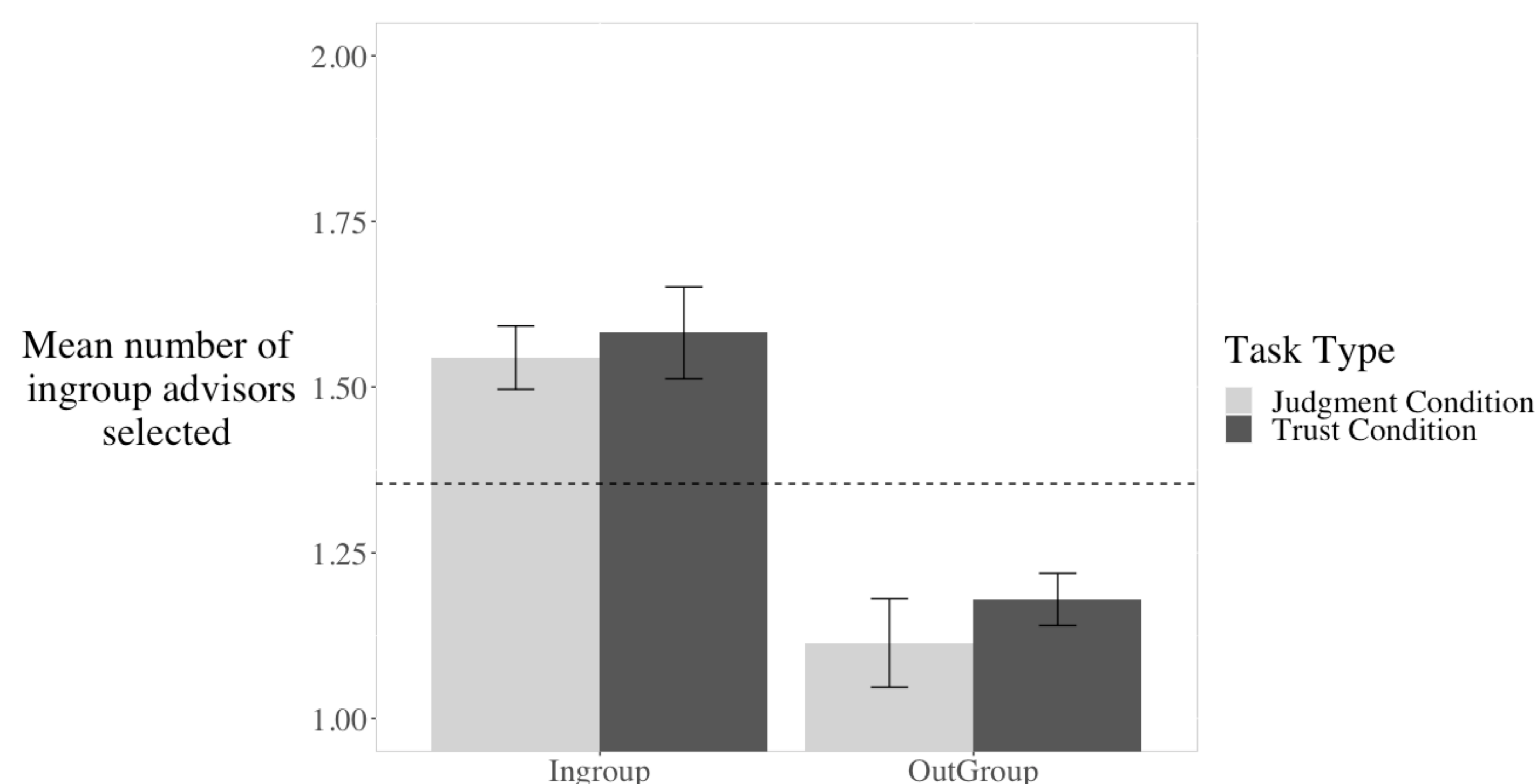
Individuals should seek diverse information to maximize effective judgment and decision making. Yet, individuals frequently engage in selective exposure by preferentially seeking out information that aligns with their prior beliefs. It is possible that selective exposure confers social benefits by signaling group membership. Across three pre-registered, financially-incentivized experiments, we test whether observation influences selective exposure (Experiment 1) and, subsequently, under what conditions observers reward decision-makers for this behavior (Experiments 2 & 3). Results support a more nuanced version of the social signaling hypothesis than previously theorized.

Experiment 1

Experiment 1 Methods

Experiment 1 (N = 883) tested when observation drives selective exposure. Decision makers were assigned to one of five between-subjects experimental conditions in the following design: 2 (observers: in-group members, outgroup-members) x 2 (future collaboration task: judgment skill, trust) + a private control condition

Experiment 1 Results

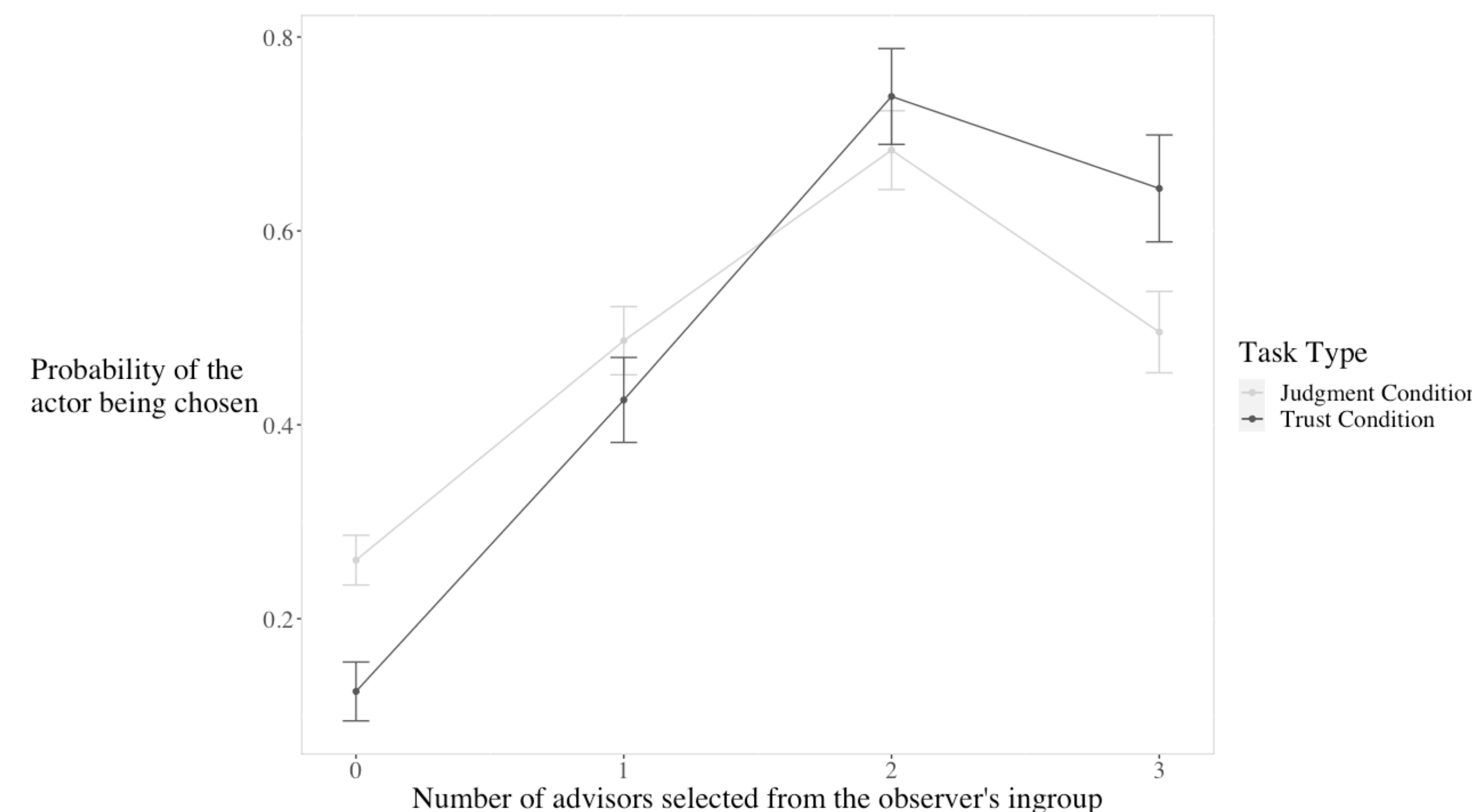


Experiment 2

Experiment 2 Methods

Experiment 2 (N = 459) tested whether engaging in selective exposure actually confers reputational benefits. Observers chose a partner for a future task based on the decision maker's actual information consumption choices from Experiment 1. We manipulated whether observers were selecting a partner for a task reliant on judgment skill or trust.

Experiment 2 Results

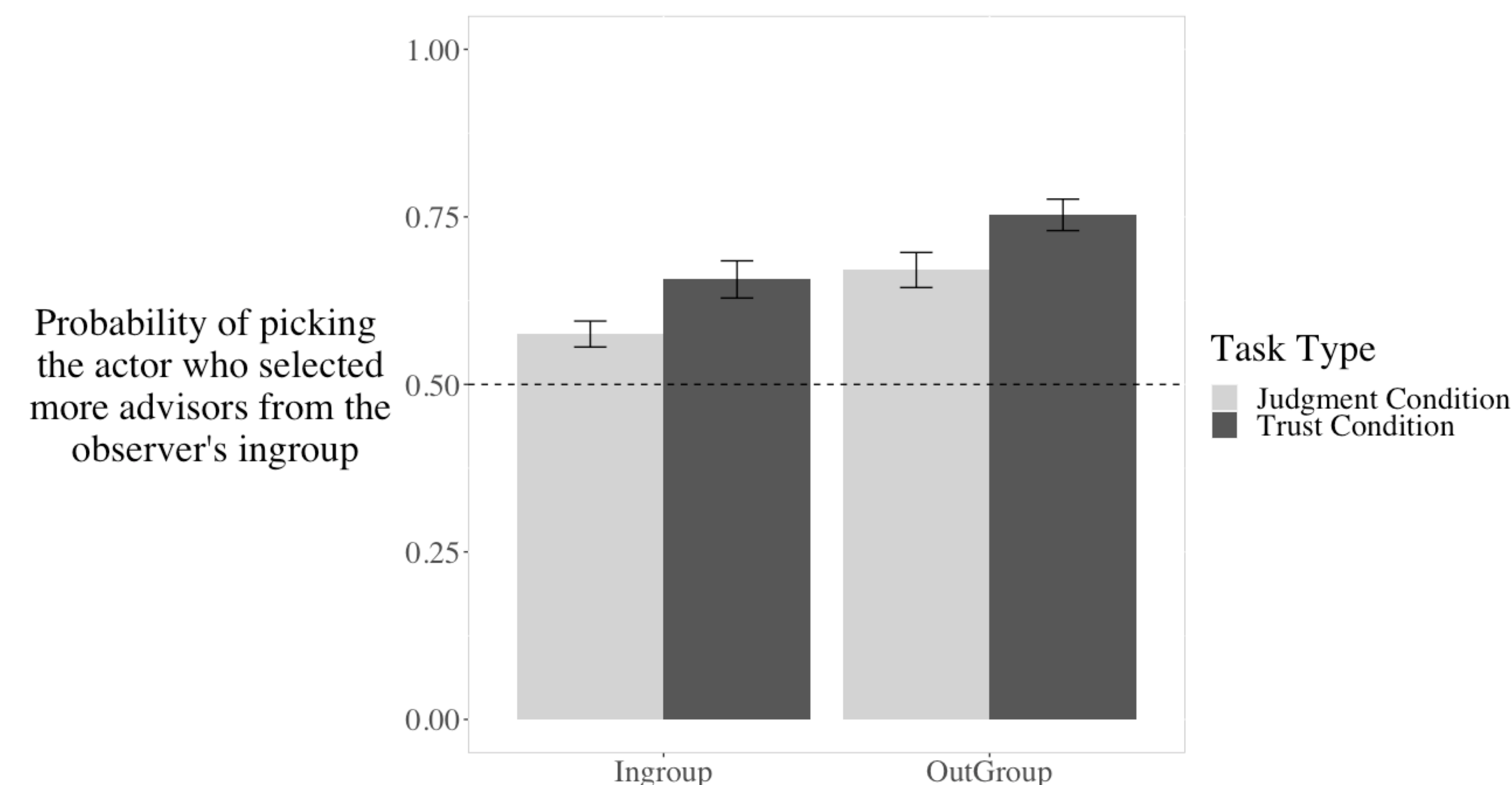


Experiment 3

Experiment 3 Methods

Experiment 3 (N = 983) was similar to Experiment 2 with the added factor of whether observers and decision makers shared a political party or not.

Experiment 3 Results



Background

Traditionally, 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 2020). However, scant empirical work has tested this hypothesis.

Conclusion & Takeaways

We find empirical support for a social signaling model of selective exposure as (1) decision makers shift their information consumption choices to signal to observers and (2) observers reward such shifts. This model is dependent on three key contingencies:

- 1. Decision context.** Observers reward decision makers who select more of the observer's ingroup sources more when expecting to collaborate on a future task reliant on trust rather than judgment skill. Importantly, actors do not intuit this sensitivity.
- 2. Congruence of group membership.** Selecting advice from the observer's ingroup is rewarded more for outgroup members.
- 3. Magnitude of selective exposure.** Observers prefer decision makers who select more information from the observer's ingroup, but also show a preference for diversification – punishing those decision makers who select *all* information from the observer's ingroup.

References

- Dorison, C. A., Minson, J. A., & Rogers, T. (2019). Selective exposure partly relies on faulty affective forecasts. *Cognition*, 188, 98–107. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cognition.2019.02.010>
- Hart, W., Albarracín, D., Eagly, A. H., Brechan, I., Lindberg, M. J., & Merrill, L. (2009). Feeling validated versus being correct: A meta-analysis of selective exposure to information. *Psychological Bulletin*, 135(4), 555–588. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0015701>
- Hart, W., Richardson, K., Tortoriello, G. K., & Earl, A. (2020). 'You Are What You Read.' Is selective exposure a way people tell us who they are? *British Journal of Psychology*, 111(3), 417–442. <https://doi.org/10.1111/bjop.12414>