



Rejection-based choices discourage voters from opting out

Yi-Hsin Su and Amitai Shenhav

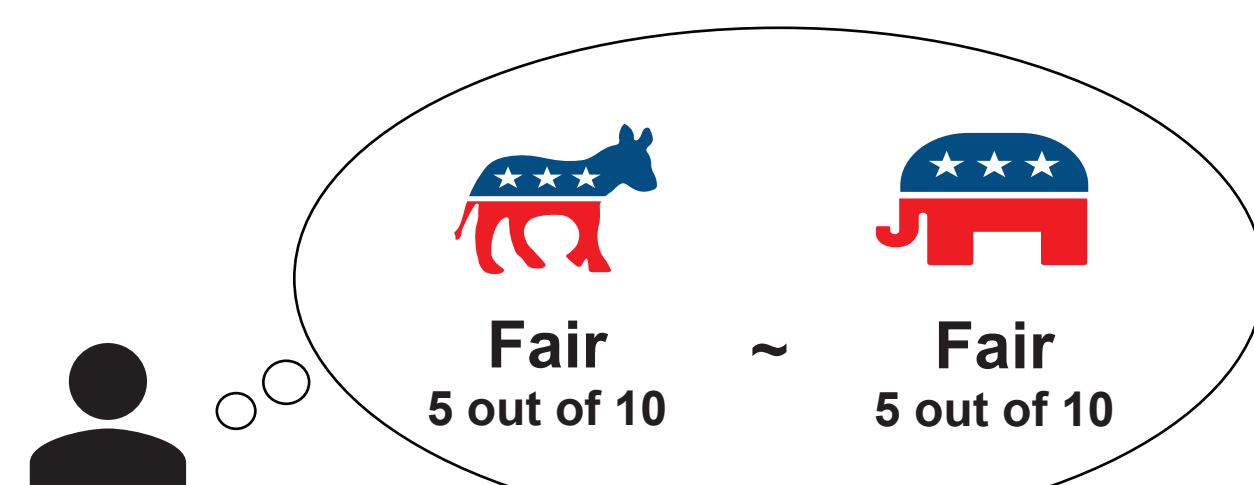
Brown University and University of California, Berkeley



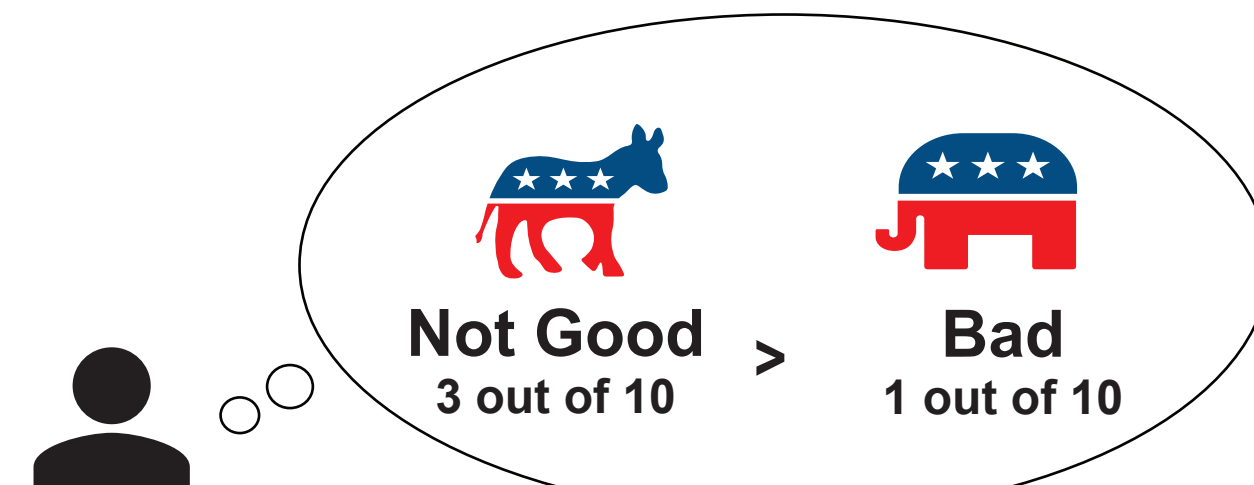
Why Voters Choose Not to Vote?

Recent elections suggest that a substantial proportion of voters sit out elections and/or report undecided in polls, but WHY [1-2]?

Reason 1: Low Relative Desirability
Voters equally prefer both options (Indecisive)



Reason 2: Low Overall Desirability
Voters dislike both options (Double-haters)



Since double-haters may still have a preference, losing this information in elections and/or polls can be highly consequential!

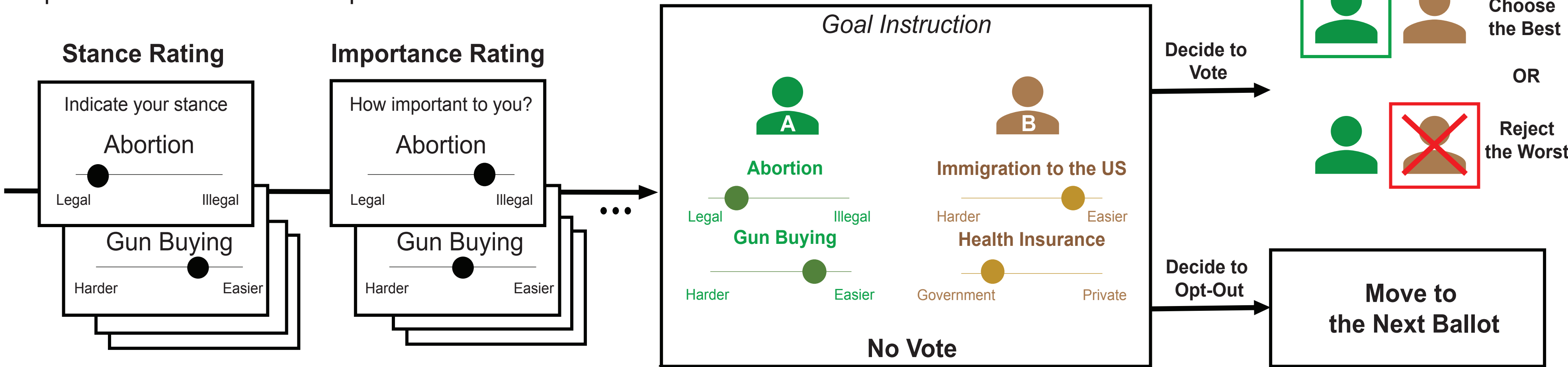
- Q1: To what extent voter opt-out depends on relative vs. overall desirability?
- Q2: To what extent voters opt out because they dislike both options, or instead because the quality of options are misaligned with the goal of choosing the best candidate (Reason 3: vote congruency)?

Task to Study Voter Opt-Out

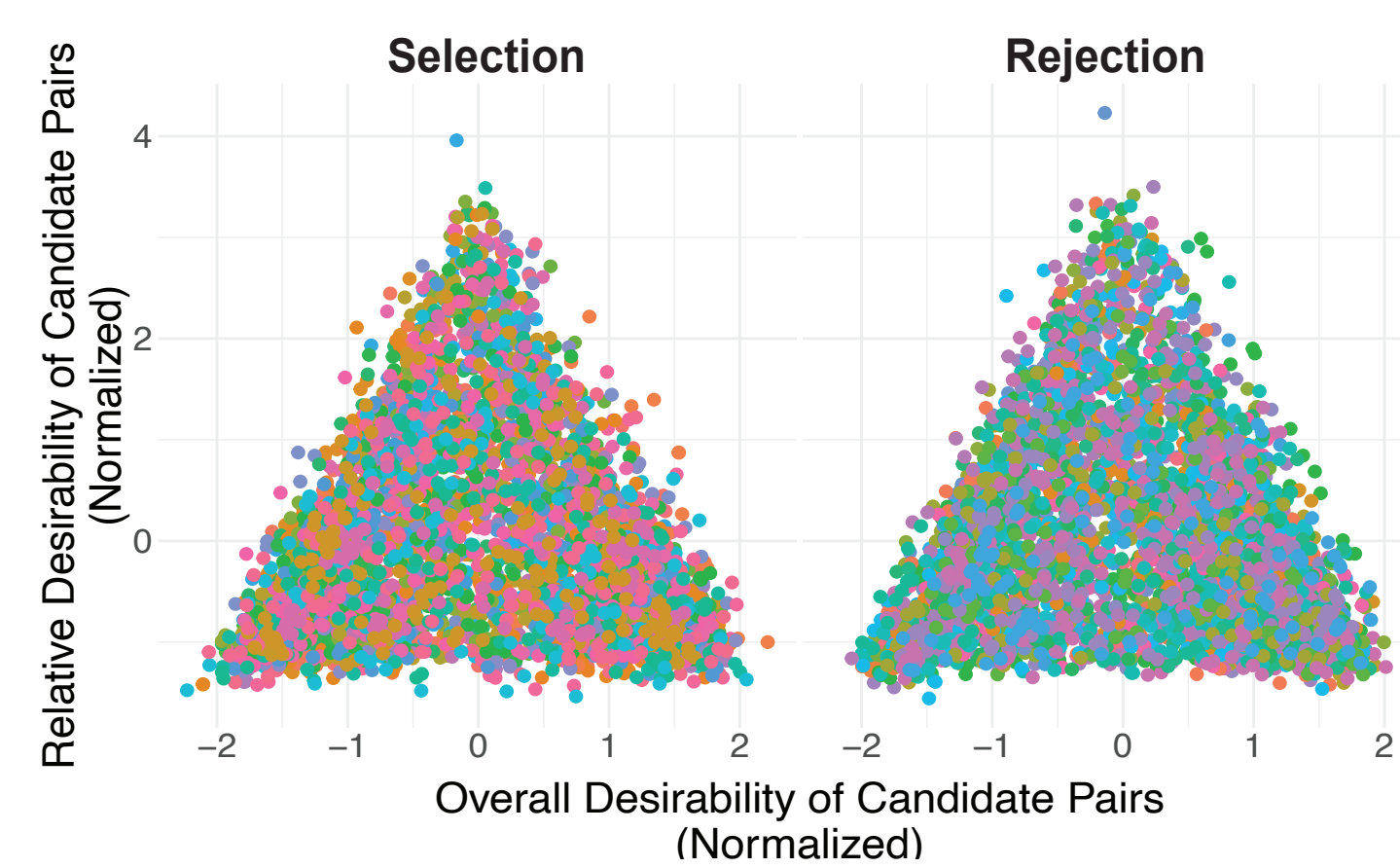
To study voter opt-out behavior, we developed a novel task in which:

- Participants were randomly assigned to Select group (asked to choose the best) or Reject group (asked to reject the worst).
- For each group, participants either sequentially (Study 1) or simultaneously (Study 2) made two decisions: whether to vote and which candidate to select/reject.

Prolific participants (N = 100 for both Studies 1 and 2) expressed their views on 13 political issues



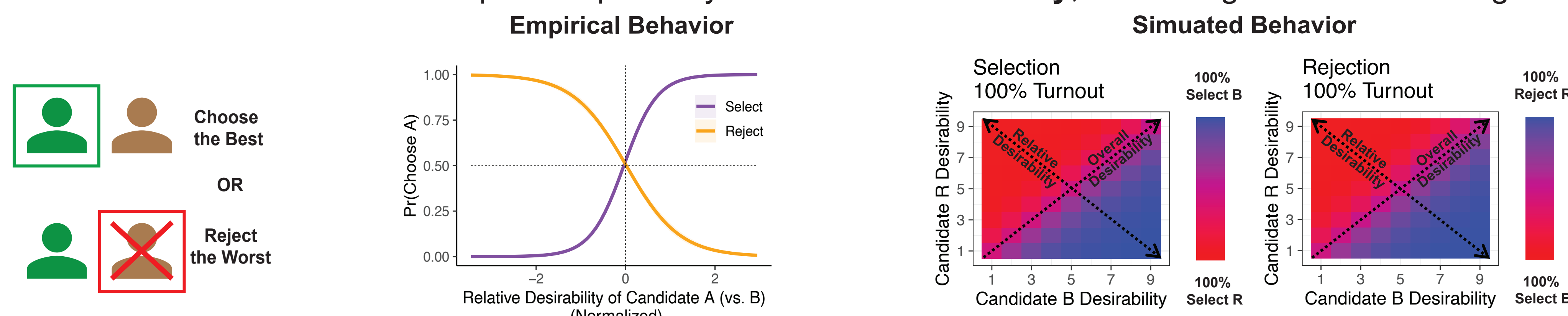
100 ballots in total, with two features varying (shown below):
Relative Desirability (Y-axis): how much more desirable one candidate is than the other
Overall Desirability (X-axis): how desirable the two candidates are on average



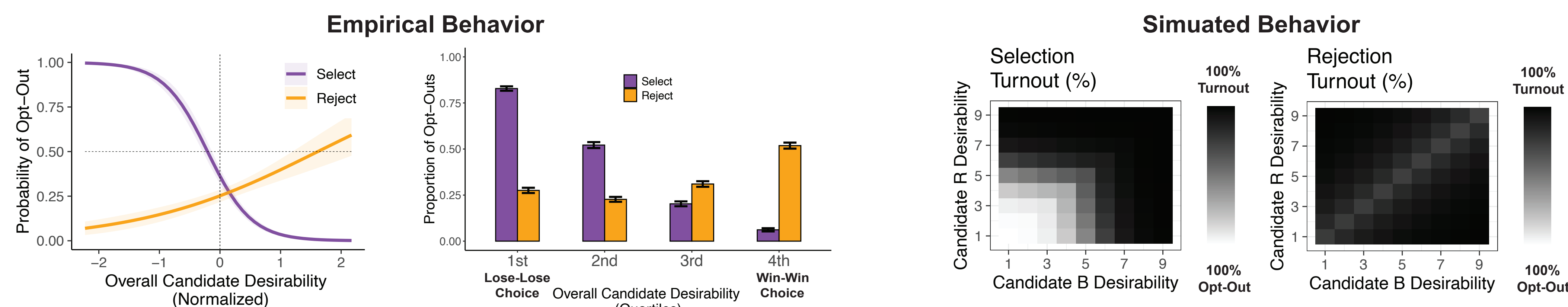
Hypothetical candidates were constructed to be well-aligned or poorly-aligned with participants' own views, so that participants perceived them from highly desirable to highly undesirable

Whether/For Whom to Vote is Dissociably Determined by Overall/Relative Desirability, Interacting with Choice Goals

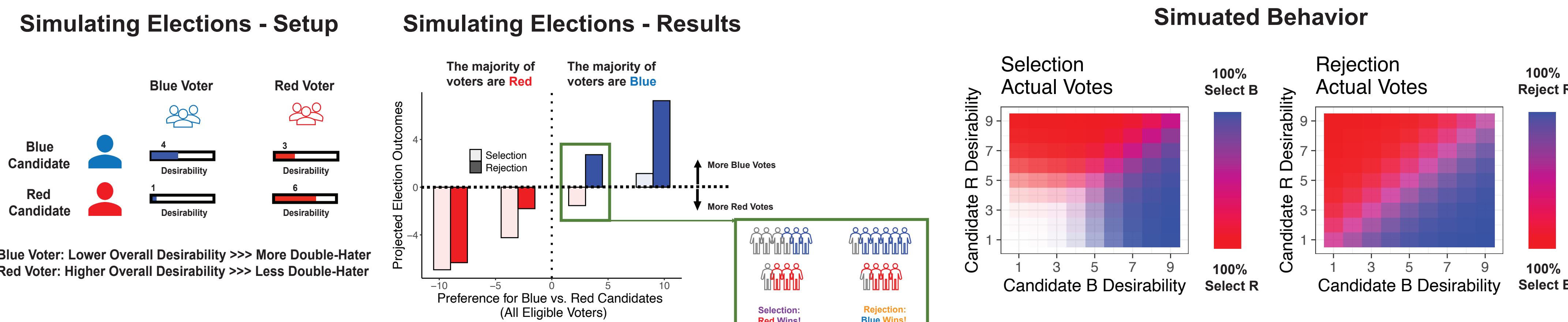
We found voters' candidate choices depended primarily on **relative desirability**, interacting with their choice goals.



Conversely, voters' **opt-out choices** depended primarily on **overall desirability**. Voters opted out when both candidates were undesirable (lose-lose choices) for selection-based voting but not for rejection-based voting, consistent with a vote congruency account.

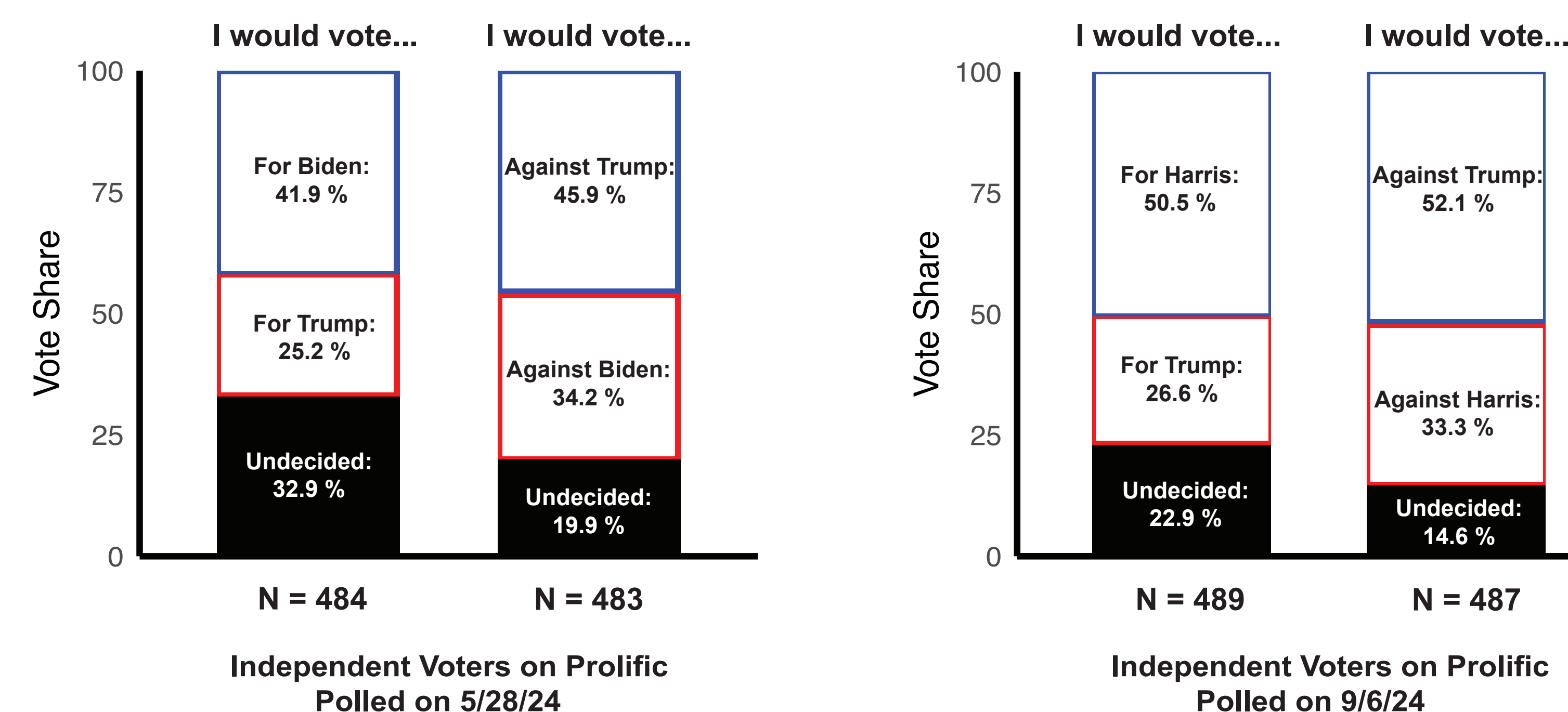


Simulating elections with hypothetical candidates (Blue vs. Red), we showed that in selection-based voting, those double-haters will be less well-represented in election outcomes, leading to biased representation. **Rejection-based voting remedied the biases by revealing the preferences of these double-haters.**



Fewer Voters Undecided When Choosing Who to Reject

In two preregistered poll surveys, we found that **Independent voters were less likely to vote undecided when asked who to vote against rather than who to vote for.**



Conclusion

- Using a novel voting task, we show that the influence of candidate desirability on voter opt-out depends heavily on how the voting decision is framed.
- Our findings provide an alternative to prominent accounts of undecided voters as being either indecisive or ill-informed.
- Our findings imply potential applications for revealing the preference of increasingly common voters who are unhappy about their options.

Reference

[1] Frank, R.W. & Martinez i Coma, F. Correlates of Voter Turnout. *Polit. Behav.* 45, 607-633 (2023).
 [2] Brody, R. A. & Page, B. I. Indifference, Alienation and Rational Decisions: The Effects of Candidate Evaluations on Turnout and the Vote. *Public Choice* 15, 1-17 (1973).