

Persuasion With Motivated Beliefs

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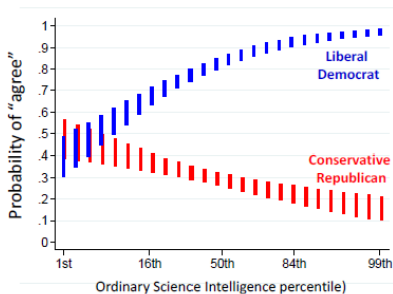
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- ▶ As much as a quarter of US economic activity broadly construable as persuasion (McCloskey and Klamer 1995)
- ▶ Are we good at persuading others? Do we converge on shared beliefs?

Political Polarization

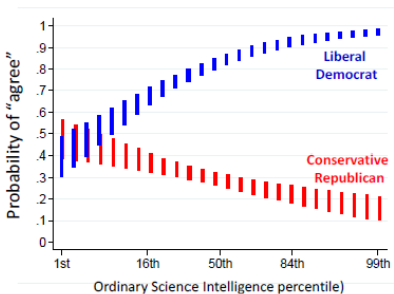
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- ▶ Marshall cognitive resources to defend a preferred belief
- ▶ Knowledge can lead to more, not less, polarization

Overview

1. Propose a (high-level) model of persuasion with belief-based utility
 - ▶ People value beliefs, not just consumption
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2. Present an incentivized experiment with persuasion on cherished beliefs
 - ▶ Can reducing perceived threat to beliefs increase persuasiveness?

Persuasion: Standard Account

- ▶ Traditionally think of information as means to an end (Stigler 1961)
- ▶ Assume individuals are (exclusively) motivated to hold accurate beliefs
- ▶ Persuasion a straight-forward exchange of information (Crawford and Sobel 1982; Kamenica and Gentzkow 2011)

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- ▶ But do people view information dispassionately?

Uncomfortable Information

The safe space [...] was intended to give people who might find comments “troubling” or “triggering,” a place to recuperate. [...] At one point [a student] went to the lecture hall—it was packed—but after a while, she had to return to the safe space. “I was feeling bombarded by a lot of viewpoints that really go against my dearly and closely held beliefs.” (“In College and Hiding From Scary Ideas.” *New York Times* 2015.)

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- ▶ We value our beliefs: painful to see them threatened
- ▶ Desire to avoid painful information (Golman, Hagmann, and Loewenstein 2017)
- ▶ Widespread and independent of standard demographics (Ho, Hagmann, and Loewenstein under review)

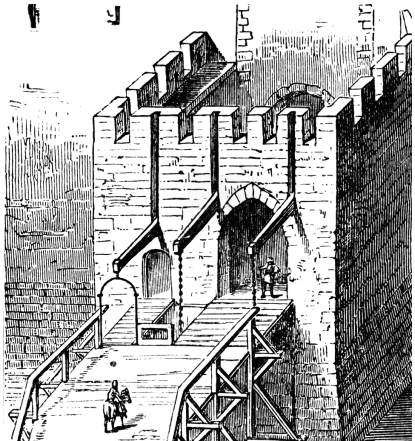
Persuasion: With Belief Utility

- ▶ Inherent tradeoff between decision-utility and belief-utility
 - ▶ Risk of future flooding, anxiety from climate change, social identity (Kahan et al. 2016)

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 - ▶ Risk of future flooding, anxiety from climate change, social identity (Kahan et al. 2016)
- ▶ When belief-utility outweighs decision utility, motivated to avoid information
- ▶ Extends beyond physical avoidance (Eil and Rao 2011; Möbius et al. 2014; Sunstein et al. 2016; Tappin et al. 2017)

Persuasion: Proposed Behavioral Account



- ▶ Desire to **protect** beliefs
- ▶ Assess **threat** of anticipated persuader
- ▶ Erect **defenses** if threat is anticipated

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 - ▶ Establish psychological defenses $\mathcal{D} = f(\mathcal{A}, \mathcal{I}, \mathcal{E})$
2. (Biased) updating of beliefs as a function of \mathcal{D}
 - ▶ $P(A|B) = (1 - \mathcal{D}) \cdot \frac{P(B|A) \cdot P(A)}{P(B)} + \mathcal{D} \cdot P(A)$

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- ▶ Strategy: Find questions that can be incentivized, but tackle closely-held underlying beliefs

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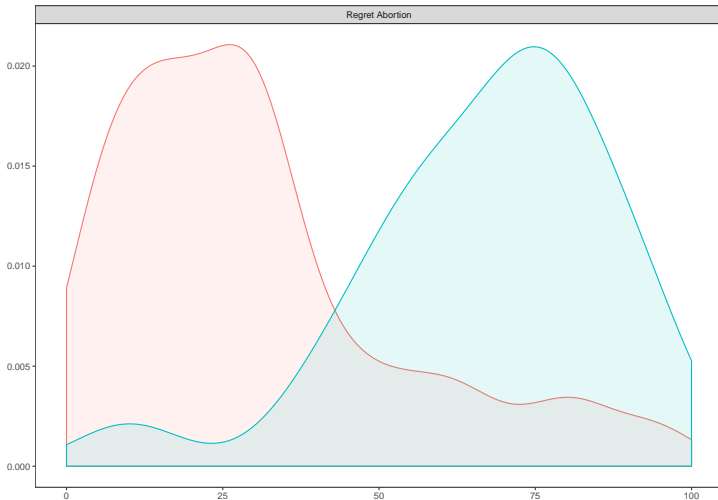
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 5. Support path to residency for undocumented immigrants
% of deported undocumented immigrants convicted of a crime

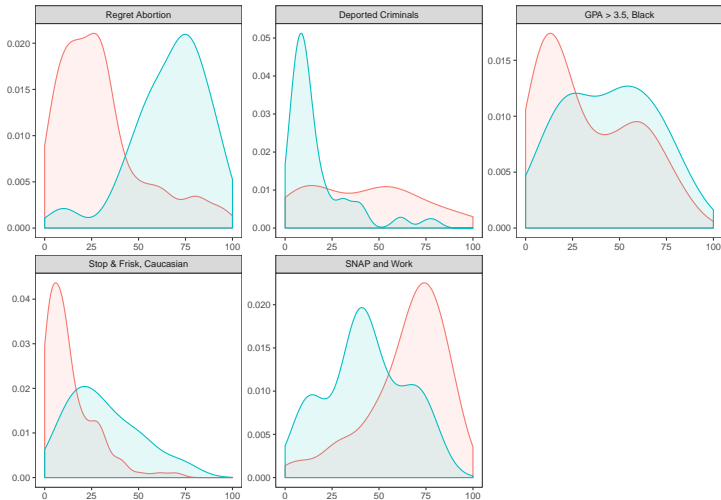
Beliefs Correlate With Attitudes (n = 202)

Distribution of estimates for people who strongly agree (red) or disagree (blue) that abortion should always be legal



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Distribution of estimates for people who strongly agree (red) or disagree (blue)



Experimental Design

- ▶ Persuasion task with a persuader and a receiver
- ▶ Incentivize accuracy (both), persuasiveness (persuader)
- ▶ Test means of reducing defenses
 - ▶ Acknowledge alternative views, express doubt
- ▶ Run in three sequential stages on Amazon Mechanical Turk
 - ▶ Persuaders, Judges, Receivers

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 3. Repeat estimates (self-persuasion)
 4. Report extent of uncertainty about advice

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- ▶ Want to (truthfully) report that persuader validates diverging beliefs
- ▶ Participants have choice of 3 levels of certainty about their recommendation
- ▶ Two options are decoys; 92% (and all selected) persuaders chose moderate option
 - ▶ I can see how someone could make a higher or lower estimate than I did. Providing an estimate is difficult, but I believe that I thought carefully about it. Although I am not completely convinced that my estimate is right, I think my argument will help someone make up their mind and make a good decision.

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- ▶ Keep fixed the message receivers see across conditions
 - ▶ Reduces variance and drops unpersuasive messages

Stage 3: Receivers

- ▶ 405 Participants recruited via MTurk
- ▶ Elicitate estimates and attitudes
 - ▶ One estimate incentivized (QSR)
- ▶ Matched to belief they strongly (dis)agree on
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 2. No message (baseline)

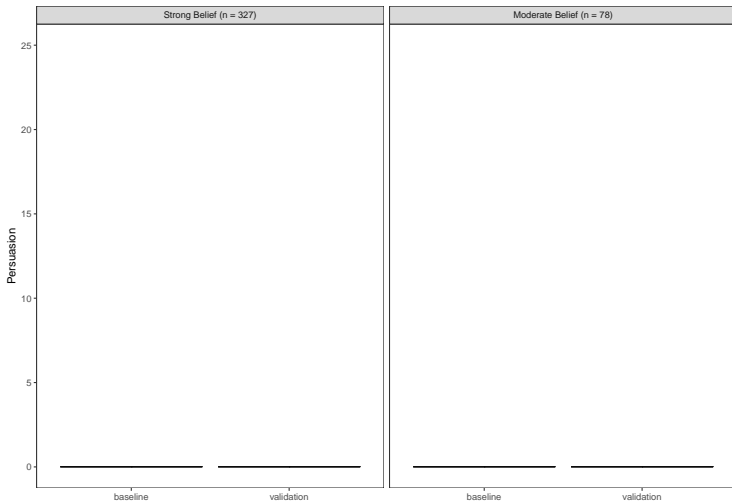
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- ▶ Receive persuasive message
- ▶ Incentivized second estimate on that question only

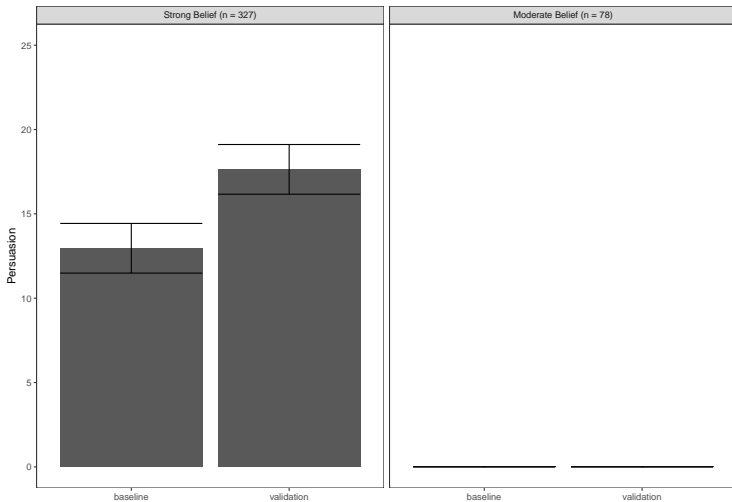
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- ▶ Persuasion: percentage point change in direction of argument

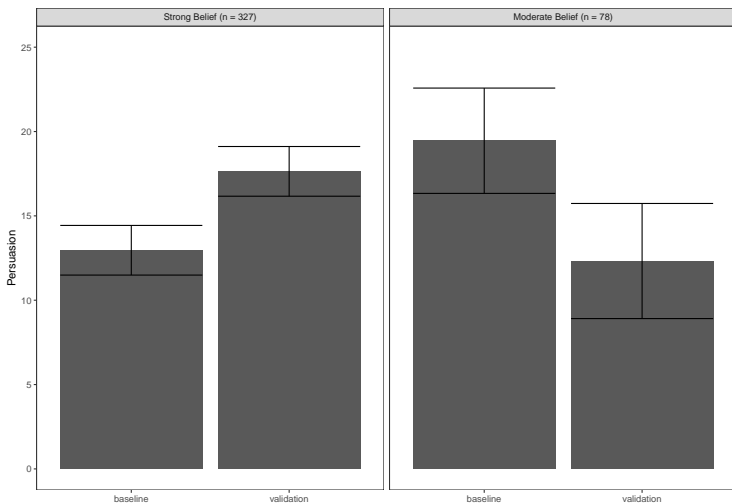
Receivers: Persuasion By Condition



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Receivers: Persuasion OLS

	Percentage Points Persuaded	
Validation	-7.131 (4.370)	-5.802 (4.232)
Strong Belief	-6.493* (3.262)	-4.887 (3.168)
Validation × Strong Belief	11.808* (4.856)	10.830* (4.717)
Intercept	19.455*** (2.885)	24.871*** (6.686)
Message FE	No	Yes
Observations	405	405
R ²	0.019	0.119

Note: * p<0.05; ** p<0.01; *** p<0.001

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- ▶ Persuaders provided two estimates for all questions
- ▶ Compare change in second-round estimate after writing a persuasive message vs. the remaining beliefs

Self-Persuasion

	Self-Persuasion	
	(1)	(2)
Persuasiveness	0.008 (0.011)	-0.055 (0.183)
Persuasive Message	-2.891* (1.137)	-2.882** (1.104)
Persuasiveness x Persuasive Message	0.059* (0.025)	0.059* (0.024)
Intercept	-0.413 (0.508)	-5.763 (5.767)
Belief FE	No	Yes
Individual FE	No	Yes
Observations	2,005	2,005
R ²	0.005	0.262

Note:

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Thank You

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