MOTIVATION, MISINFORMATION, AND STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION IN POLITICAL DISCUSSION

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RESEARCH QUESTION: How do citizens' motivations affect their ability to learn about politics through political discussion?

BACKGROUND:

- Political philosophers believe citizens need to deliberate about issues to arrive at informed opinions, participate meaningfully in democracies
- Real-world political discussion rarely meets the standards set by these philosophers.
- Previous work on the topic has overlooked the role of motivations.
- Psychologists focus on several sets of motivations that govern information search and processing:
  - **Partisan Motivations**: desire to seek information that reinforces your predispositions. E.g., Democrats seek information from liberal sources, Republicans from conservative.
  - **Accuracy Motivations**: desire to seek information that leads to most correct conclusion.
  - **Civic Motivations**: desire to help others reach their most desirable conclusion.

ARGUMENT:

Effect of Discussion = Information × Motivation

- Meaningful discussion can occur, if the participants hold the right set of motivations
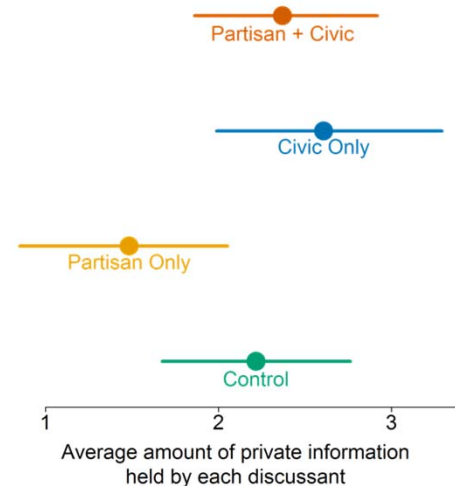
HYPOTHESIS:

- **Partisan motivations** encourage biased communication patterns
- **Accuracy motivations** encourage more information seeking including from people who hold dissimilar views
- **Civic motivations** encourage honesty

DATA & METHODS: Small-group experiment conducted in FSU's XS/FS experimental lab
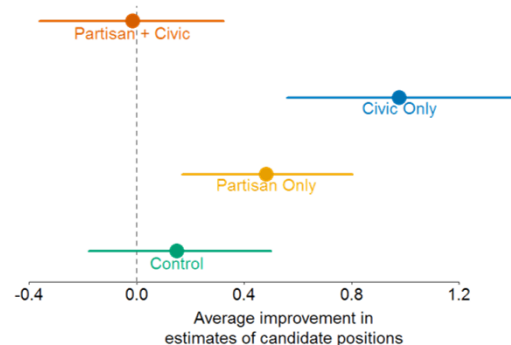
- Subjects (Ss) vote for one of two computer generated candidates
- Ss and candidates each assigned integer position between 1 and 7. Ss seek and share info to learn the candidates' positions
- Proximity Payment: All Ss paid if winning candidate is closer to their position than losing candidate
- Economic incentives to manipulate motivations:
  - **Partisan Motivations**: paid if specific candidate wins, regardless of proximity
  - **Accuracy Motivations**: Not yet implemented
  - **Civic Motivations**: paid if they share info with other subjects who subsequently vote for the candidate closest to their own position

RESULTS

Ss w/ only **partisan** motivations seek info from less expert discussants:

Ss w/ only **civic** motivations vote correctly at high rate, but people with **civic** and **partisan** motivations perform worse than **partisans**:

CONCLUSION: Discussion can be beneficial, depending on the mix of motivations people bring to the discussion

- When people enter a discussion with no agenda and a desire to help, discussion can improve democratic outcomes
- When **partisan** and **civic** motivations collide, **civic** motivations negate some normatively unappealing aspects of **partisan** motivations
- **Partisan** motivations also counteract the greatest benefits arising from **civic** motivations