

Unbundling Autocratic Capture: Complexity, Media Asymmetry, and Cognition

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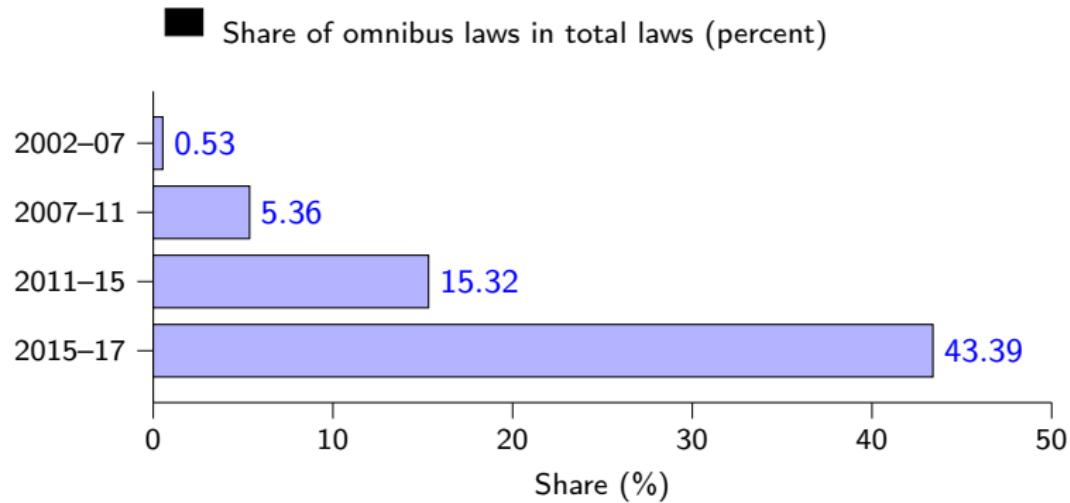
October 29, 2025

Big Picture: Why Backsliding Slips Through?



Figure: 2017 Turkish Constitutional Referendum

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Source: TBMM (Grand National Assembly of Turkey)

Introduction

Claim: Contemporary democratic erosion rarely comes “at gunpoint.” It proceeds *legally* via omnibus packages and media asymmetries that dull scrutiny.

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Two recurring tools

- ▶ **Strategic bundling** (omnibus/constitutional packages): popular benefits paired with clauses that centralize power, weaken oversight, or tilt elections.
- ▶ **State-captured / constrained media**: positive coverage saturates; dissenting analysis is scarce or costly.

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Illustrative patterns (non-exhaustive)

- ▶ *Constitutional “comprehensives”*: multi-issue amendments that mix tax/family benefits with media/judicial curbs.
- ▶ *Security & emergency packages*: surveillance/policing upgrades bundled with limits on review or protest.
- ▶ *Electoral “technical fixes”*: administrative or threshold tweaks embedded in broader governance reforms.

Literature

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1) Predispositions / Identity

- ▶ Affective polarization, partisan loyalty, charismatic attachment; weak democratic norms (Svolik, 2018; Voelkel et al., 2023b; Hollyer et al., 2023; Hobolt et al., 2024).

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2) Strategic Trade-offs

- ▶ Voters knowingly accept institutional costs for policy/expressive benefits (Luo and Przeworski, 2021; Grillo and Prato, 2023; Gratton and Lee, 2024; Chiopris et al., 2021).

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 - ▶ *Limit:* Assumes clear perception of democratic costs; in practice, bundles + biased media obscure them. Citizens value democracy unless framed as blocking safety/welfare (Chu et al., 2025; Wunsch and Gessler, 2023).

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Core claim:

Bundling \times media asymmetry \rightarrow lower detection & resistance.

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Scope Condition: Citizens unable to distinguish incumbent types when facing omnibus bills.

Hypotheses

Main Hypotheses:

H1: Complexity may either decrease reform support (via complexity aversion), or increase it (via cognitive overload).

H2: Biased cues may either decrease reform support (via heightened skepticism) or increase it (via salient anchors).

H3: Complexity and biased cues together increase the support for harmful reforms.

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Mechanism Hypotheses:

H4: Complexity alone increases the perceived complexity of the decision.

H5: Biased cues alone increase the perceived complexity of the decision.

H6: Complexity and biased cues together increase perceived complexity by less than the sum of their separate increases.

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Auxiliary Hypotheses:

H7: Complexity and biased cues together decrease the support for good reforms.

H8: Complexity and biased cues together worsen the gap between supporting good and avoiding bad reforms.

Research Design

► 2 x 2 Factorial Design:

1. **Complexity:** Small (reform bundles with 3 lines of changes) vs Large (with 5 lines of changes).
2. **Biased Cues:** Some positive changes in reform bundles are colored and emboldened.

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► Four Treatment Arms:

1. Small Complexity & No Biased Cues
2. Small Complexity & Biased Cues
3. Large Complexity & No Biased Cues
4. Large Complexity & Biased Cues

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► Two Blocks:

- **Block 1:** Baseline with Two Tasks (one with higher EV and one with lower EV compared to SQ, in a randomized order).
- **Block 2:** Two tasks where an Advisor also recommends the reform bundle (as another proxy for biased cues).

Research Design

- ▶ **Incentivized decision tasks**, choice over two bowls:
 - ▶ A *bowl* is a composition (*Purple*, *Blue*, *Gray*) with $P + B + G = 20$.
 - ▶ Color Values: **Purple**=60, **Blue**=30, **Gray**=0 (credits).

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- ▶ **Tasks (per Block):**
 - ▶ Compare **Status Quo (SQ) bowl** vs bowl with a **Reform Bundle** (rules transform SQ to final bowl).
- ▶ **Lotteries & payoffs:**
 - ▶ Choosing a bowl induces a lottery with $EV = 60 \cdot P/20 + 30 \cdot B/20$.
 - ▶ One bowl choice and color *randomly chosen and paid*.

Block 1 Example Tasks

Option 1

Başlangıçtaki kase: 2 Mor, 7 Mavi, 11 Gri.

Now let's change this bowl with the following 3 rules:

1. Add 1 Blue, Remove 2 Purple, Remove 1 Gray
2. Add 2 Purple, Add 6 Gray, Remove 1 Blue
3. Remove 2 Gray, Remove 1 Blue, Remove 2 Purple

Option 2

Başlangıçtaki kase: 2 Mor, 7 Mavi, 11 Gri.

Process: No rules are applied. Draw one ball from the initial bowl.

Option 1

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Option 2

Başlangıçtaki kase: 2 Mor, 7 Mavi, 11 Gri.

Now let's change this bowl with the following 3 rules:

1. **Add 1 Blue**, Remove 2 Purple, **Remove 1 Gray**
2. **Add 2 Purple**, Add 6 Gray, Remove 1 Blue
3. **Remove 2 Gray**, Remove 1 Blue, Remove 2 Purple

Figure: Small Bundle w/o Biased Cues

Figure: Small Bundle with Biased Cues

Block 1 Example Tasks

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Başlangıçtaki kase: 2 Mor, 7 Mavi, 11 Gri.

Process: No rules are applied. Draw one ball from the initial bowl.

Option 2

Başlangıçtaki kase: 2 Mor, 7 Mavi, 11 Gri.

Now let's change this bowl with the following 3 rules:

1. **Add 1 Blue**, Remove 2 Purple, **Remove 1 Gray**
2. **Add 2 Purple**, Add 6 Gray, Remove 1 Blue
3. **Remove 2 Gray**, Remove 1 Blue, Remove 2 Purple

Option 1

Başlangıçtaki kase: 2 Mor, 7 Mavi, 11 Gri.

Now let's change this bowl with the following 5 rules:

1. **Add 1 Blue**, Remove 2 Purple, **Remove 1 Gray**
2. Add 1 Purple, Remove 1 Blue, Add 5 Gray
3. **Add 2 Purple**, Add 6 Gray, Remove 1 Blue
4. Remove 5 Gray, Add 1 Blue, Remove 1 Purple
5. **Remove 2 Gray**, Remove 1 Blue, Remove 2 Purple

Option 2

Başlangıçtaki kase: 2 Mor, 7 Mavi, 11 Gri.

Process: No rules are applied. Draw one ball from the initial bowl.

Figure: Small Bundle with Biased Cues

Figure: Large Bundle with Biased Cues

Block 2 Example Tasks

Option 1

Başlangıçtaki kase: 5 Mor, 5 Mavi, 10 Gri.

Process: No rules are applied. Draw one ball from the initial bowl.

Your ADVISOR recommends this option.

Option 2

Başlangıçtaki kase: 5 Mor, 5 Mavi, 10 Gri.

Now let's change this bowl with the following 5 rules:

1. Add 6 Blue, Remove 1 Gray, Add 1 Purple
2. Remove 1 Purple, Add 1 Blue, Remove 1 Gray
3. Add 2 Purple, Remove 3 Blue, Add 2 Gray
4. Add 1 Gray, Remove 1 Blue, Add 1 Purple
5. Remove 8 Gray, Remove 1 Purple, Add 2 Blue

Option 1

Başlangıçtaki kase: 2 Mor, 7 Mavi, 11 Gri.

Now let's change this bowl with the following 5 rules:

1. **Add 1 Blue**, Remove 2 Purple, **Remove 1 Gray**
2. Add 1 Purple, Remove 1 Blue, Add 5 Gray
3. **Add 2 Purple**, Add 6 Gray, Remove 1 Blue
4. Remove 5 Gray, Add 1 Blue, Remove 1 Purple
5. **Remove 2 Gray**, Remove 1 Blue, Remove 2 Purple

Option 2

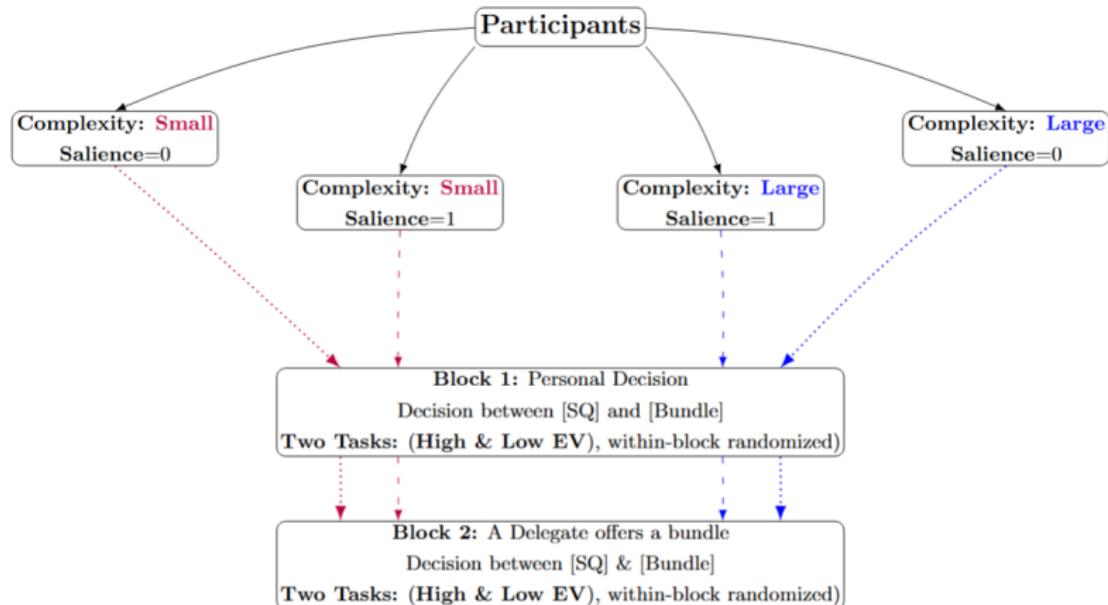
Başlangıçtaki kase: 2 Mor, 7 Mavi, 11 Gri.

Process: No rules are applied. Draw one ball from the initial bowl.

Figure: with Advisor recommendation

Figure: w/o Advisor recommendation

Experiment Procedure



- ▶ Recruitment over Meta.
- ▶ Convenience sample composed of Turkish people over 18 years old.
- ▶ All Sample (N=153), Cognitive Sample (N=94)

Main Hypotheses

Support for Low EV Reform Bundles

H1: *Complexity may either decrease reform support (via complexity aversion), or increase it (via cognitive overload).* ⇒ **Decrease**

H2: *Biased cues may either decrease reform support (via heightened skepticism) or increase it (via salient anchors).* ⇒ **Decrease**

H3: *Complexity and biased cues together increase the support for harmful reforms.* ⇒ **Increase**

Main Hypotheses

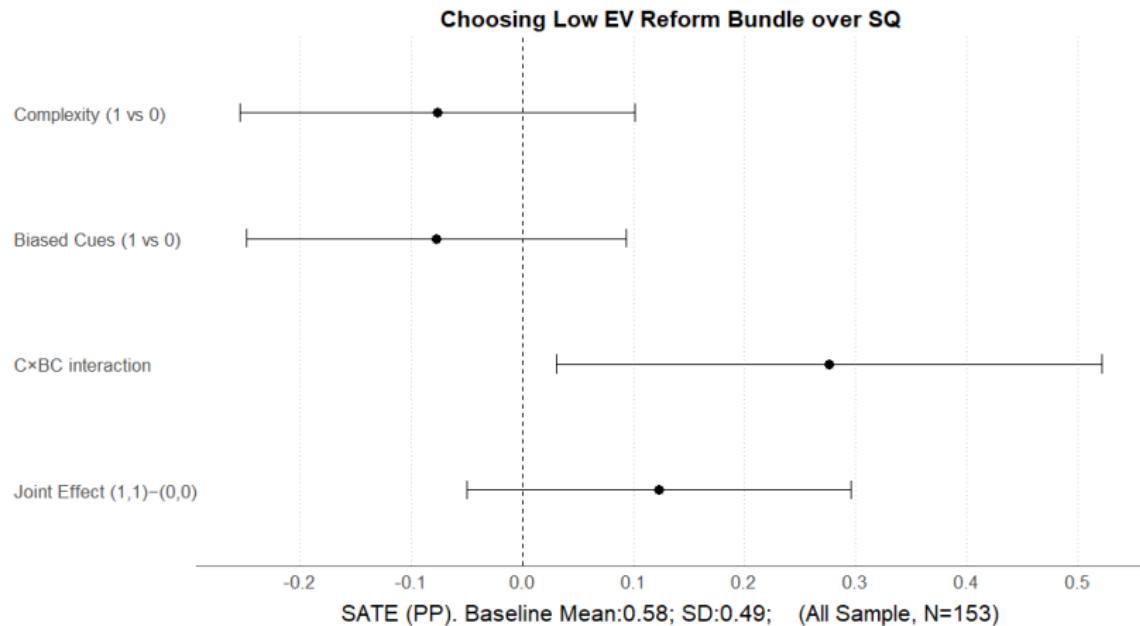


Figure: All Sample

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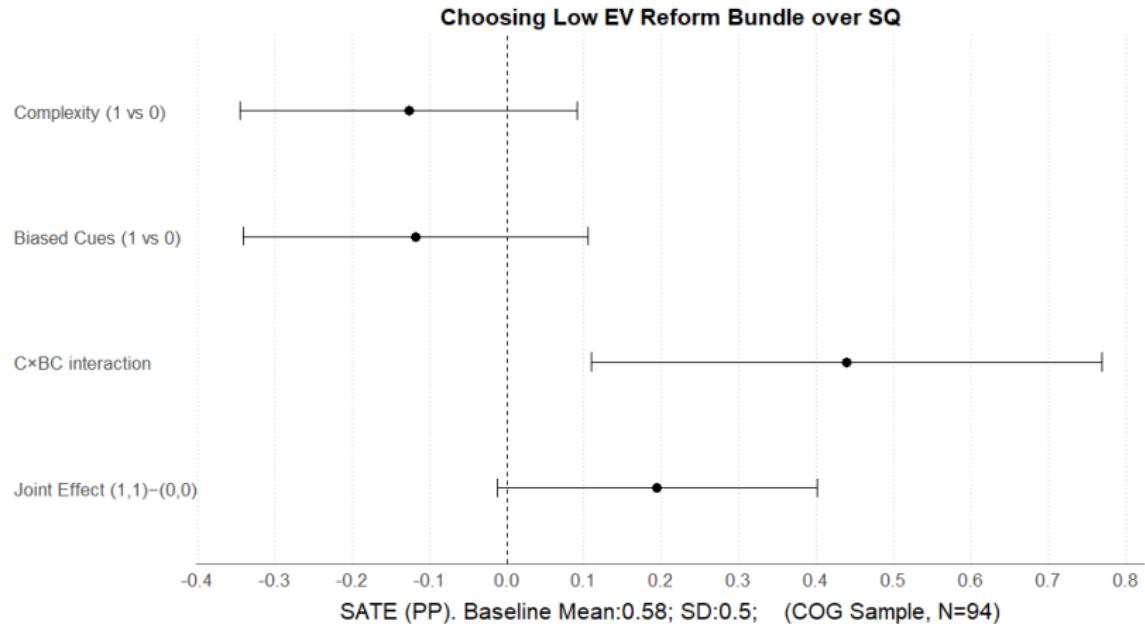


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Mechanism Hypotheses

Perceived Difficulty of Tasks:

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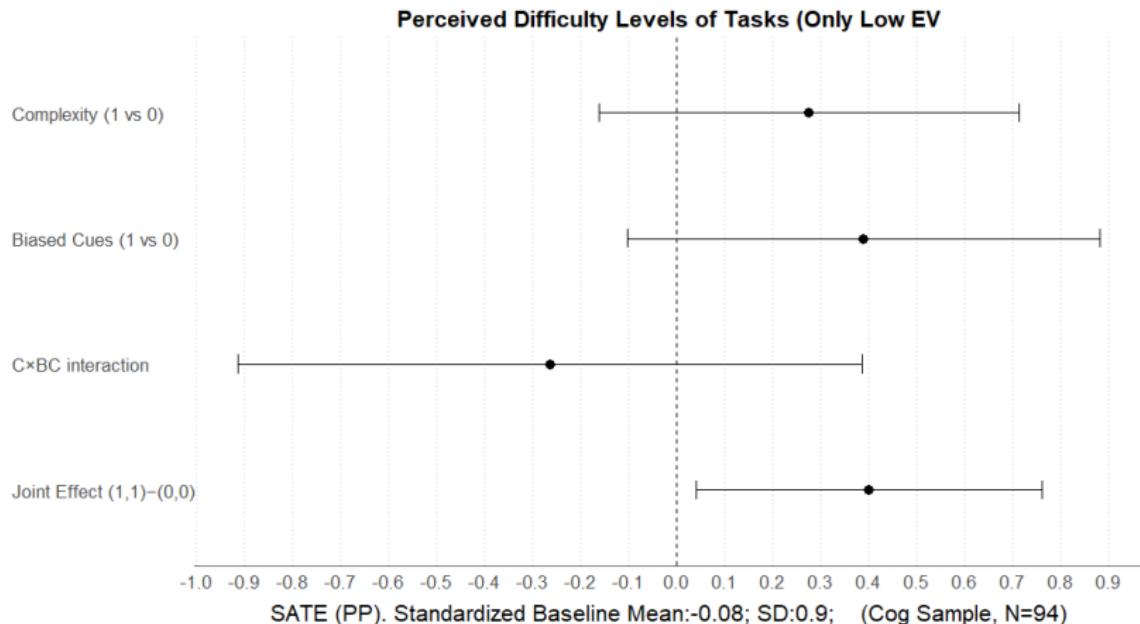


Figure: Cognitive Sample

Auxiliary Hypotheses

Recognizing High vs Low EV Bundles:

H7: *Complexity and biased cues together decrease the support for good reforms.*

H8: *Complexity and biased cues together worsen the gap between supporting good and avoiding bad reforms.*

Auxiliary Hypotheses

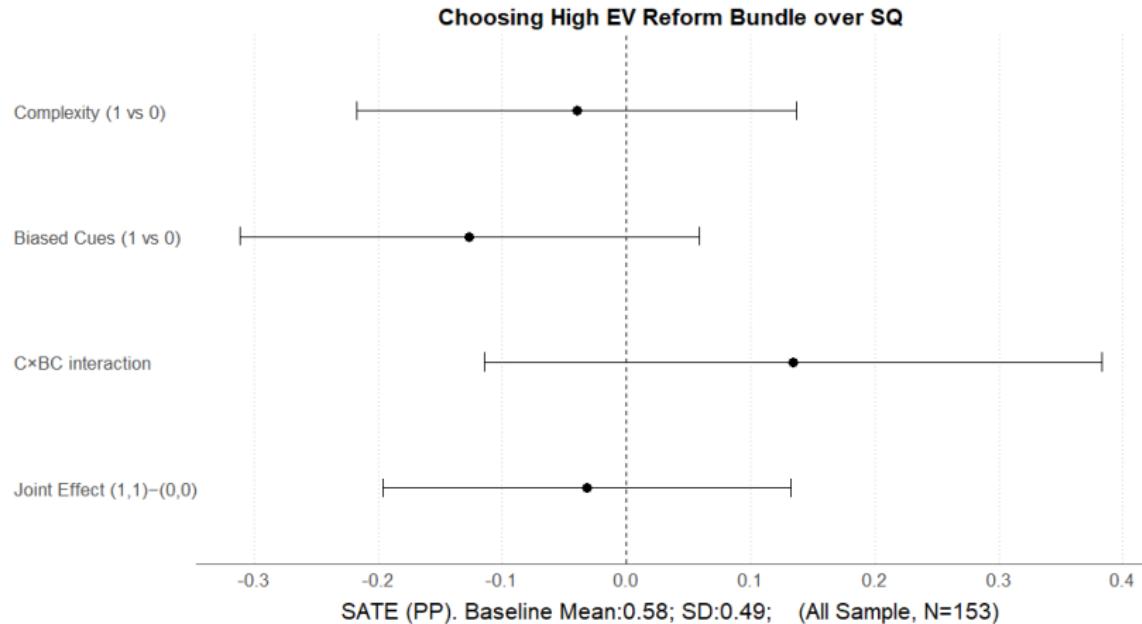


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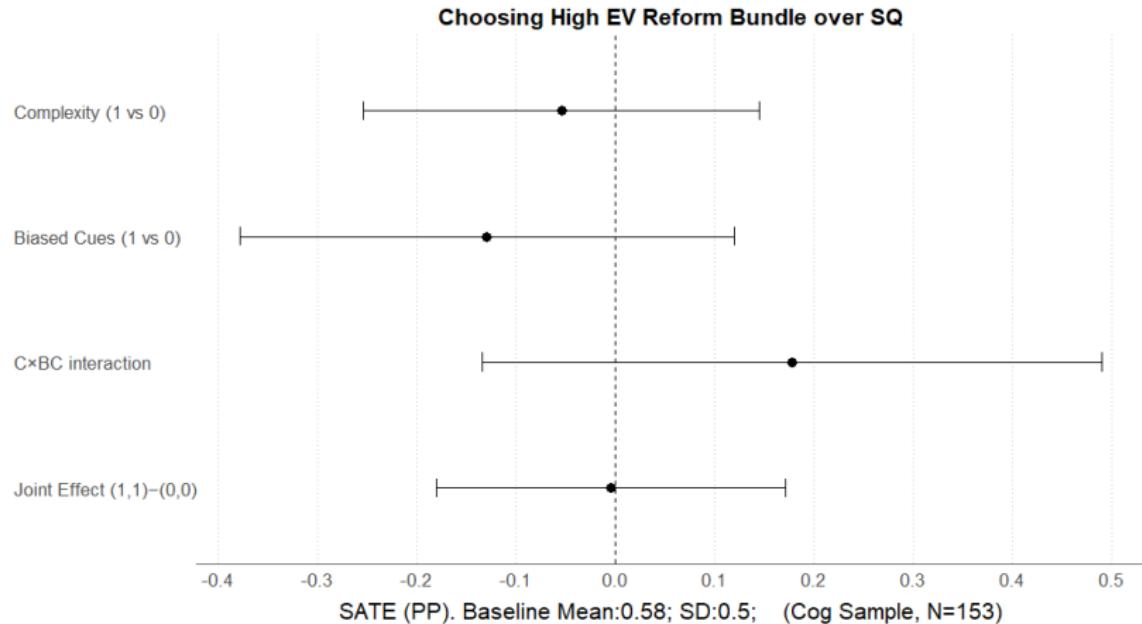


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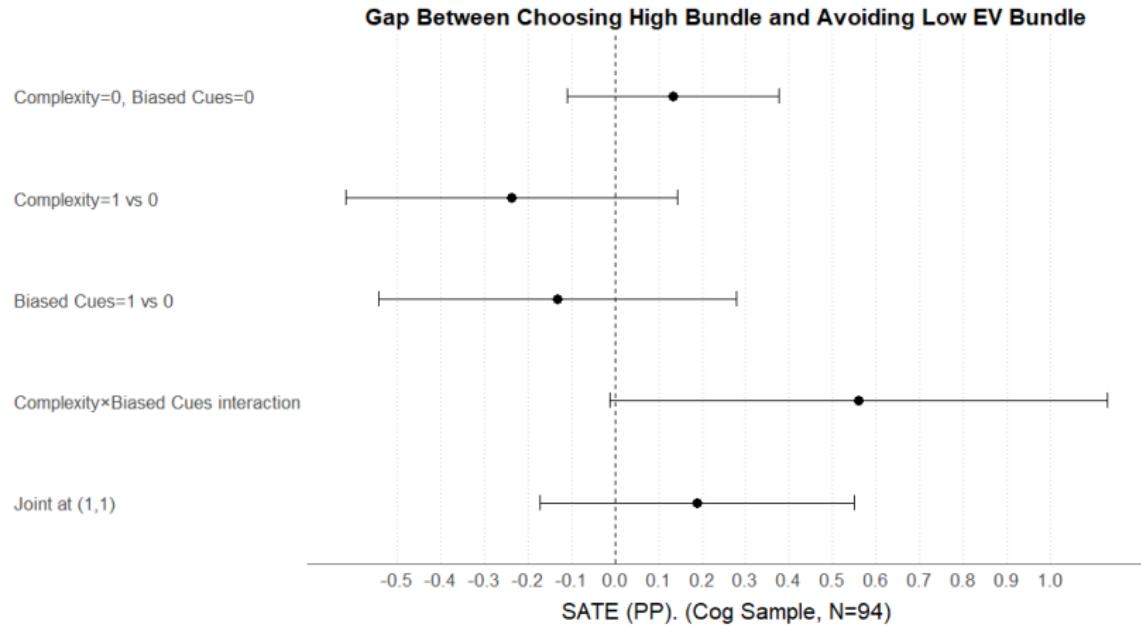


Figure: Cognitive Sample

Advisor Recommendation as a Biased Cue

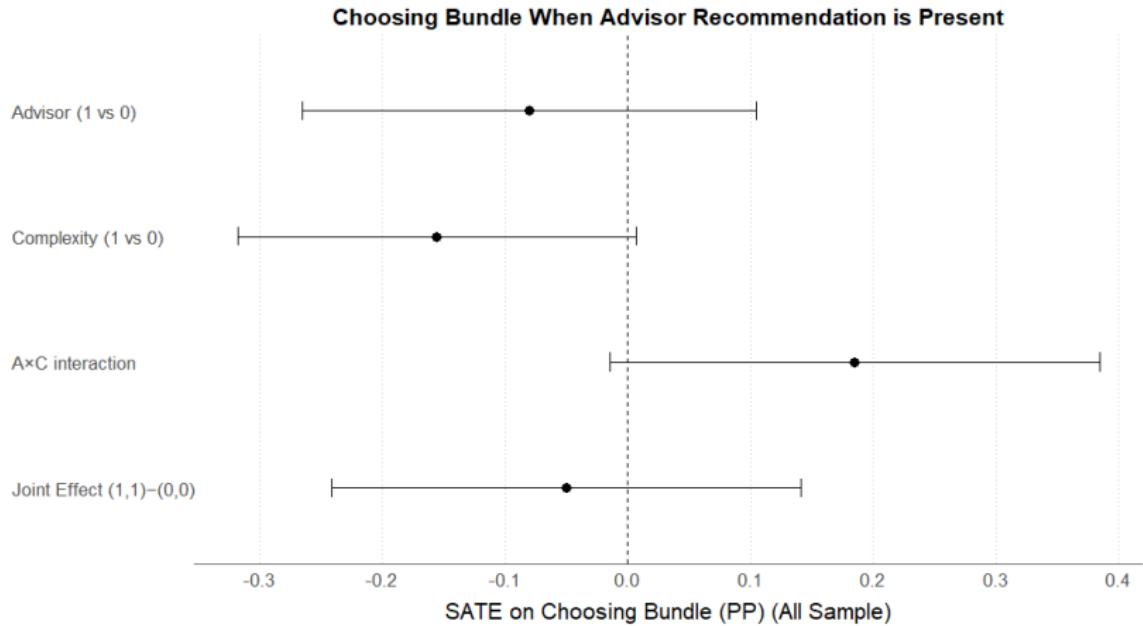


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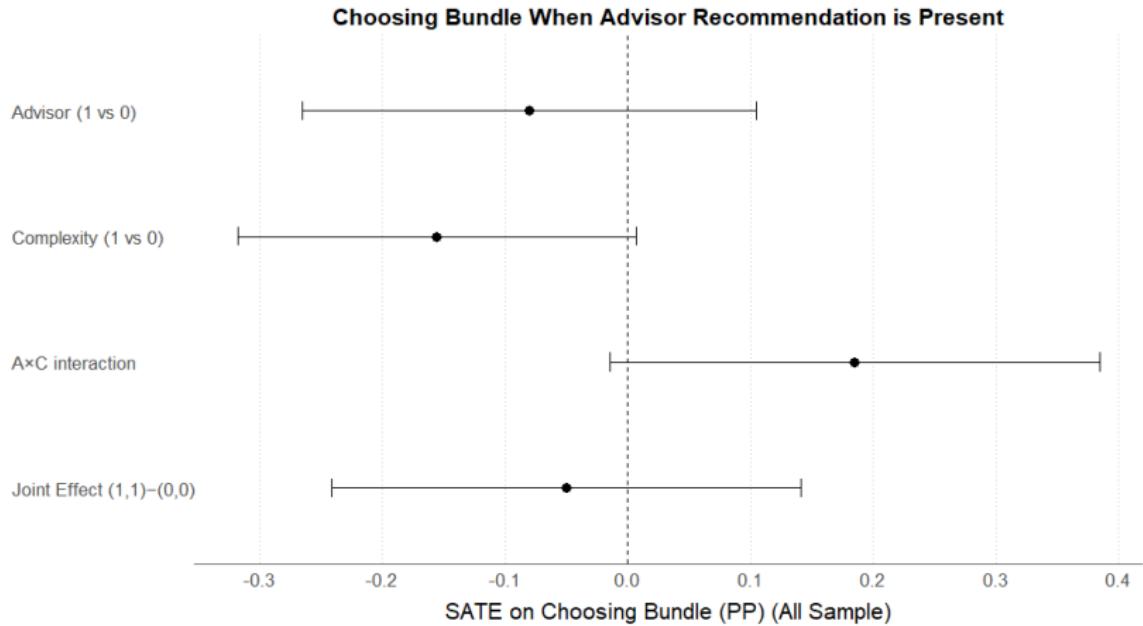


Figure: Cognitive Sample

Next...

- ▶ Decision under incomplete information with information acquisition.
- ▶ Decision tasks with policies.
- ▶ Learning strategy interventions.

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