



Psychological Biases in Municipal Officials

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Introduction:

Prominent research demonstrates that individuals are prone to framing bias in their decision-making (Quattrone and Tversky 1988), but we know very little about whether elected officials are just as susceptible to these biases even when making decisions within their realm of expertise.

Data:

- Results from Quattrone & Tversky (1988)
- 2014 American Municipal Officials Survey
- 3819 Responses from Municipal Officials

Methods:

- Replicated the framing bias questions from Quattrone and Tversky.
- Created new treatments that applied more to municipal officials' policy expertise
- Conducted difference of means test between responses in each treatment condition
- If respondents' decision-making processes were unbiased and followed the tenets of rational choice, the same proportion of respondents would choose Option A in each treatment condition. Any differences in the proportion choosing option A is due to biased decision making.

Conclusion:

Elected officials are expected to be particularly adept at making rational, incisive decisions; however, it appears that political elites are no less susceptible to framing bias than the average constituent. We suspect that municipal officials rely too heavily on intuitive processes, overestimating their capability to effectively evaluate situations related to their expertise. Further research is needed to identify effective modes of reducing the pervasive impact of implicit biases.

Vignettes & Results

Problem A –Original

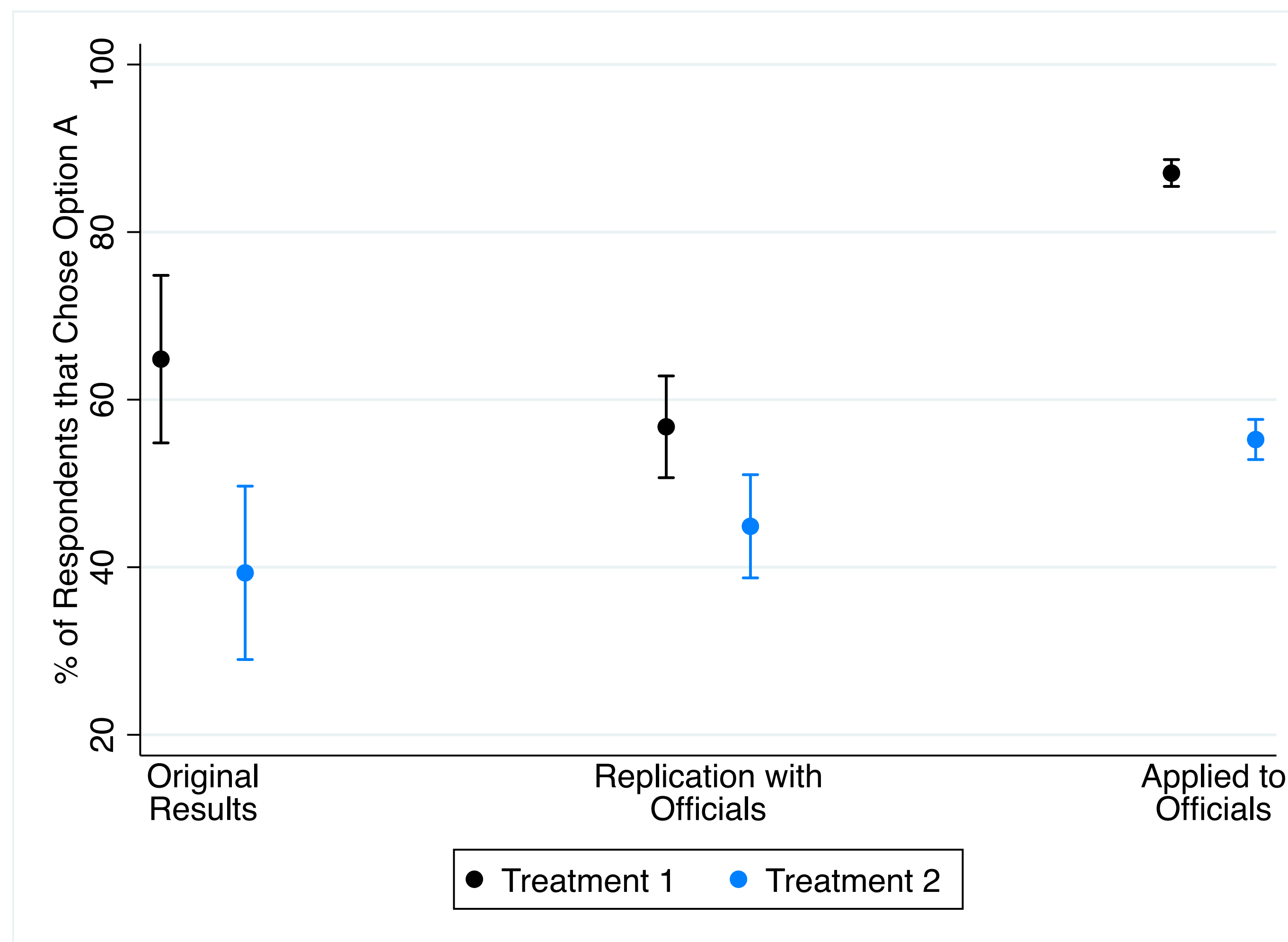
Imagine there were a presidential contest between two candidates, Frank and Carl. Frank wishes to keep the level of inflation and unemployment at its current level. The rate of inflation is currently at **[23/42]%**, and the rate of unemployment is currently at **[22/15]%**. Carl proposes a policy that would **[increase/decrease]** the rate of inflation by 19% while **[decreasing/increasing]** the rate of unemployment by 7%.

Suppose that you were asked to cast your vote for either Frank or Carl. Please indicate your vote.

Problem A –Applied

Imagine that your city is considering two options for tax policies, option A and option B. Option A is to keep the sales and property taxes at their current level. The sales tax is currently **[2.3/4.2]** and the property tax has a mill rate of **[22/15]**. Option B would **[increase/decrease]** the sales tax by 1.9% and **[decrease/increase]** the mill rate by 7 points.

Suppose that you were considering these options. Which would you choose?



Problem B –Original

Imagine that one nation is considering two presidential candidates, Brown and Green, who differ only in their policies, which they are sure to implement if elected. After studying the policies advocated by Brown and Green and the policies currently being pursued by four other nations, two leading economists made projections about the monthly standard of living under each of these policies and the standard of living in four neighboring nations. The forecasts made by each economist are summarized in the following table:

Suppose that you were considering these options. Which would you choose?

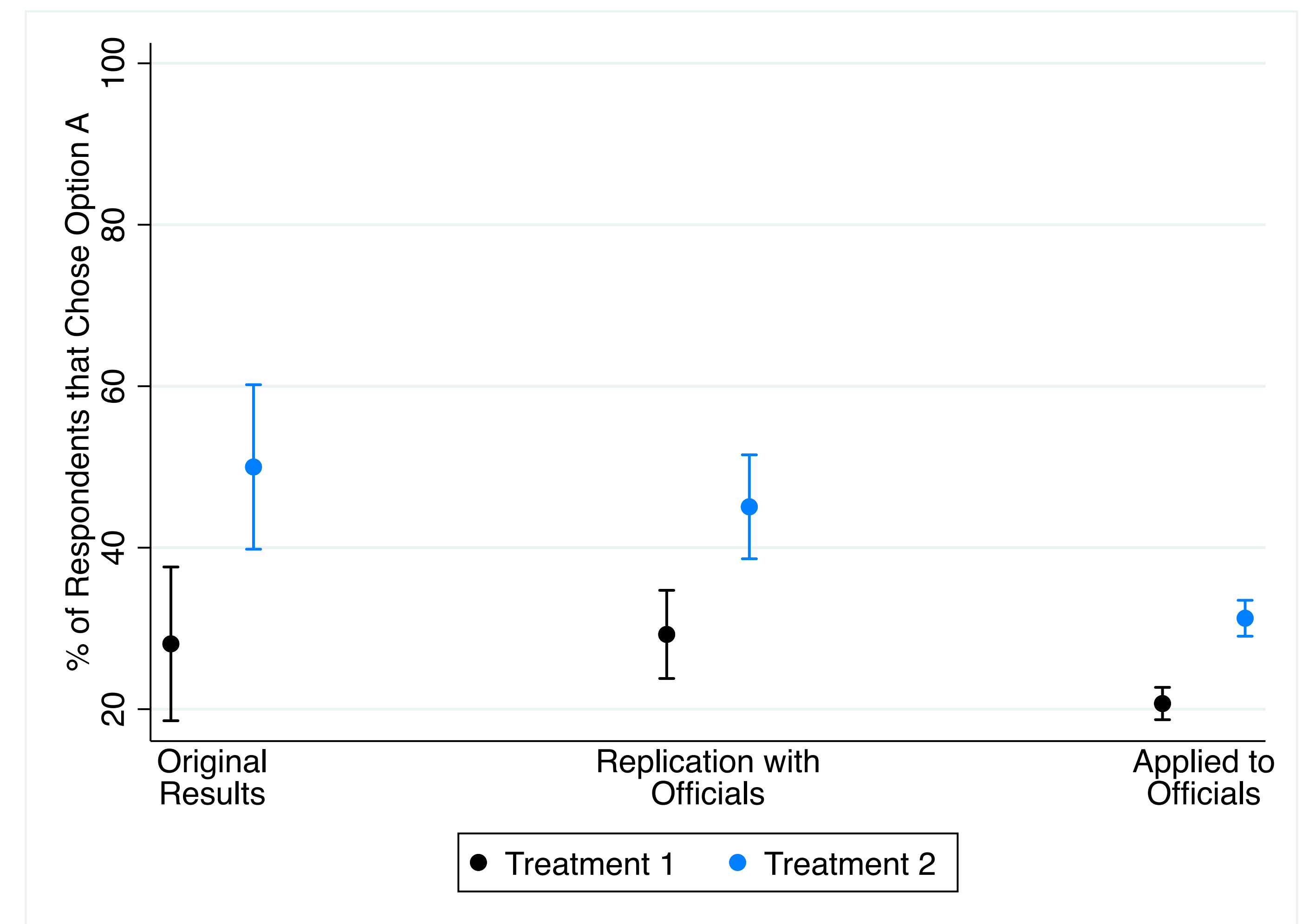
	Projected Monthly SLI in Dollars per Capita		
	Other Four Nations	Brown's Policy	Green's Policy
Economist 1	[\$4,300/\$6,300]	\$6,500	\$5,100
Economist 2	[\$4,500/\$6,500]	\$4,300	\$5,300

Problem B -Applied

Imagine that your city is considering two options for tax policies, option C and option D. Two leading economists in your state have made tax revenue projections for your city as well as four neighboring cities similar to your own. In making these projections for your city, the economists consider how both tax policy option C and option D affect your city's projected tax revenue. The per capita forecasts made by each economist are summarized in the following table:

Suppose that you were considering these options. Which would you choose?

"Uses the same table included above with 'Policy C, Policy D' replacing 'Brown's Policy, Green's Policy' "



Quattrone, George A., and Amos Tversky. "Contrasting Rational and Psychological Analyses of Political Choice." *American Political Science Review* 82, no. 3 (September 1988): 719–36. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1962487>.

<http://www.municipalsurvey.org/2014-results/>