

# **Thinking About Politics**

## An Experimental Inquiry Into the Cognitive Associations between Political and Apolitical Traits and Their Social Consequences in Italy

**Gaetano Scaduto**

Erasmus University Rotterdam/UA/Unimib

# Overview of the Dissertation

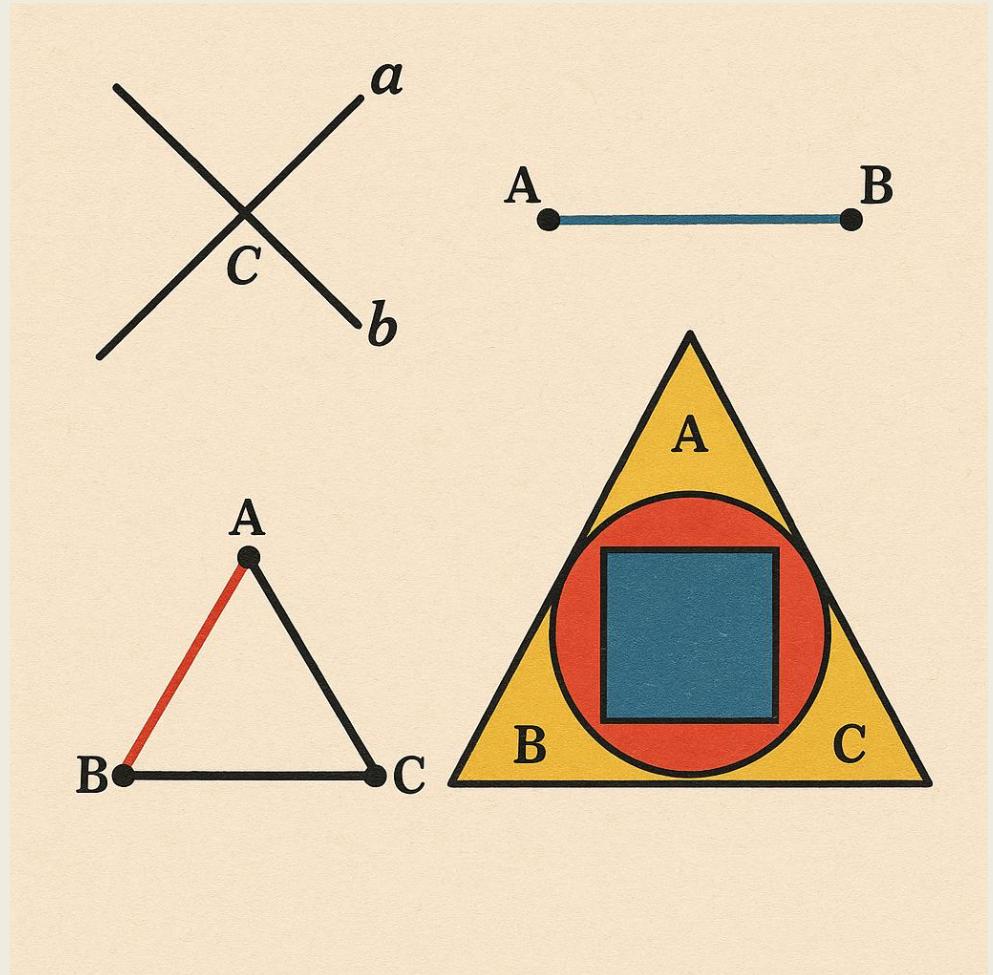
- ▶ **Chapter 1:** Introduction
  - ▶ **Chapter 2:** Theoretical Framework and Literature Review
  - ▶ **Chapter 3: A Taste of Politics:** Content, Predictors, and Possible Consequences of Political Inferences from Food Preferences
  - ▶ **Chapter 4: More Than Just Lifestyles?** Exploring the Relative Weights of Sociodemographic, Psychological, and Lifestyle Traits in Ideological Inferences
  - ▶ **Chapter 5: Political Inferences in the Wild:** Inferring Politicians' Ideology from Apolitical Cues in the Presence of Explicit Political Information
  - ▶ **Chapter 6: A Trojan Horse or an Optical Illusion?** An Investigation into the Social Consequences of PL on Political Conversations
  - ▶ **Chapter 7: Conclusions**
- 
- Conceptual work, (semi-)systematic literature review (52 studies)
- Survey vignette experiment, nationally representative sample (PollStar)
- Conjoint experiment, nationally representative sample (VIPOP)
- Visual conjoint experiment, nationally representative sample (VIPOP)
- Parallel design experiment, multi-country representative sample (VIPOP)

# Towards a definition of Politicultural Linking



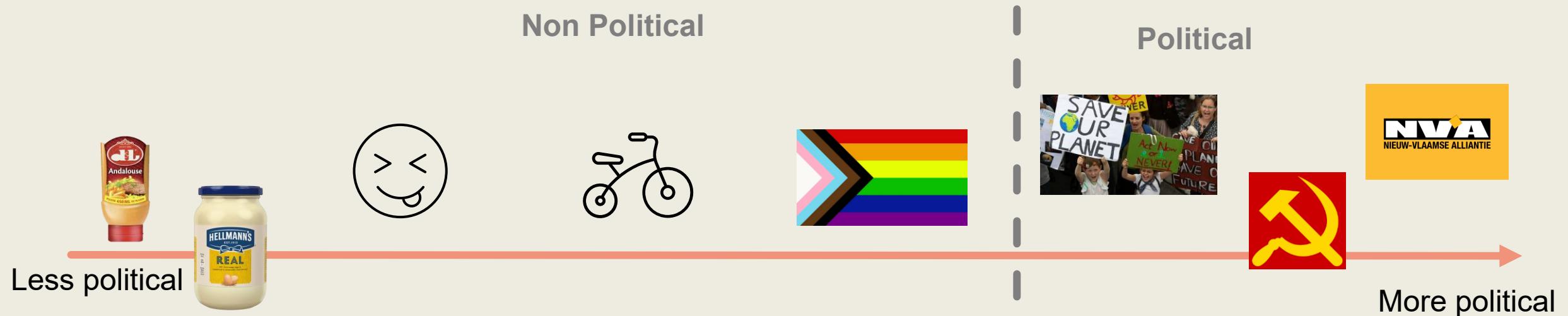
# The Axiomatic Nature of Politicalness

- ▶ What does it mean for something to be *political*?
  - ▶ No agreement in philosophy or the social sciences
  - ▶ Indeed, “[D]eciding what is and what is not political is a fraught, perhaps intractably opaque, matter” (Bernstein, 2018, p. 2).
- ▶ Does that mean we cannot say anything about what is and is not political?
  - ▶ We cannot prove that two parallel lines never intersect. Yet, we built Euclidean geometry over the axiomatic statement that they would.
  - ▶ I adopt an axiomatic approach to the definition of “political”



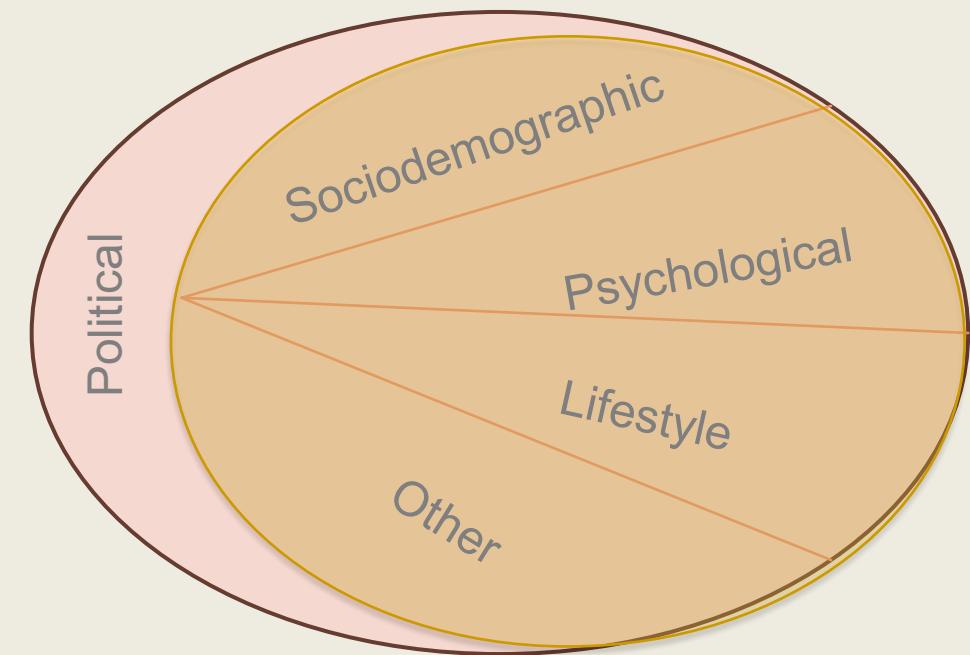
# The operational definition of political and apolitical

- ▶ People have an intuitive understanding that certain **traits** are *more political* than others (Scaduto, 2025)
- ▶ This can imply either
  - ▶ A **continuous definition**: «something is political to a certain degree»
    - ▶ Implies a **metric**: a way to measure *how much something is «more political» than something else*
  - ▶ A **discrete definition**: «something is either political or it is not».
    - ▶ Implies a **border**: a point from where things stop being political and start being apolitical
    - ▶ I propose a **discrete definition**



# Drawing the line of «Political Traits»

- ▶ Political traits:
    - ▶ “[T]raits unambiguously signaling membership to a political group”.
  - ▶ Political groups:
    - ▶ “Groups characterized by a shared (positive or negative) ideology, partisanship, position on political issues, vote choice, or support for political candidates.”
      - ▶ E.g., “conservative”, “Democrat”, “pro-choice”, “Trump supporter”, or “antifascist”, “antipetista”, “Never Trumper” are, according to this definition, political traits
  - ▶ Apolitical Traits:
    - ▶ “*Traits that are not political*”
- The literature shows a subcategorization in:
- ▶ *Sociodemographic*
  - ▶ *Psychological*
  - ▶ *Lifestyle*
  - ▶ *Others* (e.g., *body shapes, accents, athletic skills, IQ*)



# Relationships between Political and Apolitical

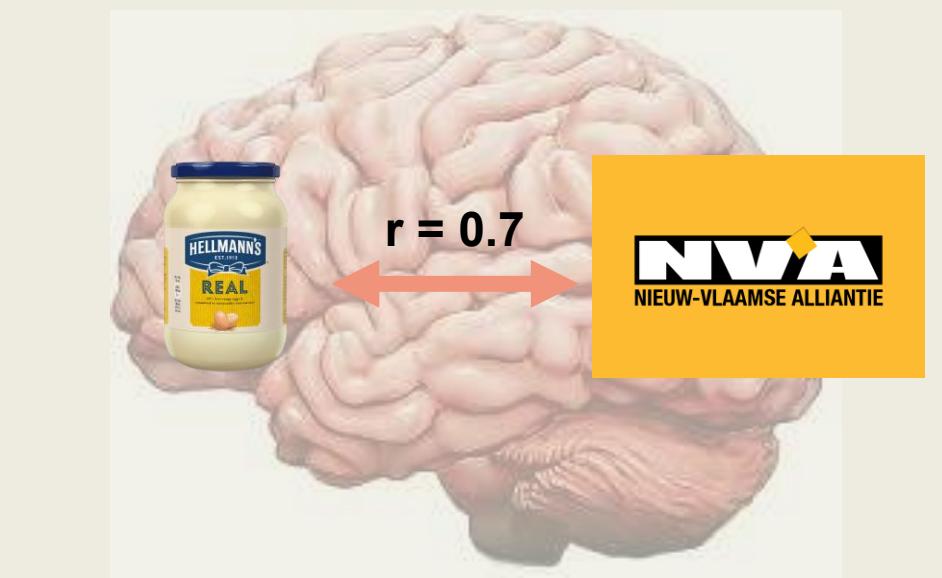
## ► The alignment (between p. and ap.):

*“a situation in which, in a given context, political and apolitical preferences show significant co-occurrence, hence ending up being correlated”*



## ► The association (between p. and ap.):

*“the set of one’s perceived alignments”*



# Alternative ways for associations to arise

- ▶ Associations can arise from actual alignments, but can also arise from:

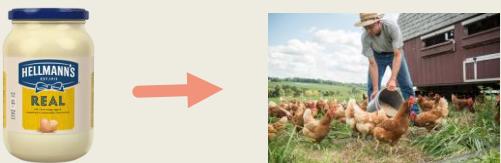
1. Perceived alignments

- ▶ E.g., representativeness heuristic:
  - ▶ I observe that among mayonnaise eaters, there are more right-wingers than left-wingers

2. Media representations (e.g., infotainment; ads)

3. Elite cues

4. Multiple-step associations



# Focus: the role of the media

- ▶ Famous Club for Growth PAC TV Ad About Howard Dean

"France of the rednecks": accused of "social contempt" after the use of this expression,

The latter had described [Laurent Wauquiez](#), then president of the Republicans party, as "the candidate of guys who smoke cigarettes and drive diesel cars", before the latter denounced in return the "contempt" of the executive.

Ambrosi (FdI): "Noi amiamo il buon cibo e vino, la sinistra gli insetti e le droghe. Ecco perché sono una tipa di destra"

di Valeria Forgnone

Il tweet della deputata di Fratelli d'Italia. Utenti scatenati tra cui Elio Vito, ex parlamentare di Forza Italia: "E soprattutto senza stereotipi e luoghi comuni". E altri: "Ti sei dimenticata che mangiano i bambini"



På lördag avslutar Sverigedemokraterna sin valturné på Nytorget i Stockholm. Hur hamnade partiet där, mitt bland Söders latteliberaler? Ett svar är Linus Bylund, Åkessons stabschef och partiets allt mäktigare man från Södermalm.



Karin Eriksson  
Text



# Little game on media stereotypes

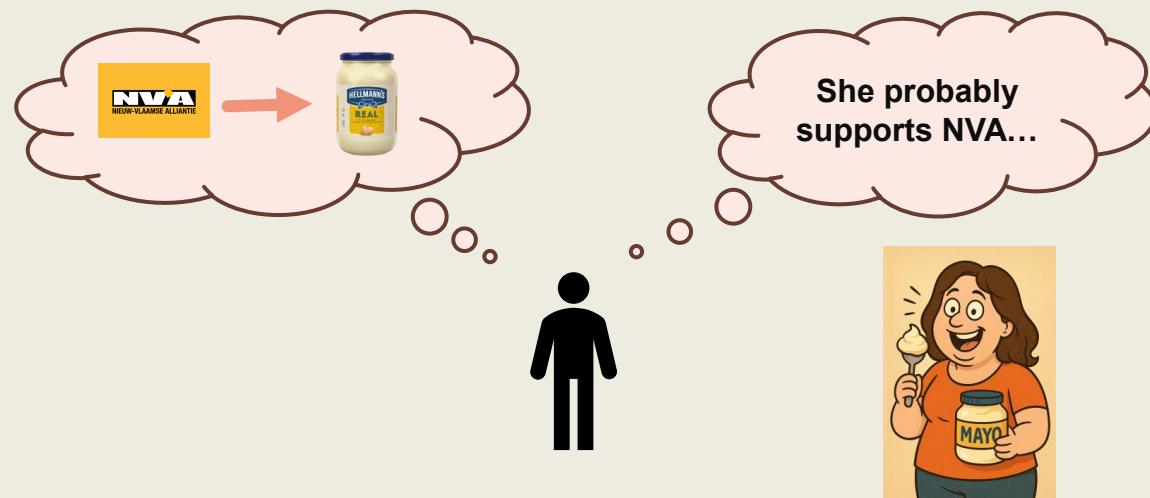


# Inferential strategies

- ▶ We use associations to produce social *inferences*
  - ▶ →Attributions of a certain trait to subjects whose certain characteristics are known
- ▶ Inferences can be produced through two main **inferential strategies**

## I use my knowledge (beliefs) about the world

- ▶ **Stereotyping:** the subject attributes to the target beliefs about the characteristics, attributes, and behaviors of members of certain groups (Hilton & Von Hippel, 1996)



## I use my knowledge (beliefs) about myself

- ▶ **Projection:** the subject attributes to the target their own mental states
- ▶ **Counter-projection:** the subject attributes to the target the opposite of their own mental states

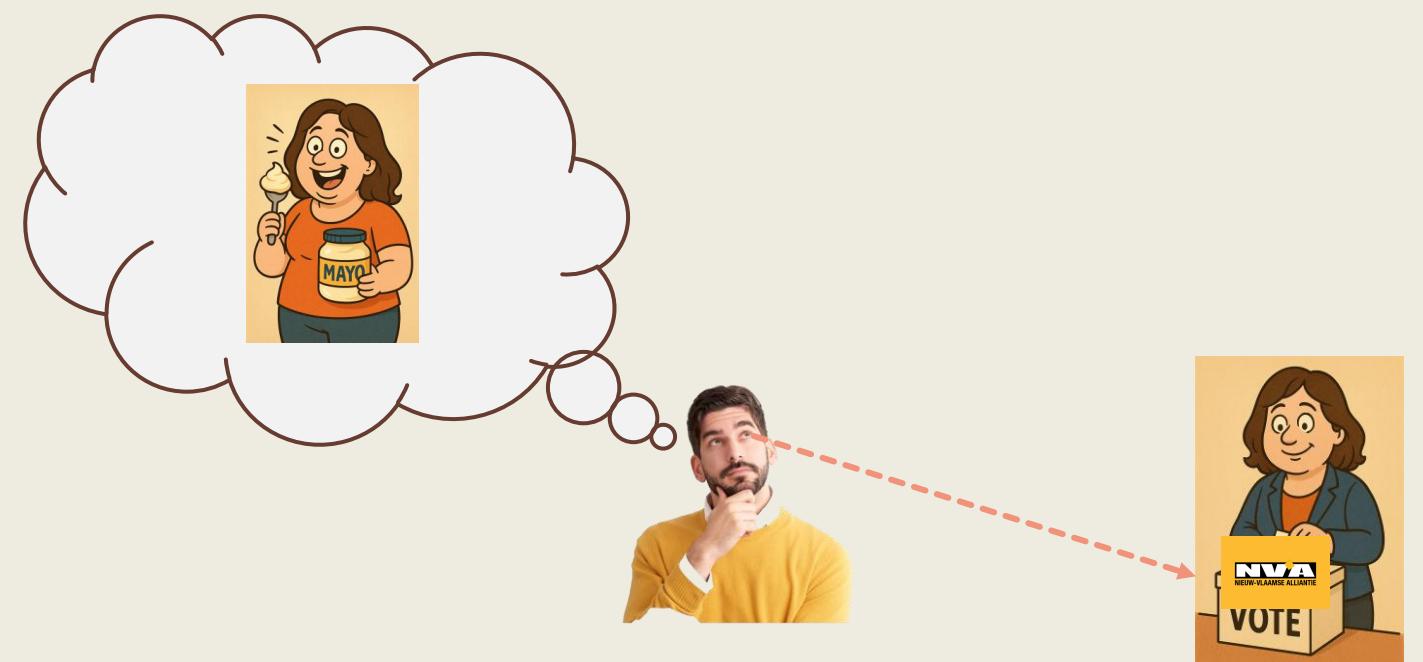


# Inferential directions

- ▶ **Political inferences from apolitical cues ( $A \rightarrow P$ )**: The act of inferring, from apolitical traits, one's political traits.



- ▶ **Apolitical inferences from political cues ( $P \rightarrow A$ )**: The act of inferring, from political traits, one's apolitical traits.



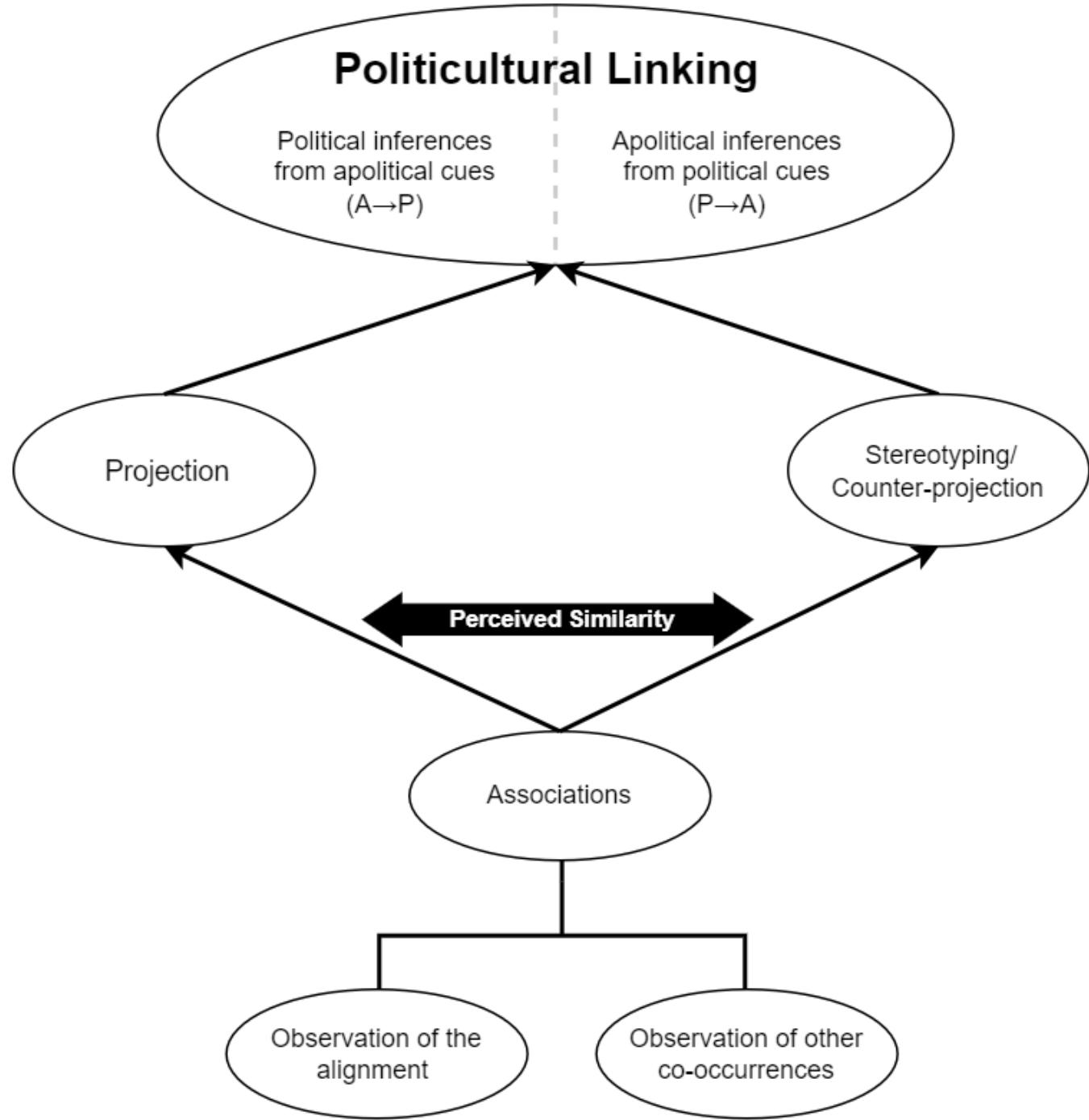
# Politicultural Linking

## ► Politicultural Linking (PL):

*The act of producing inferences about others' political or apolitical characteristics based on the associations between these*

- Innovations of this concept:
  - Captures **both inferential directions** simultaneously ( $A \rightarrow P + P \rightarrow A$ )
  - Captures **both inferential strategies** simultaneously (Stereotyping + Projection)
  - Encompasses a **broad set of political traits**, not focusing only on certain political groups (e.g., partisan stereotypes)
  - Explicitly account for **lifestyle traits**, previously neglected
  - Explicitly **excludes inferences between political traits** (e.g., inferring one's issue preferences from partisanship)

# The Full Theoretical Framework



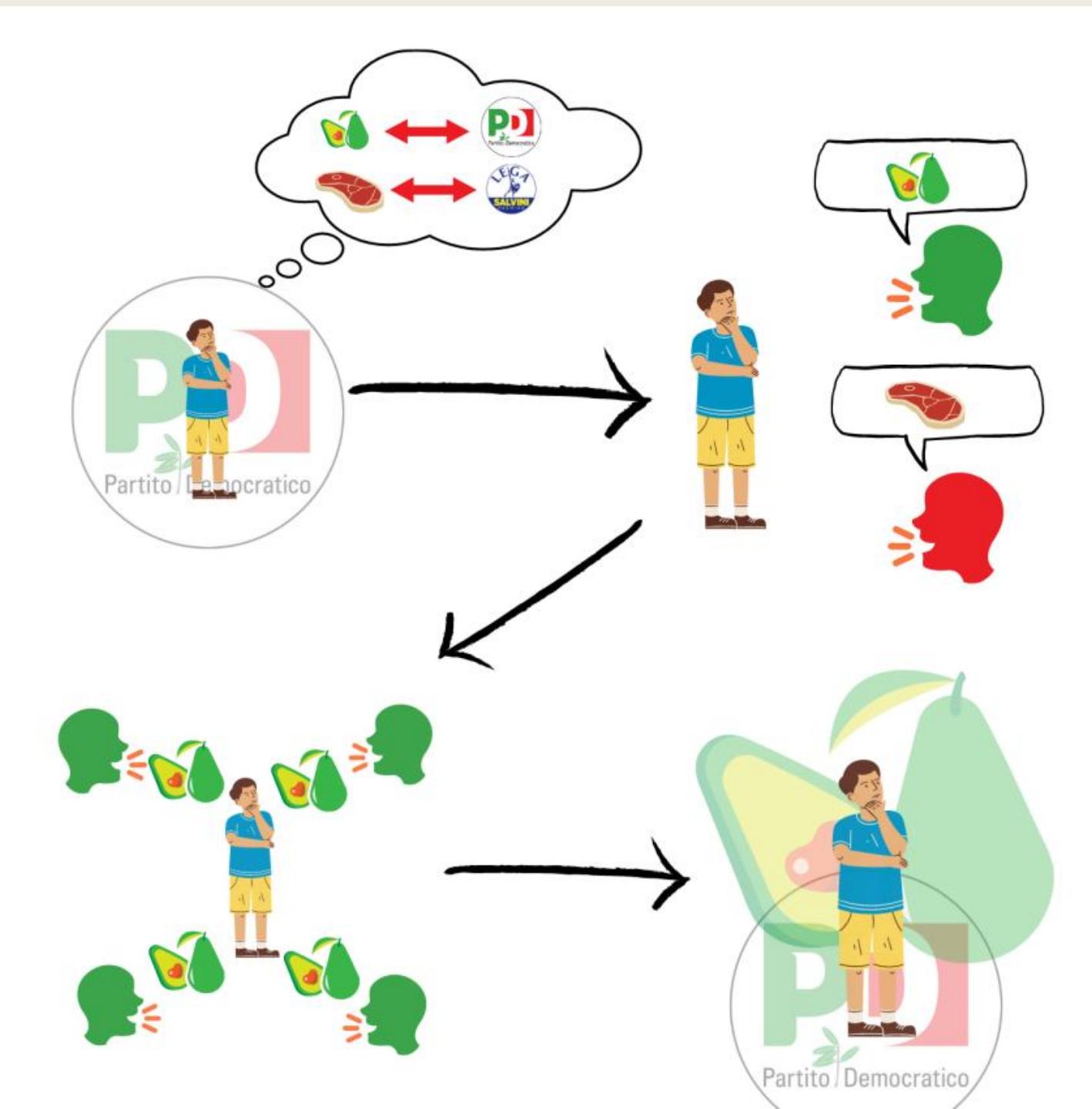


# *A Taste of Politics:* Content, Predictors, and Possible Consequences of Political Inferences from Food Preferences

# Questions answered in this chapter

- ▶ **Does PL exist, and can it be observed?**
  - ▶ Are food preferences associated with certain ideological and partisan preferences in Italy?
- ▶ **When is PL more likely to be observed? (Subject characteristics)**
  - ▶ Ideological self-placement,
  - ▶ Affective polarization,
  - ▶ News media exposure,
  - ▶ The level of cultural consumption
- ▶ **Can PL hinder cross-group contacts?**
  - ▶ Are people less prone to interact and discuss politics with individuals they did PL on?

**Why is this important?**



# Data and Methods

- ▶ **Data:** The PollStar Survey
  - ▶ Fielded in April 2023 to N=1096 people
  - ▶ Nationally representative sample
- ▶ **Methods:** Survey Vignette Experiment
  - ▶ Participants read a **vignette**:
    - ▶ They sit in a restaurant and see someone ordering a certain (randomly-assigned) menu.
  - ▶ After, participants
    - ▶ Guess the person's **ideology** (a) and **partisanship** (b)
    - ▶ Say whether they would **spend time** with them (c) and **discuss politics** (d)
  - ▶ They also **explain the reasons** for their guesses (open answers)

Imagine you are having lunch at a restaurant offering five menus at a fixed price of 20 euros. Each menu includes a first course, a second course, and a side dish. The five menus are:

**Basic menu:** pasta with tomato sauce, baked flounder, and mixed salad.

**Vegan menu:** farro and quinoa salad, grilled tofu, and sautéed kale.

**Meat menu:** charcuterie board, grilled sausage, and baked potatoes with crispy bacon.

**Traditional menu:** trenette pasta with Ligurian pesto, eggplant parmigiana, and sautéed chicory with fava beans.

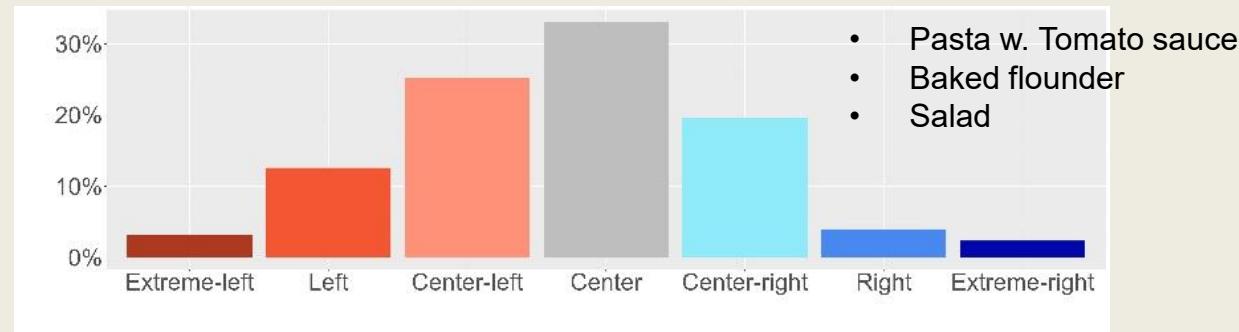
**Ethnic menu:** noodles in broth, moussaka, and frijoles with guacamole.

As you think about which one to choose, you hear the person sitting at the table next to yours choosing the:

[Randomly repeats one of the menus reported above]

# Results — The Menu Effects

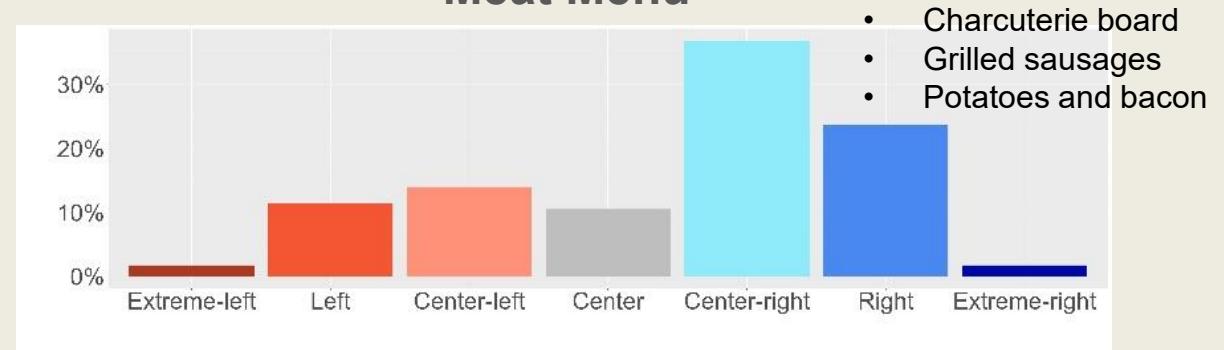
## Basic Menu



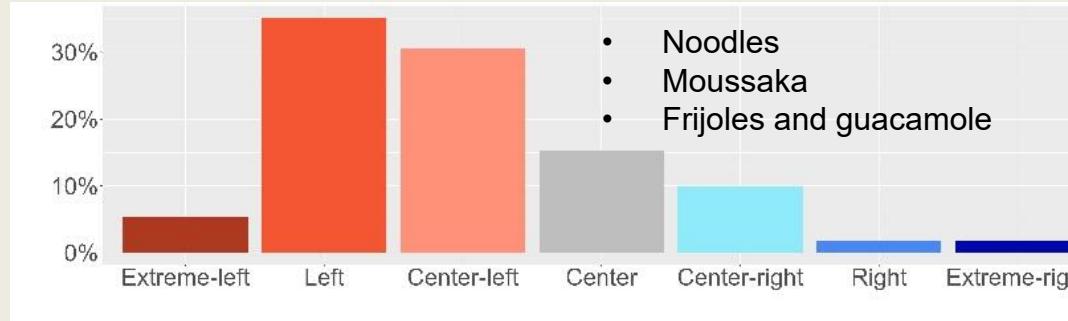
## Vegan Menu



## Meat Menu



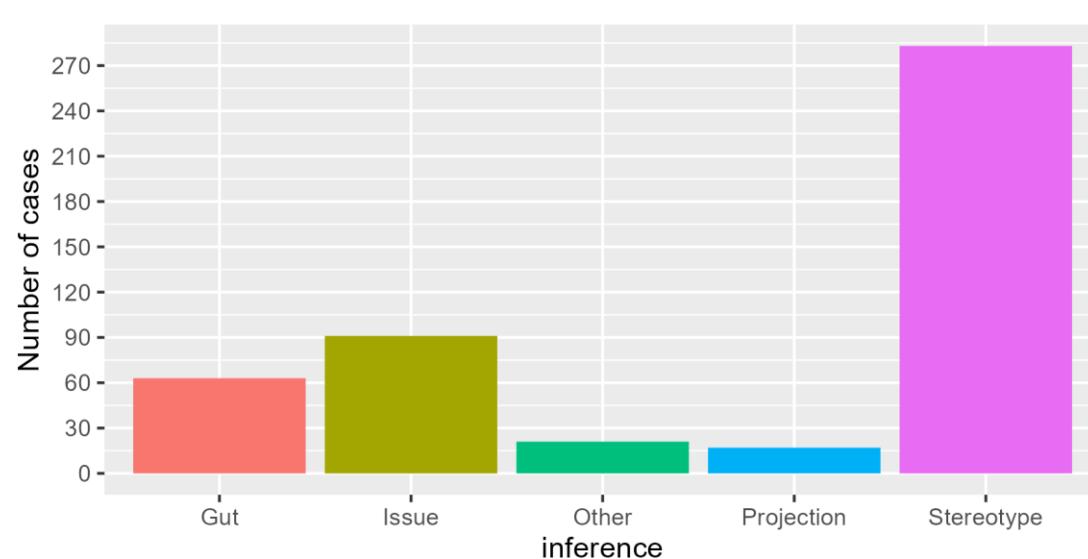
## Ethnic Menu



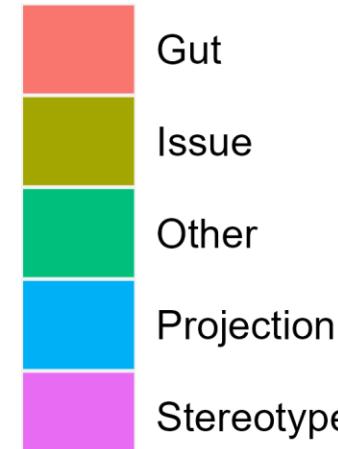
## Traditional Menu



# Results: why such a guess?



Source of Inference

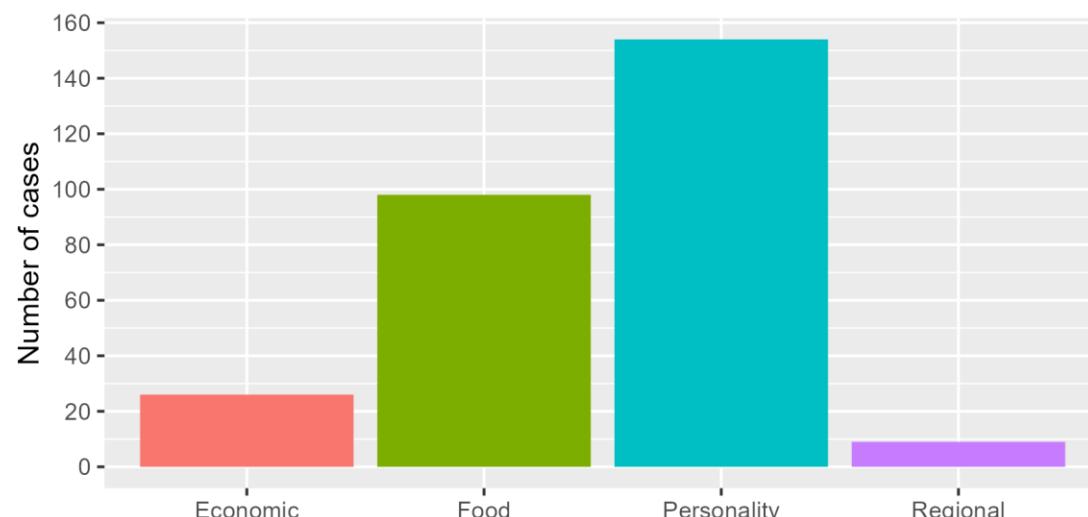


“It is an intuitive thing, it has no rational basis”

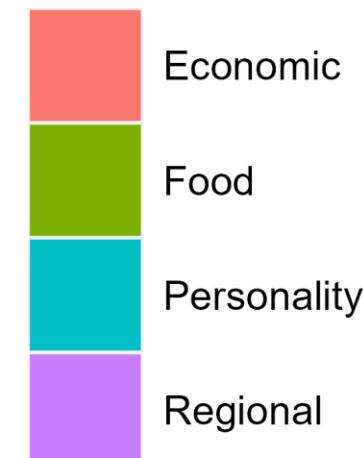
“Vegan people usually care a lot about the environment”

“So many things should be said about this...”

“Is the same menu I would have chosen”



Type of Stereotype



“Because they are eating things that everyone can afford”

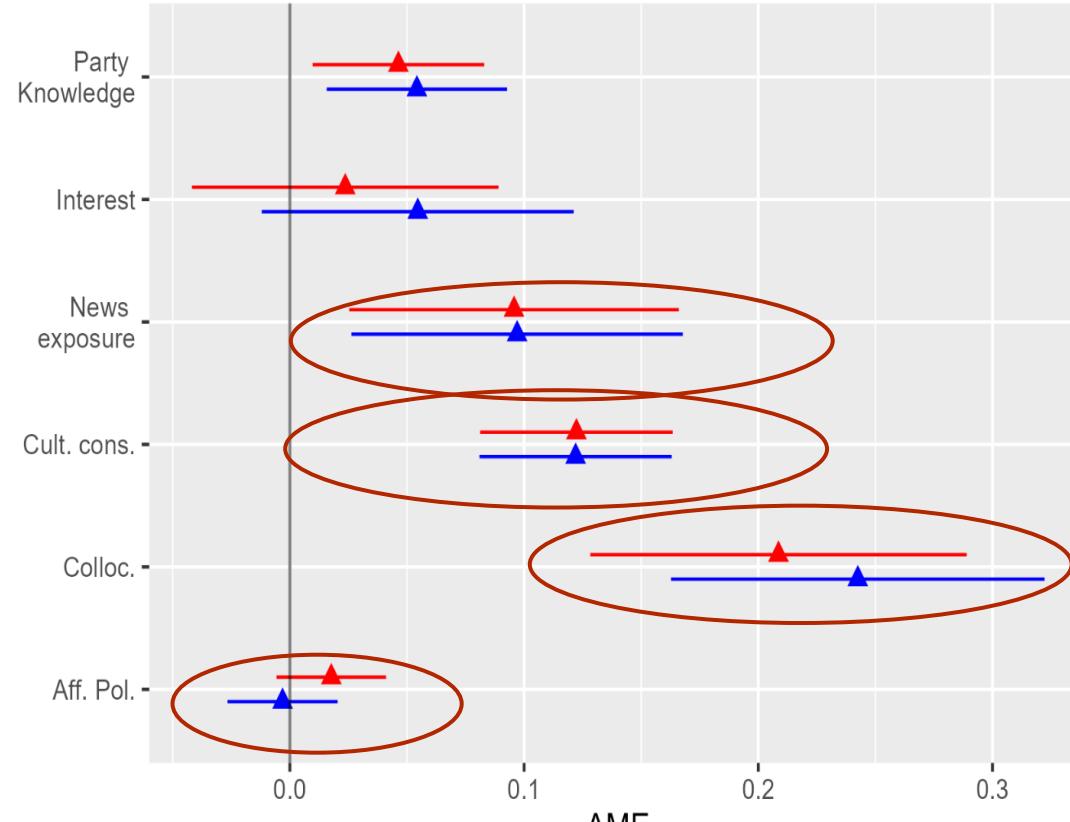
“The chosen menu abundant in calories makes me imagine they lean to the right”

“Person with little personality, who follows the herd”

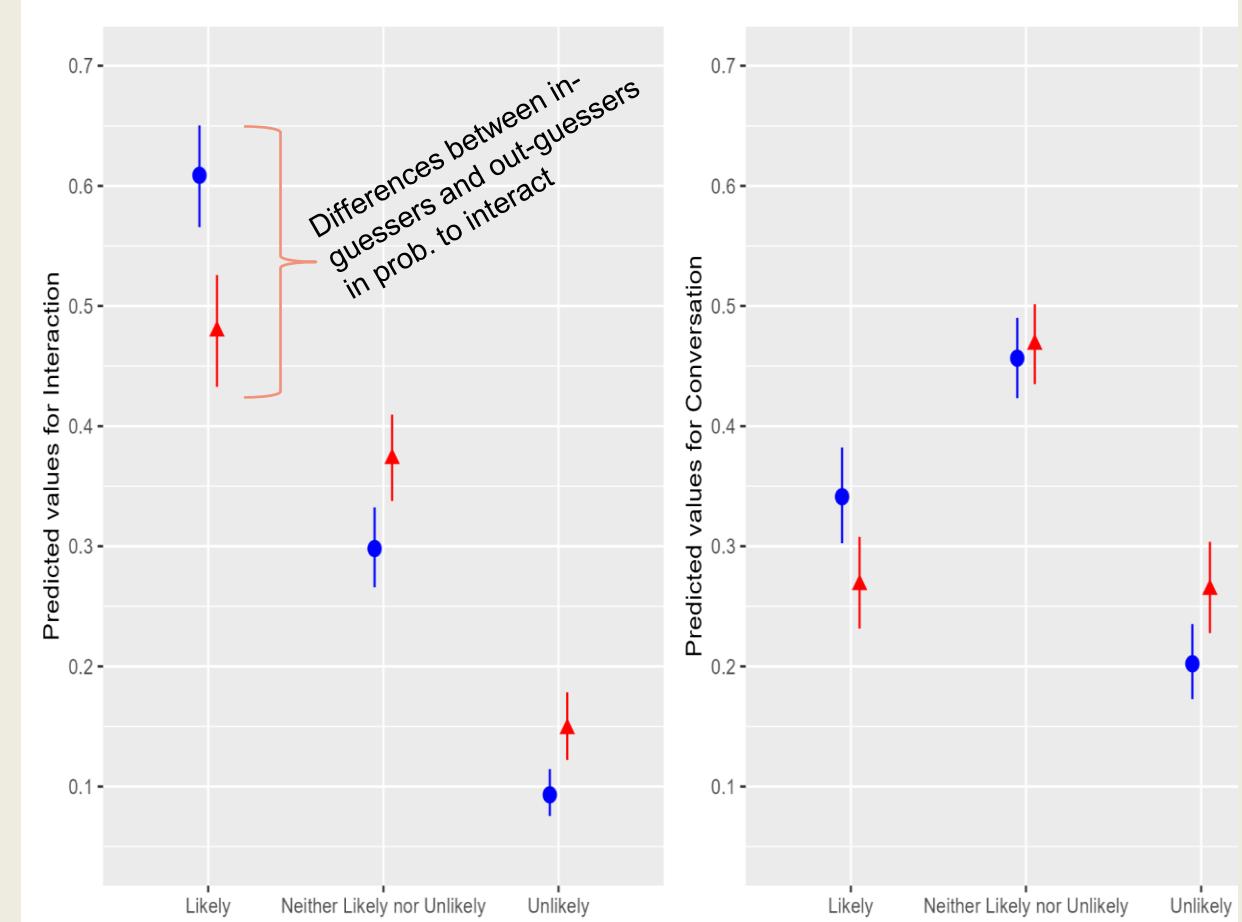
“Typical menu of northern Italy”

# Results

## The predictors of PL



## The consequences of PL



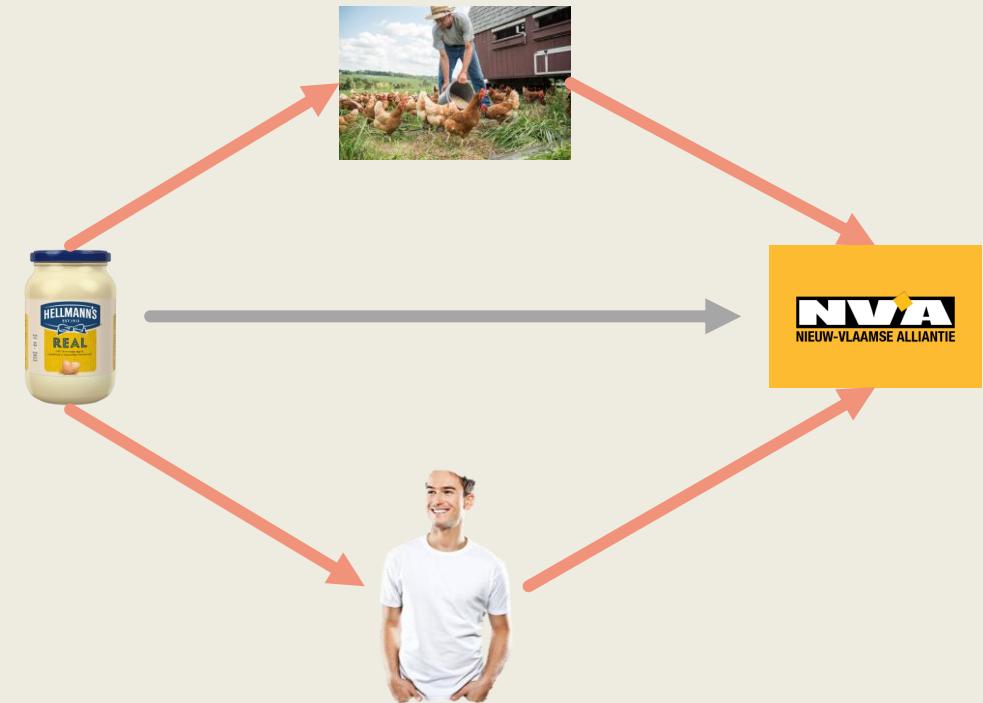
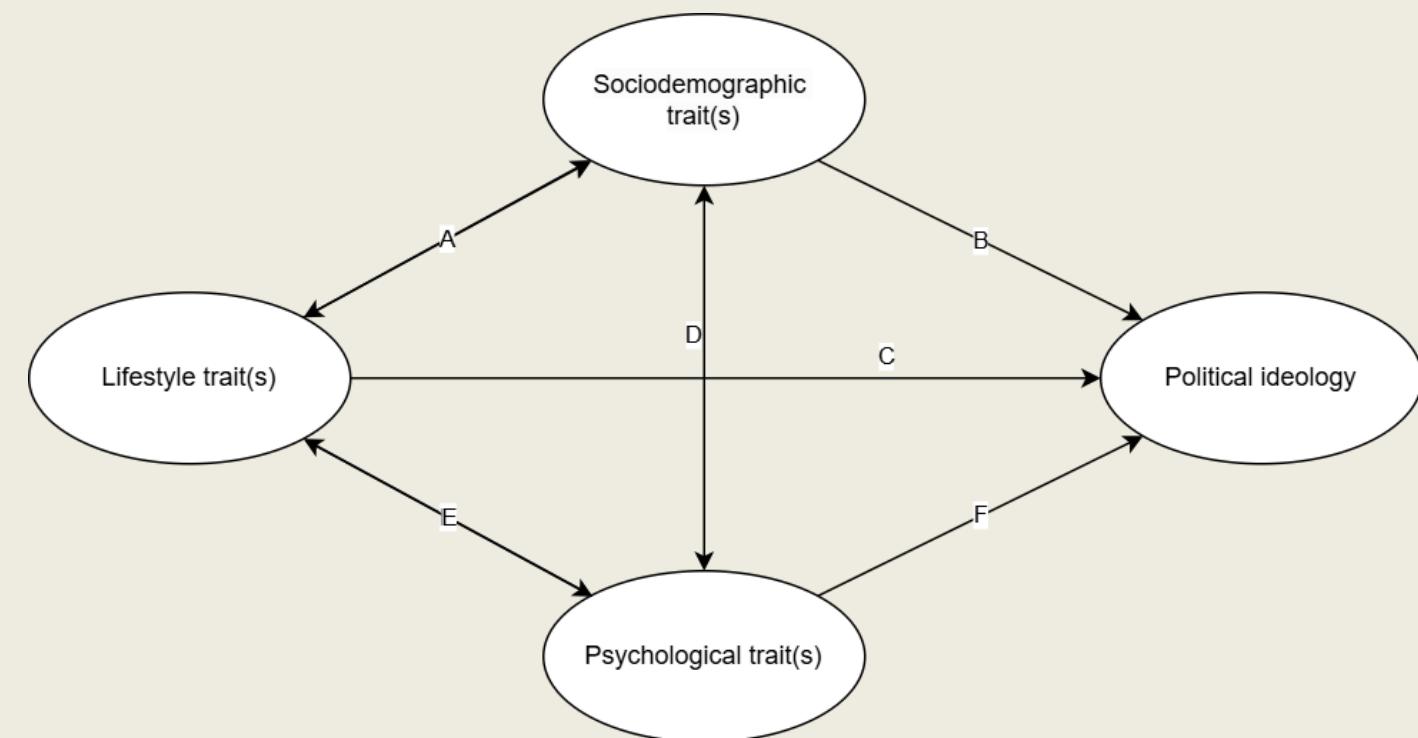


# More Than Just Lifestyles? Exploring the Relative Weights of Sociodemographic, Psychological, and Lifestyle Traits in Ideological Inferences

# Questions answered in this chapter

## ► When is PL more likely to be observed? (characteristics of the target)

- Are lifestyle traits **directly** associated with political ideology, or are they associated with other (sociodemographic or psychological) apolitical traits that are in turn associated with political ideology?
- Which apolitical traits **are more likely** to be associated with the ideological leanings of another person?



# Data and methods

## ► Data: The VIPOP Survey

- Nov. 2024 , representative sample of N=1529 Italians
- Simultaneously fielded in France, Sweden, and the Czech Republic

## ► Methods: The *Forced-choice textual conjoint experiment*

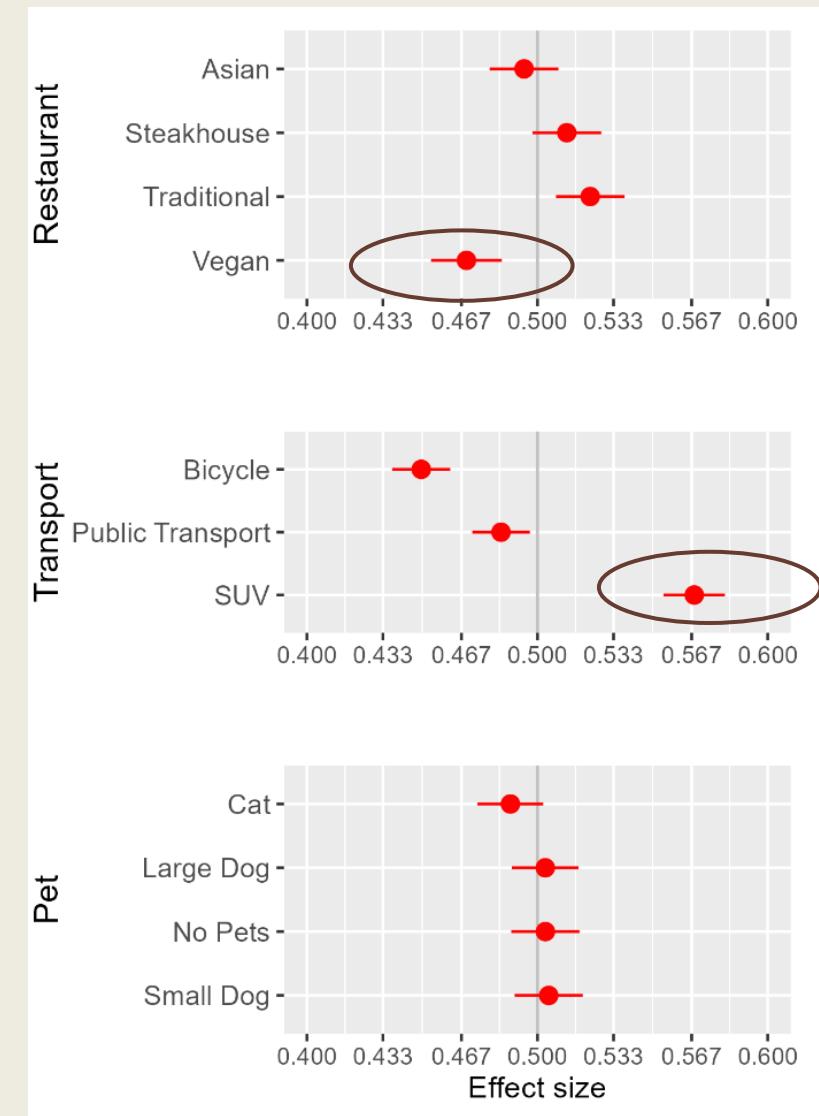
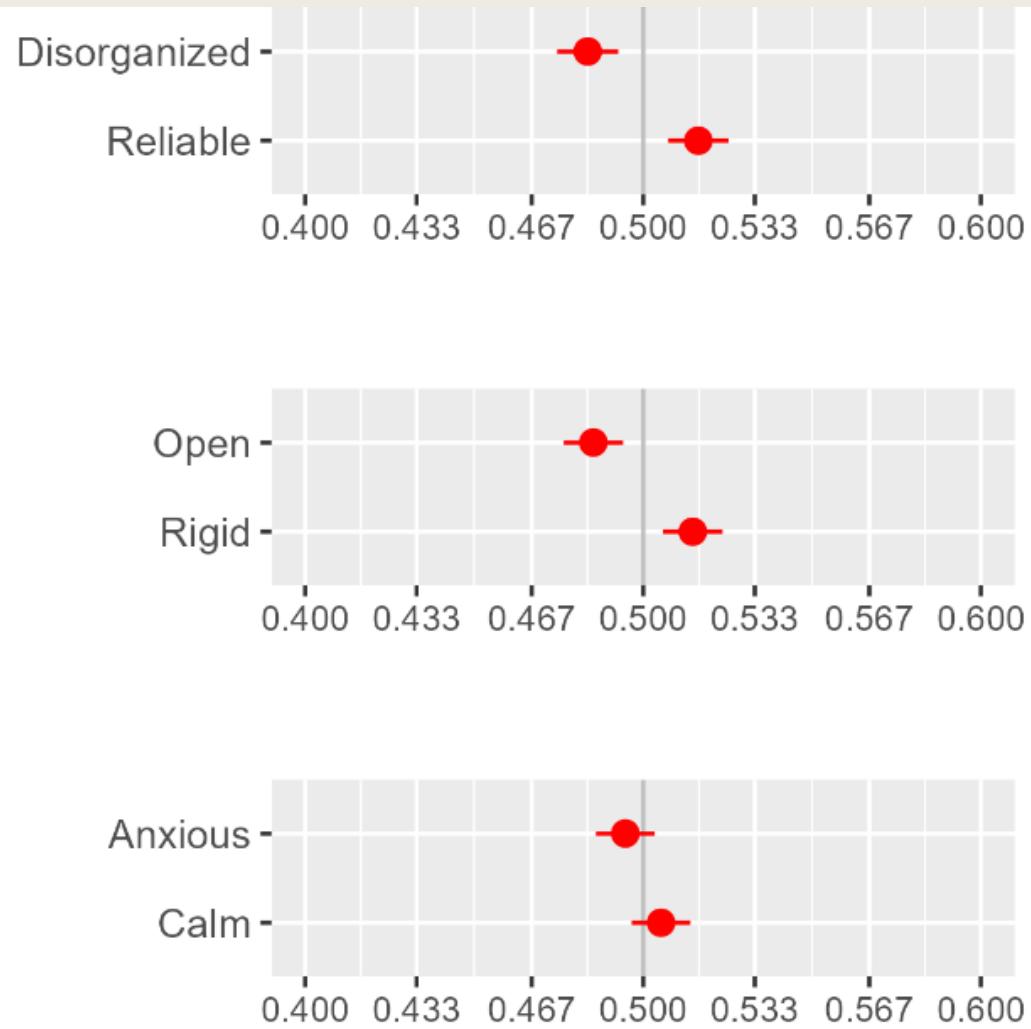
- Participants choose «who is more right-wing» between pairs of profiles described through a series of randomly assigned apolitical attributes
- We isolate the effects of each attribute on these perceptions
  - We can say whether lifestyles affect ideological perceptions *independently*

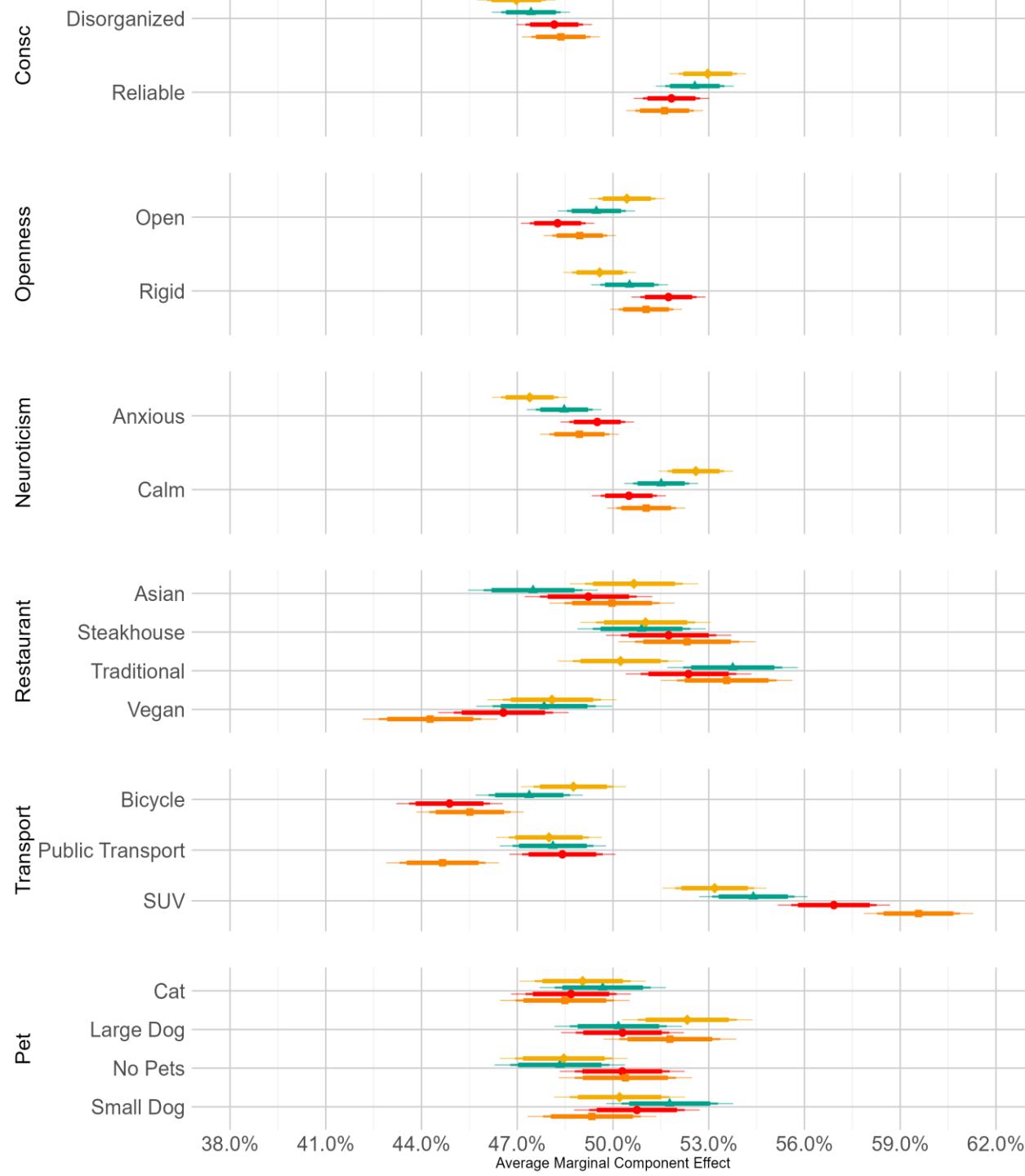
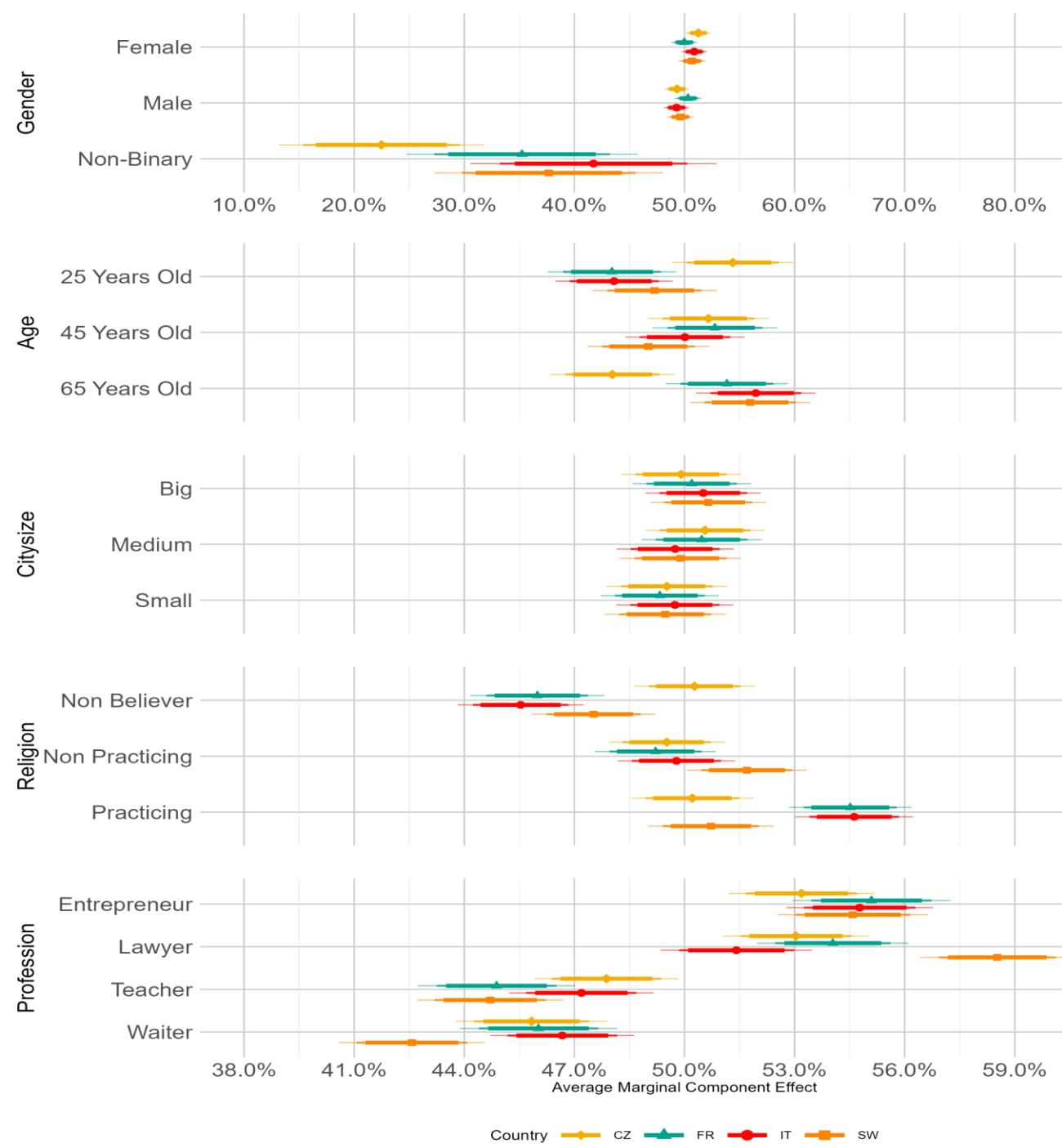
|                                    | Profile A  | Profile B                               |
|------------------------------------|--|---|
| <b>Gender</b>                      | Female   | Female                                  |
| <b>Age</b>                         | 45   | 25                                      |
| <b>Religion</b>                    | Non-religious  | Religious, practicing                   |
| <b>Lives in...</b>                 | A big city   | A big city                              |
| <b>Profession</b>                  | Teacher  | Waitress                                |
| <b>Conscientiousness</b>           | Reliable and self-disciplined person                 | Reliable and self-disciplined person;   |
| <b>Openness to new experiences</b> | Person open to new experiences, with many interests; | Person of habit, with a rigid routine   |
| <b>Emotional stability</b>         | Calm, emotionally stable person                      | Anxious person who gets agitated easily |
| <b>Favorite restaurant</b>         | Asian restaurant                                     | Steakhouse                              |
| <b>Main mean of transportation</b> | Bycicle  | Public Transport                        |
| <b>Pet</b>                         | Cat  | Has no pets                             |

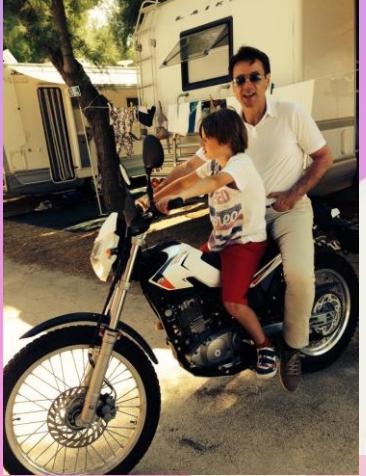
# Results— Sociodemographics



# Results— Psychological and Lifestyle Traits







# Political Inferences in the Wild: Inferring Politicians' Ideology from Apolitical Cues when Explicit Political Information is Present





## Questions answered in this chapter

- ▶ When is PL more likely to be observed? (context)
  - ▶ Are political inferences from apolitical cues **still relevant** for inferring **politicians'** ideology when explicit political information, such as issue positions, is available?
  - ▶ Can we still talk about PL when not using it as a strategy to cope with missing information?



# Data and Methods

- ▶ **Data:** The VIPOP Survey
- ▶ **Methods:** The Visual Conjoint Experiment

- ▶ Participants observe two fictional politicians' profiles, randomly generated alternating between different political and apolitical characteristics
- ▶ Subsequently, they state who they consider **more right-wing**



A diagram illustrating the Visual Conjoint Experiment (VIPOP) method. At the top, a legend shows a grid of six categories: [PROFILE PICTURE], [NAME], [JOB], [CANDIDACY], followed by three icons: follow, +, and a person icon. Below this, a 2x3 grid of profile cards represents different combinations of characteristics:

| [PICTURE: POSITIONAL ISSUE]  | [PICTURE: FOOD]   | [PICTURE: TIME] |
|--|---|-----------------|
| [PICTURE: GROUP]   | [PICTURE: VALENCE ISSUE]  | [PICTURE: PET]  |
| 111 post   | 780 follower  | 233 follow      |
| Aissatou Diouf<br>Insegnante<br>Candidata alla Camera dei Deputati | Luigi Ferrari<br>Politico<br>Candidato alla Camera dei Deputati |                 |

Red arrows point from the bottom row of the grid down to the two profile cards. The left card is for Aissatou Diouf, and the right card is for Luigi Ferrari. Each card includes a follow button, a + icon, and a person icon.

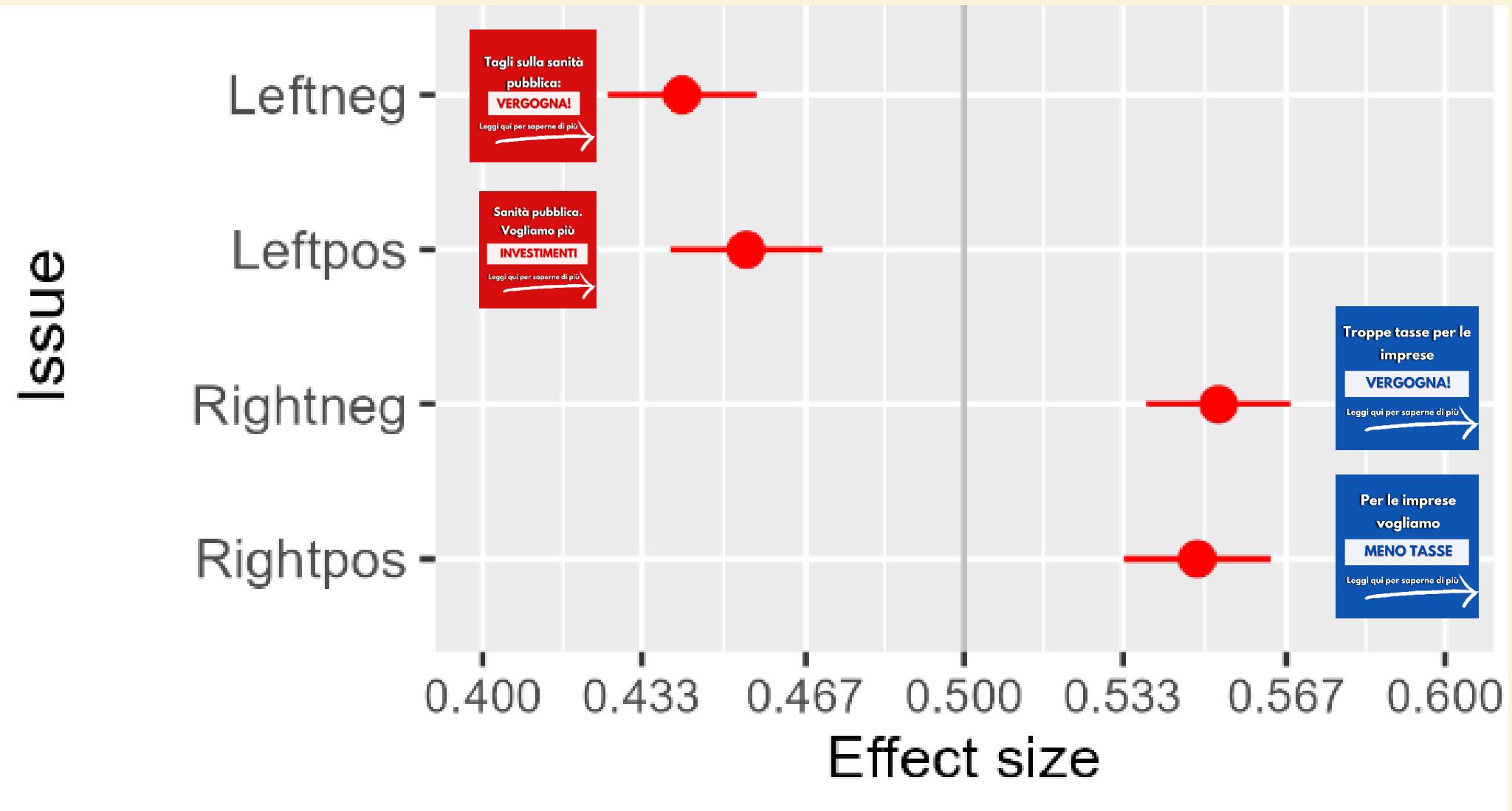
The Aissatou Diouf card displays the following information:

- Follow button
- + icon
- Person icon
- Profile picture of Aissatou Diouf
- Name: Aissatou Diouf
- Post count: 111
- Follower count: 780
- Follow count: 233
- Text: Insegnante, Candidata alla Camera dei Deputati
- Call-to-action: Tagli sulla sanità pubblica, VERGOGNA! Leggi qui per saperne di più
- Images: A plate of food, a child in a spacesuit, a group of people, hands stacked, a dog, and a yellow flower.
- Text: INSIEME, CON ONESTÀ!

The Luigi Ferrari card displays the following information:

- Follow button
- + icon
- Person icon
- Profile picture of Luigi Ferrari
- Name: Luigi Ferrari
- Post count: 111
- Follower count: 780
- Follow count: 233
- Text: Politico, Candidato alla Camera dei Deputati
- Call-to-action: Tagli sulla sanità pubblica, VERGOGNA! Leggi qui per saperne di più
- Images: A large burger, a child running, a group of people, a hand holding money, and a dog.
- Text: CON NOI, PER UN FUTURO MIGLIORE, BASTA CORRUZIONE!

# Results—The Political Beats the Apolitical



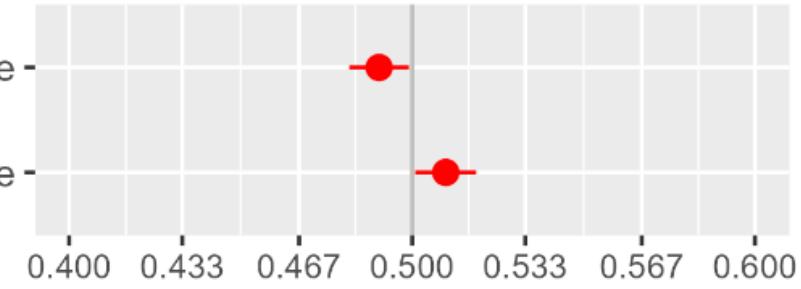
# Results—The Political Beats the Apolitical



Gender

Female

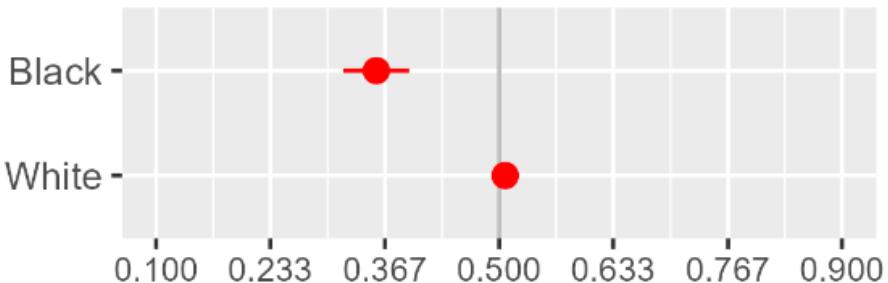
Male



Ethnicity

Black

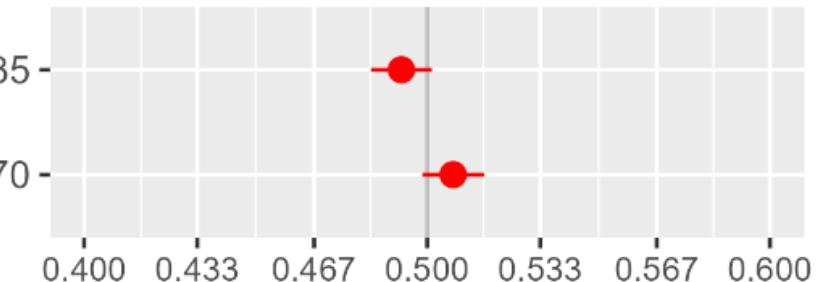
White



Age

35

70



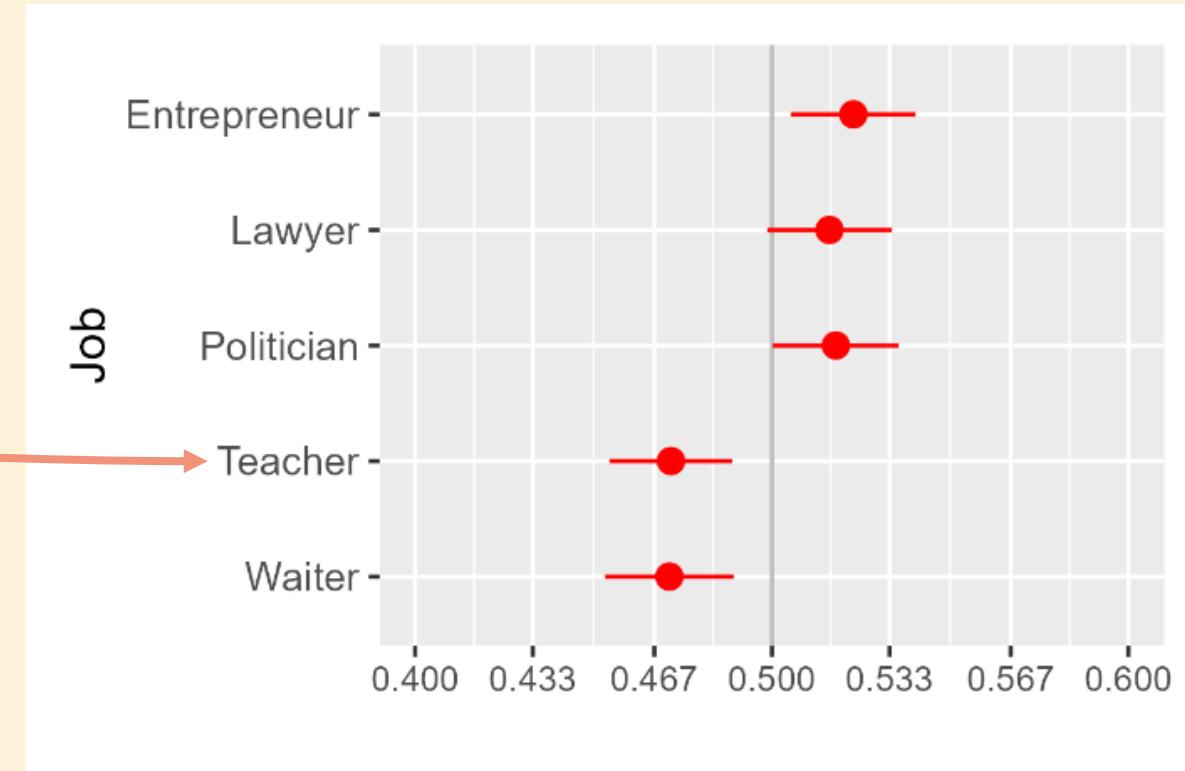
# Results—The Political Beats the Apolitical

111 post    780 follower    233 follow

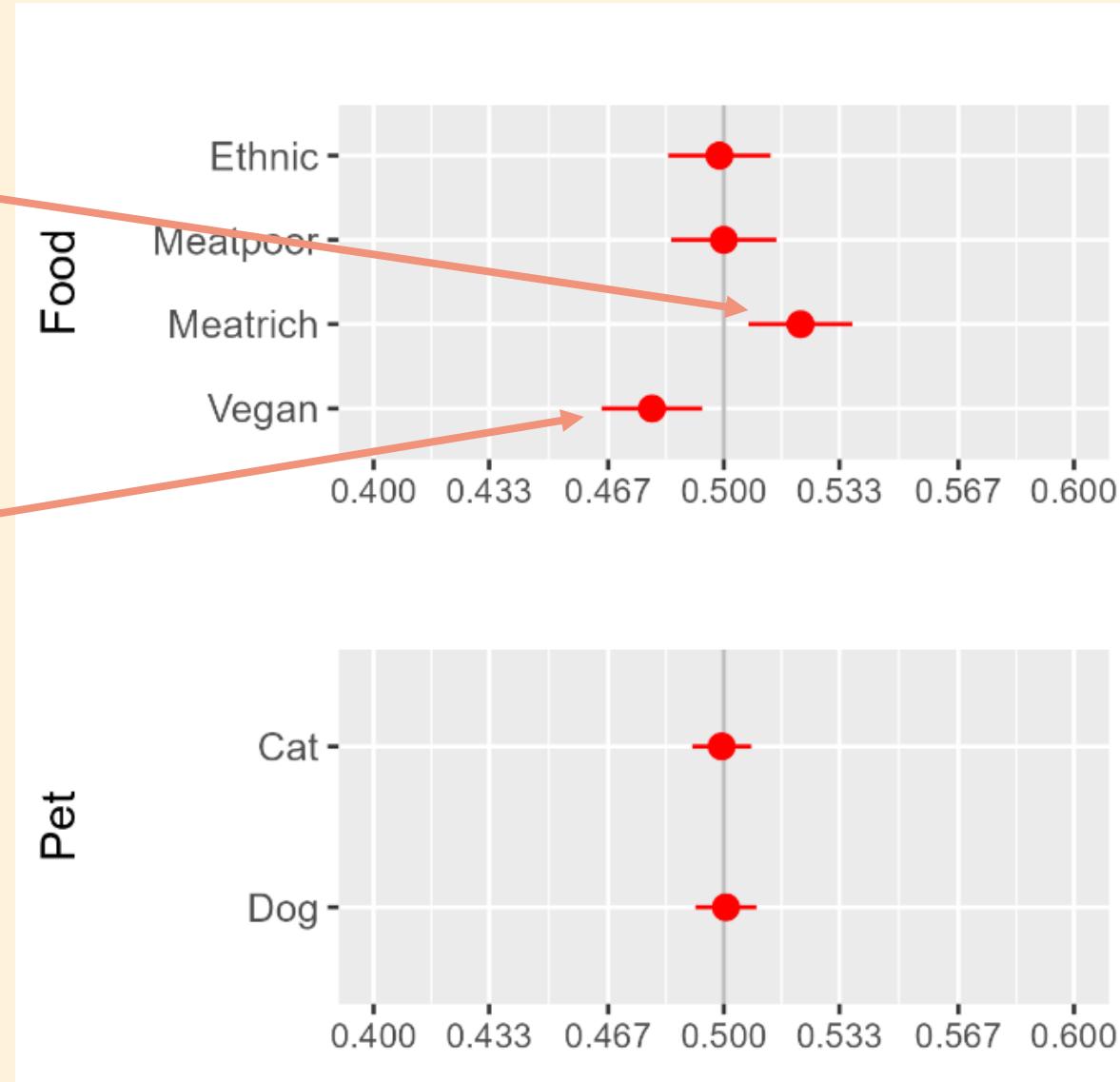
Aissatou Diouf

Insegnante  
Candidata alla Camera dei Deputati

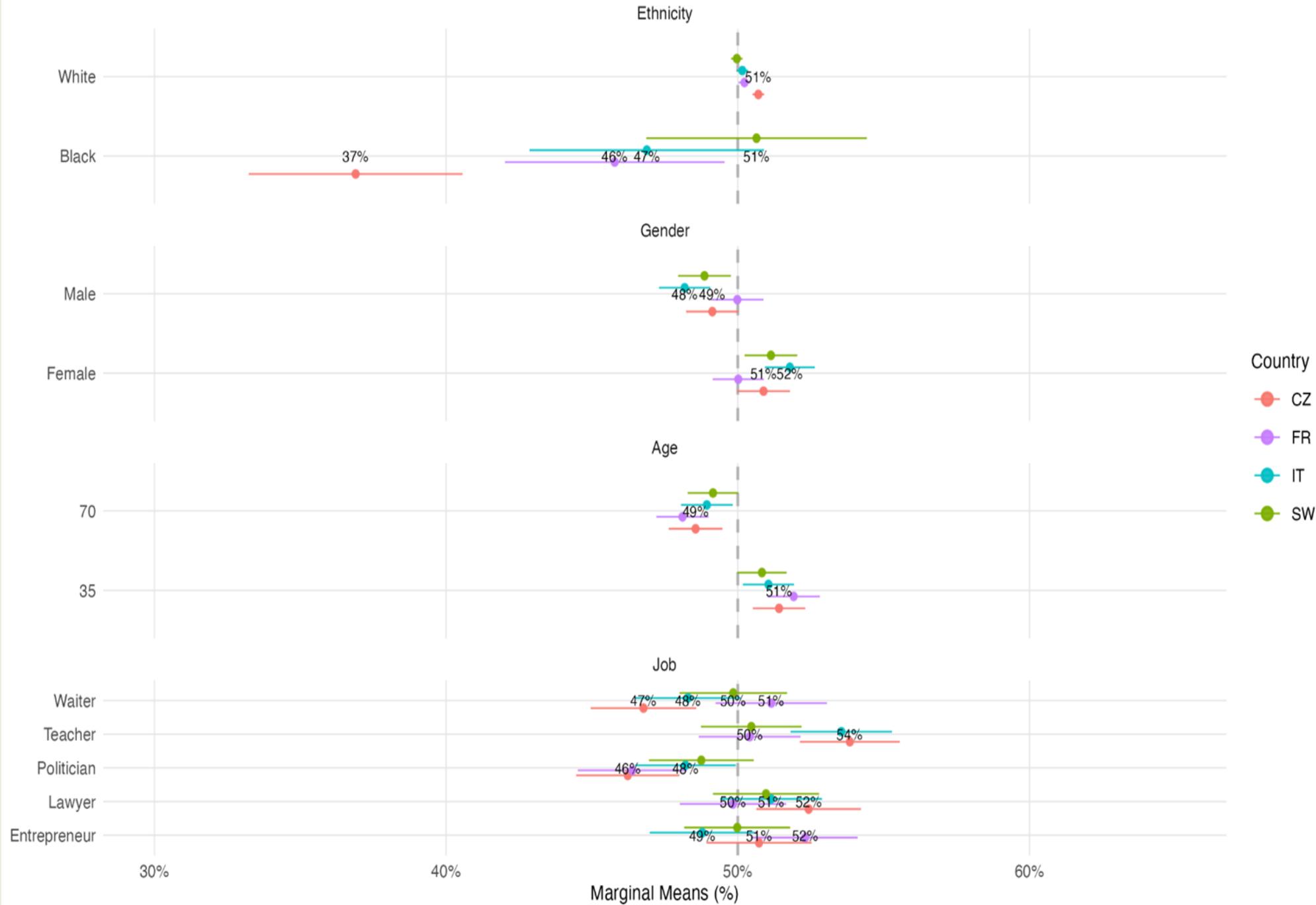
follow +follow



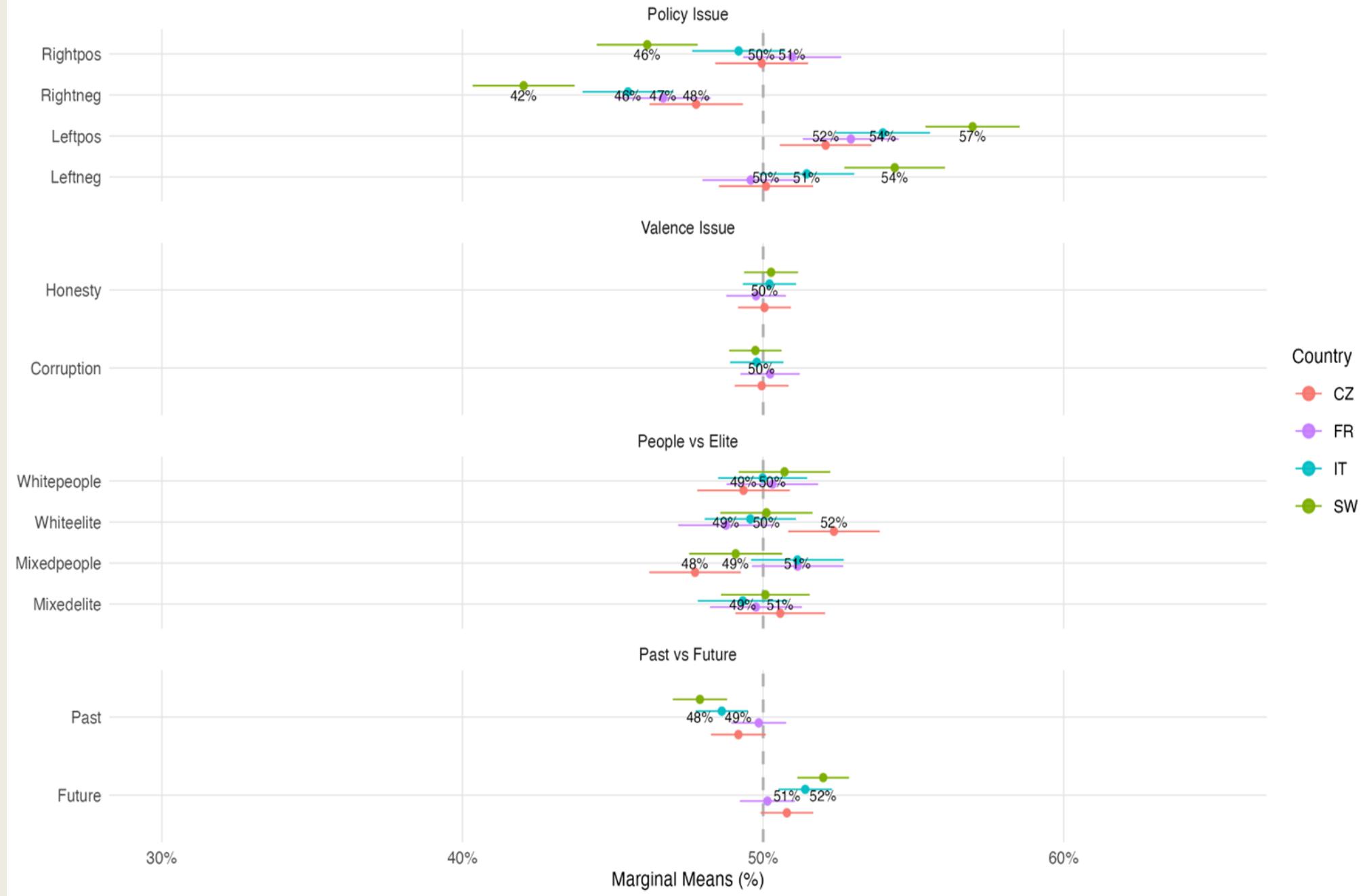
# Results—The Political Beats the Apolitical



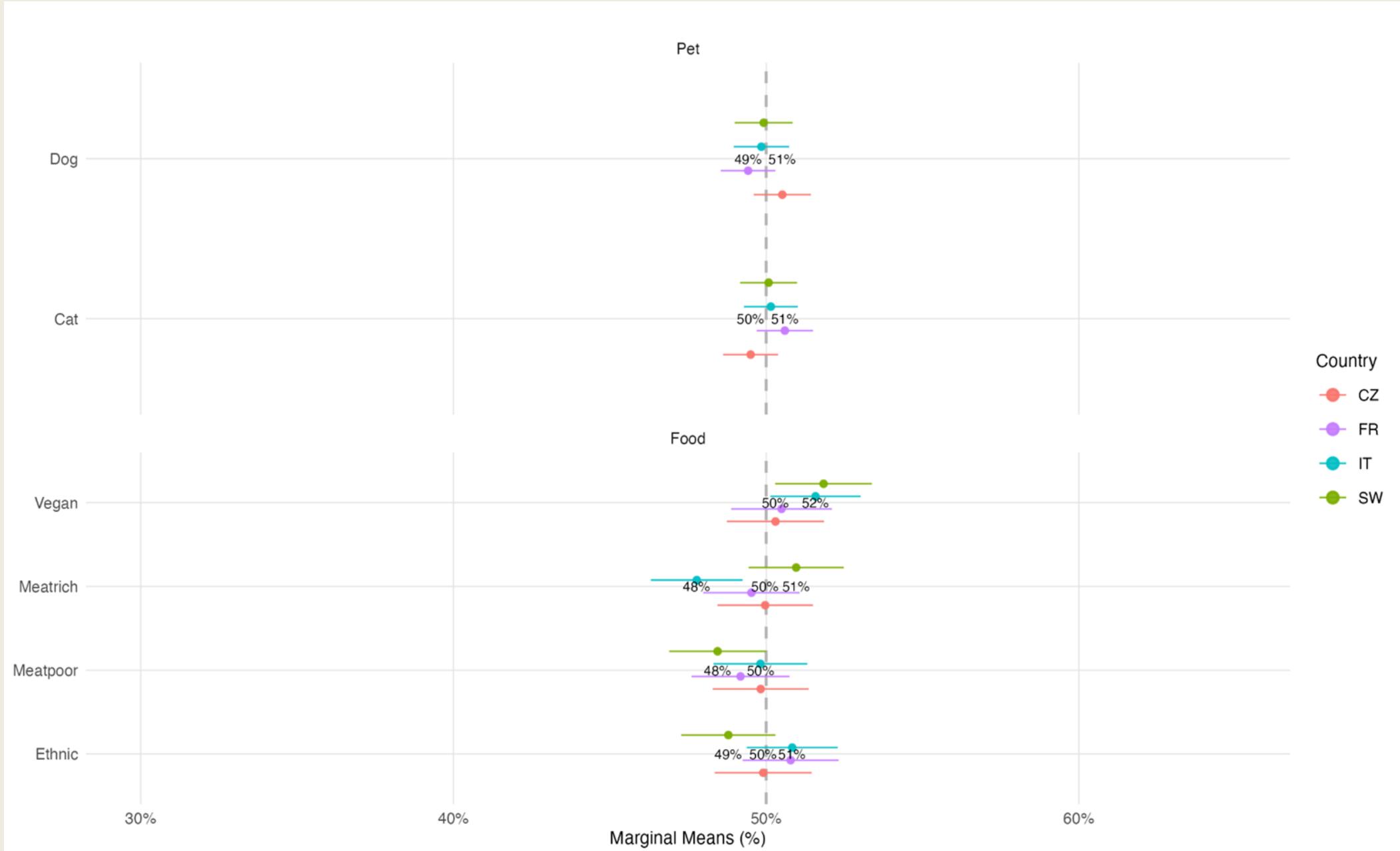
# Results hold in of Europe



# Results hold in of Europe



# Results hold in of Europe



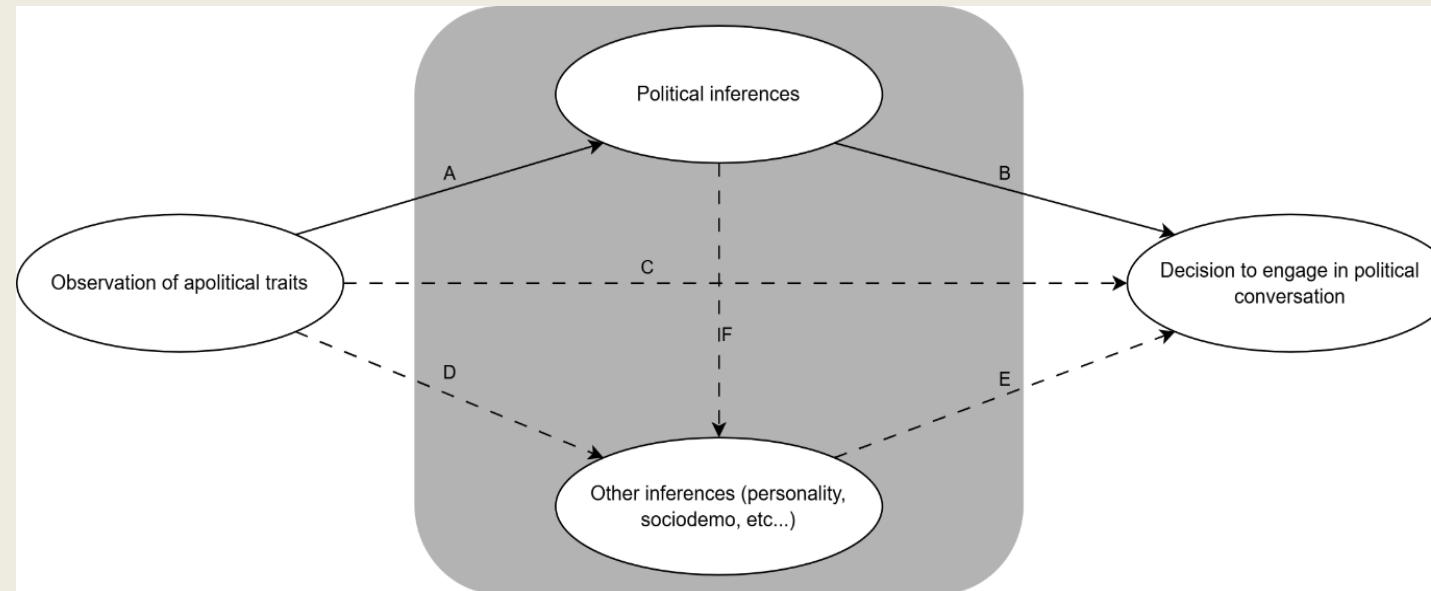


# **Trojan Horses and Optical Illusions: An Investigation into the Social Consequences of PL on Political Conversations**

# Questions answered in this chapter

## ► Can PL hinder cross-group contacts?

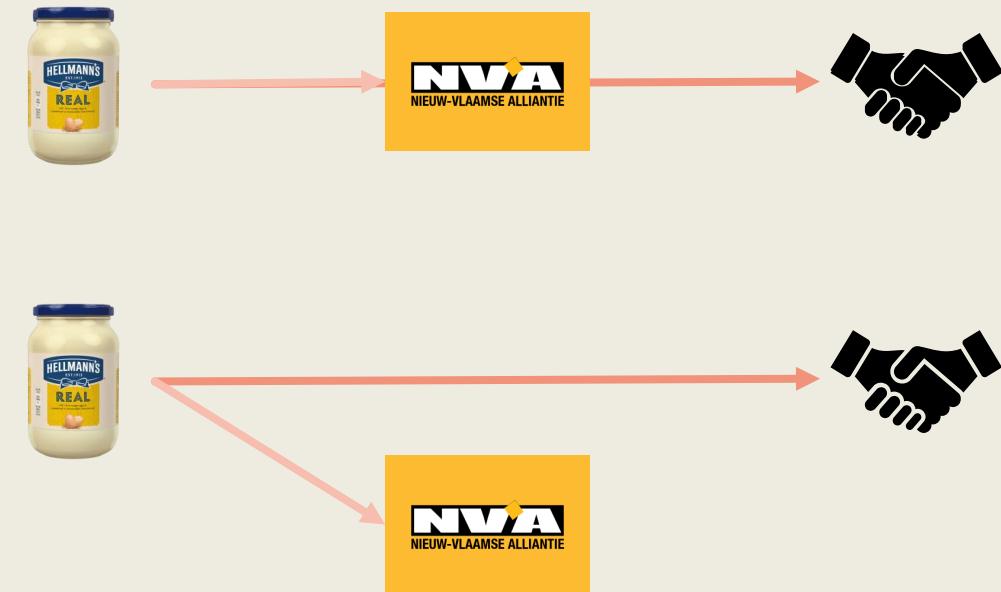
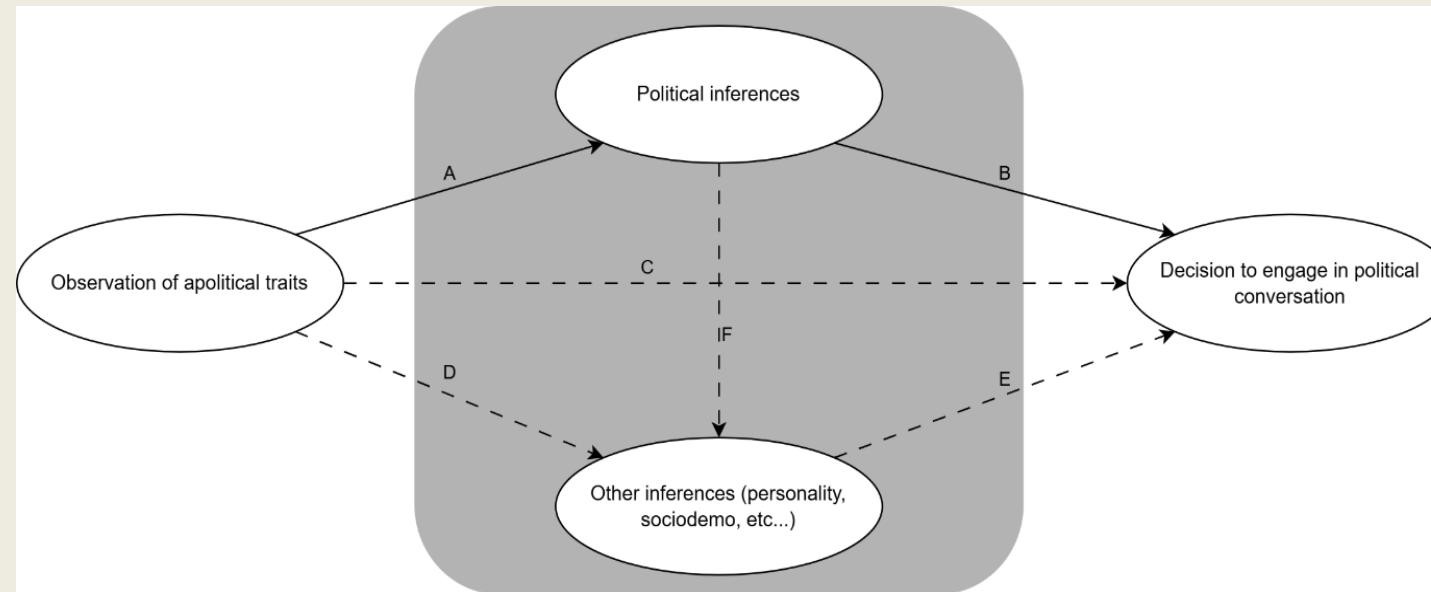
- Do political inferences play a role in the decision to engage in political conversation with people whose apolitical traits are known, or does (perceived) apolitical similarity drive these choices without the intervention of political inferences?
  - Is the polarizing effect of PL just an optical illusion caused by the alignment?
- Which effects of similarity in apolitical traits on the decision to engage in conversation are more strongly mediated by political inferences?



# Questions answered in this chapter

## ► Can PL hinder cross-group contacts?

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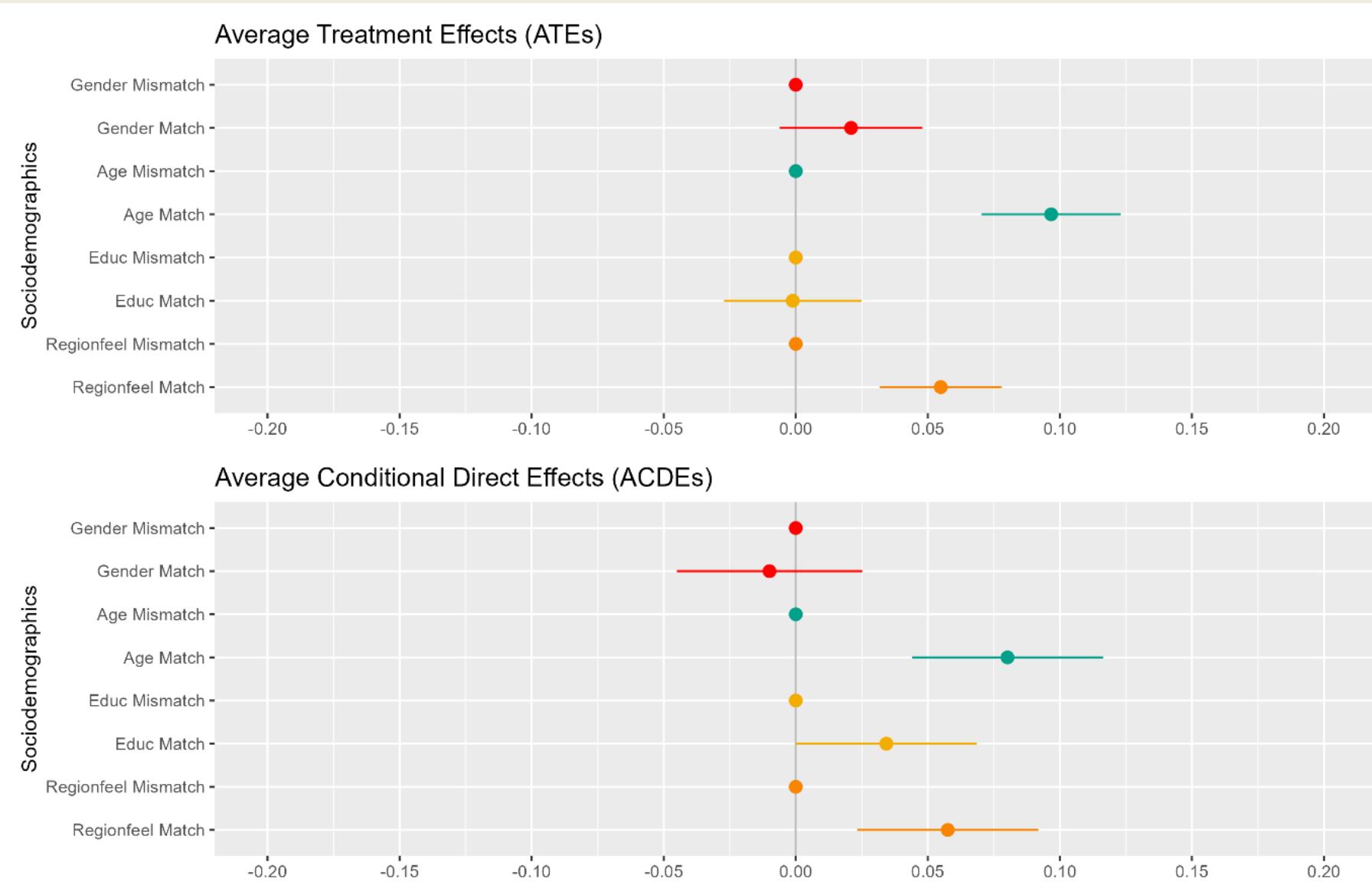
# Data and Methods

- ▶ **Data:** The VIPOP data collection (IT, FR, SW, and CZ); N~6000
- ▶ **Methods:** The Parallel Design Conjoint Experiment
  - ▶ Sample is split in two
    - ▶ Half observes pairs of profiles with **9 apolitical attributes**
    - ▶ Half observes pairs of profiles with **9 apolitical attributes+political ideology**
    - ▶ Respondents state *who they would rather have a political conversation with*
  - ▶ We can separate the effect of each trait into **direct** and **indirect portion**.
    - ▶ Direct: the effect of the **attribute similarity per se**
    - ▶ Indirect effect: the effect of **attribute similarity through ideological inferences**

| Profile A  | Profile B  |
|--|--|
| Male   | Female   |
| Under 35   | Over 60  |
| No university degree                                 | University degree or above                           |
| North  | South  |
| "Agree/Strongly agree"                               | "Disagree/Strongly disagree"                         |
| "Agree/Strongly agree"                               | "Disagree/Strongly disagree"                         |
| Omnivore   | Omnivore   |
| Dog  | Cat  |
| In contact with nature, with many outdoor activities | In contact with nature, with many outdoor activities |

| Profile A                                     | Profile B                                  |
|---|--|
| Male  | Female                                     |
| Between 36 and 59                             | Under 35 years old                         |
| No university degree                          | University degree or above                 |
| North   | South                                      |
| "Agree/Strongly agree"                        | "Neither agree nor disagree"               |
| "Neither agree nor disagree"                  | "Neither agree nor disagree"               |
| Omnivore                                      | Omnivore                                   |
| Dog   | Prefers not to have animals                |
| In a city full of art and cultural activities | In a resort, with many relaxing activities |
| Left-wing (0 to 3 on the ideological scale)   | Does not collocate                         |

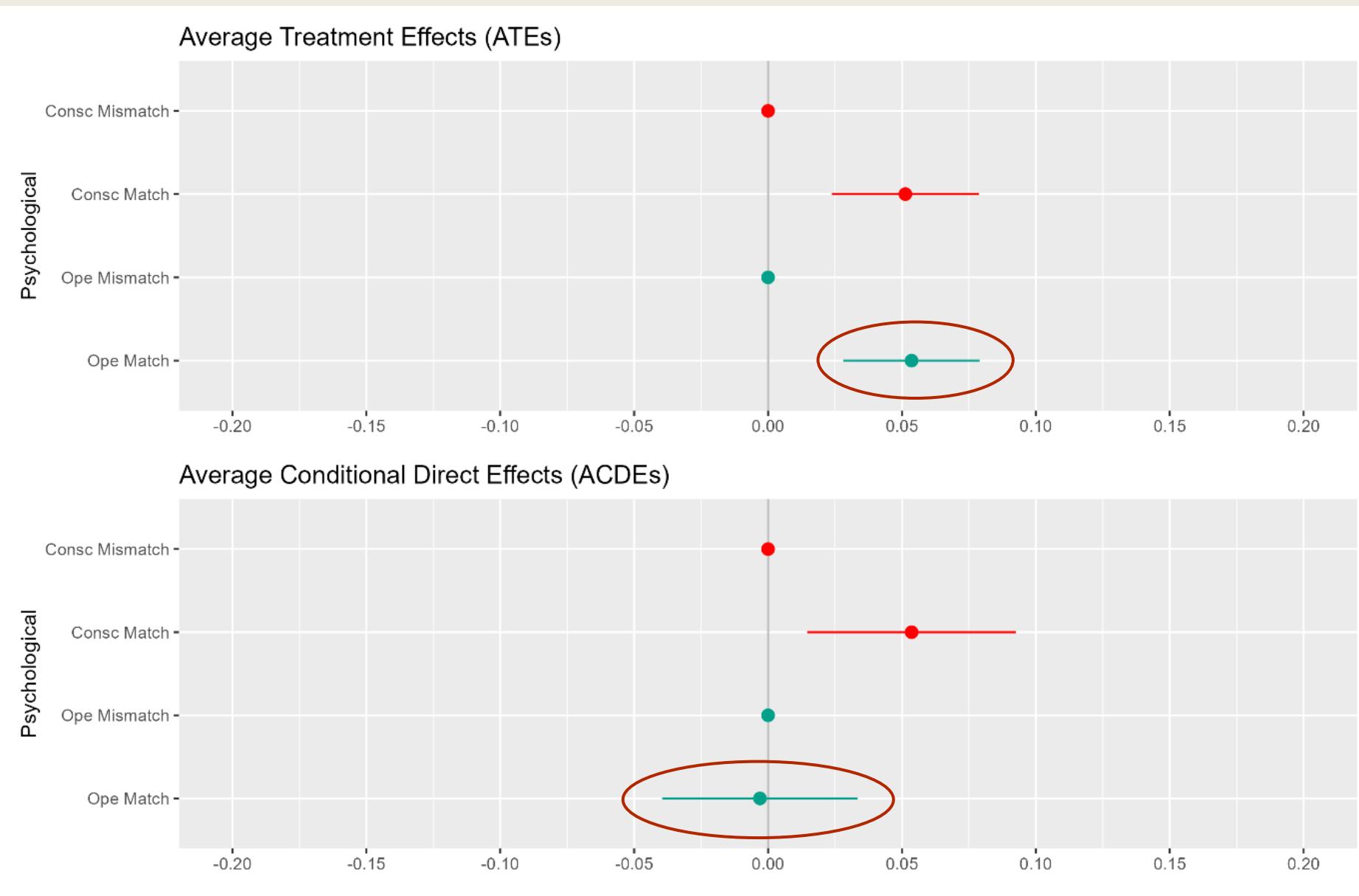
# Results: Are political inferences consequential?



The difference between these two effects here (eliminated effect) represents the portion of the effect *mediated by political inferences*.

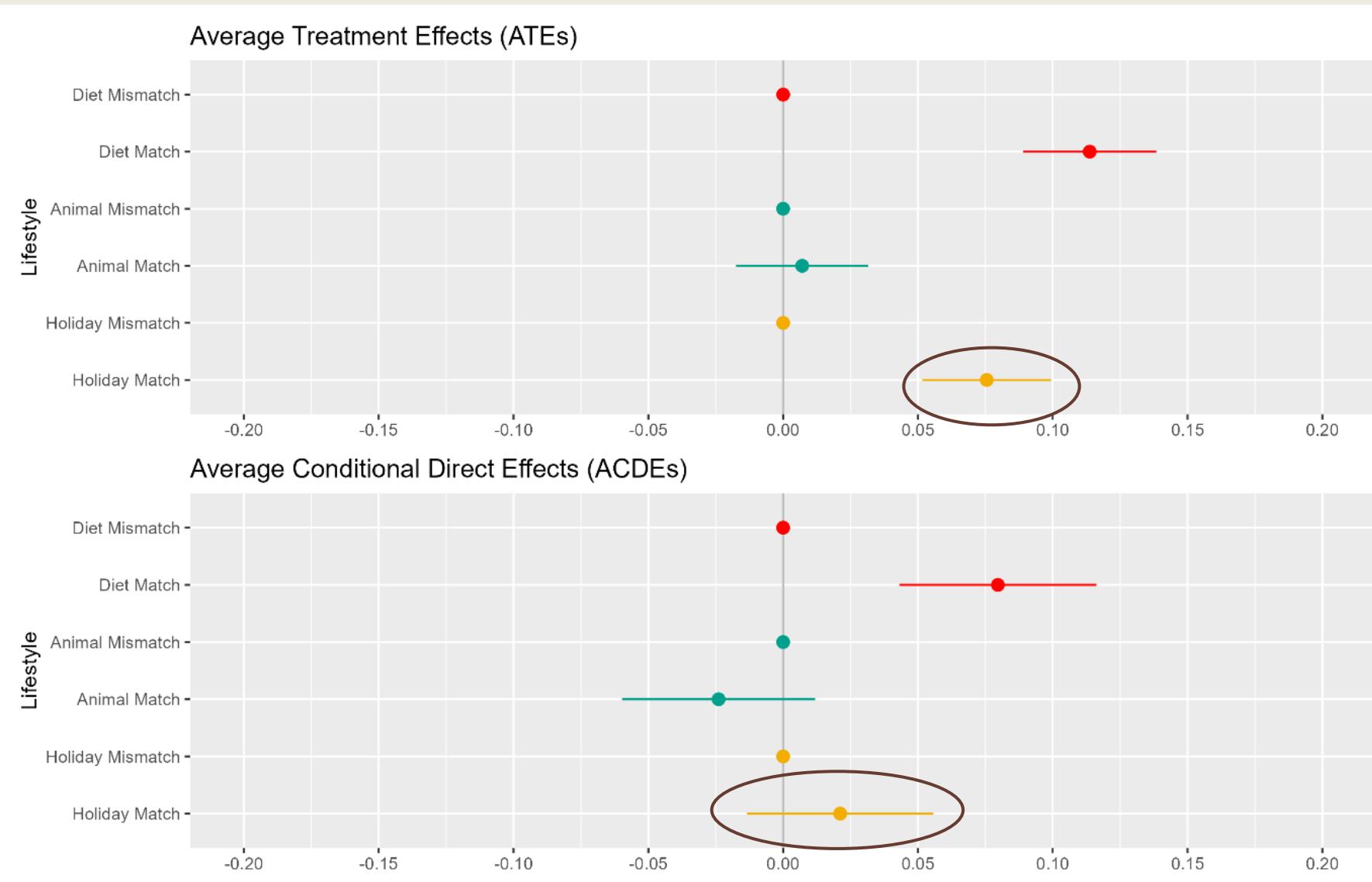
For sociodemographic traits, no significant difference

# Results: Are political inferences consequential?



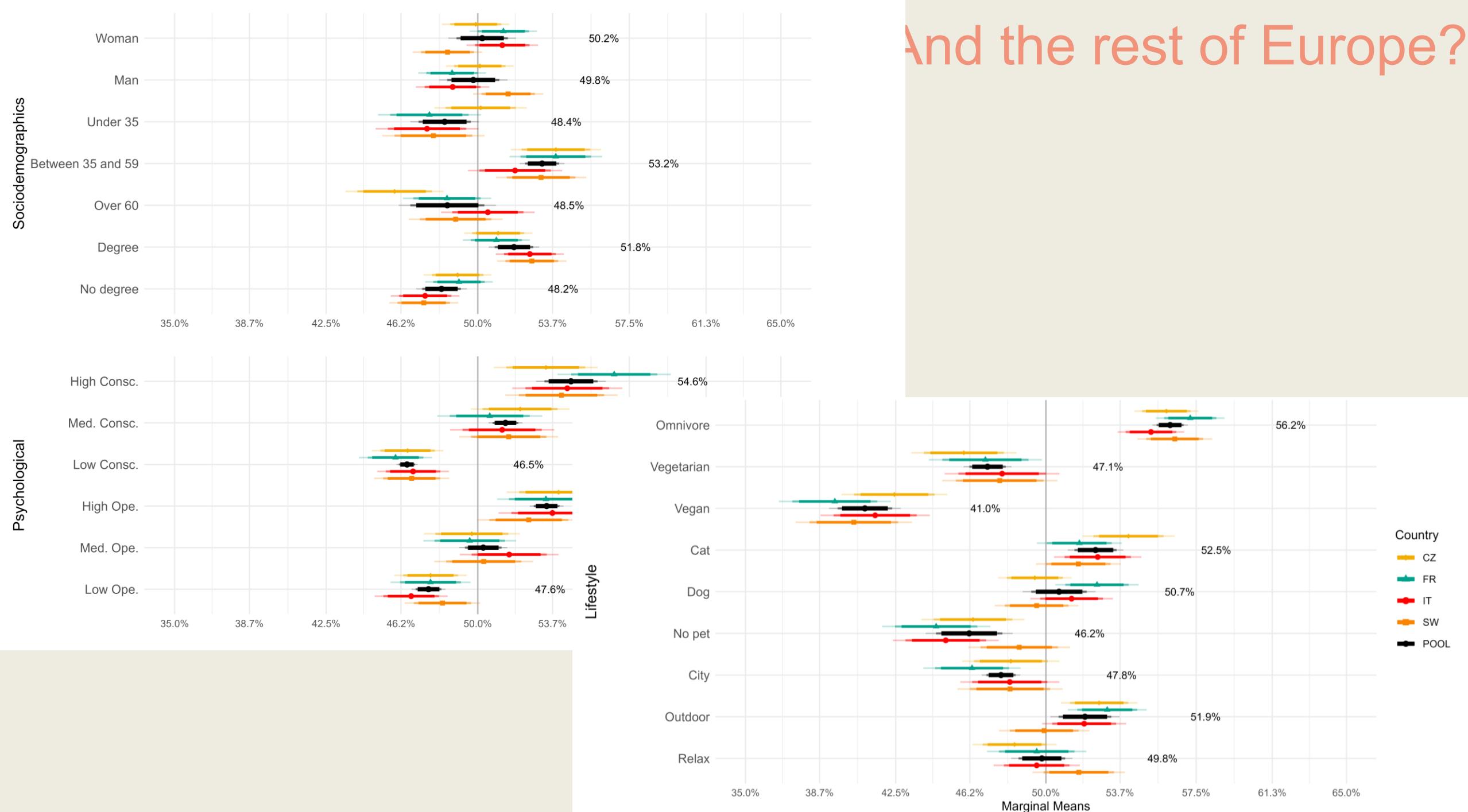
Significant  
difference detected!

# Results: Are political inferences consequential?

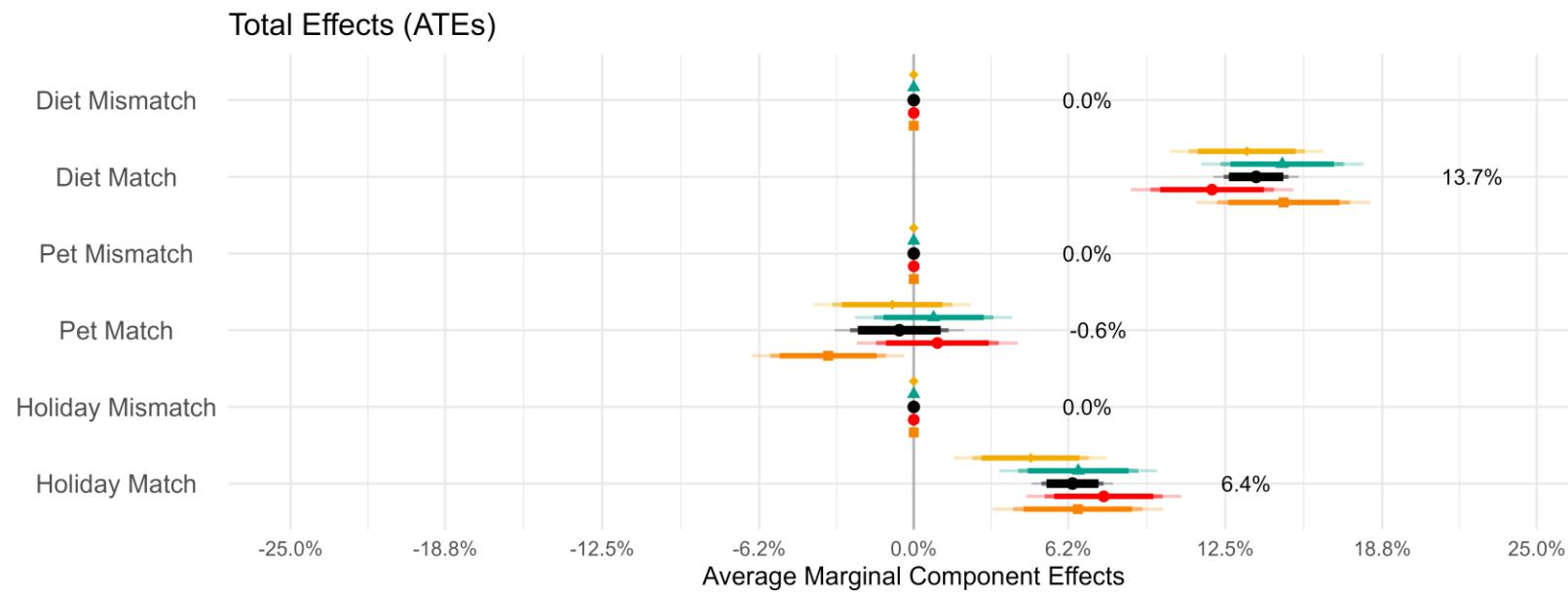
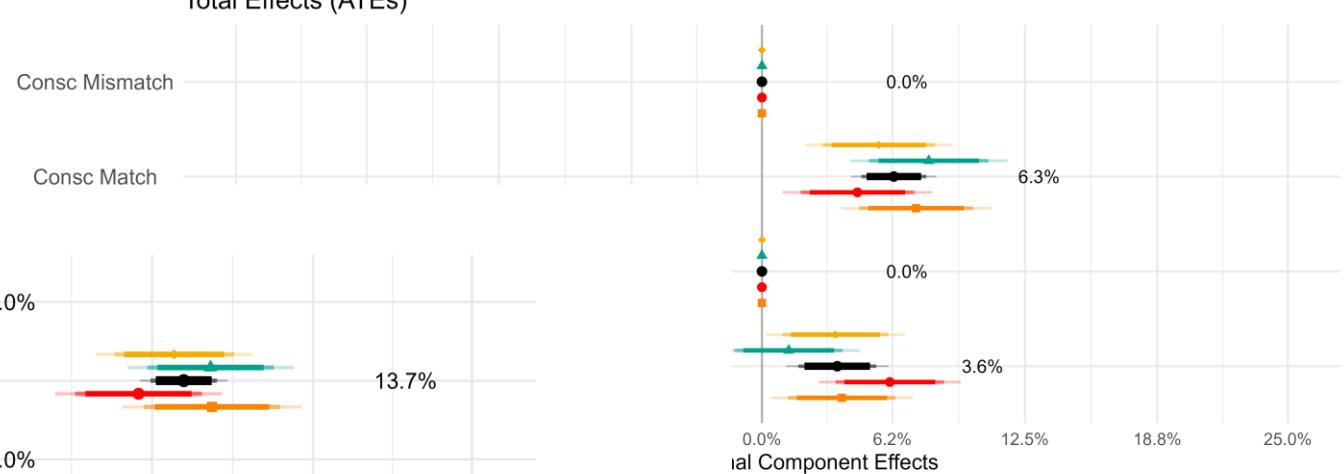
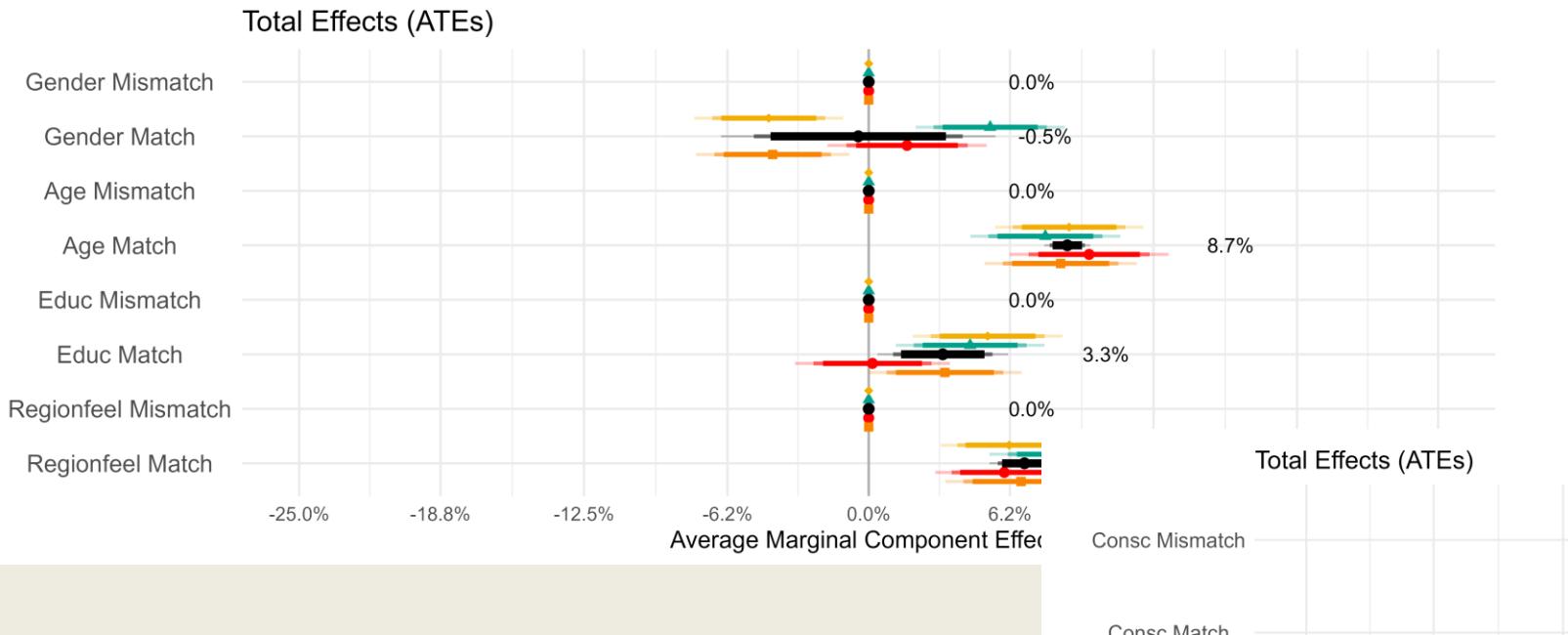


Significant difference detected!

# And the rest of Europe?



# And the rest of Europe?



# Conclusions

# Questions we answered

- ▶ ***Does PL exist, and can it be observed?***
  - ▶ Yes, it does exist, and it can be observed!
- ▶ ***When is PL more likely to be observed? (Subject)***
  - ▶ When a subject is an ideologue, is highly exposed to news media, and has higher cultural capital
- ▶ ***When is PL more likely to be observed? (Target)***
  - ▶ When observing a target's sociodemographic and lifestyle traits, rather than personality
    - ▶ In particular, one's religion, profession, food preferences and transportation preferences
- ▶ ***When is PL more likely to be observed? (Context)***
  - ▶ It is more likely to be observed *in absence of explicit political information*, although it still plays a role even when political information is available: it enhances or shrinks perceptions, but does not switch them
- ▶ ***Can PL hinder cross-group contacts?***
  - ▶ *For most traits, PL does not seem to hinder cross-group contacts*
  - ▶ *Yet, this means that in contexts where political and apolitical cues are strongly aligned, cross-group contacts are indeed endangered*

# Thank you!