

The Impact of Citizens' Assemblies on Democratic Resilience: Evidence from the Field

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SCRIPTS
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Contestations of the Liberal Script



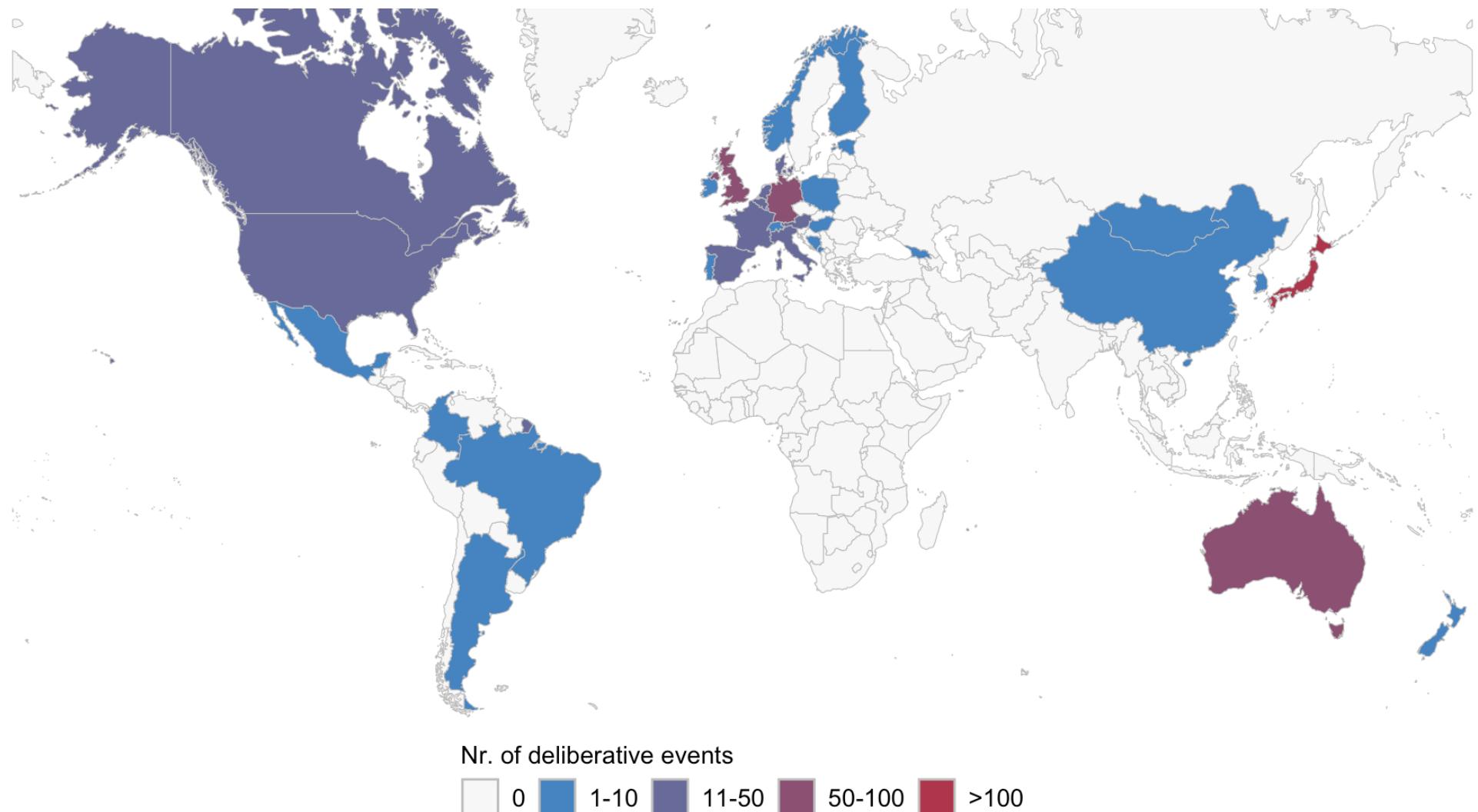
Volkswagen**Stiftung**

Tim Wappenhans 	Dr. Bernhard Clemm 	Dr. Felix Hartmann 	Prof. Dr. Heike Klüver 
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October 9, 2025

Antidote to Democratic Erosion

Deliberative Events



**Can citizens' assemblies
increase *democratic resilience*?**

State of the Literature

Citizens' Assemblies

- promise to strengthen **democratic resilience**

But

- limited **empirical evidence**
 - pre-post design
 - often initiated by researchers
- **normative concerns**
 - bypassing representative democratic institutions
 - reproducing inequalities

Preview

What we do

- large-scale field intervention in Germany
- moderated citizens' assemblies w/ MPs, **no formal policy recommendations**
- match **treated** (n=435) to **control** units (n=2,675)

What we find

- large, robust effects on **democratic resilience**
 - political **trust**
 - political **efficacy**
 - civic **engagement**
 - reduced susceptibility to **conspiracy thinking**

Theoretical Background

Democratic Resilience

a system's **capacity** to withstand, adapt to, or recover from shocks while preserving its principles (Merkel and Lührmann 2021; Holloway and Manwaring 2023)

- previously focus on **macro level** (*institutional guardrails*)
- we hold resilience to be a **citizen capacity**
- attitudinal & behavioral resources **preserving democracy** in times of crisis and shock

Citizen Level Democratic Resilience

- **Democratic trust**
 - more difficult for anti-system parties to gain traction (Croissant and Lott 2024)
- **Political efficacy**
 - system seen as functional and responsive (Boulianne 2018)
- **Civic engagement**
 - effective bulwark against democratic breakdown (Merkel and Lührmann 2021)
- **Conspiracy thinking**
 - countering misinformation

Expectations: Citizens' Democratic Resilience

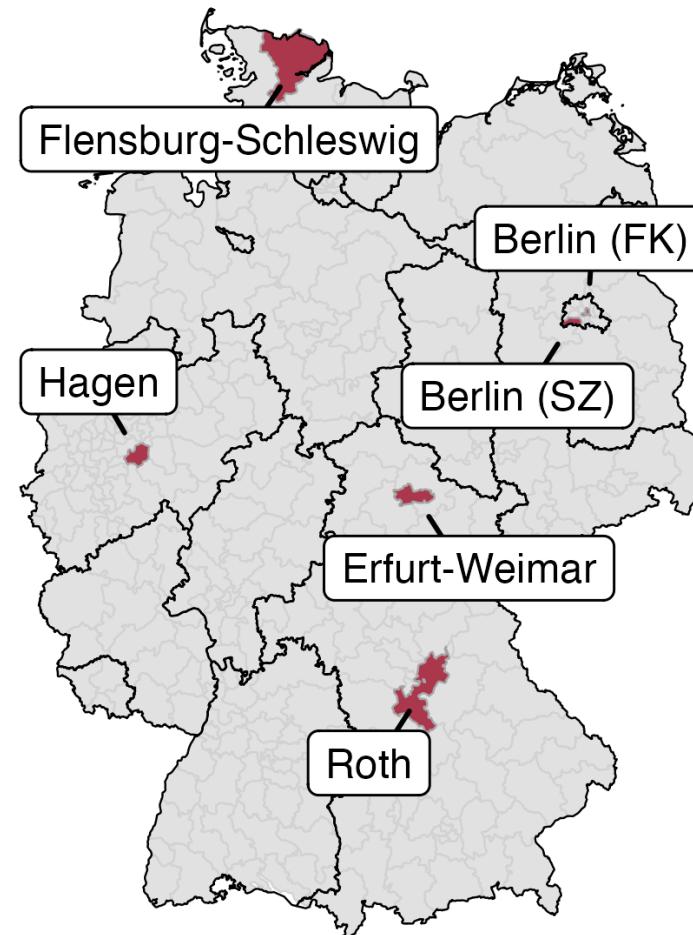
- **H1: Democratic trust**
 - other opinions, more tolerance for institutions ([Fishkin et al. 2024](#))
- **H2: Political efficacy**
 - taken seriously by elites, trust in political skills ([Boulianne 2018](#))
- **H3: Civic engagement**
 - political confidence encourages engagement ([Gastil et al. 2008](#))
- **H4: Conspiracy thinking**
 - promoting accuracy-based reasoning ([Fishkin et al. 2021](#))

The Case

Field intervention

Hallo Bundestag

- MPs deliberating with
≈ 25 constituents
- 6 electoral districts
- 17 events
- 8 hours
- vetted info material
- national political topics
- trained mediators
- **deliberating**
≠ deciding !



Distinct Design

- better **representation**
 - door visits to enforce random selection
- better **deliberation**
 - facilitated through trained moderators
 - combination of **vertical** and **horizontal** deliberation
- compatible with **democratic institutions**
 - perspective getting, no policy proposals

Citizens' Assembly Structure

Session	Activities
Welcome	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Welcoming participants- Ice-breakers
Small Groups (Morning)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Active Listening Exercises- Discussions and topic selection for the afternoon
Plenary (Pre-Lunch)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Presentation of group topics- Formation of discussion groups
Small Groups (Afternoon)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Problem definition- Solution development
Plenary (MP Discussion)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Welcoming MPs- Group presentations and discussions with MPs
Concluding Session	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Feedback and reflections

Treatment

Welcome (Erfurt-Weimar)



hallobundestag.de

Treatment

Icebreakers (Erfurt-Weimar)



Treatment

Topics for afternoon (Erfurt-Weimar)



Treatment

Topic selection (Erfurt-Weimar)



Treatment

Deliberation w/ MPs (Erfurt-Weimar)



Treatment

Deliberation w/ MPs (Erfurt-Weimar)



Analytical Strategy

Matching

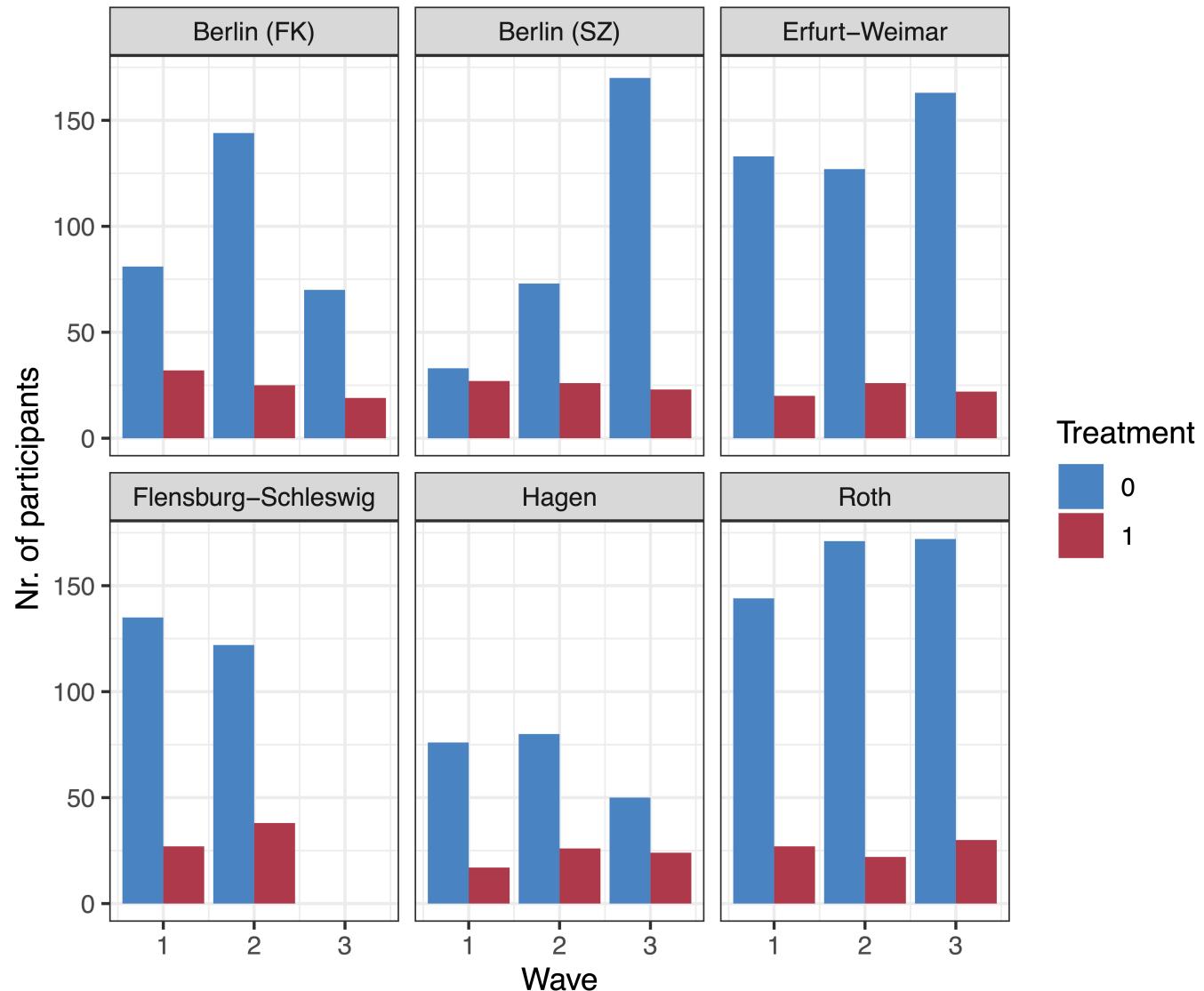
Two-sample approach

- two separately drawn random samples
- closely mimicking NGO's approach
- match participants ([Xu and Yang 2022](#))
 - 8 covariats (preregistered)
- ATT estimated using:

$$Y_i = \alpha + \beta \text{Treatment}_i + \gamma X_i + \epsilon_i$$

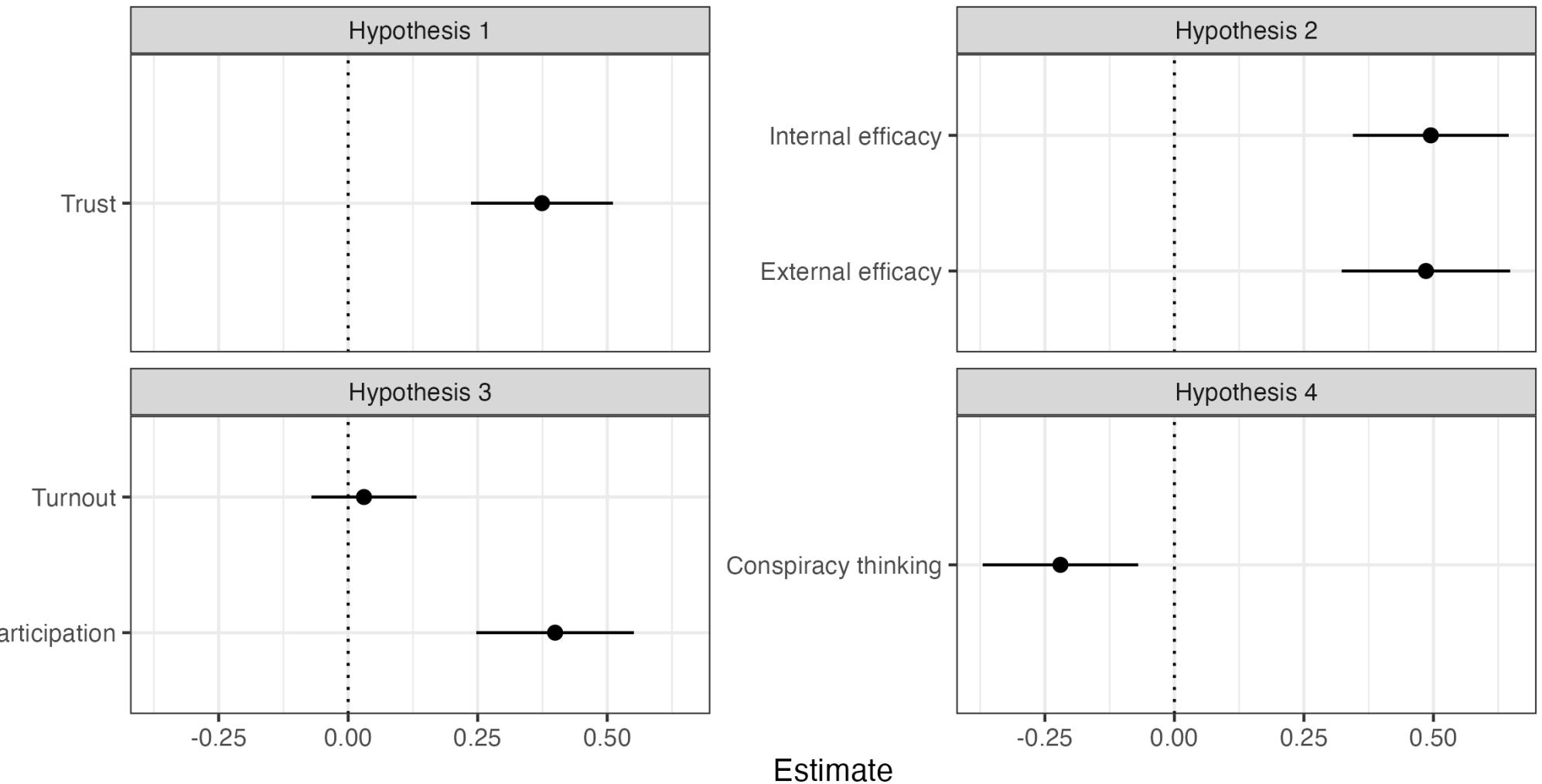
Descriptives

Participation



Results

Main Specification



Results for individual items

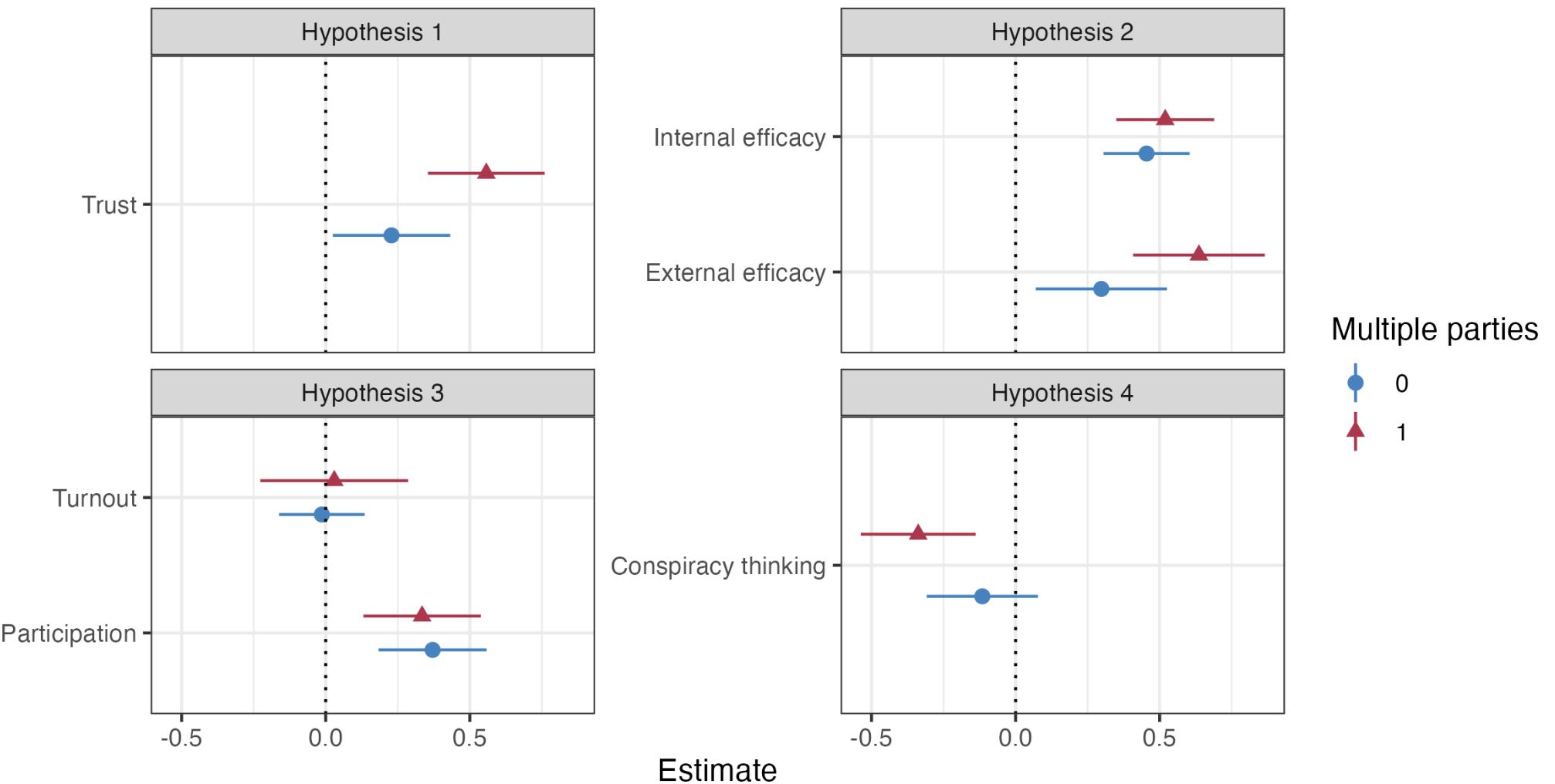
► Appendix

Internal Validity

Results not driven by selection

- selection
 - exclude 40% of control who wouldn't participate
- within-subject changes ► Appendix
 - mirror matching results
- sensitivity ► Appendix
 - confounder needs to be **11x stronger** as political interest

Heterogeneity: Vertical Deliberation



Results for individual items [► Appendix](#)

Takeaway



Results of Citizens' Assemblies

Democratic resilience

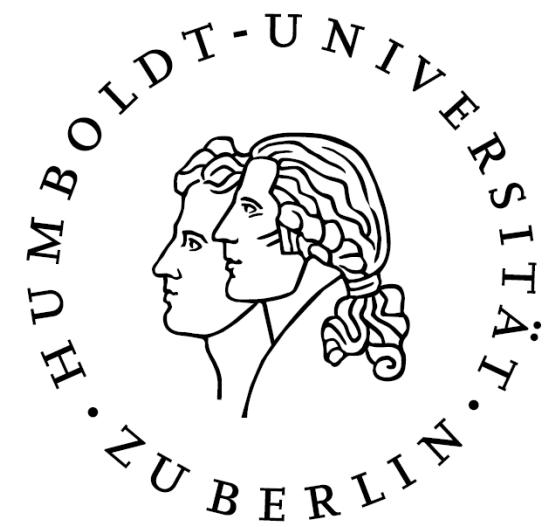
- increase **trust, efficacy, engagement**
- reduce **conspiracy thinking**

Ongoing research

- **spillover**
- increase **uptake**

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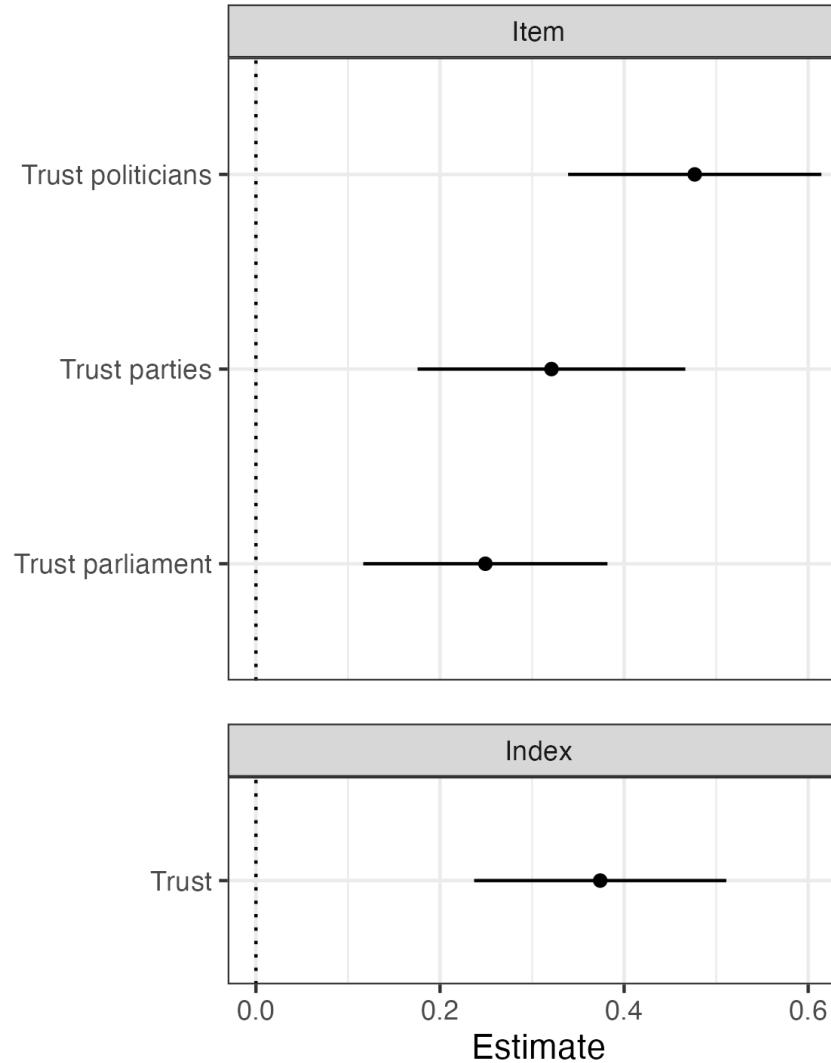
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Appendix

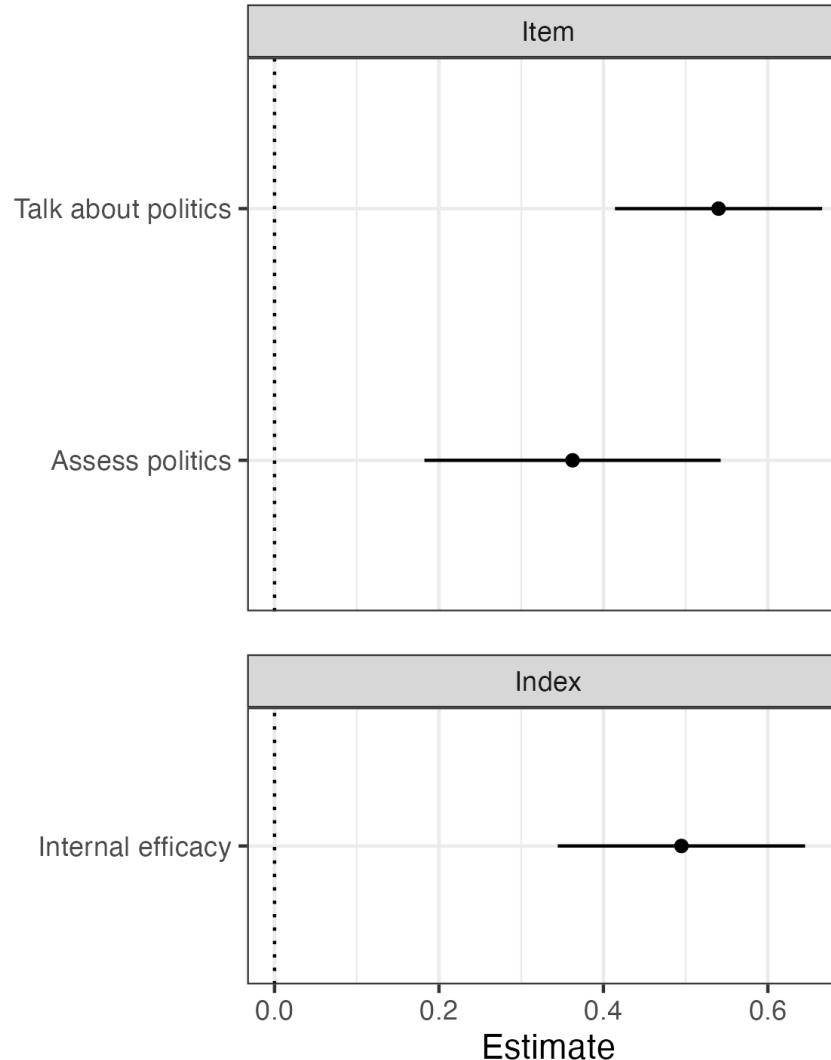
Trust

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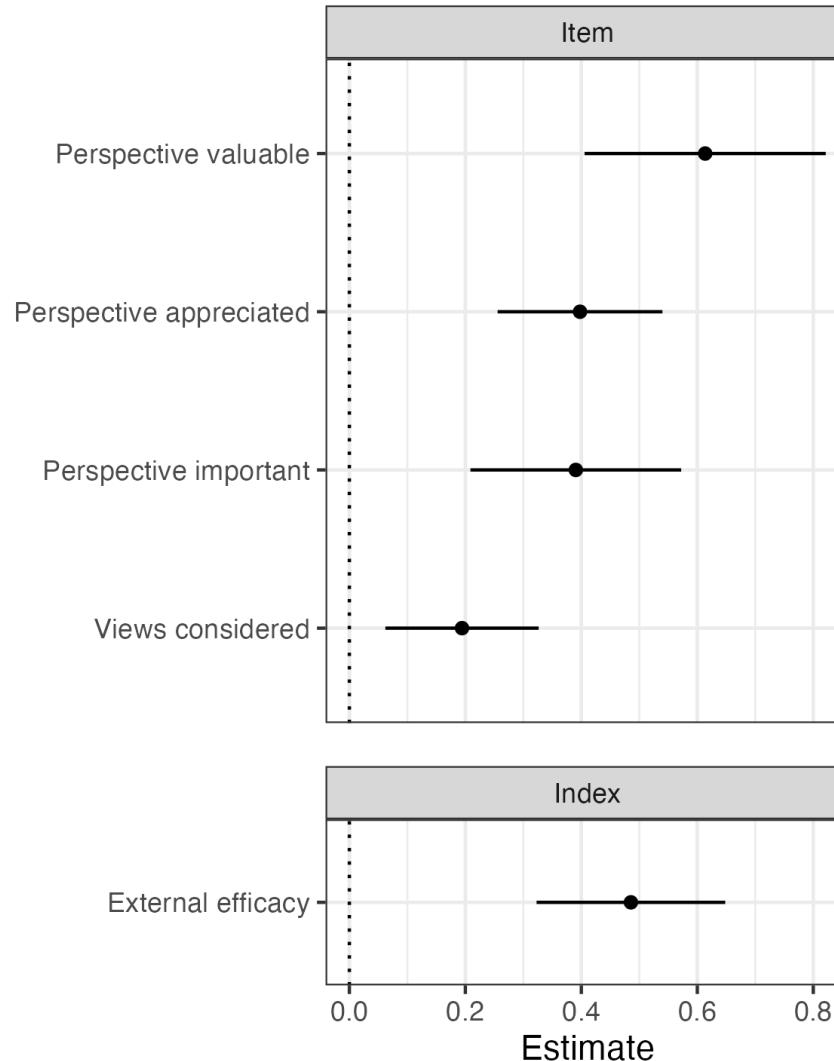
Internal efficacy

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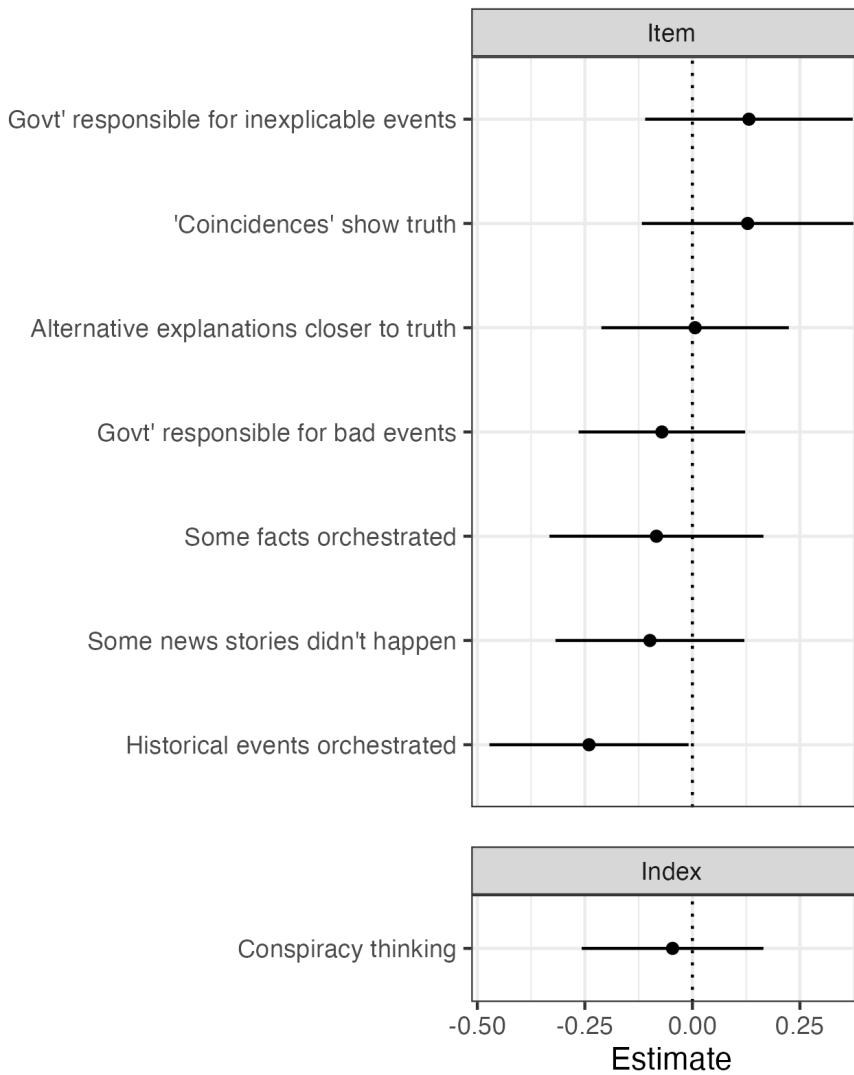
External efficacy

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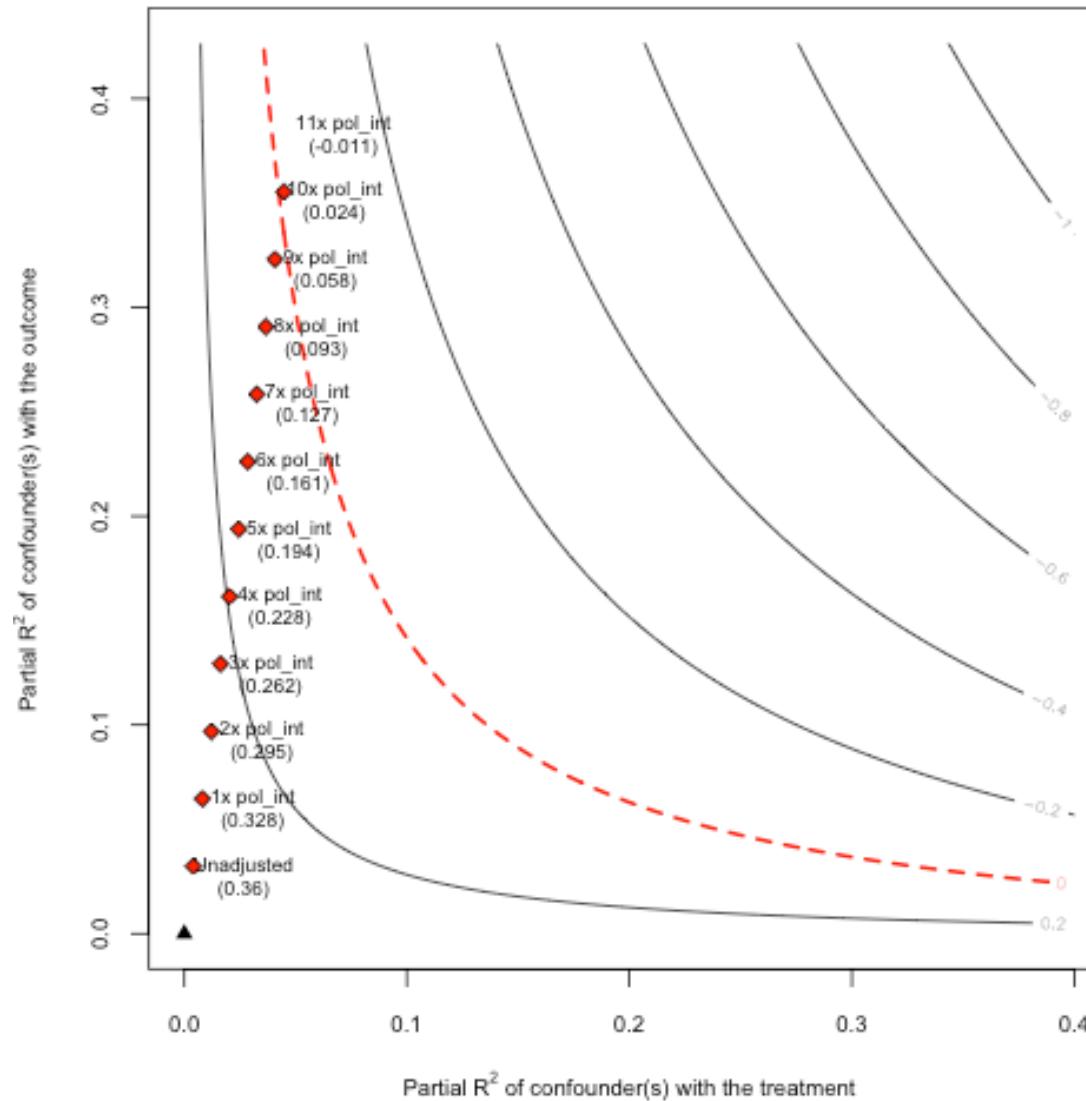
Conspiracy thinking

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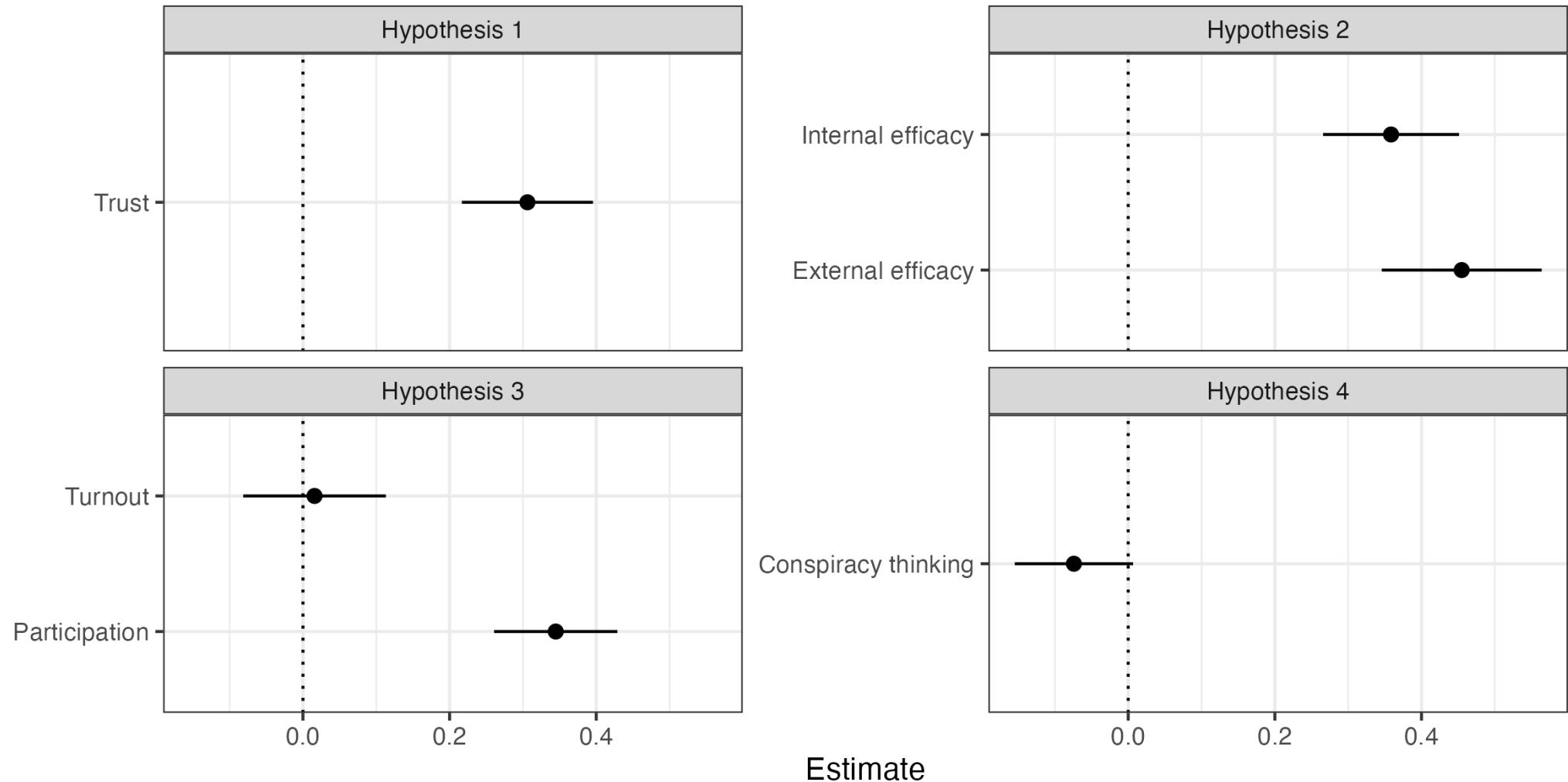
Sensitivity analysis

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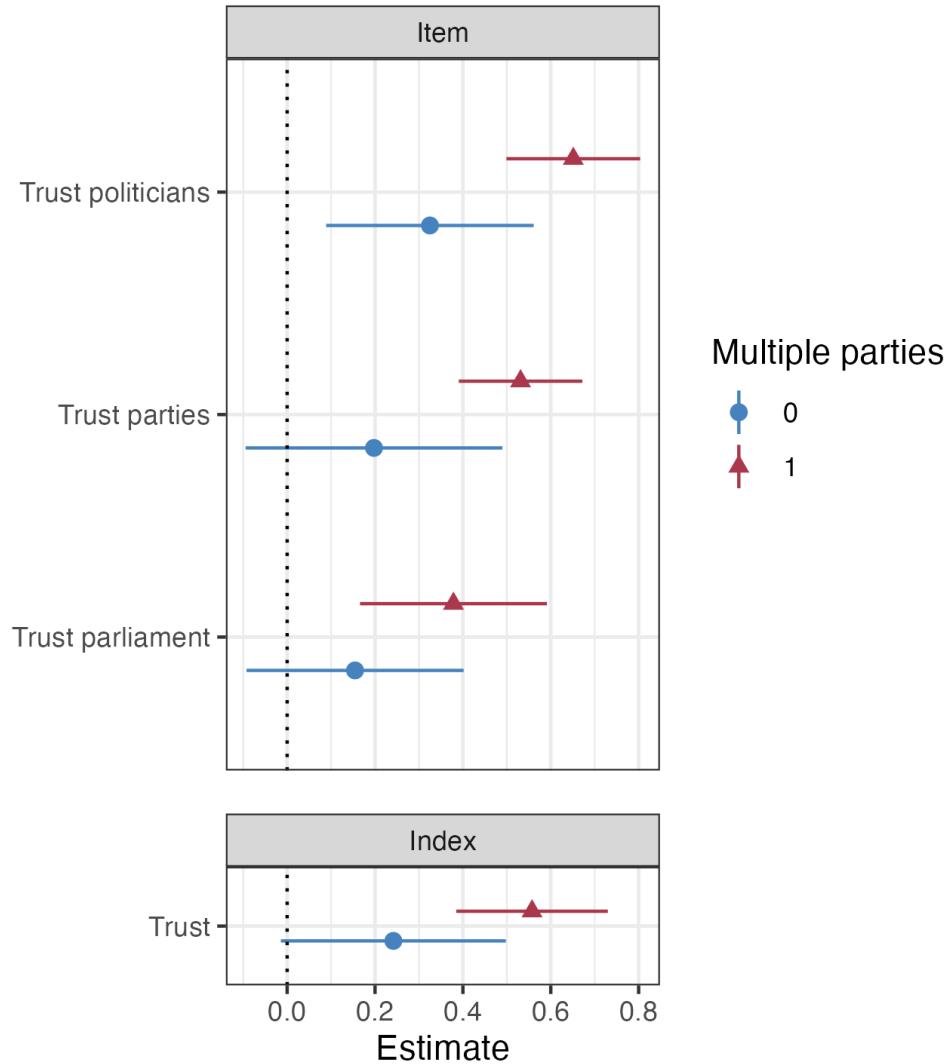
Within-subject design

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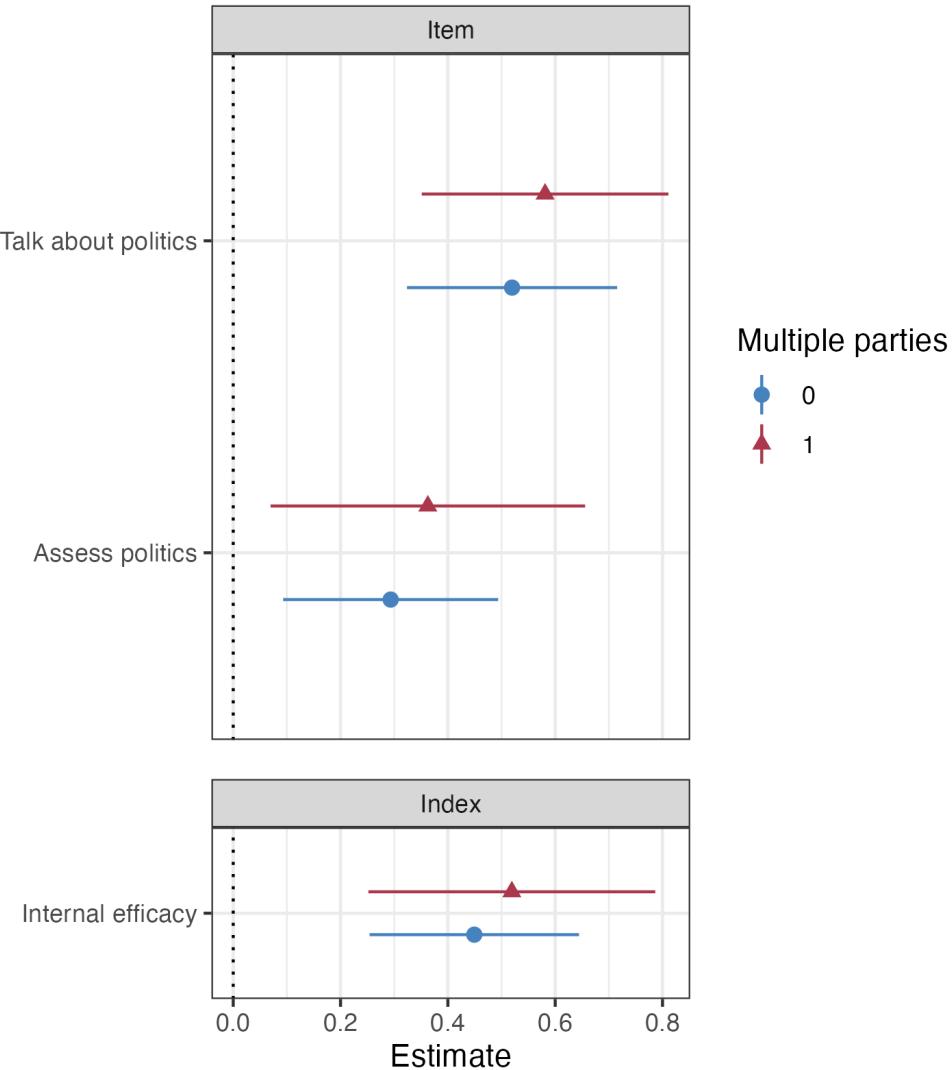
Trust

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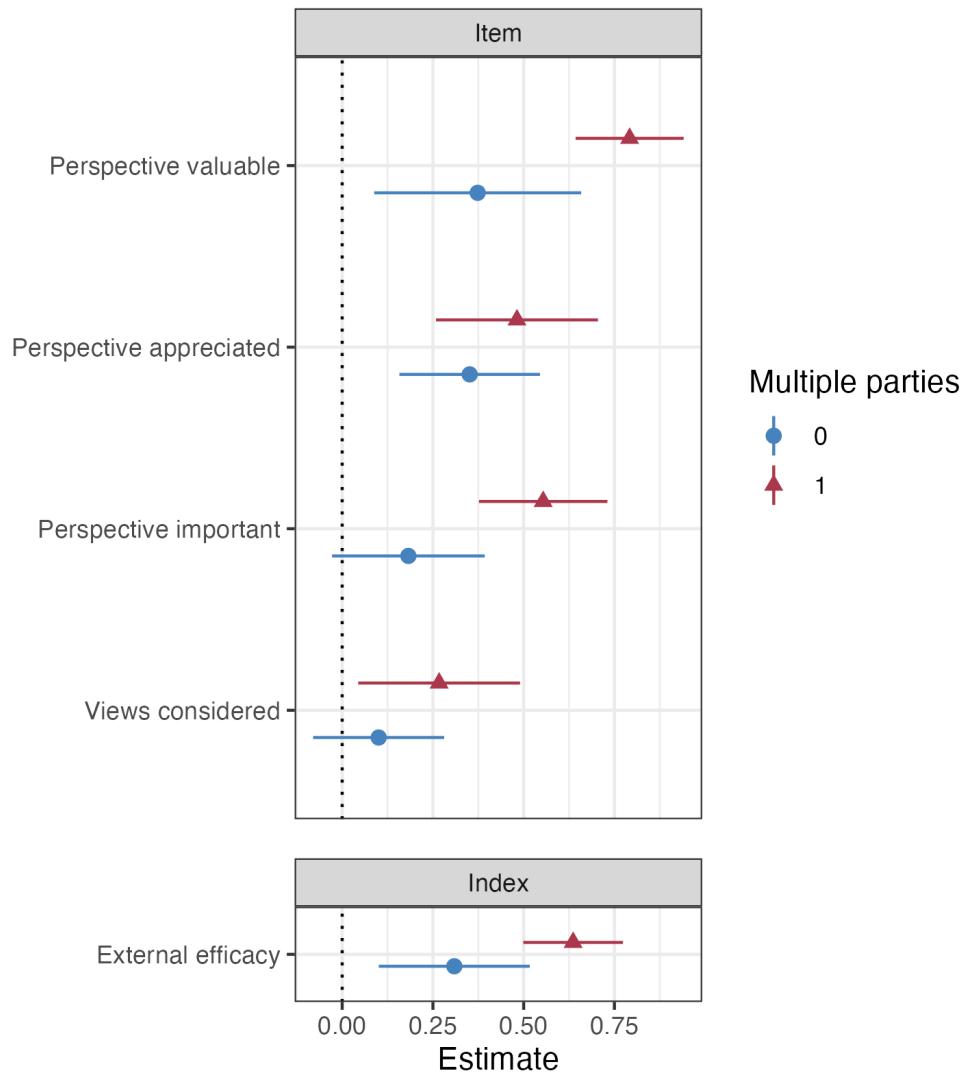
Internal efficacy

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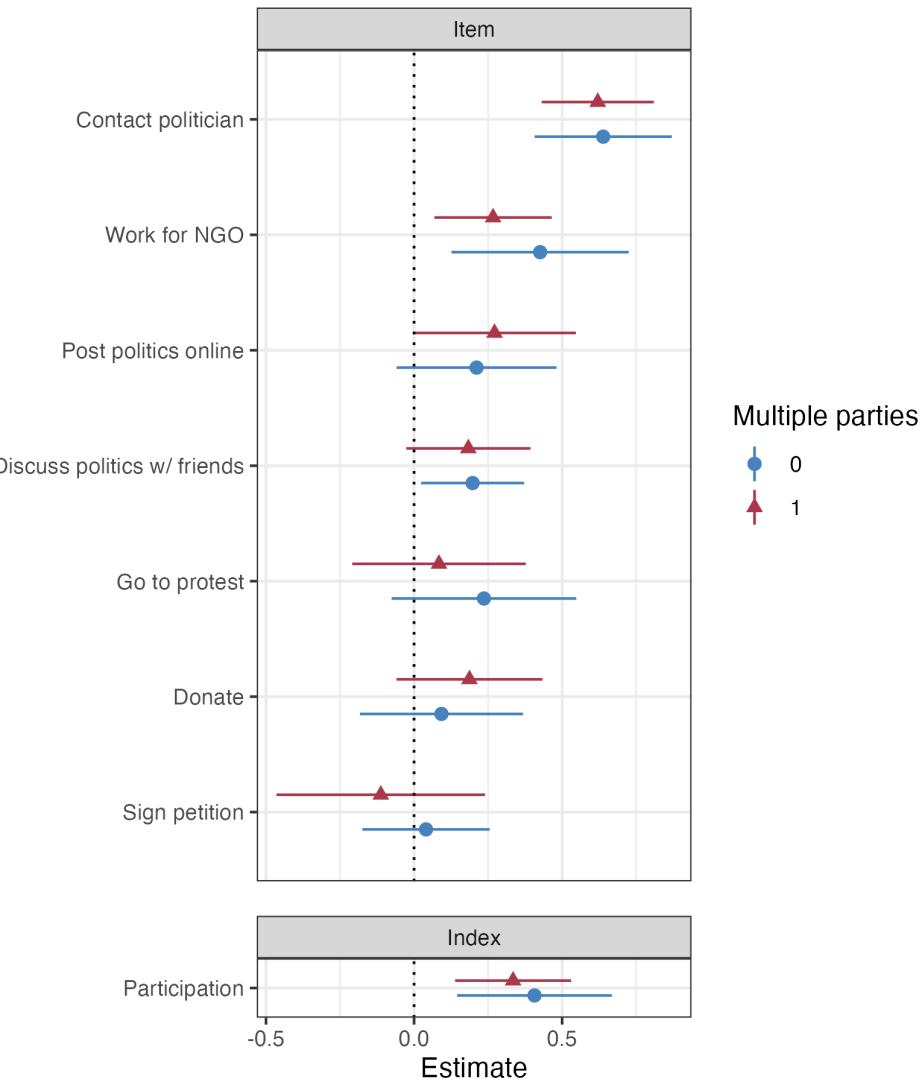
External efficacy

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Civic engagement

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Conspiracy thinking

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