

Identity-Based Elections

Helios Herrera (University of Warwick & CEPR)

Ravideep Sethi (David Eccles School of Business, U of Utah)

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Political identity and motivated reasoning

“More often than not, citizens do not choose which party to support based on policy opinion; they alter their policy opinion according to which party they support.”

Liliana Mason, *Uncivil Agreement* (2018)

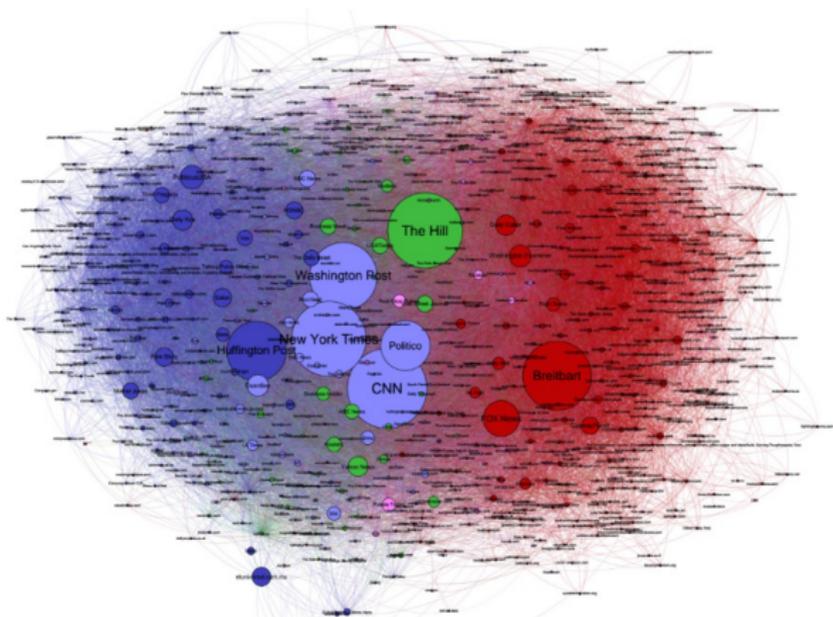
Political identity and motivated reasoning

“Most people’s ideological commitments are extraordinarily soft. What they think of as a belief is often a post-hoc rationalisation of a group loyalty. Crucially, this is more true, not less, of degree-holding, “high-information” voters.”

Janan Ganesh, *Financial Times* article (July 2022)

Rich new media environment

1.25 million news articles from 25,000 outlets shared on Twitter



Source: Benkler et al. (2017)

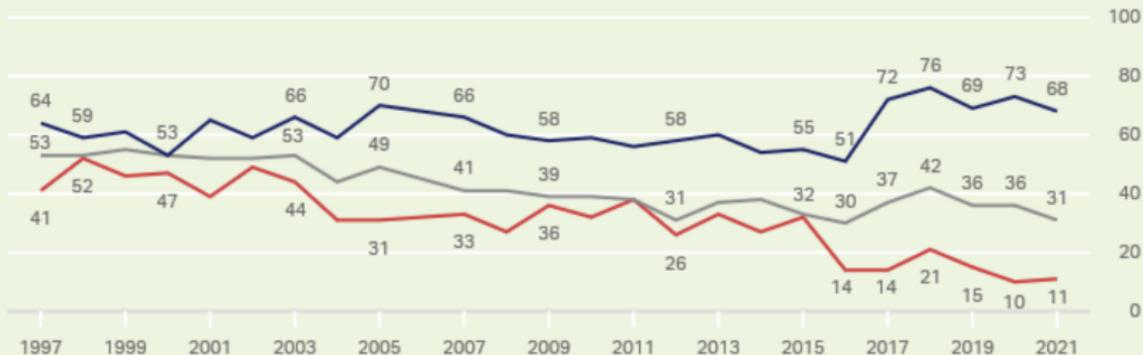
Asymmetric trust in mass media

Americans' Trust in Mass Media, by Political Party

In general, how much trust and confidence do you have in the mass media -- such as newspapers, TV and radio -- when it comes to reporting the news fully, accurately and fairly -- a great deal, a fair amount, not very much or none at all?

% Great deal/Fair amount

— Republicans — Independents — Democrats



Data from 1972, 1974 and 1976 not shown

GALLUP

Asymmetric trust in mass media

“one of the clearest differences between Americans on opposing sides of the political aisle is that large portions of Democrats express trust in a far greater number of news sources”

Jurkowitz et al. (2020), Pew Research Center report

Dichotomy of info sources

Inside

- Chosen by agent from rich environment

Outside

- Mainstream media landscape
- Variation in bias, precision, and beliefs thereof
- Information the agent is inadvertently **hit with**

Ingredients

- Political identity is important
- The choice set of news outlets has become rich
- Individuals consume news from selected outlets
- *Something* motivates the choice of outlets:
 - Political faith preservation
- Individuals are also exposed to news from the outside
- In the US, trust in mass media is related to political affiliation

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Basic setup

- Two parties (R and L)
- Two states: $\omega \in \{R, L\}$
 - Common priors $w := \mathbb{P}[\omega = R] = \frac{1}{2}$
- Agents have two types (R and L)
 - Half of each type

Agent's decision problem

Choose what Inside media to consume

- Objective: to hold belief that own party is better
- Given: Exogenous Outside media structure
- Constraint: Bayes plausibility

Wannabe partisans:

- Agents want to be partisan, but need to convince themselves

Each agent forms beliefs after observing **In** and **Out** signals

Aggregate beliefs → Sincere voting → Electoral outcomes

Research Questions

Our model: Information choice and voting by *wannabe* partisans in the presence of outside information

- How is the nature of chosen media related to the nature of (and belief in) mass media as a whole?
- Can the wrong party win? Under what circumstances?
- Do politicians have an incentive to sow distrust in mass media?
- Does propaganda work? Under what circumstances?

Literature - not exhaustive

Behavioral Info-Processing → Electoral Outcomes:

- Levy & Razin (2015), Ortoleva & Snowberg (2015)

Belief-based utility:

- Köszegi (2006), Akerlof & Dickens (1982)

Bayesian Persuasion (distill & aggregate):

- Kamenica & Gentzkow (2011), Kolotilin (2018), Lipnowski & Mathevet (2018)

Media Bias/Slant (Strategic Media):

- Perego & Yuksel (2022), Gitmez & Molavi (2022)
Mullainathan & Shleifer (2005), Gentzkow & Shapiro (2006),
Gentzkow et al. (2021)

Overview of Setup

Model of information acquisition followed by voting:

- Infinite agents of two types (R and L), half of each type
- Two states, two parties

Each agent receives two signals

1. Inside (S): Chosen signal structure (rich choice set)
2. Outside (s): Exogenous signal structure (many variants)

Objective: preserve political faith

- Maximize the likelihood that after the two signals are received, she believes that the state more likely matches her type

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Equivalent alternative

Two selves

- Heart:
 - Has a political identity
 - Chooses which media to consume
 - Gains utility if Mind votes for Heart's preferred party
- Mind:
 - Observes Inside and Outside signals
 - Updates rationally
 - Votes according to beliefs

Timing

1. Agent chooses a signal structure
2. State is realized
3. Signals (Inside and Outside) are realized i.i.d.
4. Belief updated - political faith may or may not be preserved
5. Sincere voting → Electoral outcome

Variants of Outside signal

Outside signal structure: $s \in \{r, l\}$

$$\mathbb{P}[s = l | \omega = L] = k, \quad \mathbb{P}[s = r | \omega = R] = m$$

Variants:

- **Asymmetric Exposure:** It is less precise for type- R agents
- **Distrust 1:** Type- R agents incorrectly believe it to be less precise
- **Distrust 2:** Type- R agents incorrectly believe it to be biased in favor of L
- **Propaganda:** It is biased in favor of party L and is known to be so
- **Surreptitious Propaganda:** It is biased in favor of party L and is not known to be so

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Type- R agent's problem

The utility function of an agent of type R is:

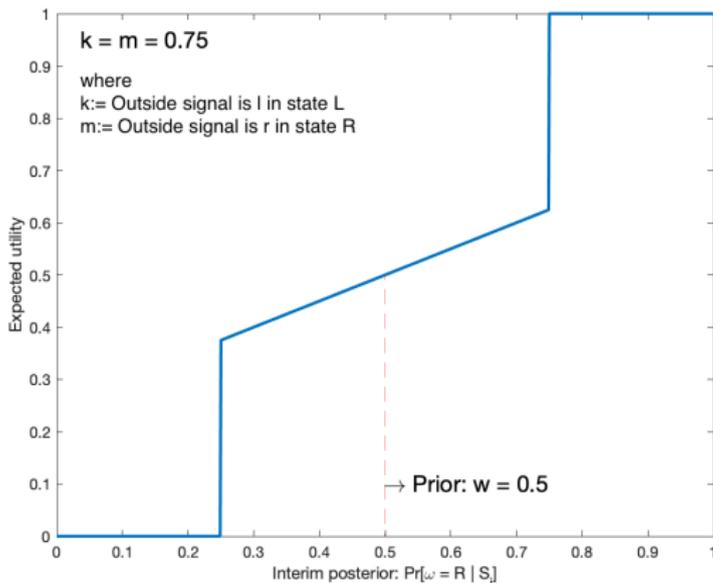
$$U_R = \begin{cases} 1, & \text{if } \mathbb{P}[\omega = R | S, s] \geq 0.5 \\ 0, & \text{otherwise} \end{cases}$$
$$\mathbb{E}[U_R] = \mathbb{P} \left[\mathbb{P}[\omega = R | S, s] \geq 0.5 \right] \quad (1)$$

The agent chooses the Inside signal structure to maximize (1)

Inside media: Our approach

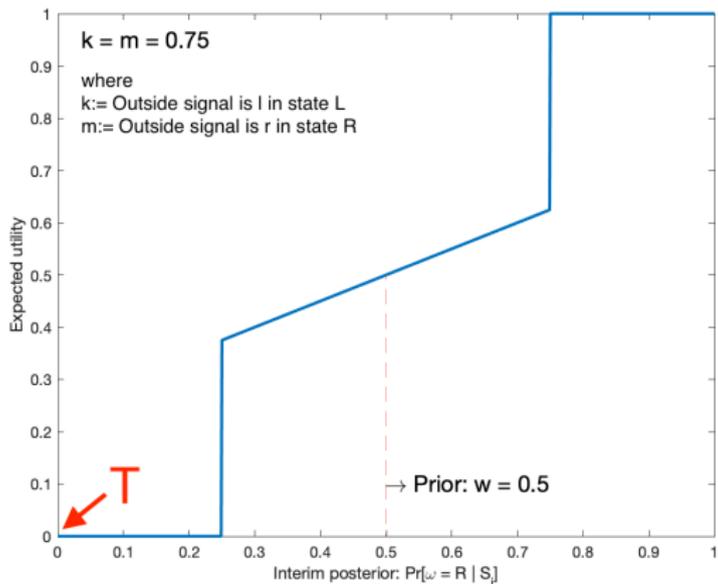
- Curated outlets → signal structure
- Sender with commitment
- Rational updating, Bayes plausibility
- Sufficient: binary signal structure
- Choice of media \equiv choice of bias

Expected utility depends on interim posteriors



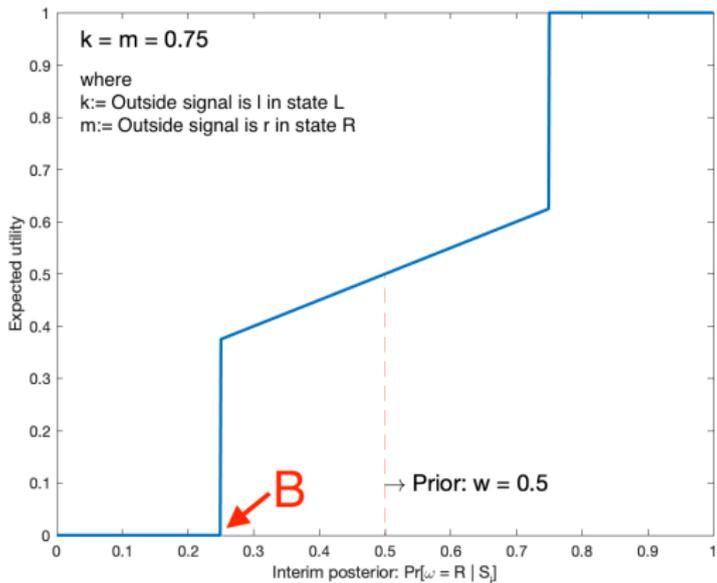
where interim posteriors are formed after observing Inside signal before observing Outside signal

Inside signals



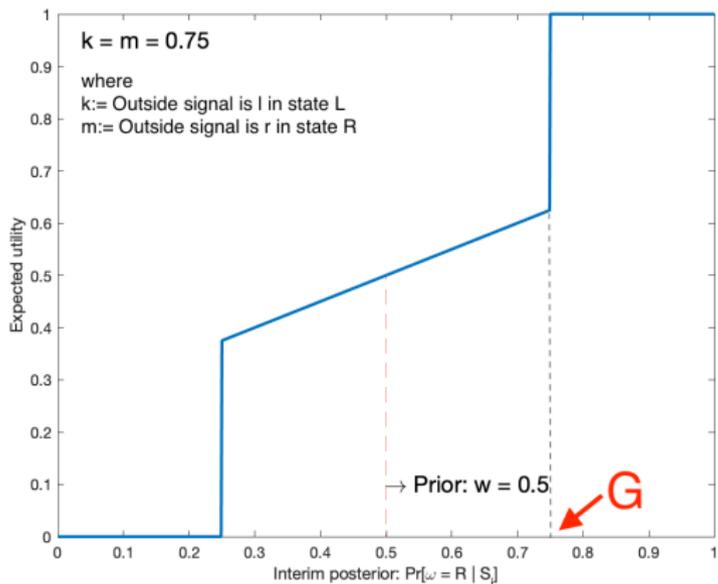
T is Terrible news: agent is sure that the state does not match her type

Inside signals



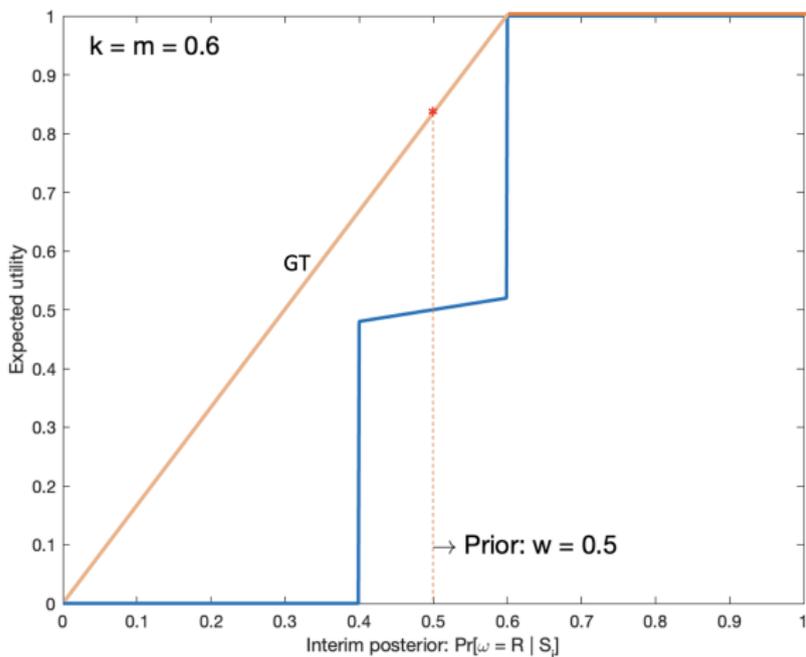
B is Bad news: not bad enough to overcome favorable Outside signal

Inside signals

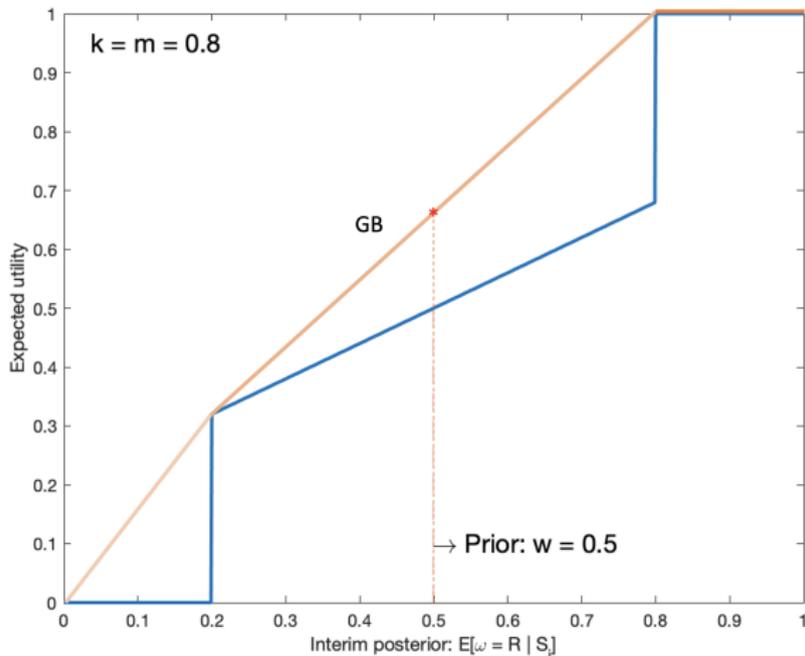


G is Good news: enough to overcome any Outside signal

Lower precision Outside signal



Higher precision Outside signal



GT versus *GB* (for a type-*R* agent)

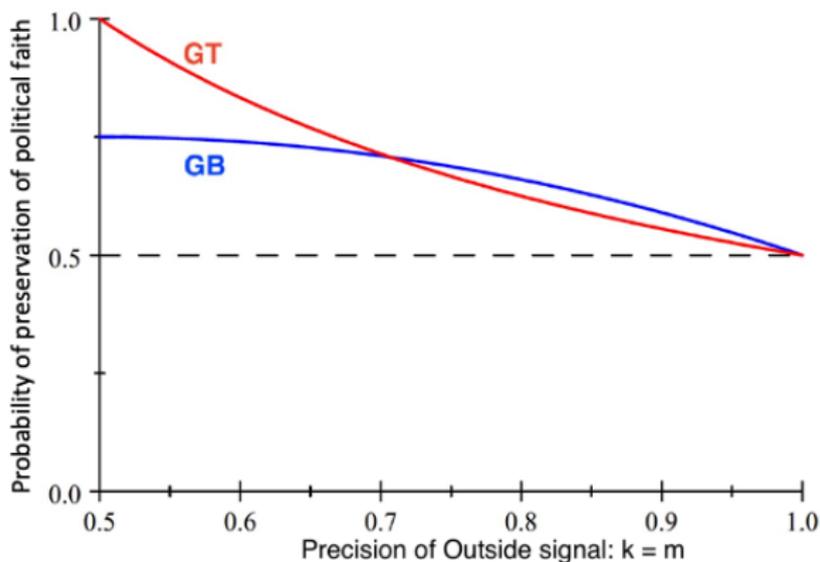
GT

- One-sided
 - In the favorable state ($\omega = R$), *G* always
 - In the unfavorable state ($\omega = L$), *G* sometimes
- Examples: Fox News for Trump, MSNBC for Biden

GB

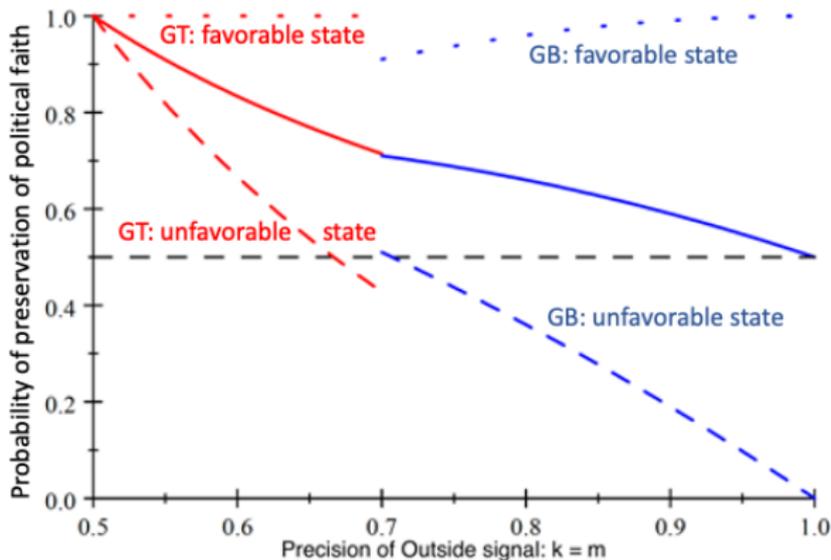
- Two-sided
 - In the favorable state ($\omega = R$), *G* sometimes
 - In the unfavorable state ($\omega = L$), *G* sometimes
- Examples: New York Times, Wall Street Journal (or whatever you think is more balanced)

GT versus GB - continued



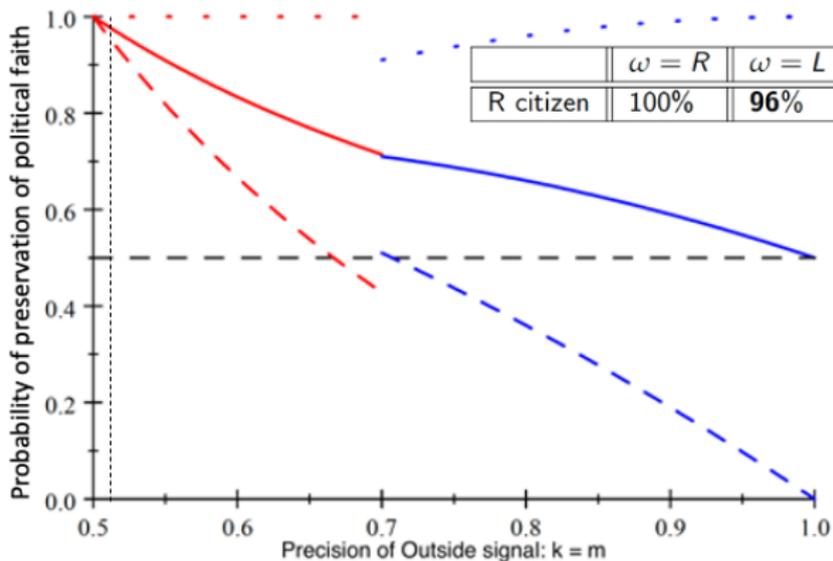
Choice of Inside signal structure reflects agent's beliefs (correct or incorrect) about Outside signal structure

Conditional chance of political faith preservation



Key example - information aggregation failure

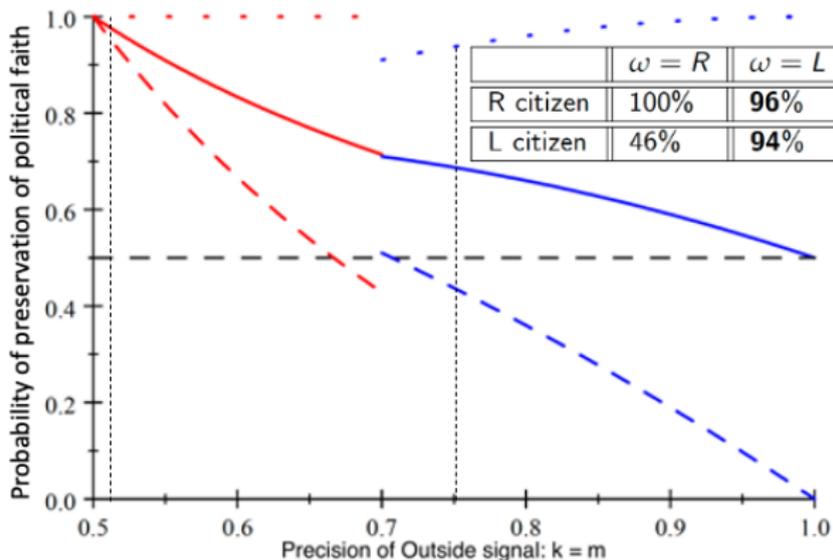
Suppose: $k_R = m_R = 0.51$



Key example - information aggregation failure

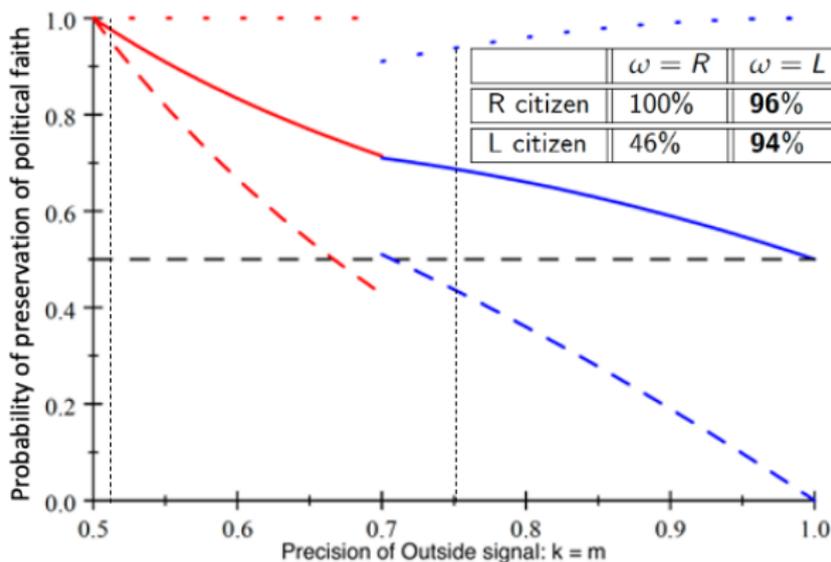
Suppose: $k_R = m_R = 0.51$

Suppose: $k_L = m_L = 0.75$



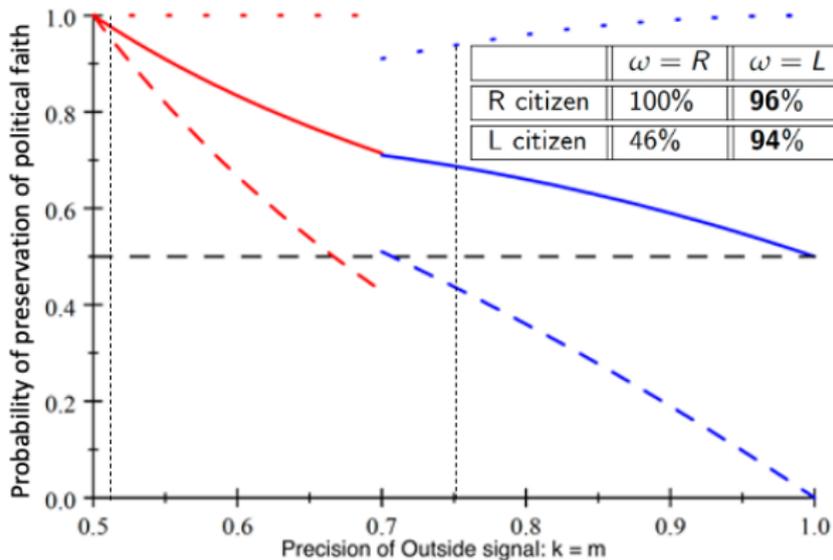
Some takeaways

1. R has a winning margin advantage
2. R can win even in state $L \Rightarrow$ Info Agg. Failure
3. Not knife-edge

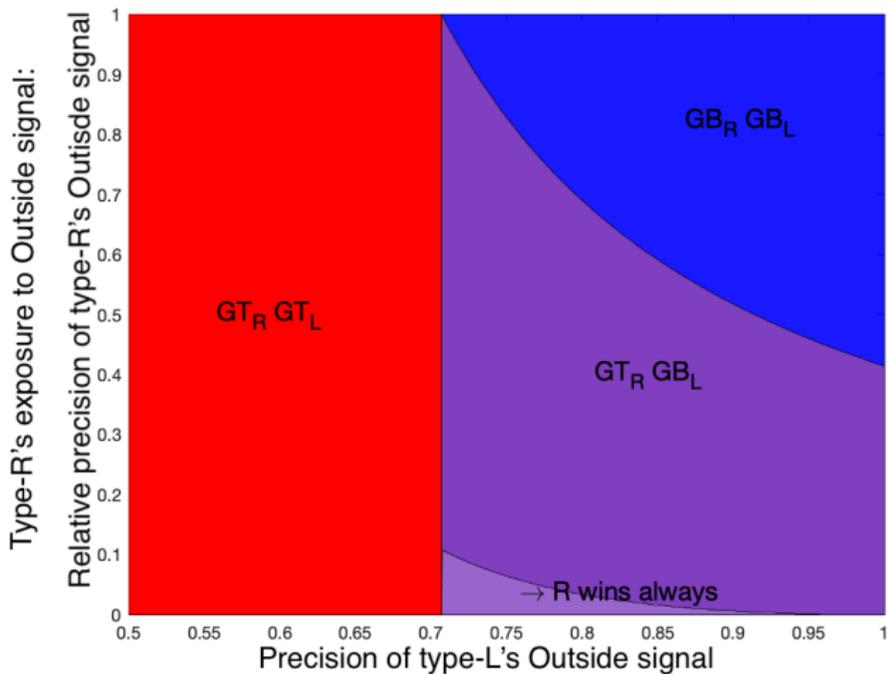


More takeaways

1. On aggregate: Political faith preservation \equiv Maximizing ex-ante expected vote share
2. Ex-ante optimal \rightarrow ex-post suboptimal
3. *Tragedy of science communication commons* - Kahan (2012)



Regions



No information misaggregation without Inside signal

Without Inside signal:

- Recall: prior $\mathbb{P}[\omega = R] = 0.5$
- Outside signal determines beliefs and votes
- Correct party always wins

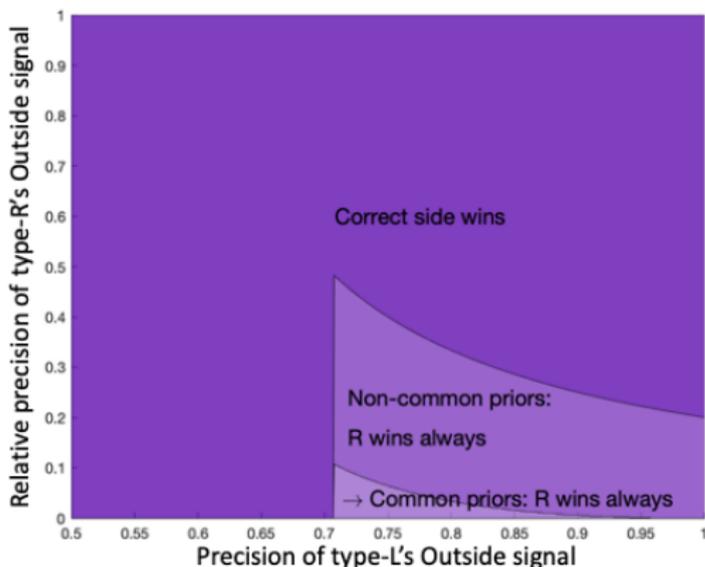
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Suppose: $k_L = m_L = 0.75$

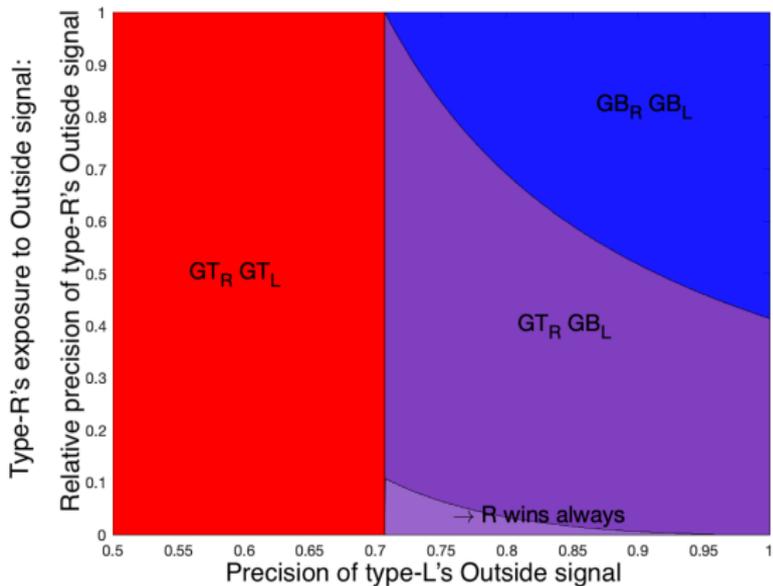
	<i>Ex-Ante</i>	$\omega = R$	$\omega = L$
R Win Margin	0%	+26%	-26%
R Win Prob	50%	100%	0%

Non-common priors

Heterogeneous priors in favor of own party expands the region of information aggregation failure ($w_R = 0.6$ and $w_L = 0.4$):



Distrust in mass media's precision



Same as asymmetric exposure

Distrust in mass media's unbiasedness

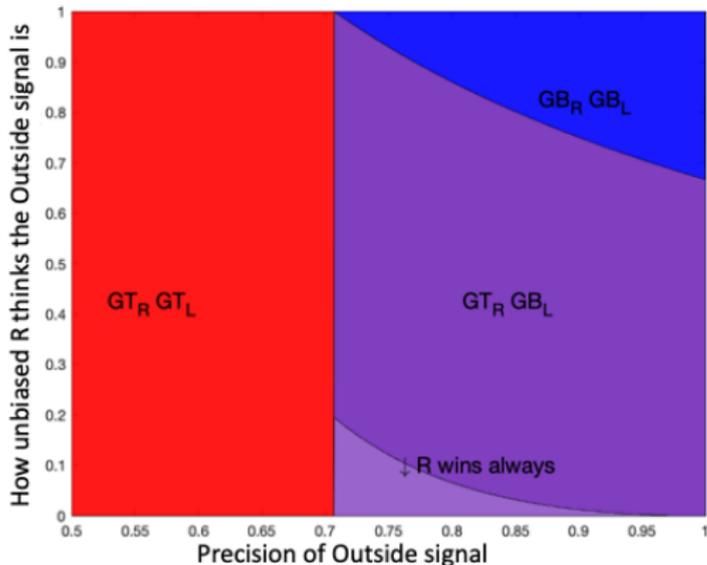
Media distrust \rightarrow incorrect belief that Outside signal is biased

Outside signal structure: $s \in \{r, l\}$

$$\mathbb{P}[s = l | \omega = L] = k, \quad \mathbb{P}[s = r | \omega = R] = m$$

Bias in favor of party $L \Rightarrow k > m$

Distrust in mass media's unbiasedness



Politicians have an incentive to sow distrust in mass media

Taking stock

Model features

- Agents are *wannabe* partisans
 - Want to vote for preferred party, but must convince themselves
 - A novel formalization of partisanship
- Dichotomization of media

Model results:

- Media choice reflects beliefs about media landscape
- Info aggregation failure with combination of:
 - Low exposure and Moderate exposure
 - Low trust and Moderate trust

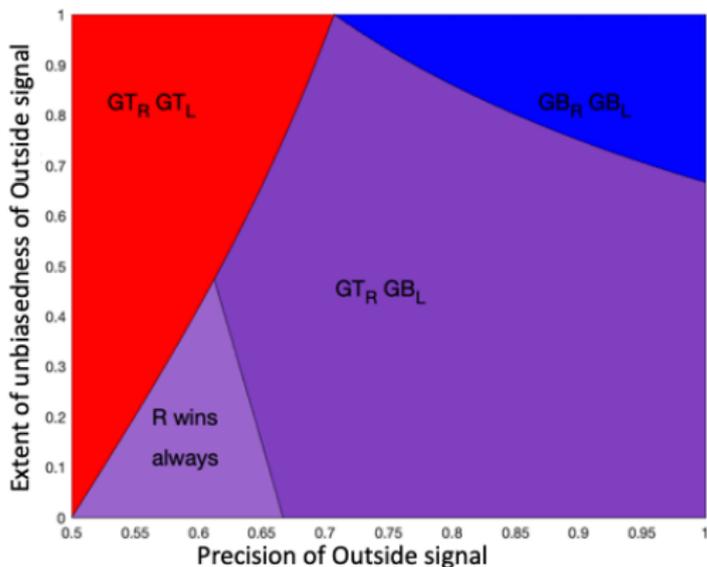
Propaganda

Suppose Putin (L) in Russia influences the media landscape:

- More pro-Putin and less anti-Putin news is realized
- Biases the Outside signal

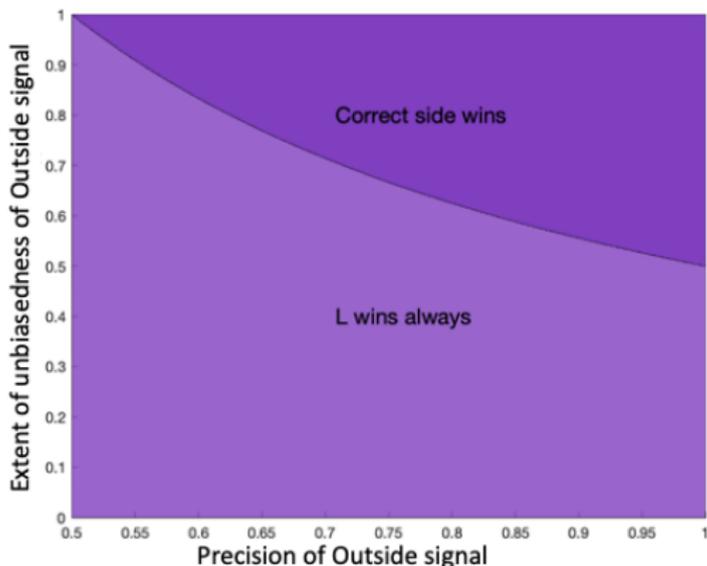
- Pro-Putin Outside signal is not very informative
- Type R citizens can preserve political faith more easily

Propaganda backfires



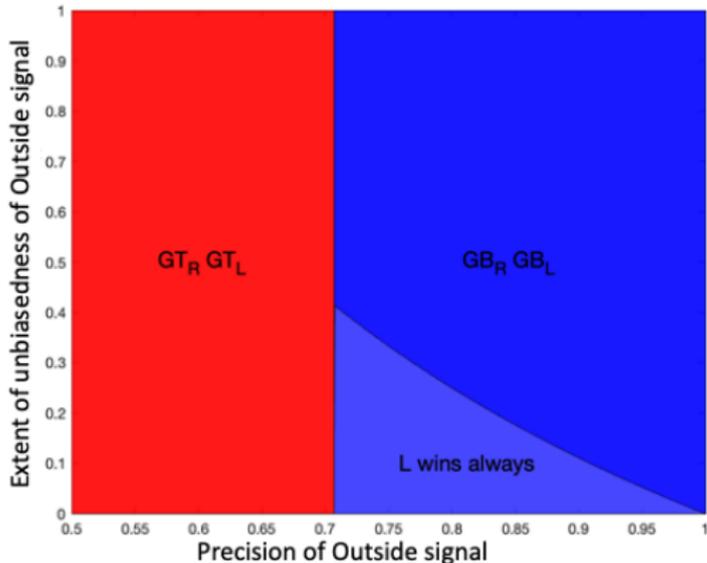
Freely available Inside media makes propaganda fail

Propaganda with censorship



Possible explanation why authoritarian regimes employ both propaganda, and censorship

Surreptitious Propaganda



May explain why propaganda outlets try to seem unbiased

Conclusion

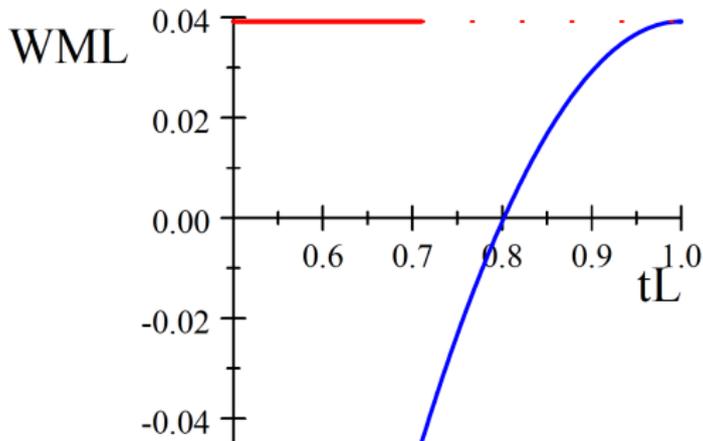
1. Agent's choice of Inside signal structure reflects her beliefs about Outside signal structure
 - Belief that the Outside signal is imprecise or biased against her
→ One-sided Inside signal structure
2. Less exposed side can win always (for some parameters)
3. Sowing distrust about mass media can be advantageous
4. Propaganda backfires without censorship or surreptitiousness
5. Results survive extensions (with nuances): heterogeneous priors, gain from learning truth, gain from more favorable posteriors, abstention, etc.
6. Results aren't knife-edge

Impact on Elections - continued

Result holds for a range of t_R and t_L

Fix $t_R = 0.51$, and suppose $\omega = L$

Consider the winning margin for party L



Impact on Elections - continued

This is not knife-edge. The result is robust to:

- More type L agents than R
- Common prior being slightly more favorable to L
- Small amount of correlation between signals

References

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