EXAMINING MOTIVATIONS IN INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION EXPERIMENTS

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Examining Motivations in Interpersonal Communication Experiments

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Abstract: Does interpersonal political communication improve the quality of individual decision-making? While deliberative theorists offer reasons for hope, experimental researchers have demonstrated that biased messages can travel via interpersonal social networks. We argue that the value of interpersonal political communication depends on the motivations of the people involved, which can be shifted by different contexts. Using small-group experiments that randomly assign participants’ motivations to seek or share information with others as well as their motivations for evaluating the information they receive, we demonstrate the importance of accounting for motivations in communication. We find that when individuals with more extreme preferences are motivated to acquire and share information, collective civic capacity is diminished. But if we can stimulate the exchange of information among individuals with stronger prosocial motivations, such communication can enhance collective civic capacity. We also provide advice for other researchers about conducting similar group-based experiments to study political communication.

Keywords: interpersonal communication, group experiments, motivations

JEL classifications: A12, B34, C56, D78, E90

The appendix for this Element can be found online at: https://cambridge.org/examining-motivations-appendix

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