

# Who's to Blame for Survey Instability: Respondents with Nonexistent Preferences or Researchers with Flawed Measures?<sup>1</sup>

Gary King<sup>2</sup>

Institute for Quantitative Social Science  
Harvard University

Society for Political Methodology, 7/18/2026

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<sup>1</sup>Slides, paper, data: [GaryKing.org/instability](https://garyking.org/instability)

<sup>2</sup>Joint work with [Libby Jenke](#), University of Houston

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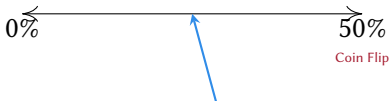
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- **What % answer differently?** 0%  50%

Coin Flip

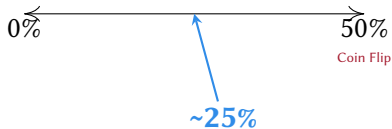
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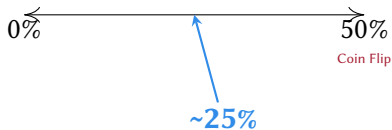
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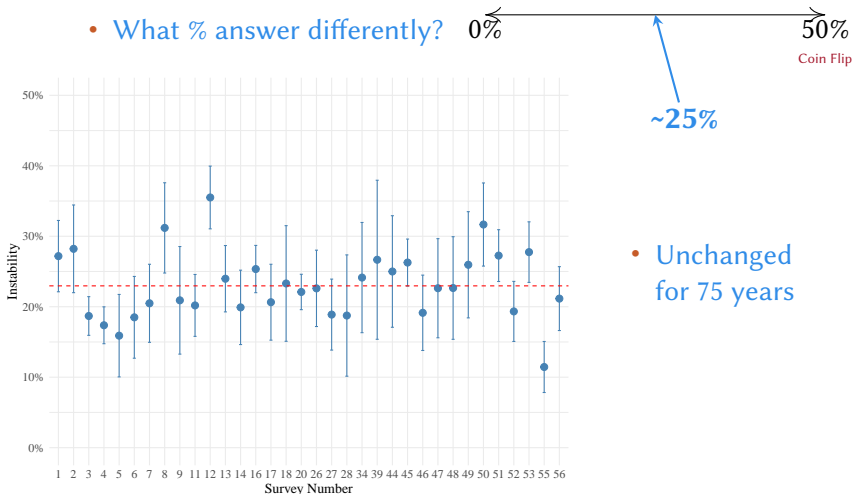
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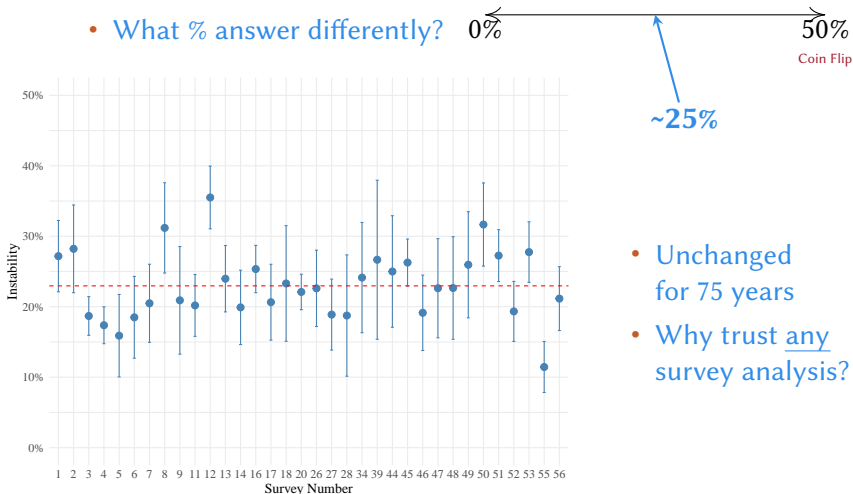
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- Why trust any survey analysis?

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## A Binary Choice Conjoint Question


(Ono and Burden, 2018)

Please carefully review the two potential candidates running for election to the U.S. House of Representatives, detailed below.

	<b>Candidate 0</b>	<b>Candidate 1</b>
Race/Ethnicity	Hispanic	Asian American
Age	52	60
Favorability rating among the public	70%	34%
Position on immigrants	Favors giving citizenship or guest worker status to undocumented immigrants	Opposes giving citizenship or guest worker status to undocumented immigrants
Party affiliation	Republican Party	Democratic Party
Position on abortion	Abortion is not a private matter (pro-life)	Abortion is a private matter (pro-choice)
Position on government deficit	Wants to reduce the deficit through tax increase	Wants to reduce the deficit through tax increase
Salient personal characteristics	Really cares about people like you	Really cares about people like you
Position on national security	Wants to cut military budget and keep the U.S. out of war	Wants to maintain strong defense and increase U.S. influence
Gender	Female	Female
Policy area of expertise	Education	Foreign policy
Family	Single (divorced)	Married (no child)
Experience in public office	12 years	4 years

If you had to choose between them, which of these candidates would you vote to be a member of the U.S. House of Representatives?


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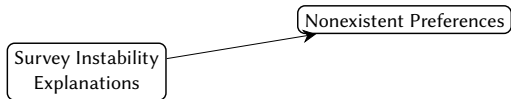
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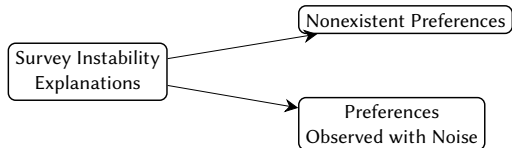
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Survey Instability  
Explanations

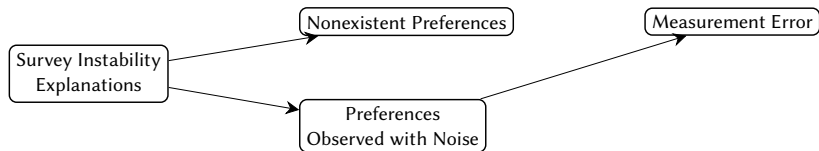
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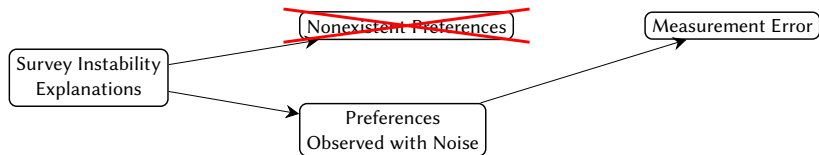
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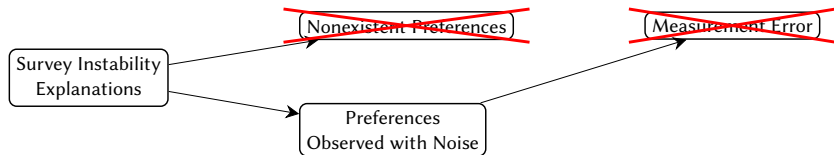
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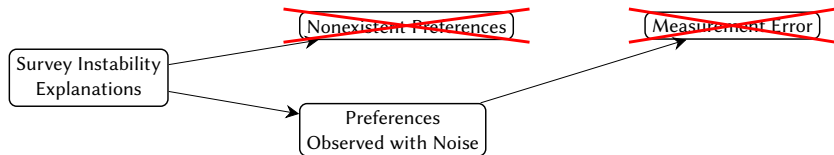
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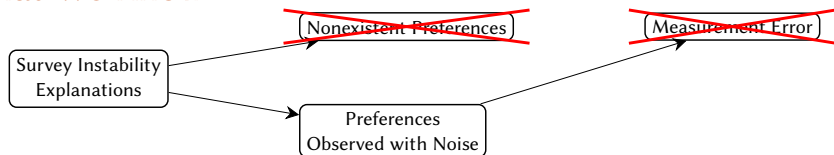


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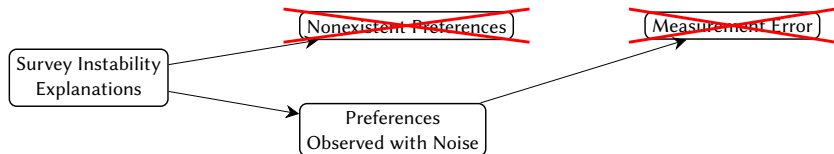
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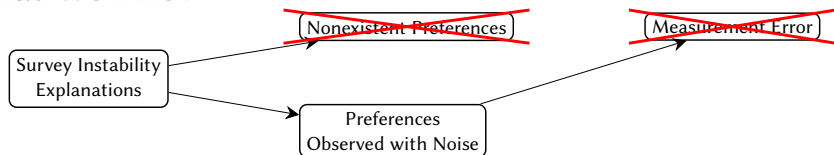
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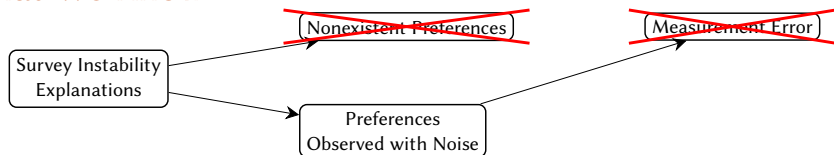
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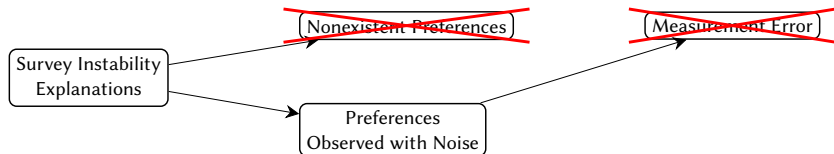
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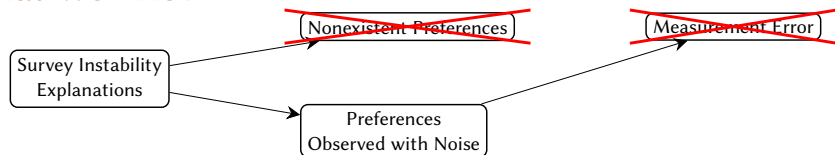
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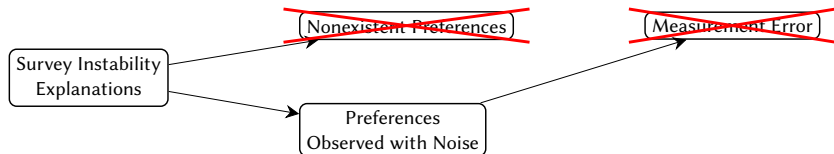
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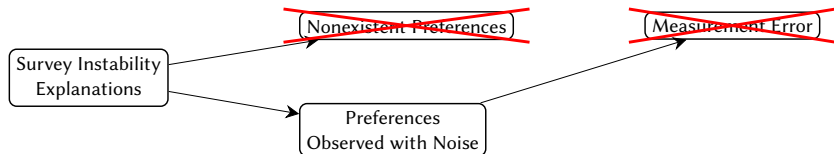


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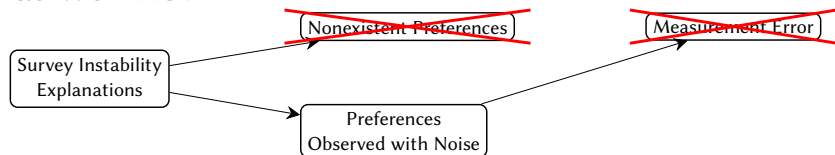
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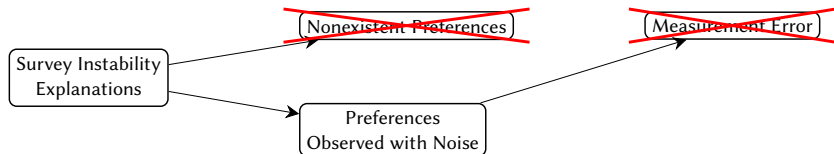
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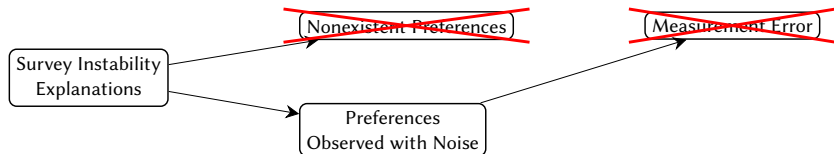
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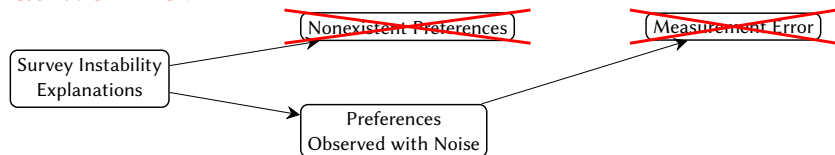
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- **The Literature:** must be, because people have preferences!
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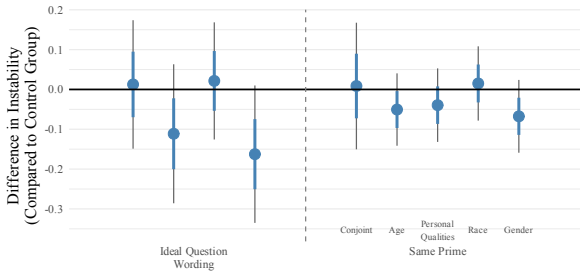
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Survey Instability  
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## Reducing Bias Doesn't Reduce Instability



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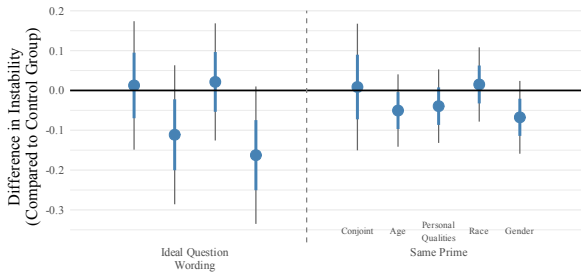
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- Left: 2008 ANES question wording changes

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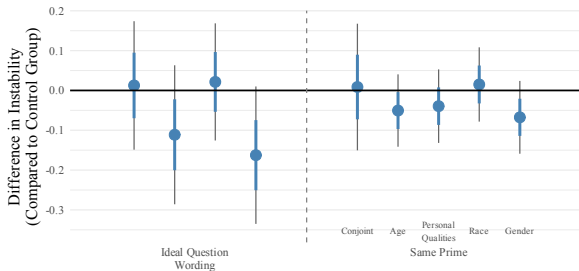
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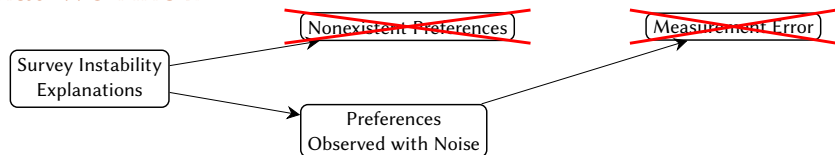
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# What We Know



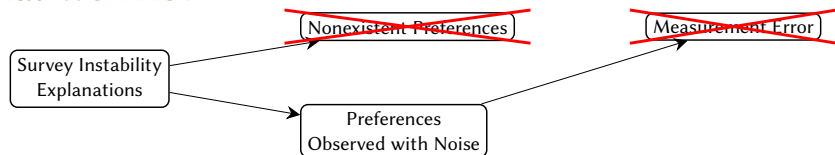
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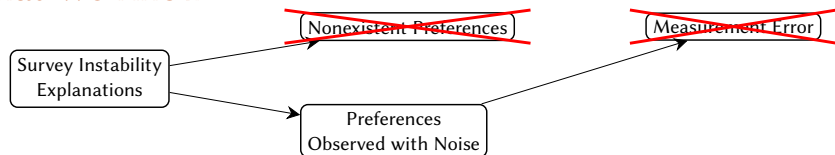
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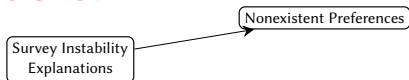
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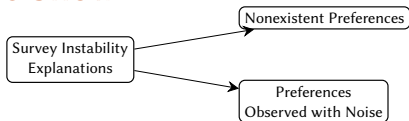
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Survey Instability  
Explanations

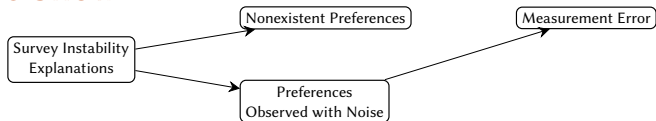
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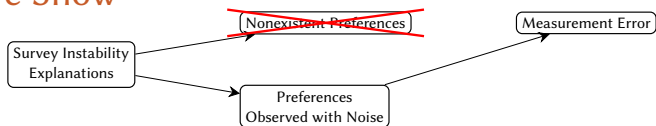
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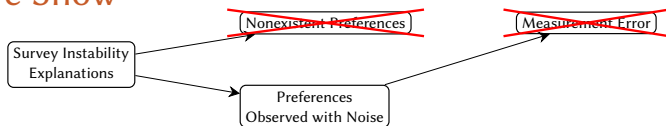
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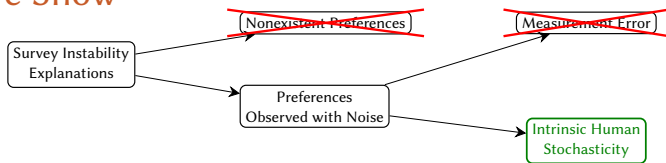
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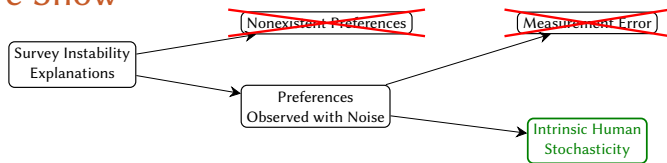
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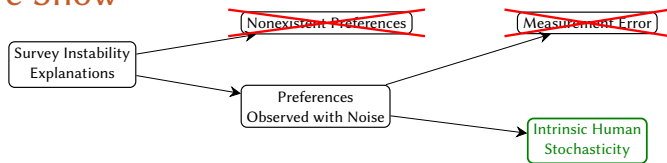


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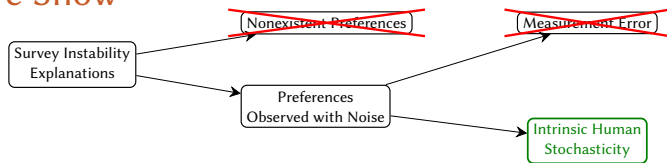
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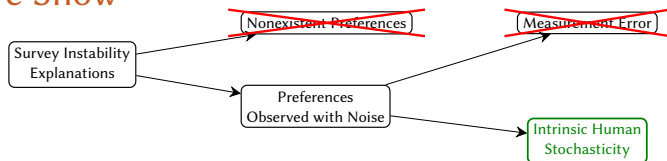
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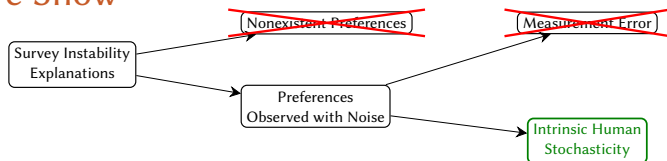
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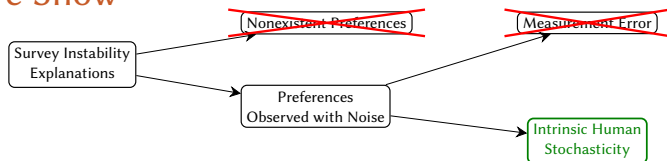
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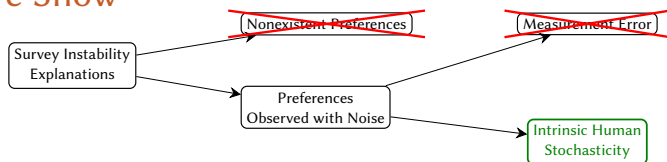
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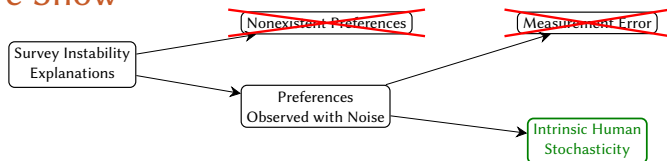
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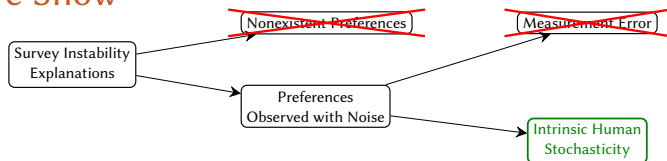
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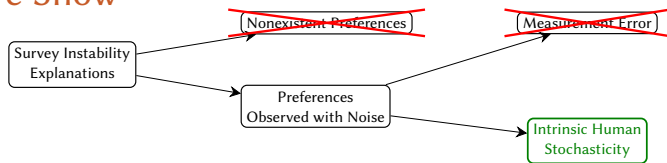
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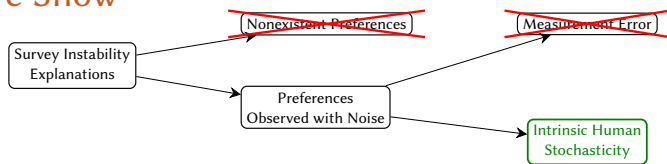
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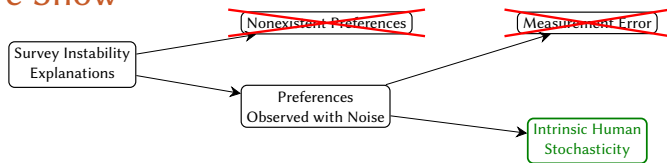
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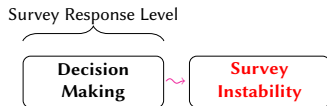


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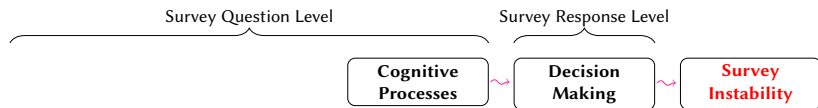
# Sources of Stochasticity Leading to Survey Instability

**Survey  
Instability**

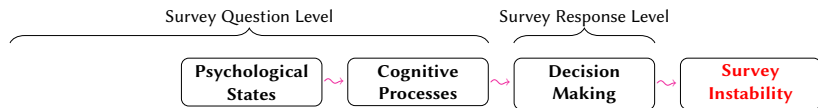
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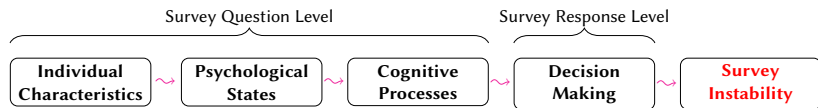
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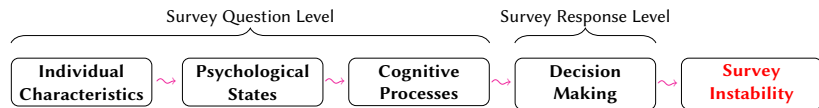
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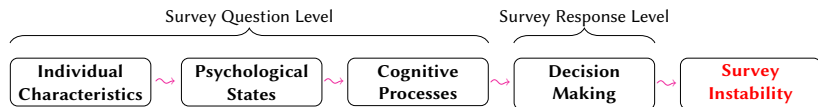


# Sources of Stochasticity Leading to Survey Instability



Used to find

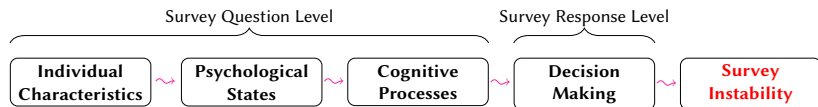
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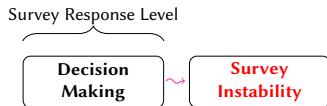
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**Election Day**


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- In 6/10, Party A is better for you than Party B.
- How many Party A candidates will you choose?

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$C_t$

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- Budget constraint:  $\sum_{i=1}^n x_i = B$

- Consumption bundle:  $C_t = (x_1, x_2, \dots, x_n)$

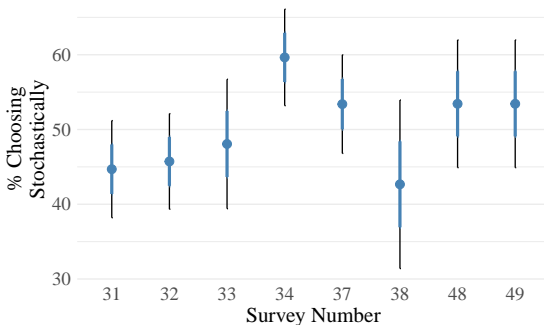
- History

$C_t$  {

- L

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## Decision Making: Highly Stochastic!



)]

= 0

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eons...)

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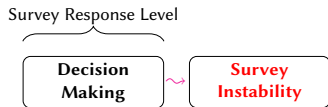
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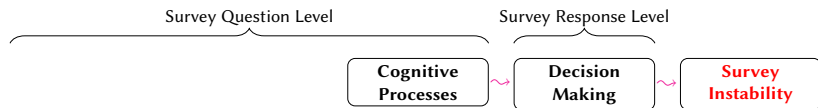
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**Survey  
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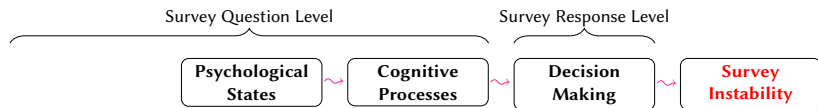
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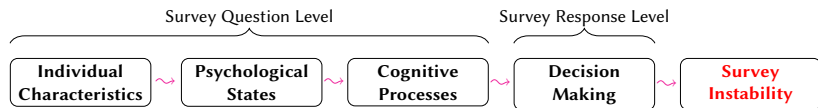
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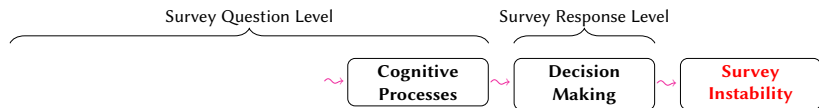
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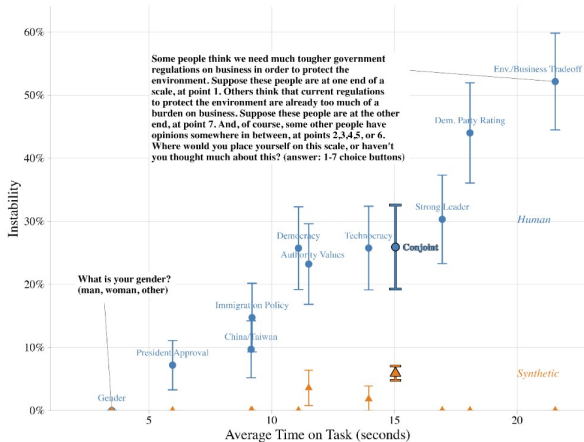
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What

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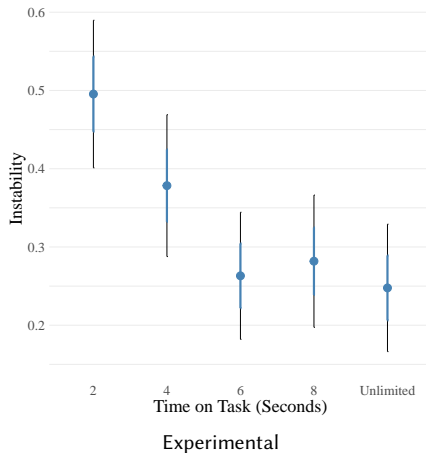
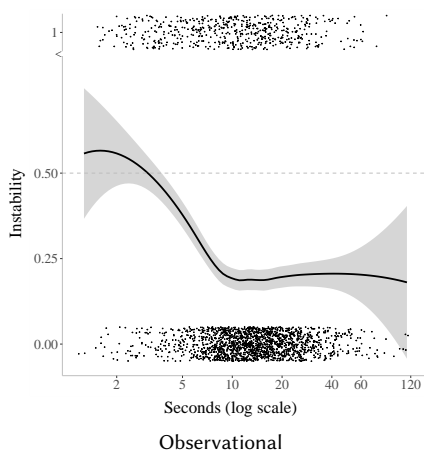
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## Limited time-on-task causes survey instability




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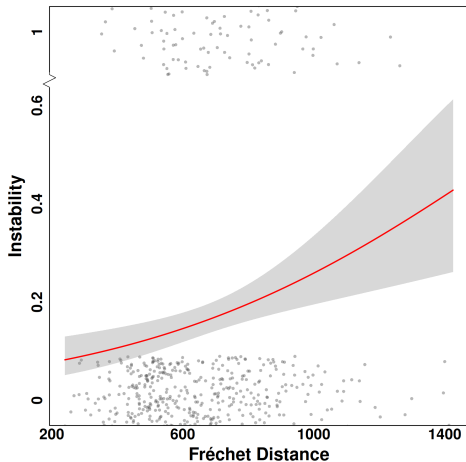
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## Stochastic Distance $\rightsquigarrow$ Survey Instability




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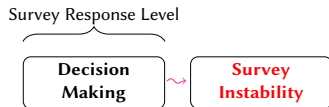
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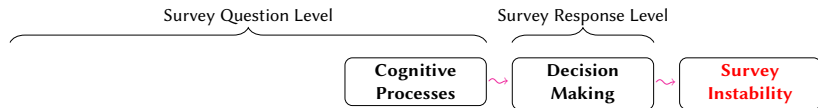
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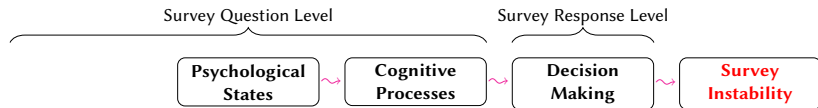
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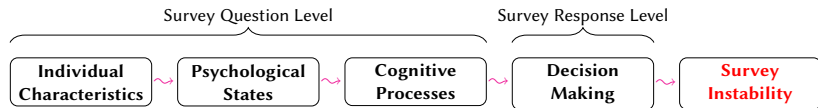
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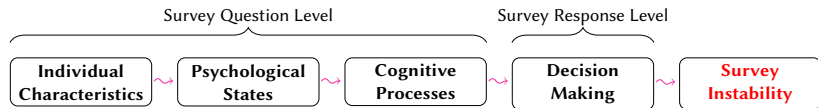
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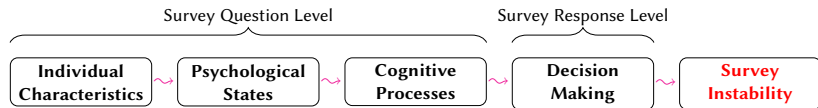
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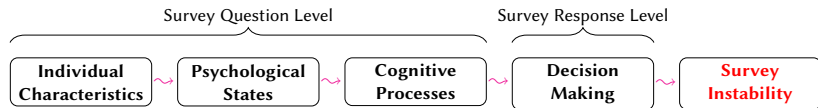


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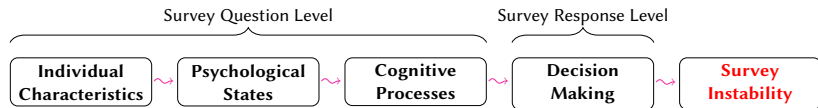
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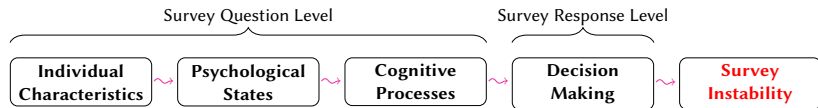
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- **Psychological States Summary**
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Everyone comes to a new task (like this survey) with things on their minds. How preoccupied were you, just before you started this survey, with thoughts or worries about your partner, job, health, children, friends, money, or other concerns?

{Very, Fairly, Slightly, Not at all} Preoccupied

# So Who's to Blame for Survey Instability?

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Explanations:

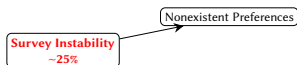
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Survey Instability  
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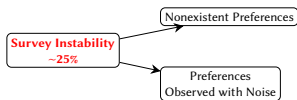
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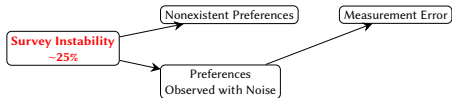
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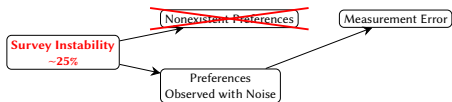
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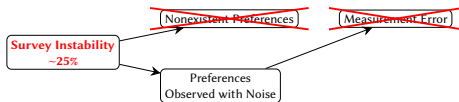
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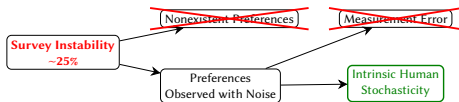
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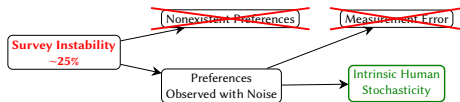
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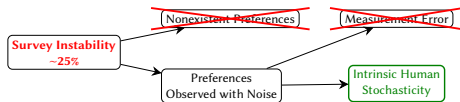
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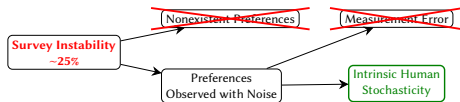


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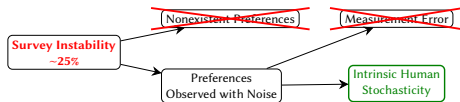


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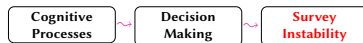


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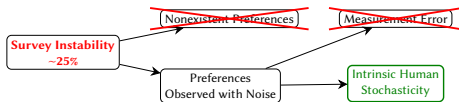


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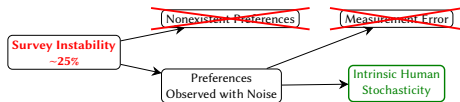


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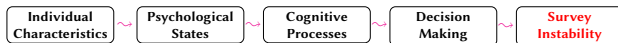


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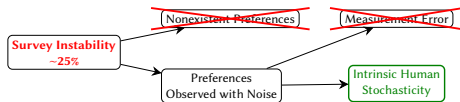


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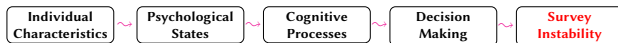


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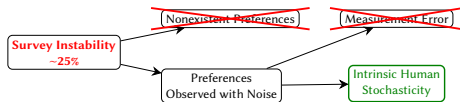
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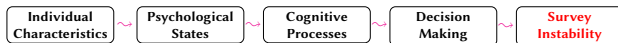
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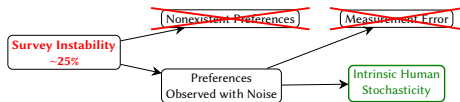


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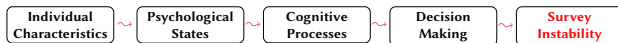
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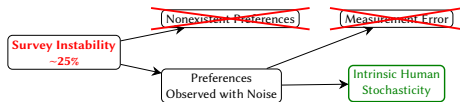


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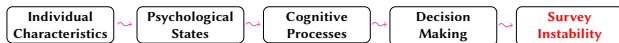
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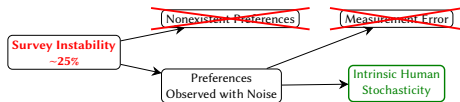


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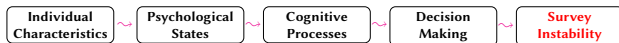
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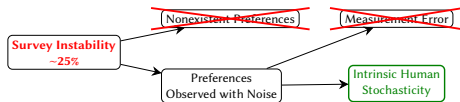


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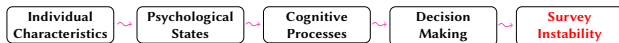
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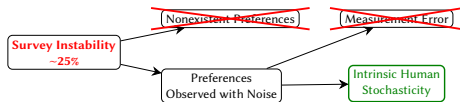


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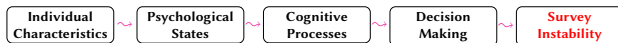
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  - preoccupied (no attention checks)

# So Who's to Blame for Survey Instability?

## Explanations:



## Sources:

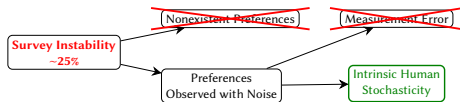


## Implications:

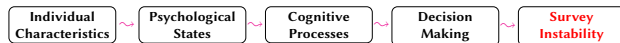
- **Improve instruments:**
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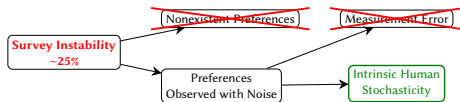


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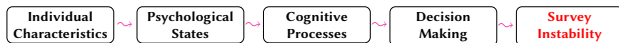
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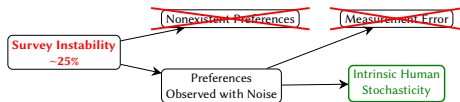


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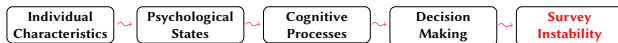
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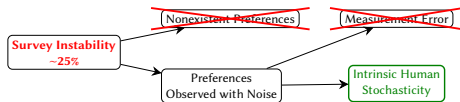


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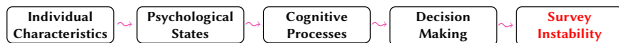
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# So Who's to Blame for Survey Instability?

## Explanations:



## Sources:



## Implications:

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