Who's to Blame for Survey Instability:
Respondents with Nonexistent Preferences or Researchers with Flawed Measures?[1]

Gary King[2]

Institute for Quantitative Social Science
Harvard University

American Political Science Association, 9/5/2026

[1] Slides, paper, data: GaryKing.org/instability
[2] Joint work with Libby Jenke

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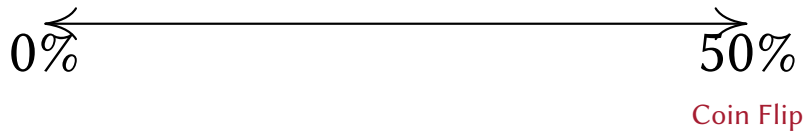

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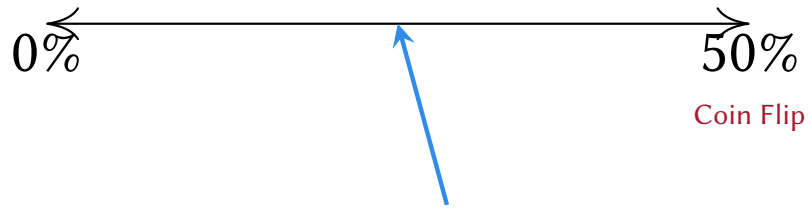

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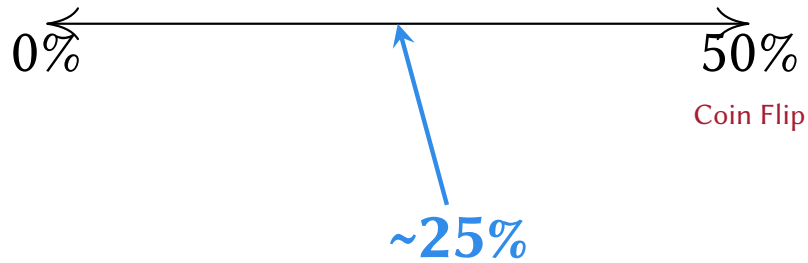

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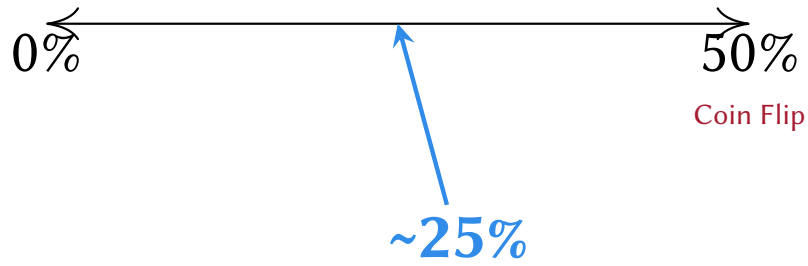

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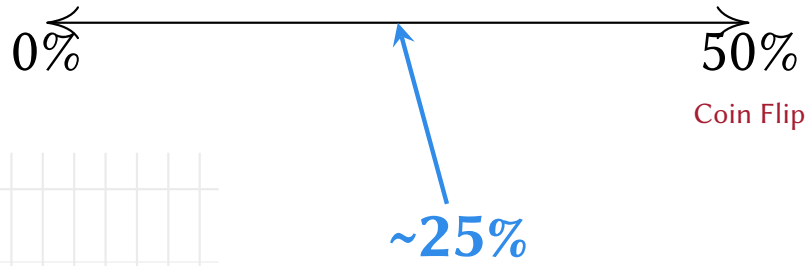

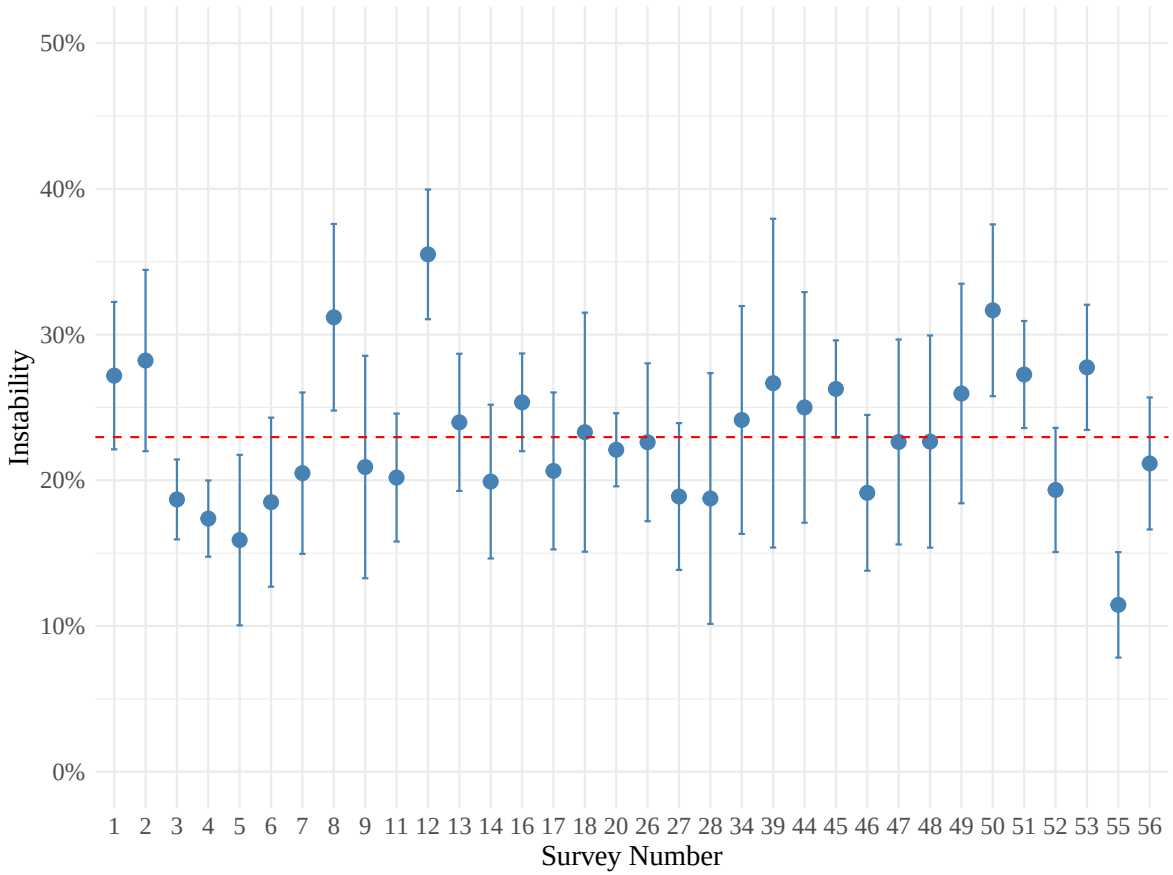

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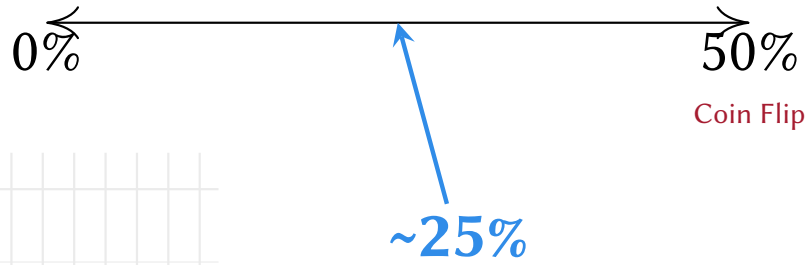

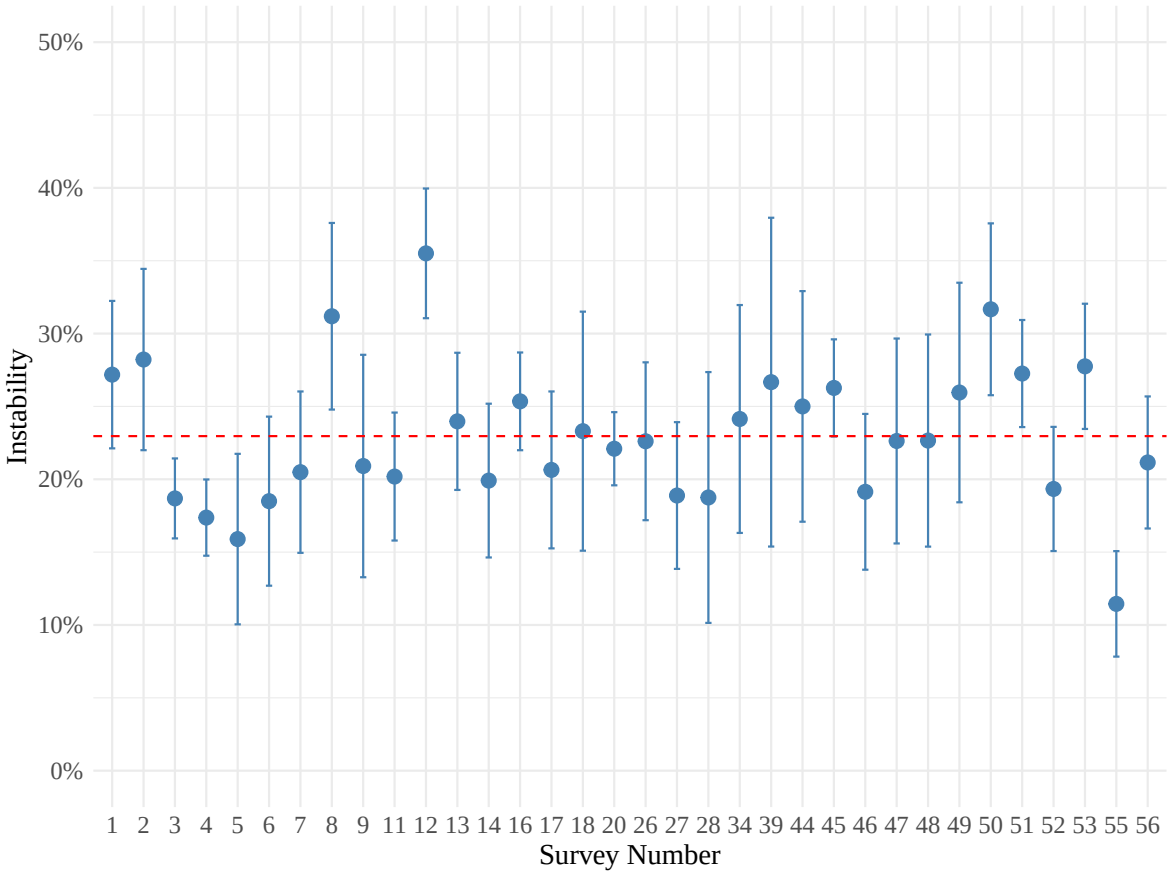

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- Why trust any survey analysis?

Research Strategy

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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.

	Candidate 0	**Candidate 1**
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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What We Know

Survey Instability Explanations

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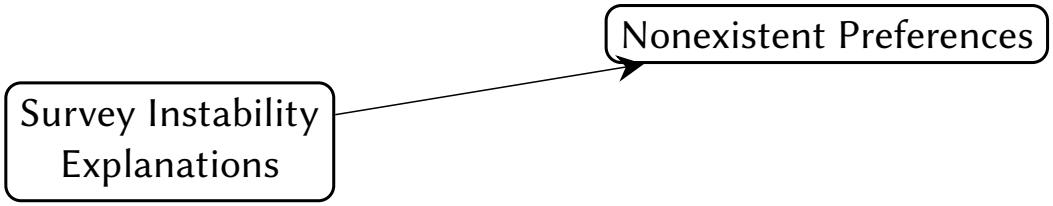
Nonexistent Preferences
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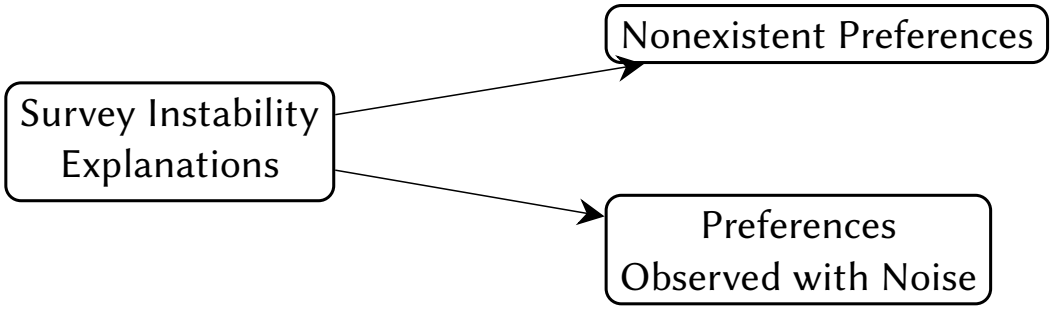
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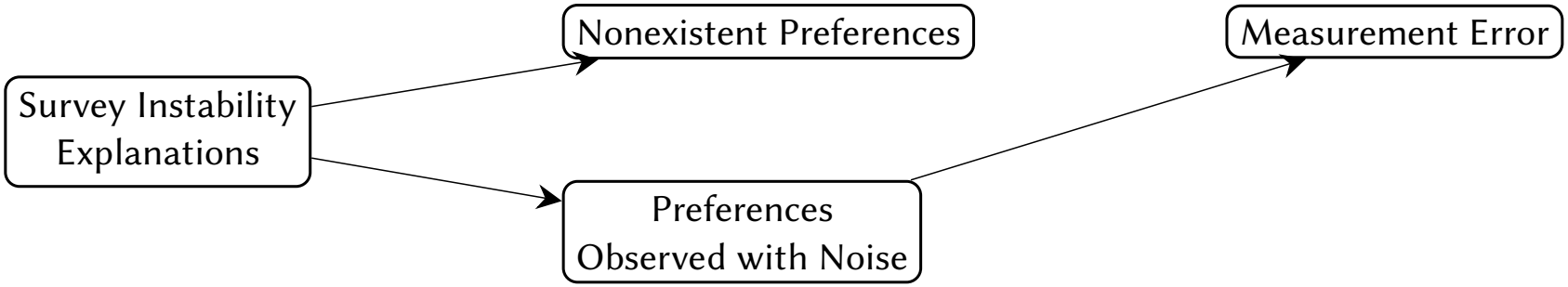
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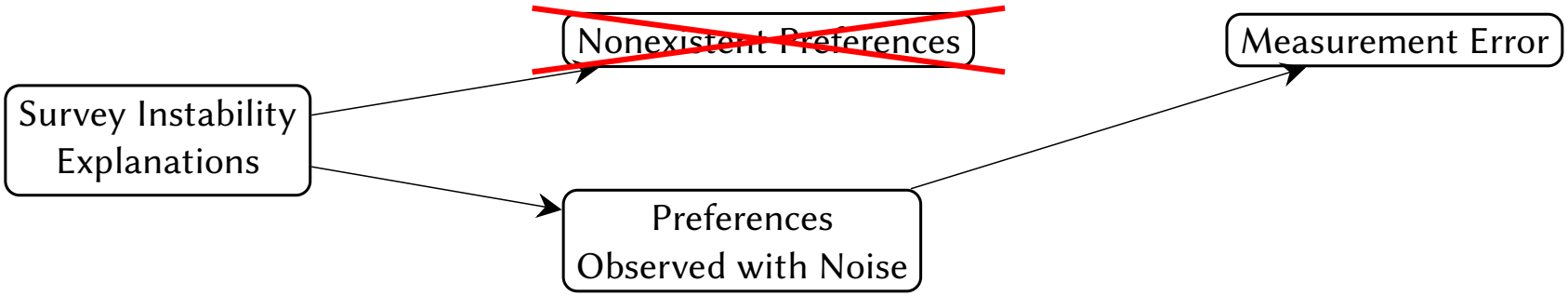
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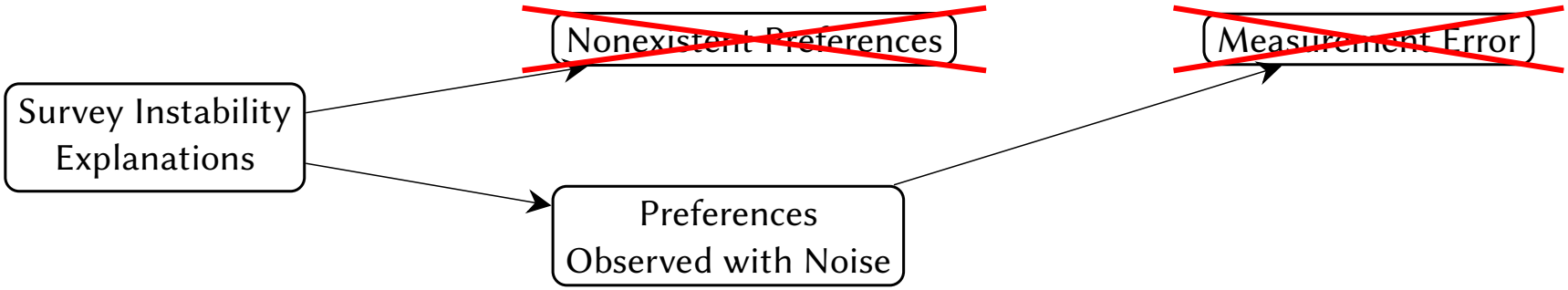
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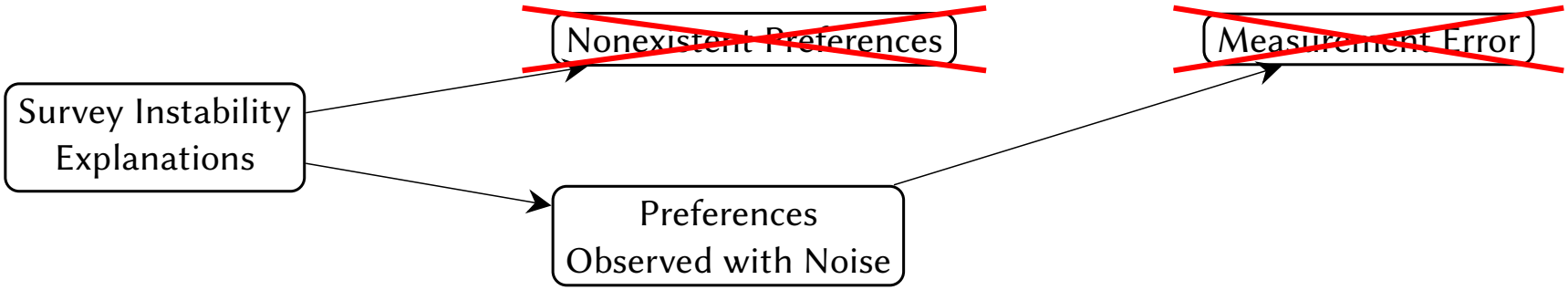

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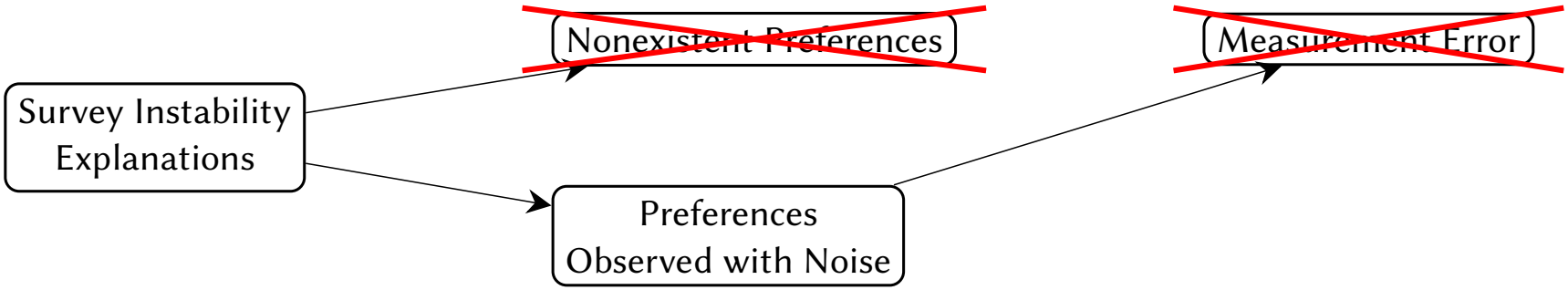

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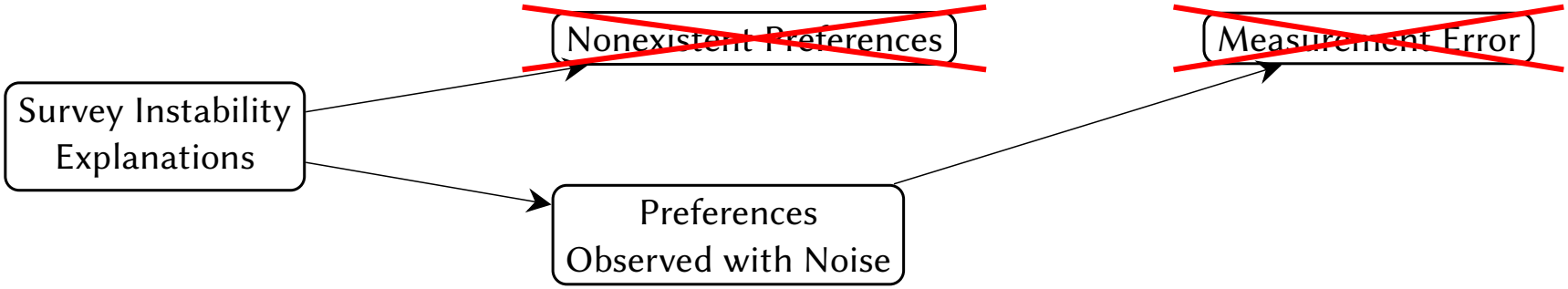

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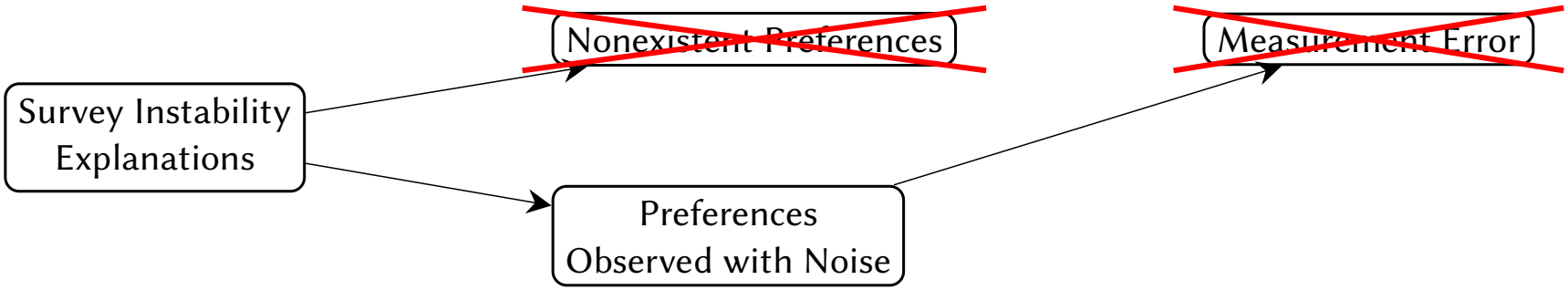

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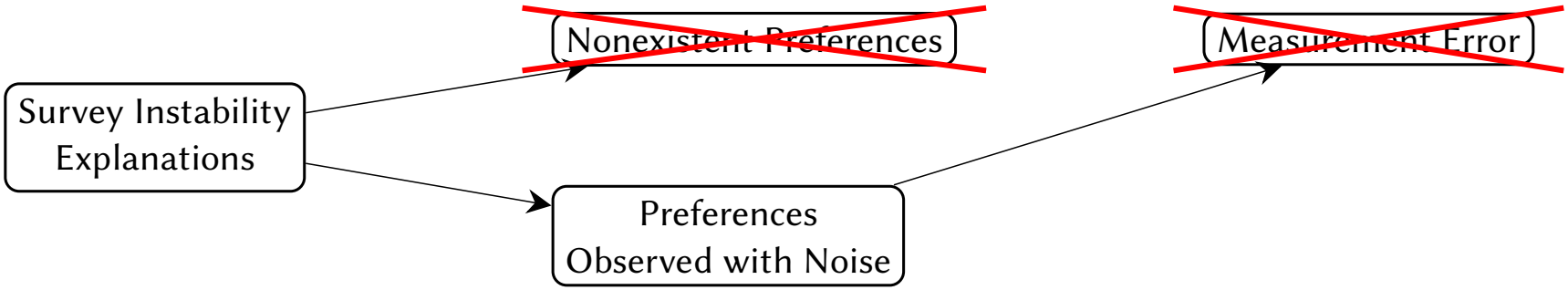

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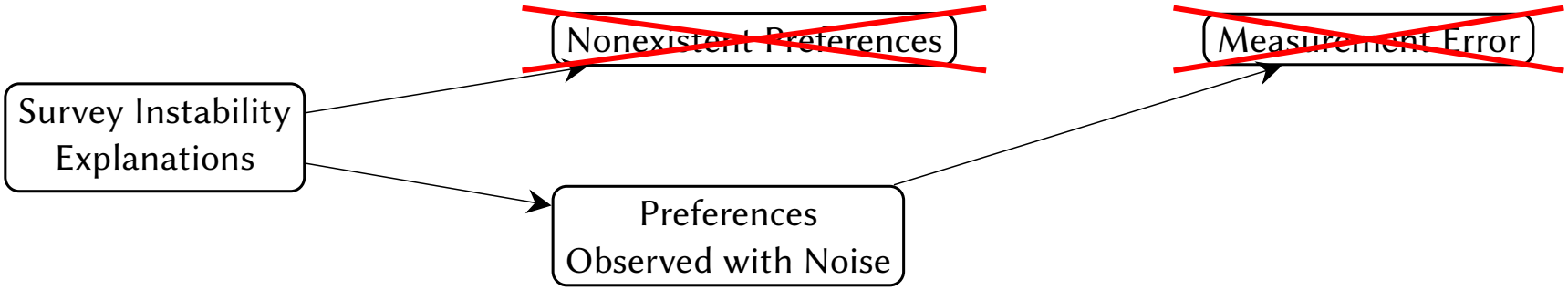

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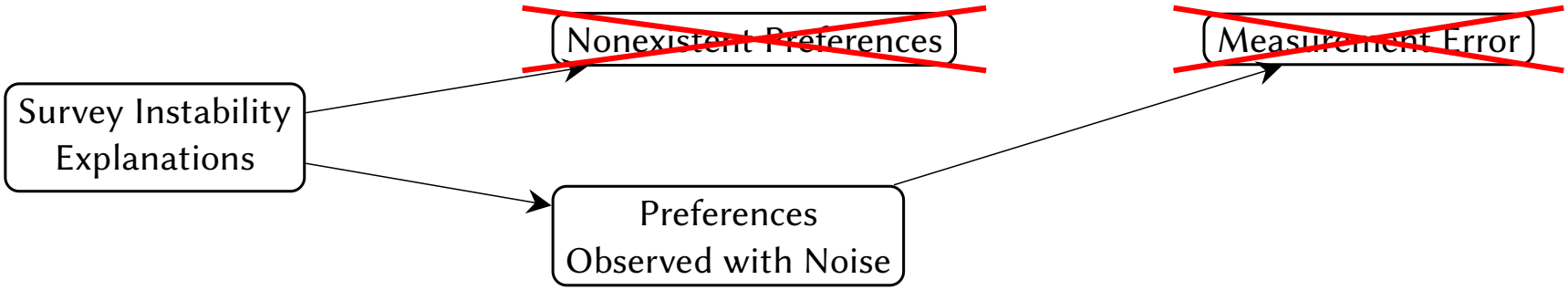

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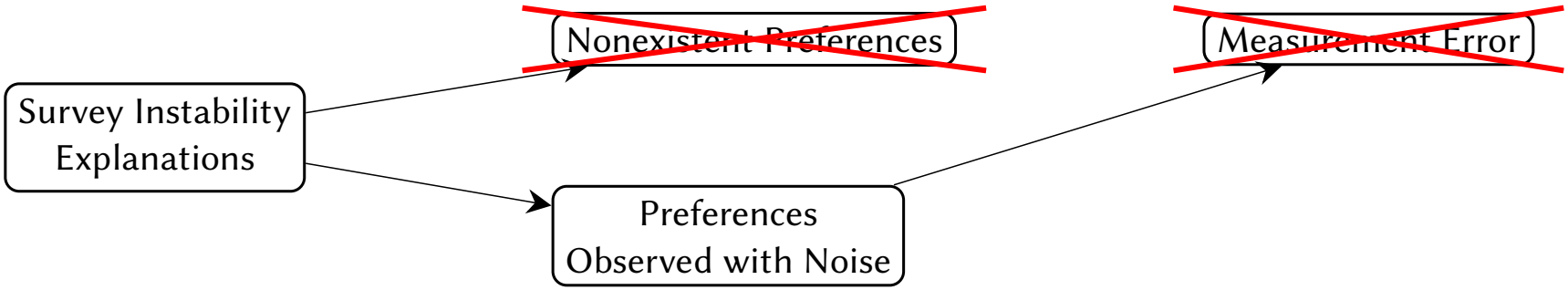

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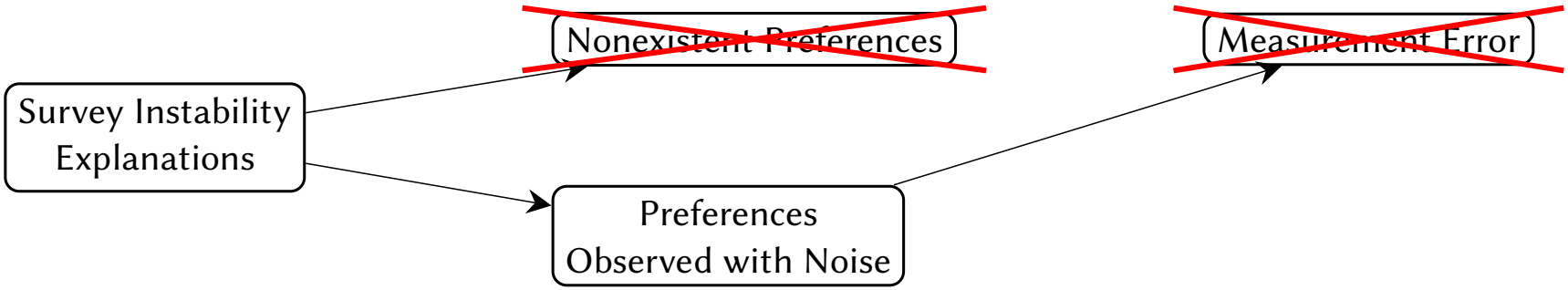

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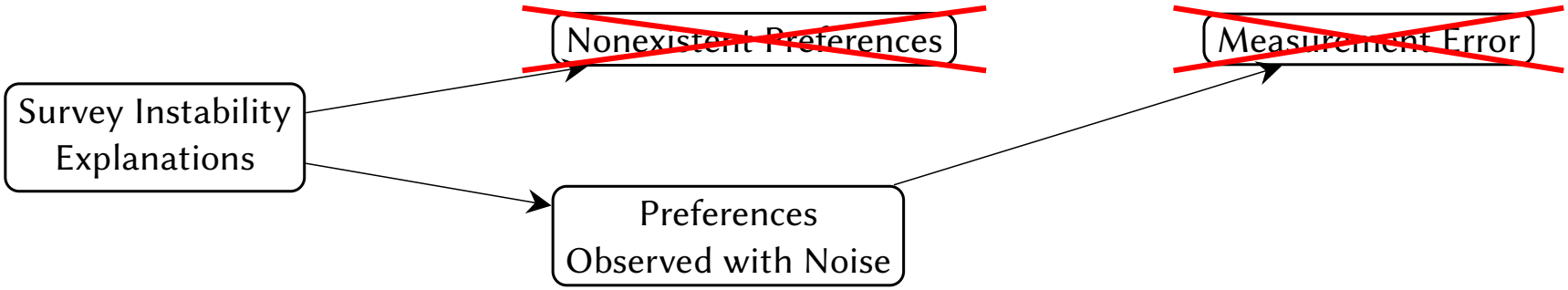

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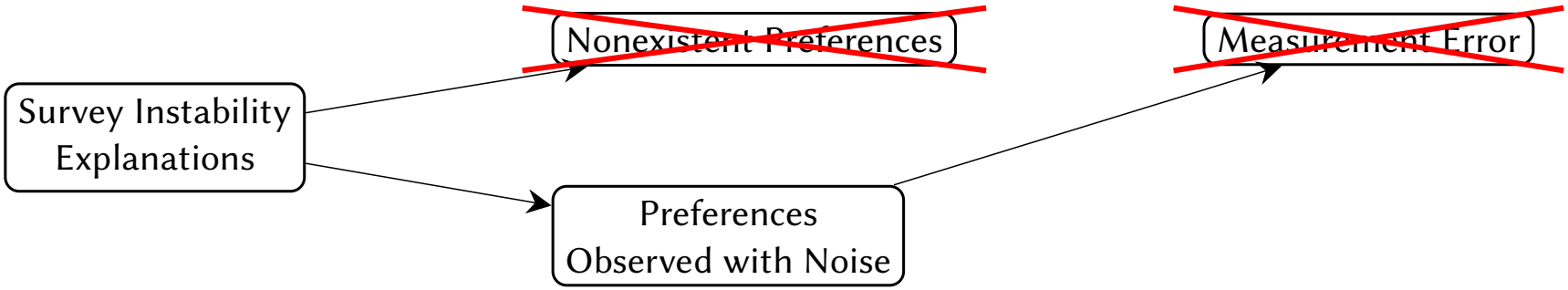

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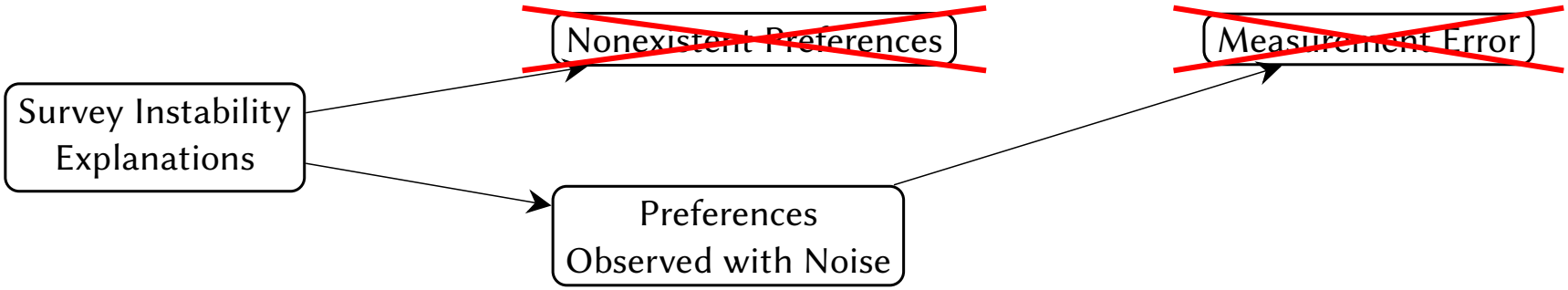

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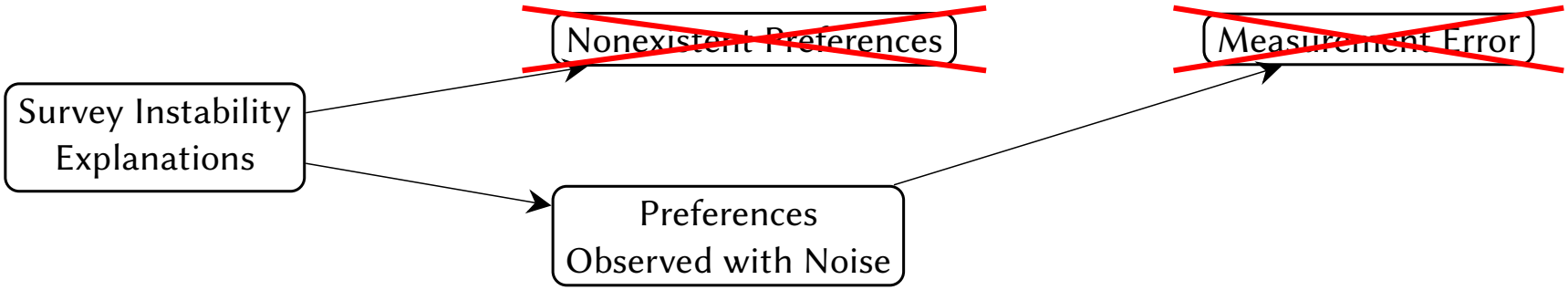

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  - ~all evidence contradicts Converse
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  - Survey improvements:
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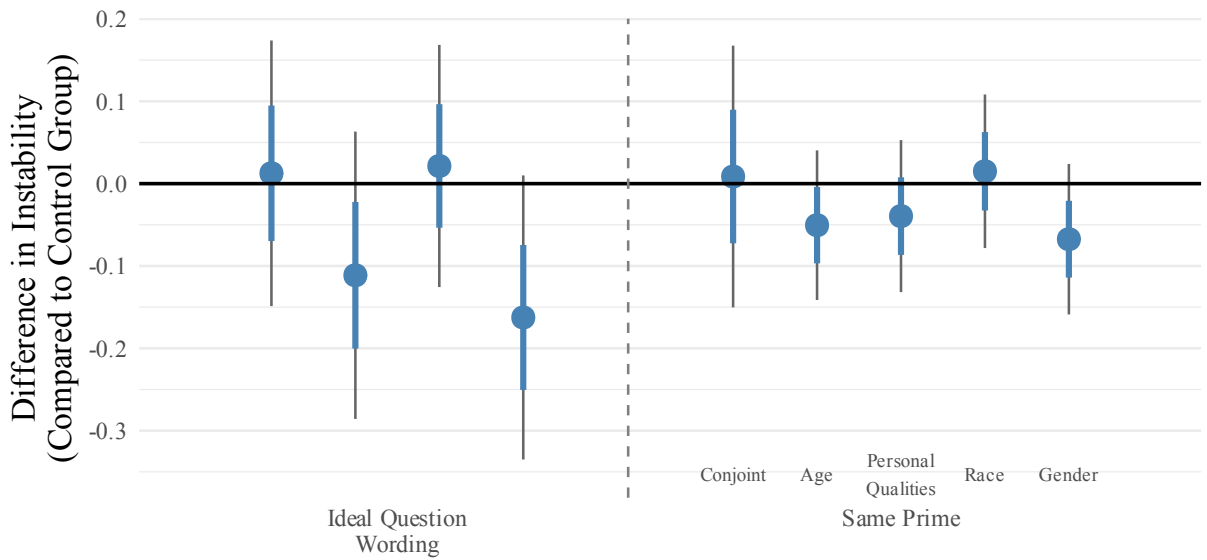
What We Know

~~Nonexistent Preferences~~

~~Measurement Error~~

Survey Instability Expla

Reducing Bias Doesn't Reduce Instability



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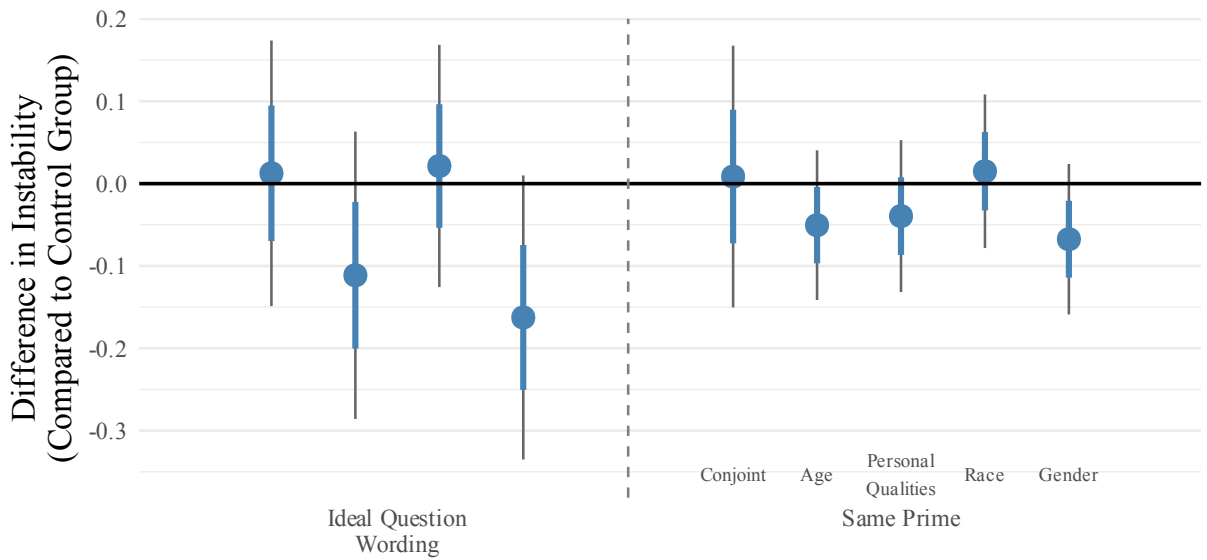

- Left: 2008 ANES question wording changes

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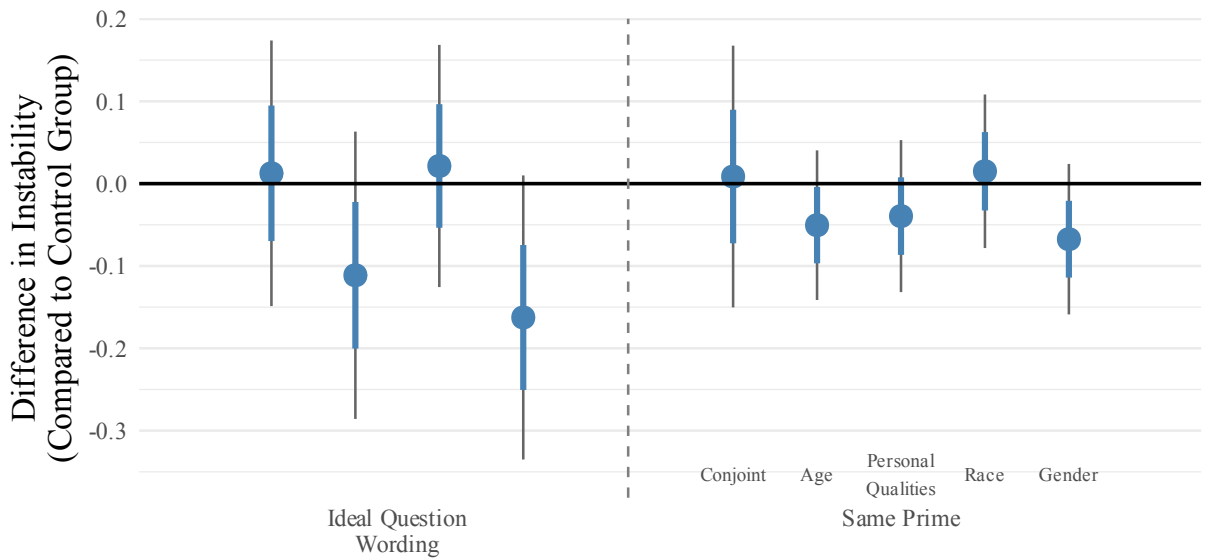

- Left: 2008 ANES question wording changes
- Right: different (priming) "considerations"

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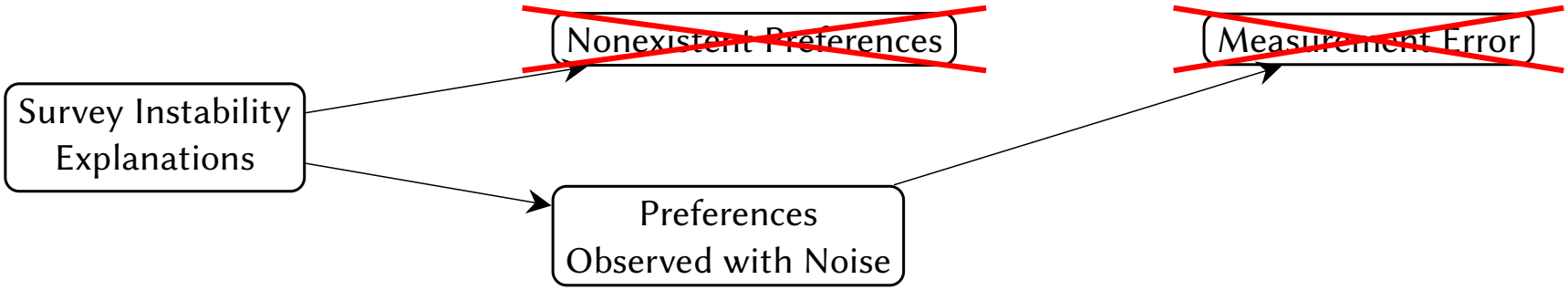
What We Know



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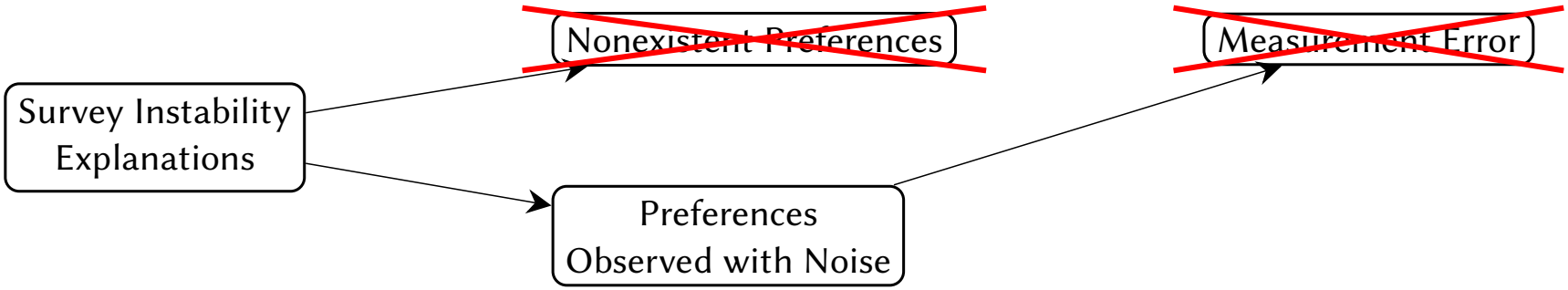

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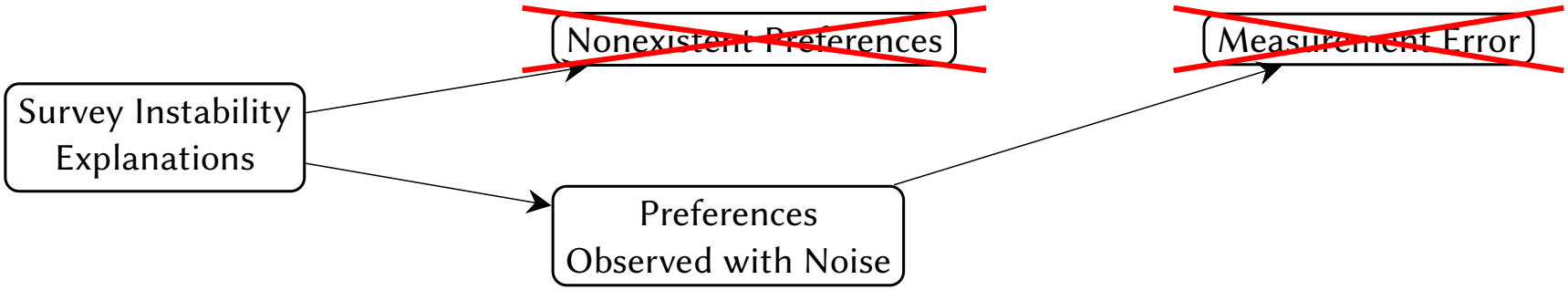

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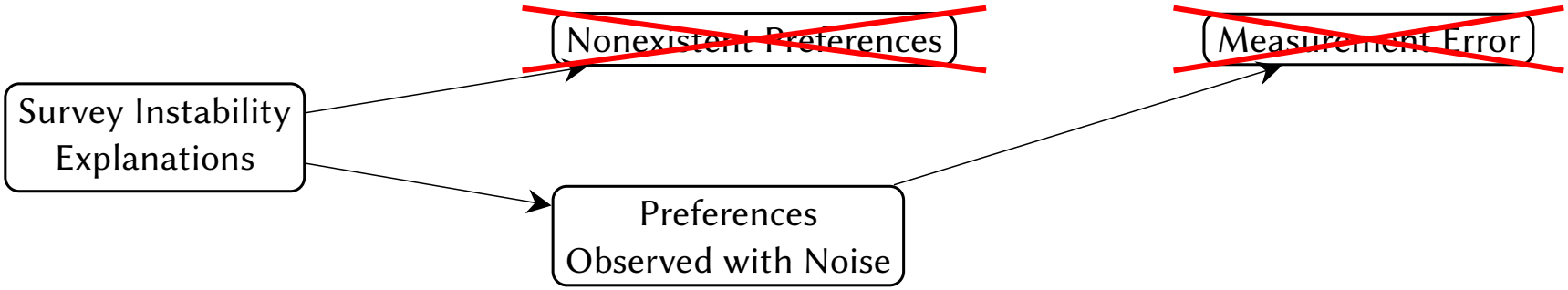
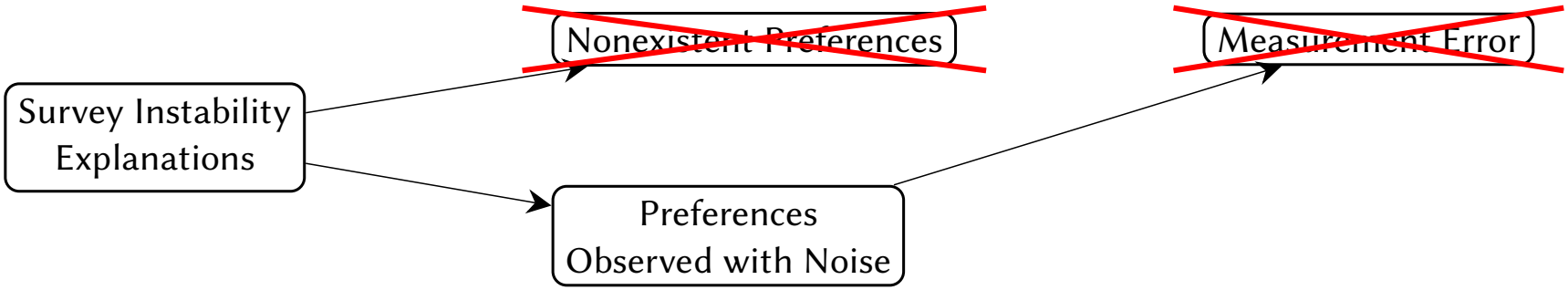

Survey Instability Explanations
Nonexistent Preferences
Measurement Error
Preferences Observed with Noise

What We Show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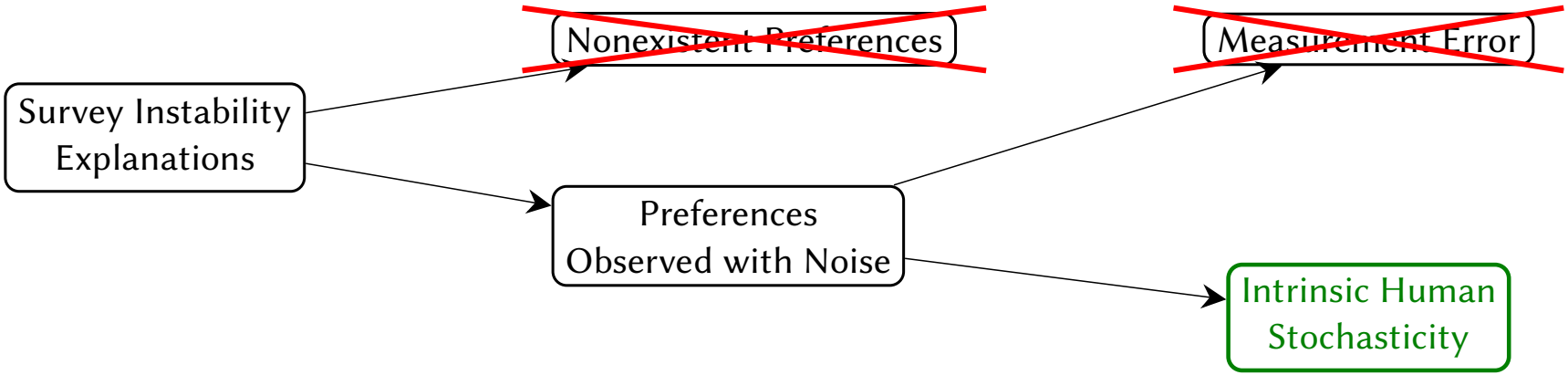
Survey Instability Explanations
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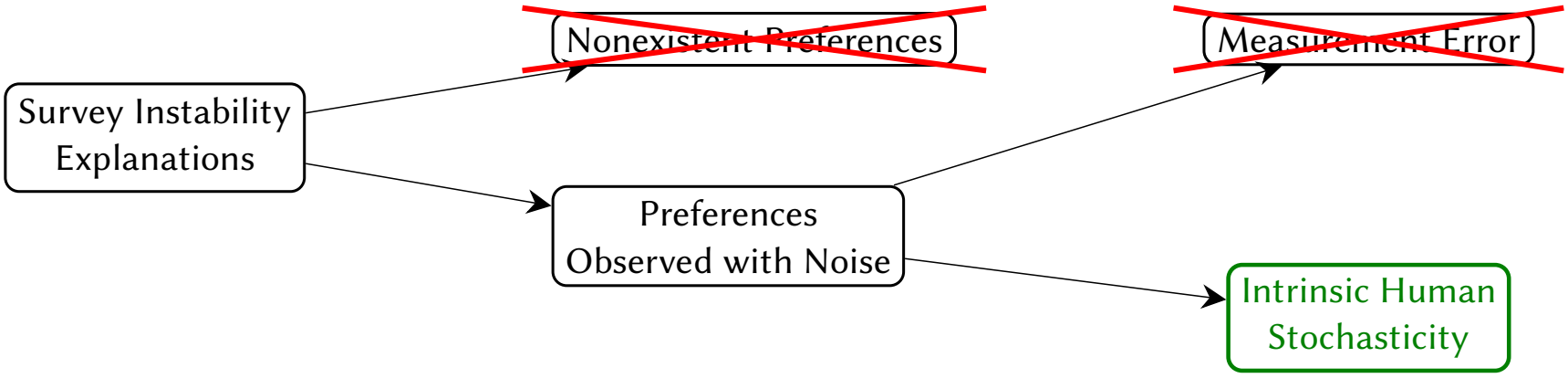
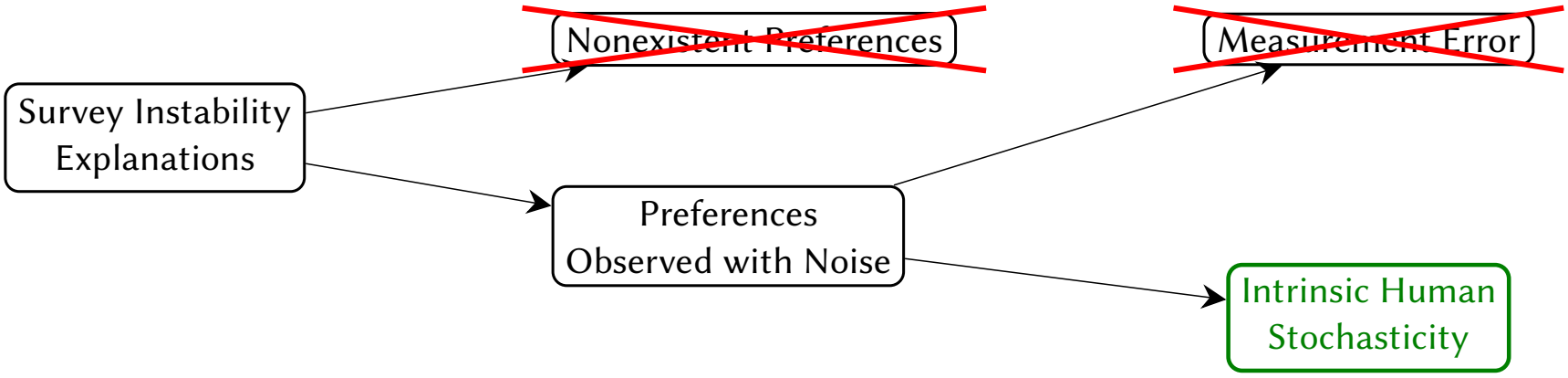
Measurement Error
Preferences Observed with Noise
Intrinsic Human Stochasticity

What We Show



- Generally, in other fields: instrument v. subject variability

What We Show



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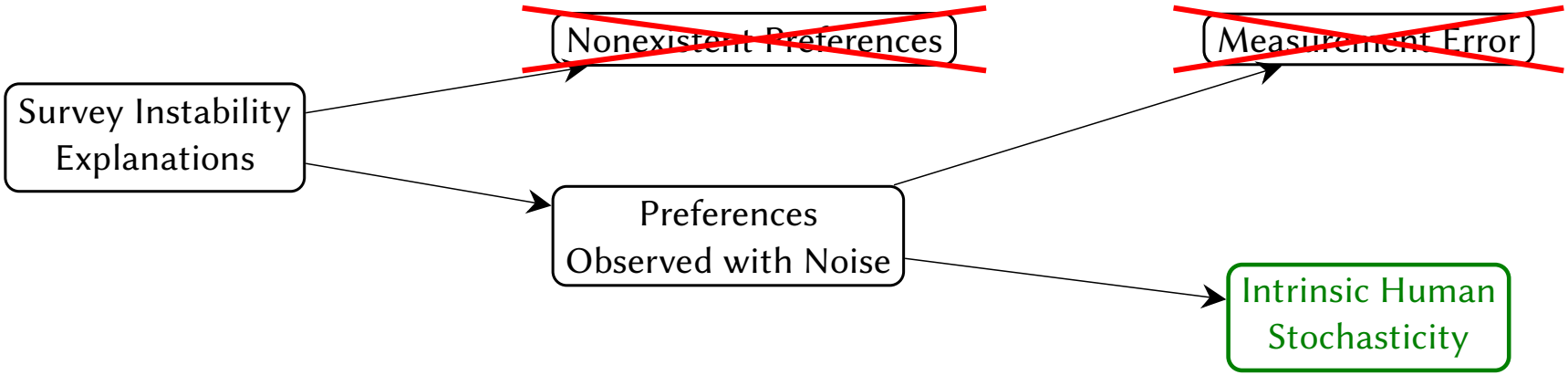

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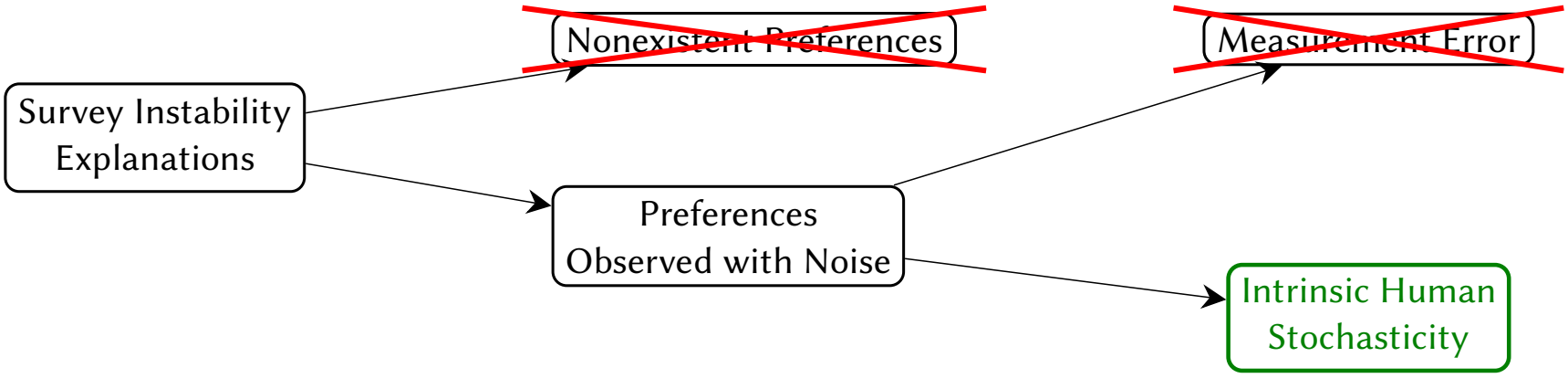

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  - biology, medicine: technical v. biological variability

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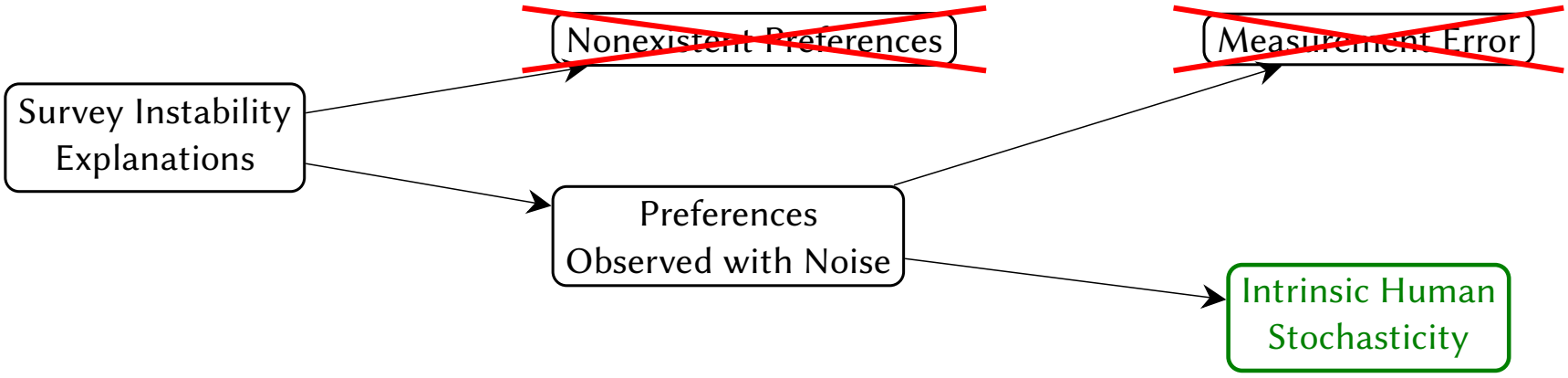

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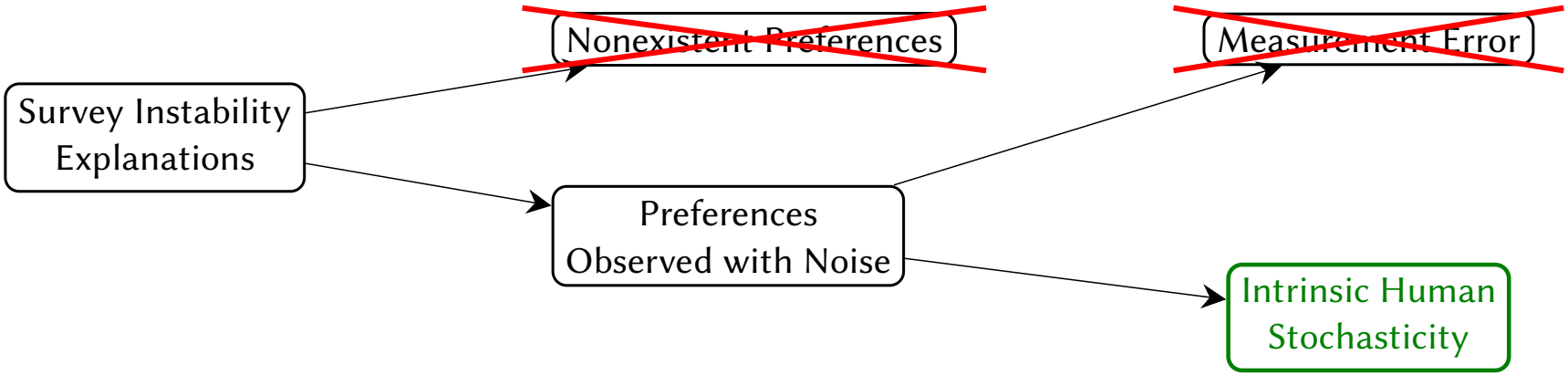

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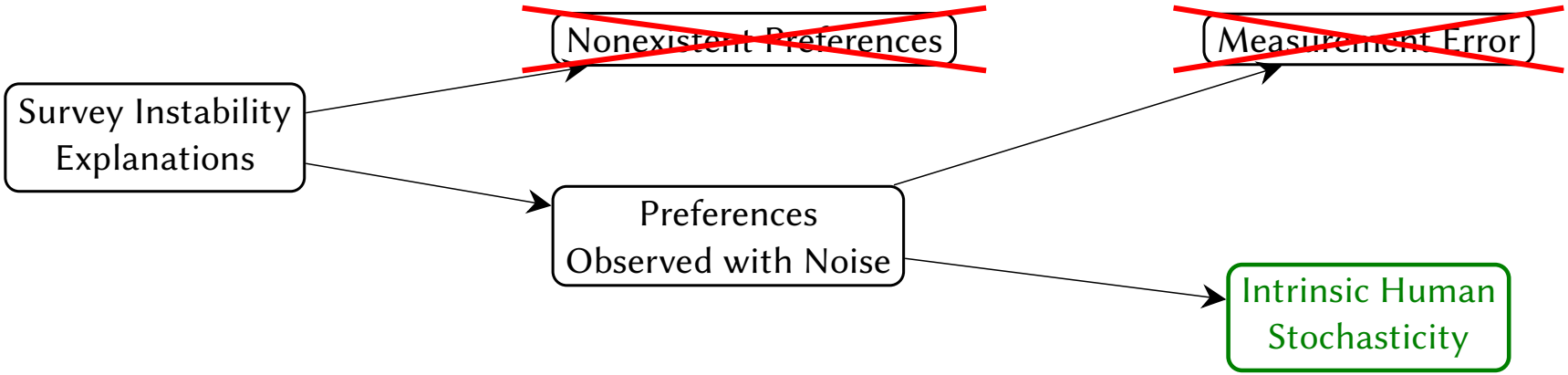

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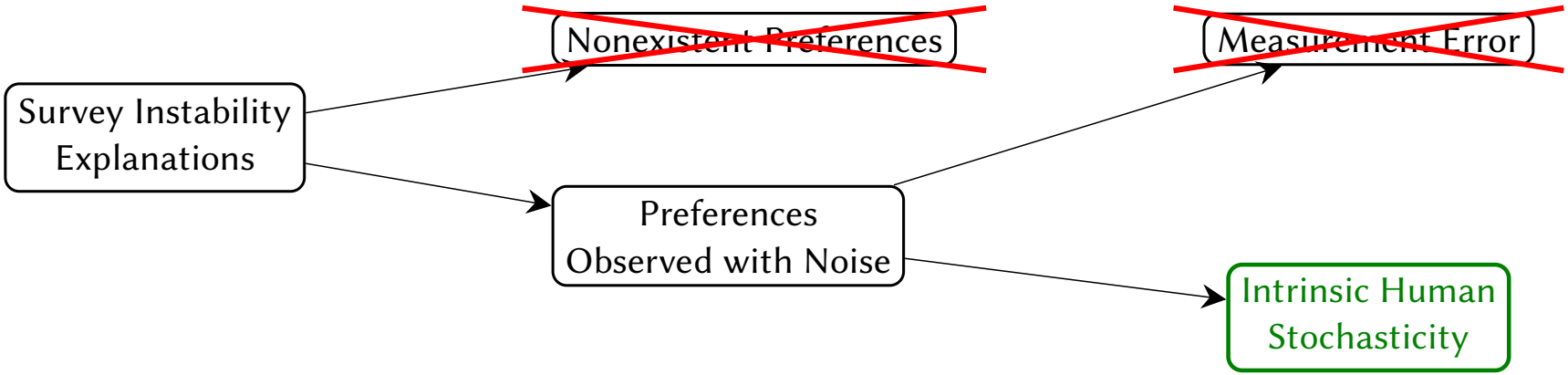

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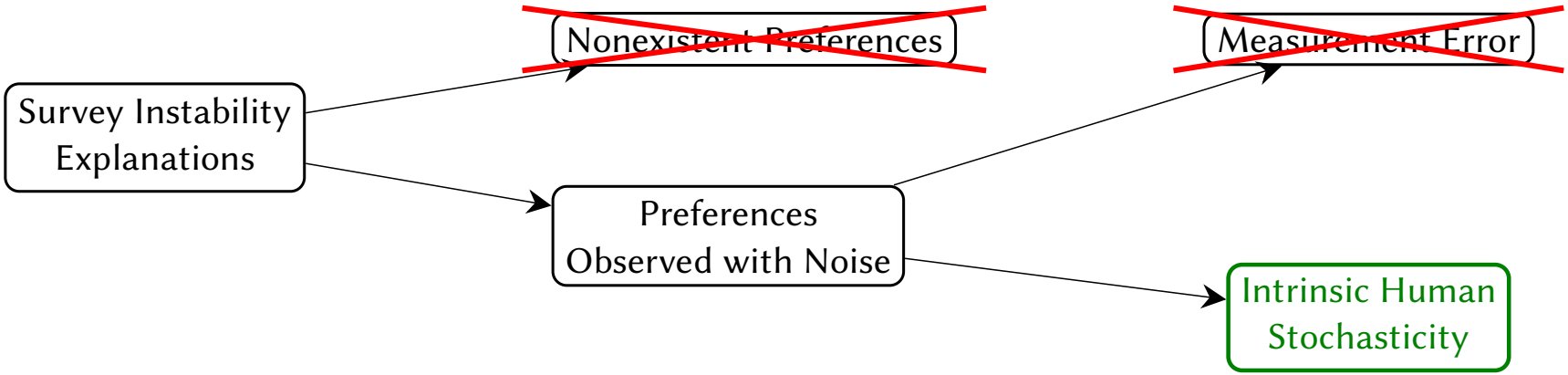

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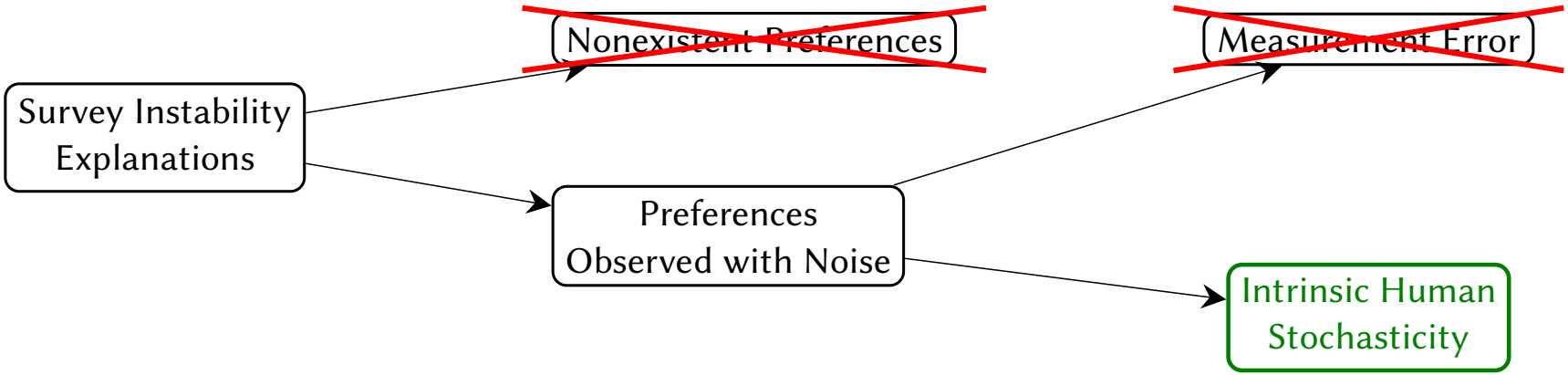

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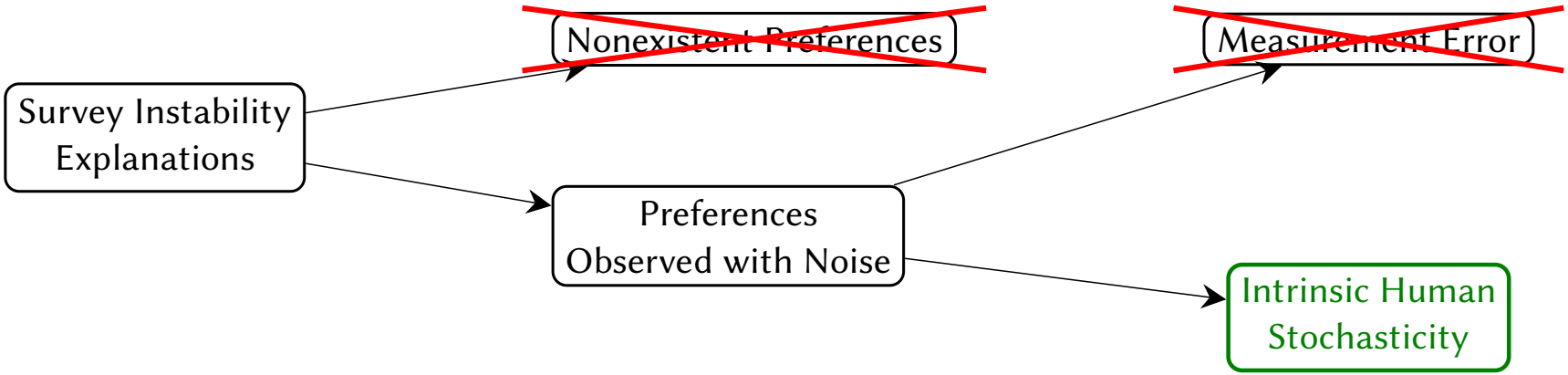

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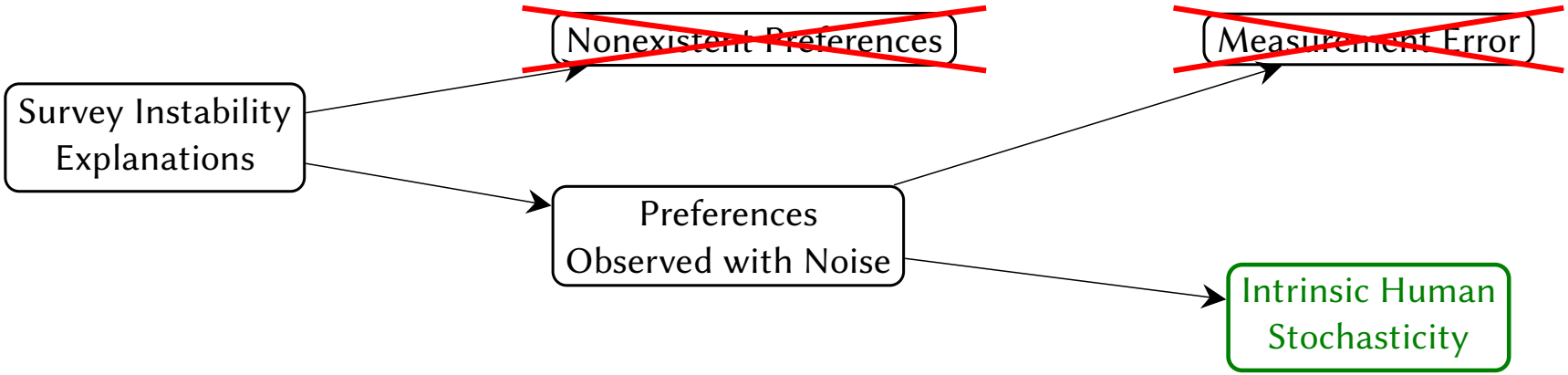

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$\Rightarrow$ The creatures we study: variables, not constants

Sources of Stochasticity Leading to Survey Instability

Survey Instability

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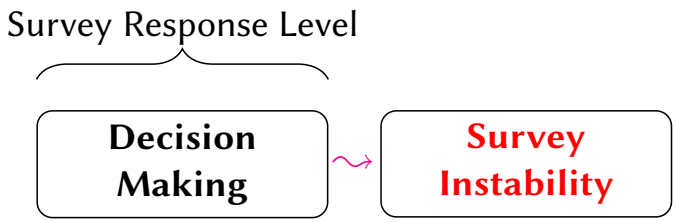

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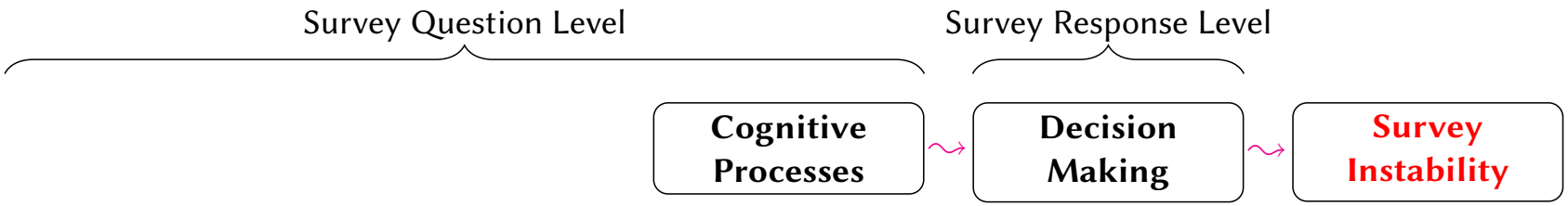

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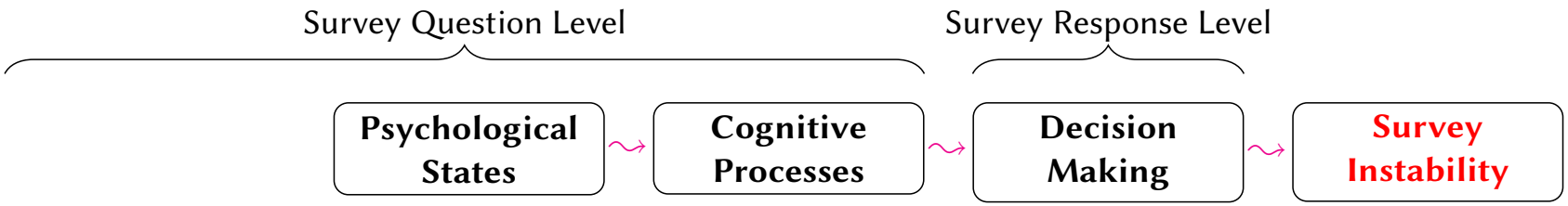

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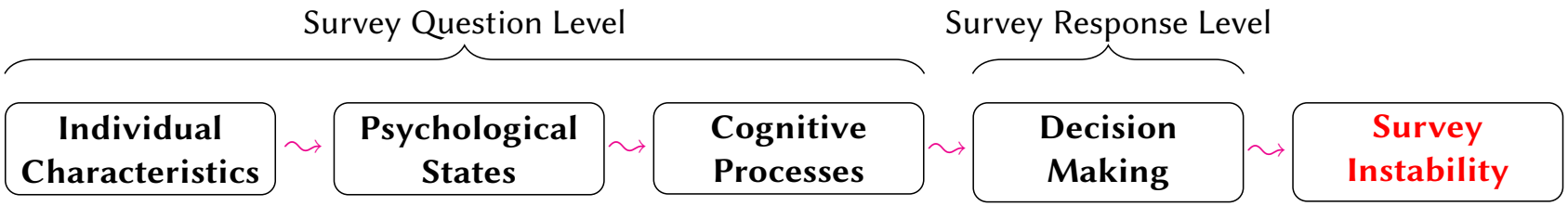

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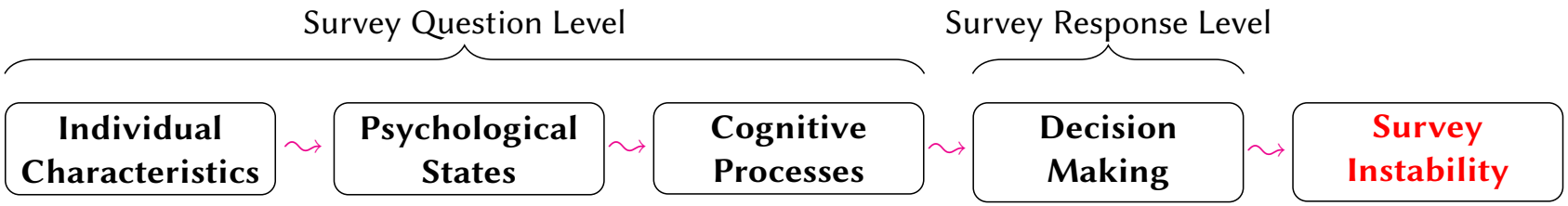

Used to find

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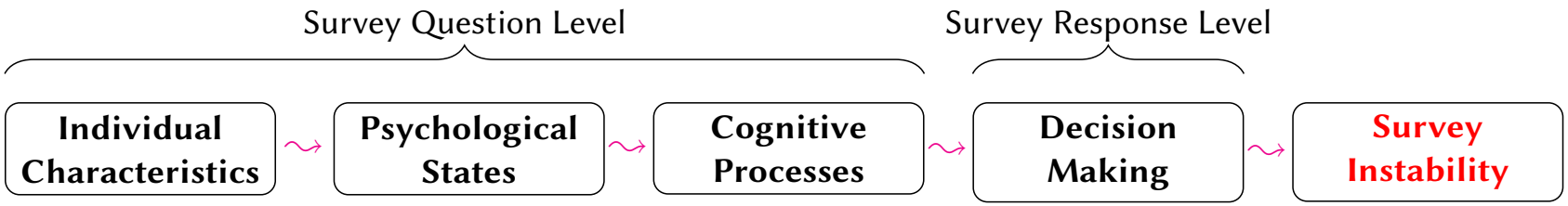

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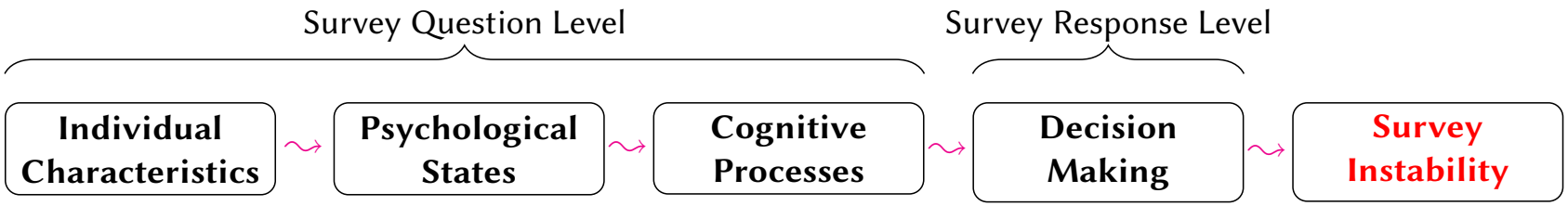

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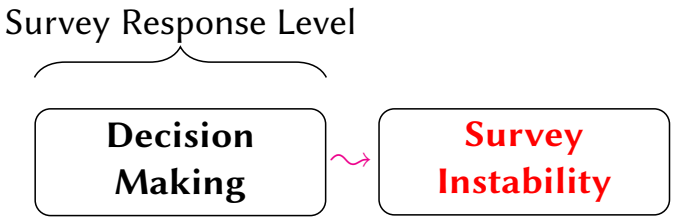

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Election Day

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Election Day

- 10 offices, each with Party A & B candidates
- 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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- How Beliefs become Choices

$$C_t \begin{cases} \end{cases}$$

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- C
- H
- L
- E

C_t { = 0 > 0 > 0

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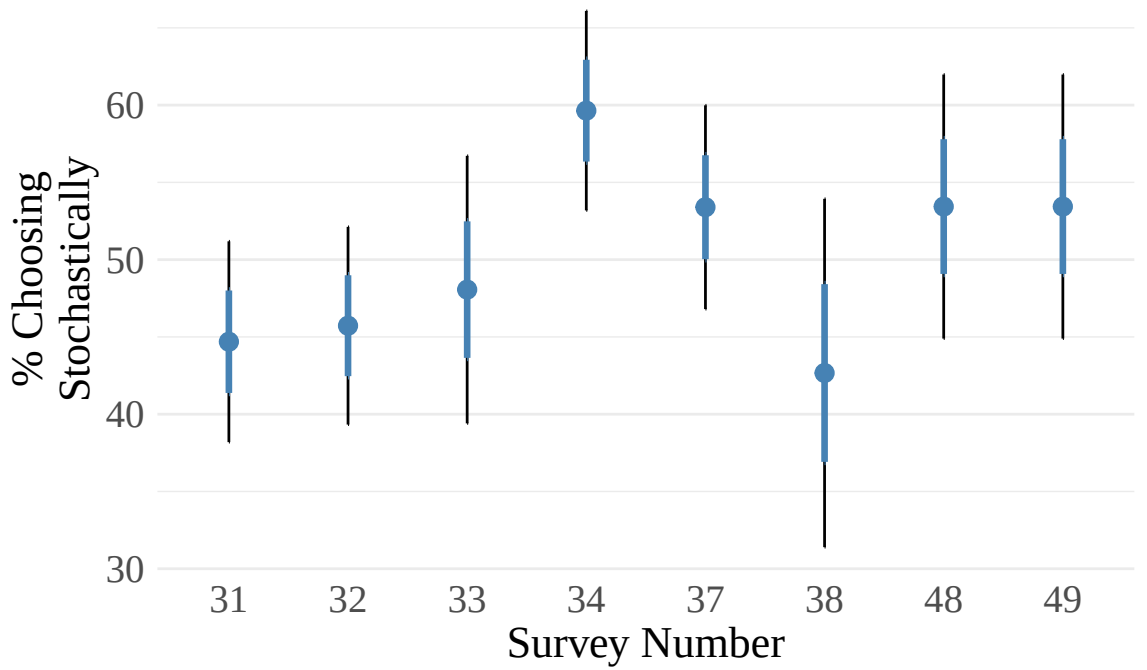

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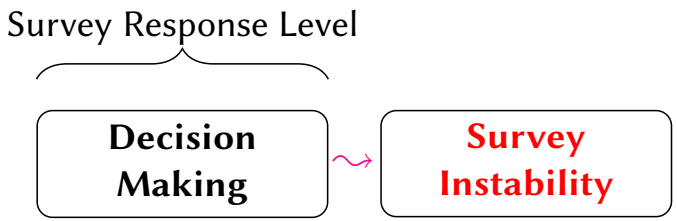
$\Rightarrow$ Human Decision Making: Adds Stochasticity

Stochasticity Sources: Cognitive Processing

Stochasticity Sources: Cognitive Processing

Survey Instability

Stochasticity Sources: Cognitive Processing



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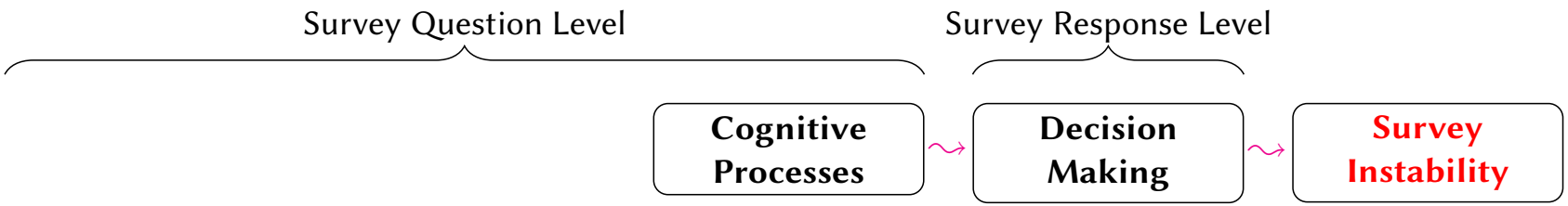

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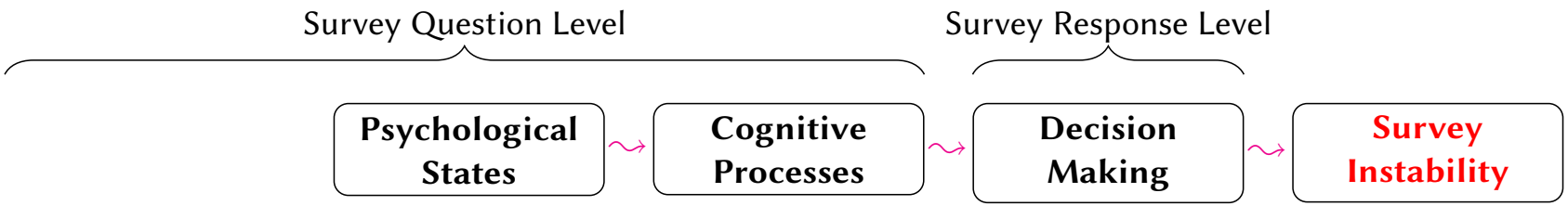

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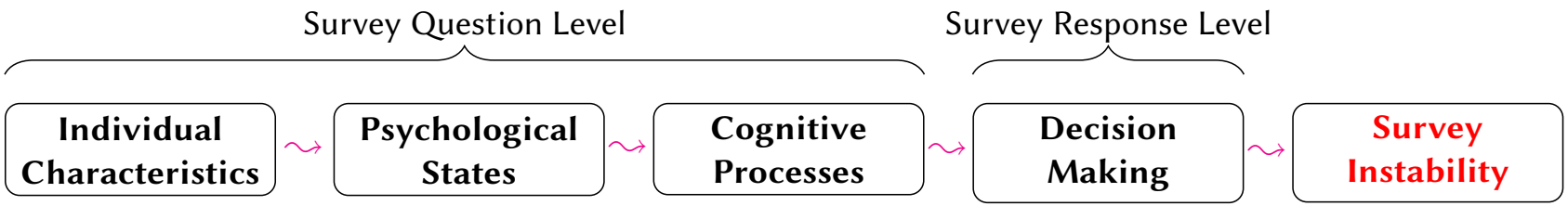

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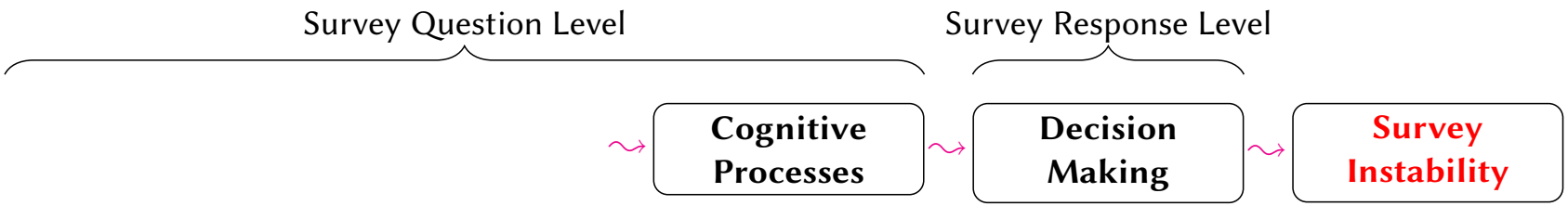

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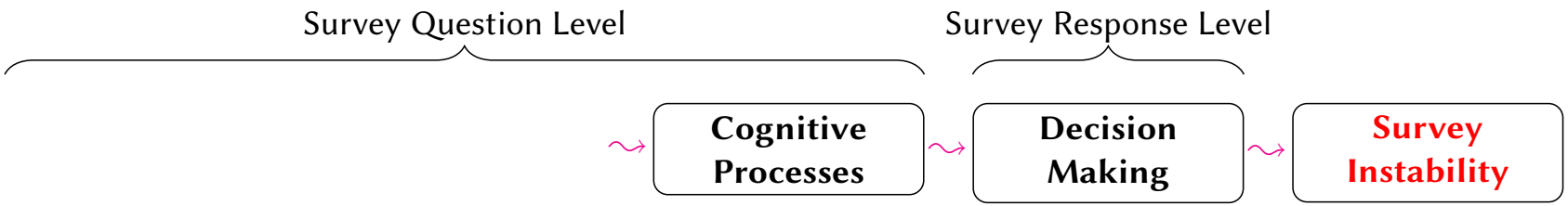

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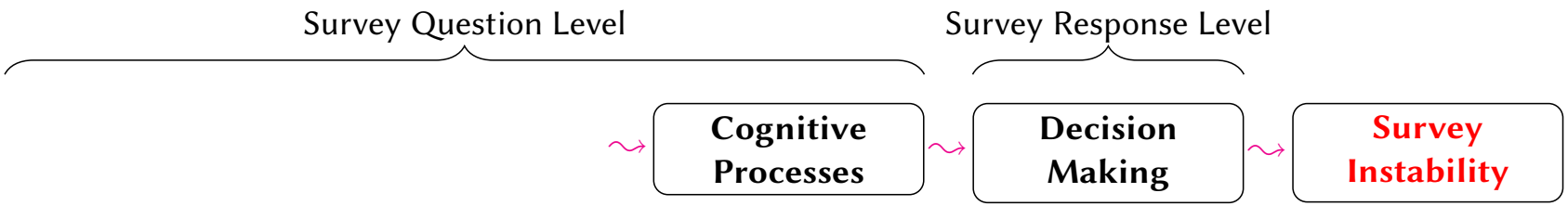

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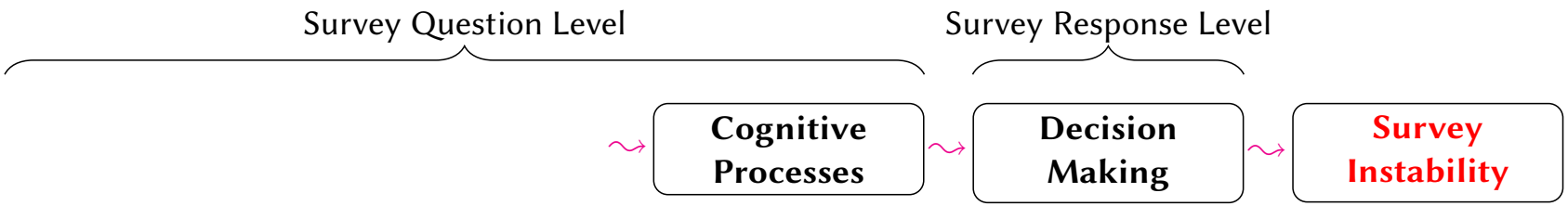

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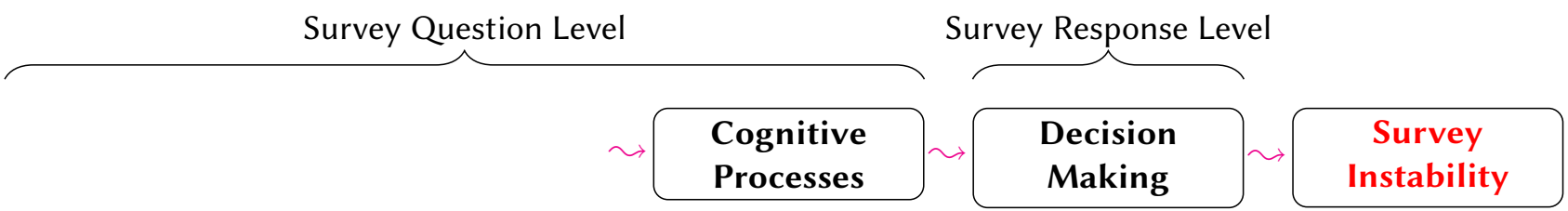

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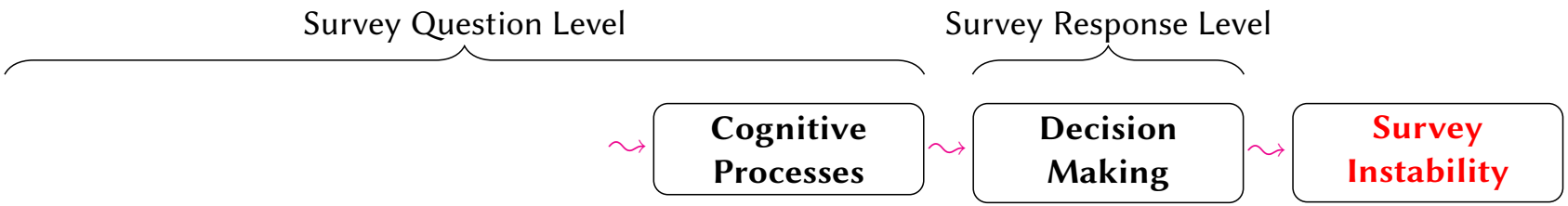

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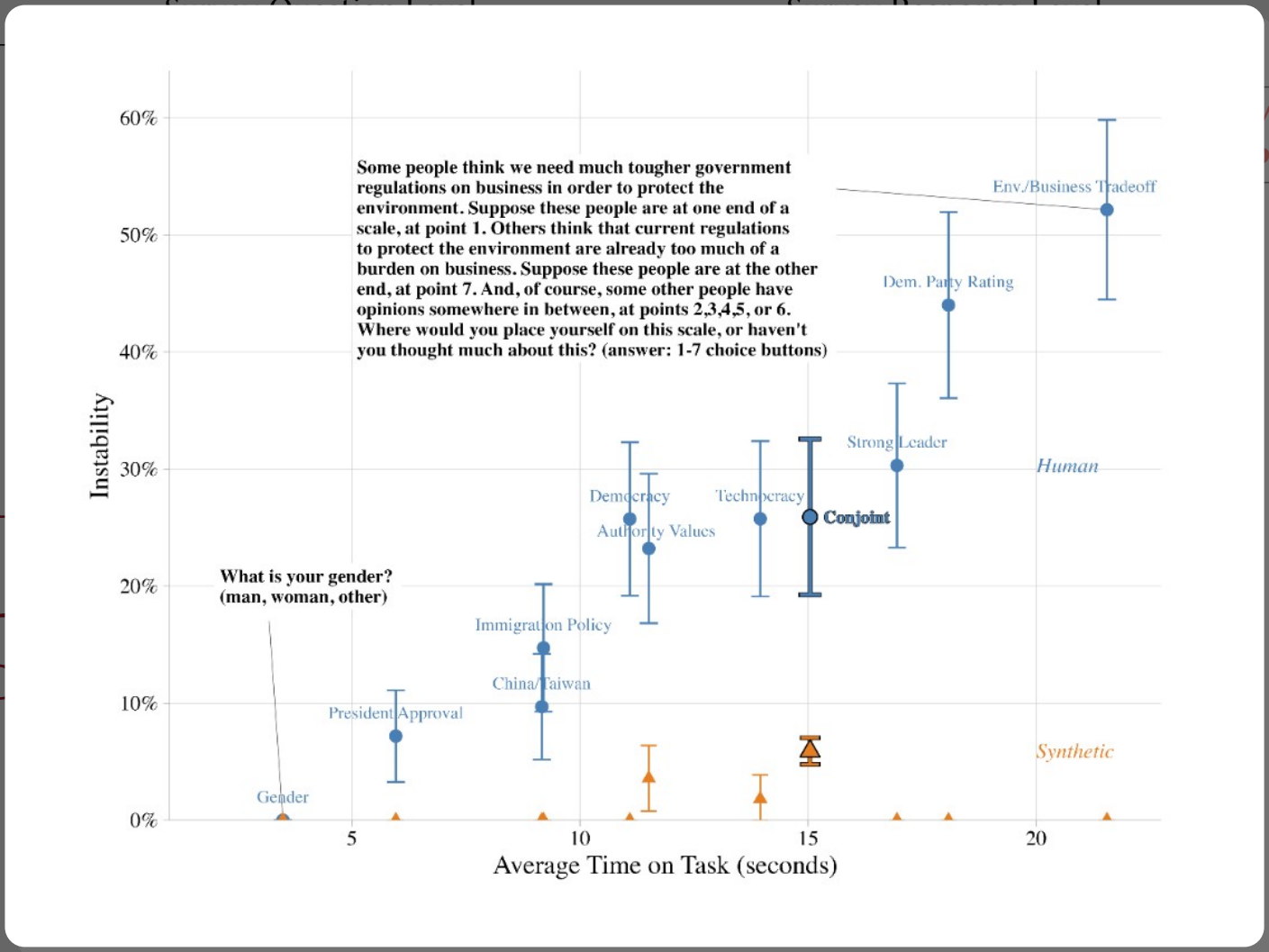

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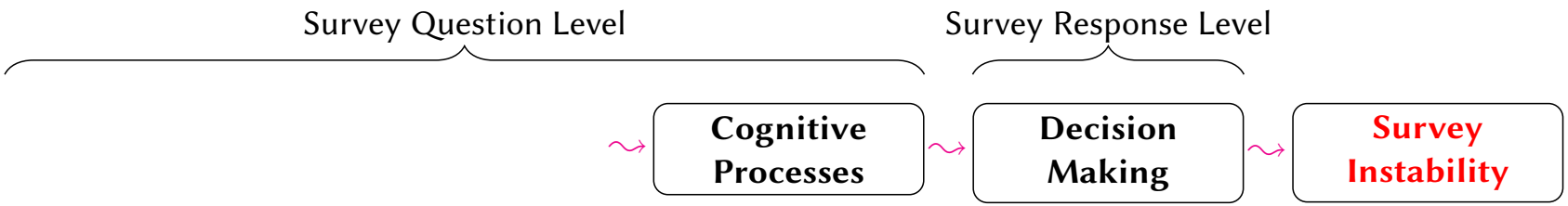

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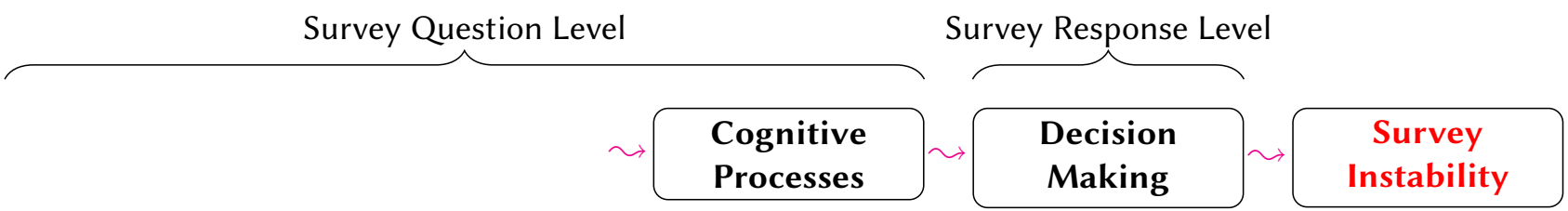

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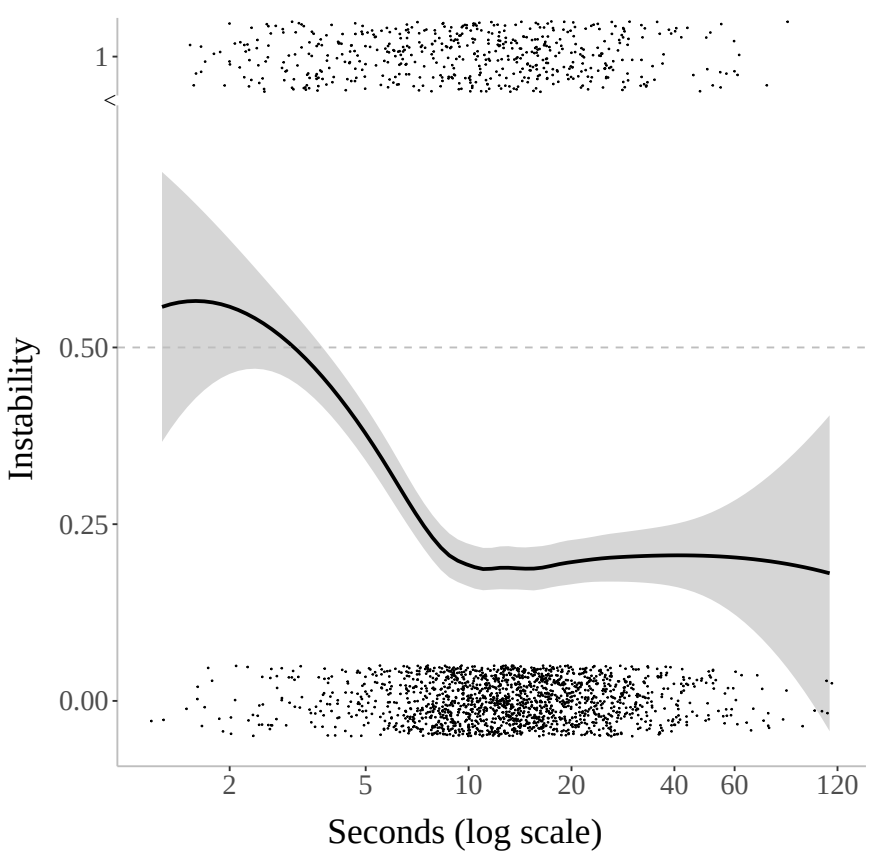
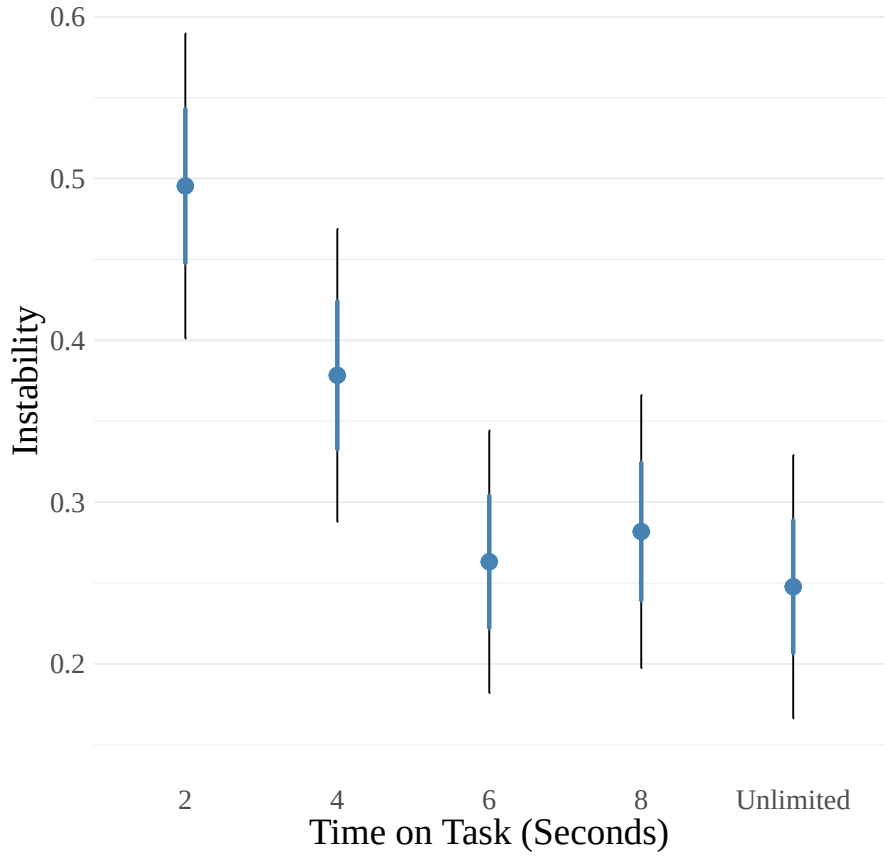
Limited time-on-task causes survey instability

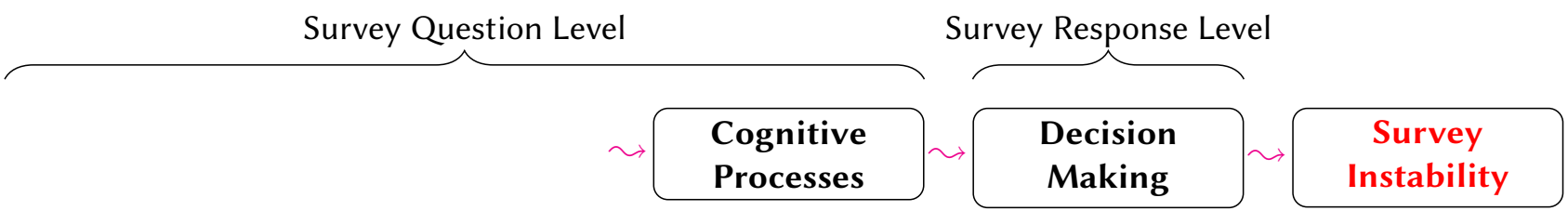


Observational



Experimental

Stochasticity Sources: Cognitive Processing



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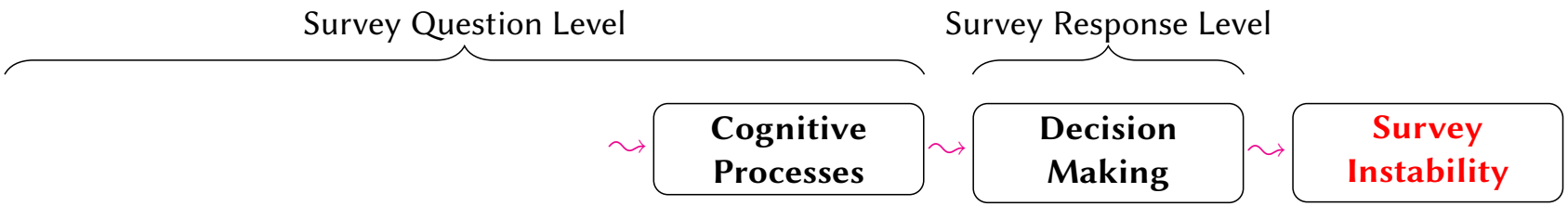

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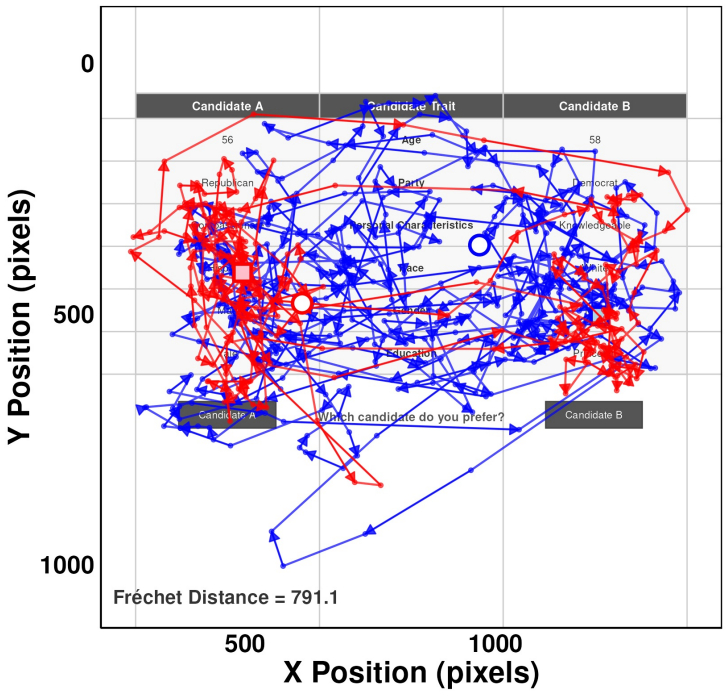
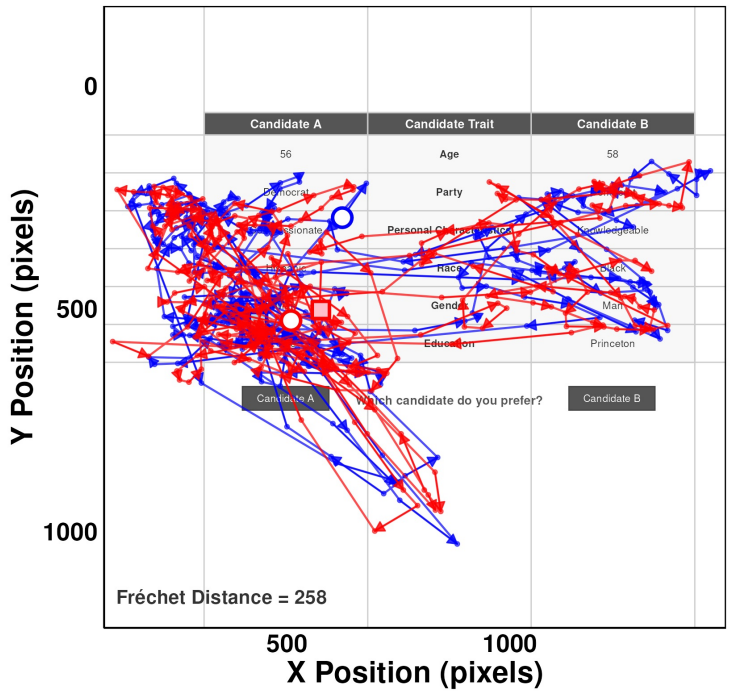
Stochasticity in Gaze Behavior

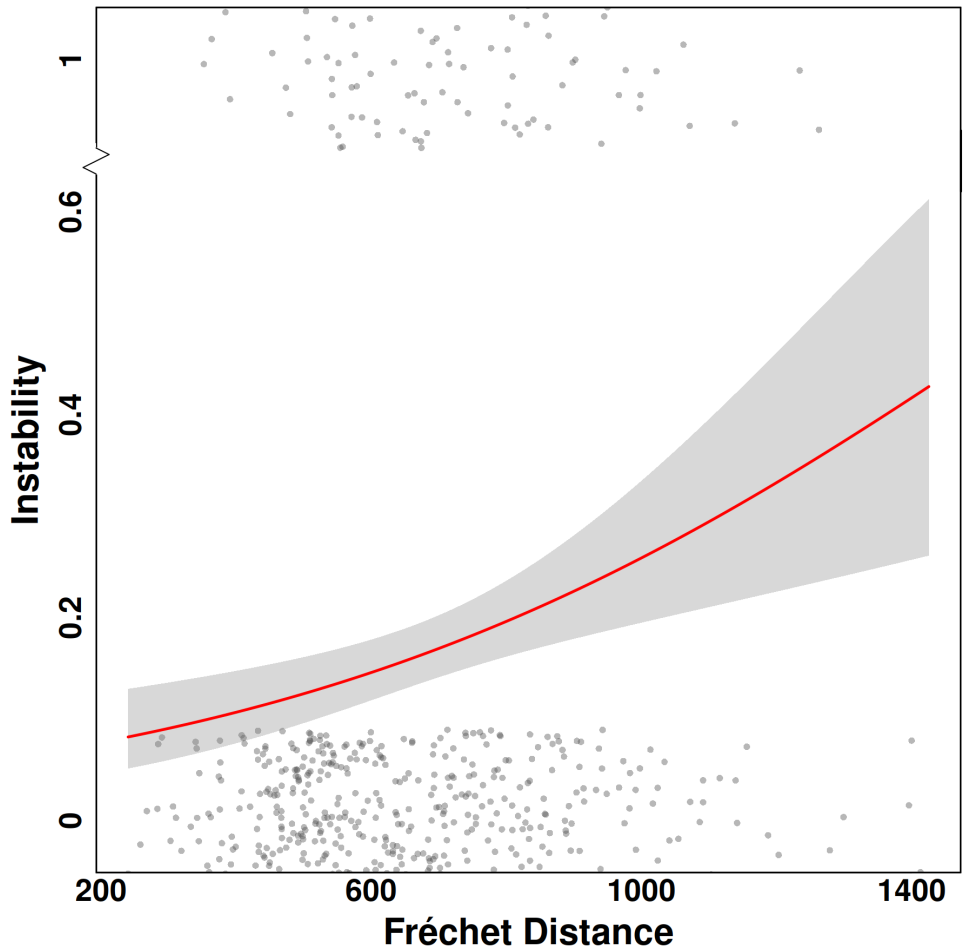


Large difference



Small difference

Stochastic Distance $\rightsquigarrow$ Survey Instability



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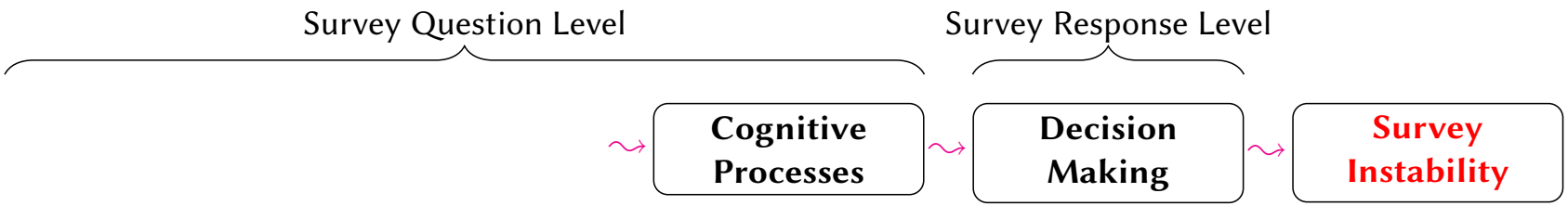

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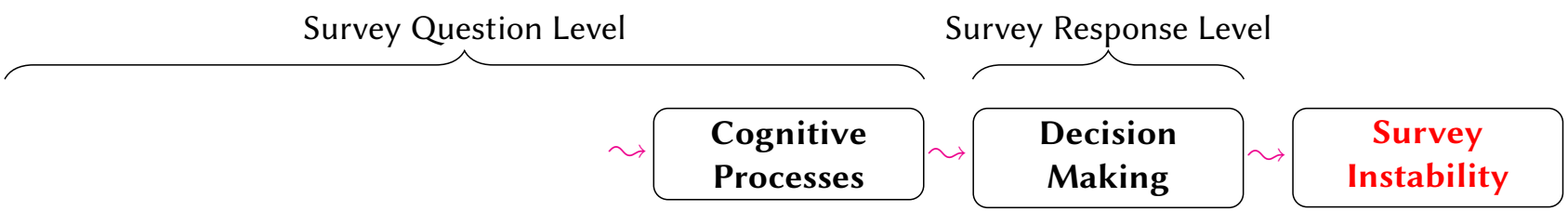

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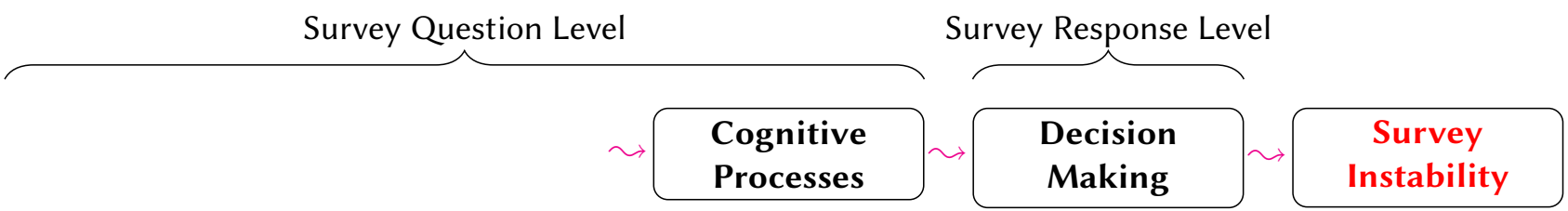

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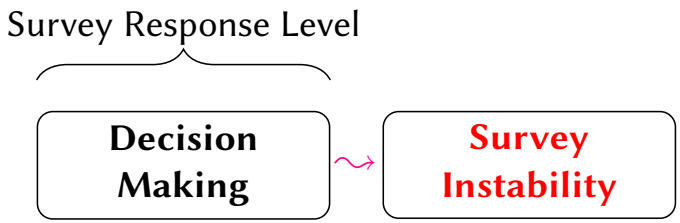
Stochasticity Sources: Psychological States

Survey Instability

Stochasticity Sources: Psychological States



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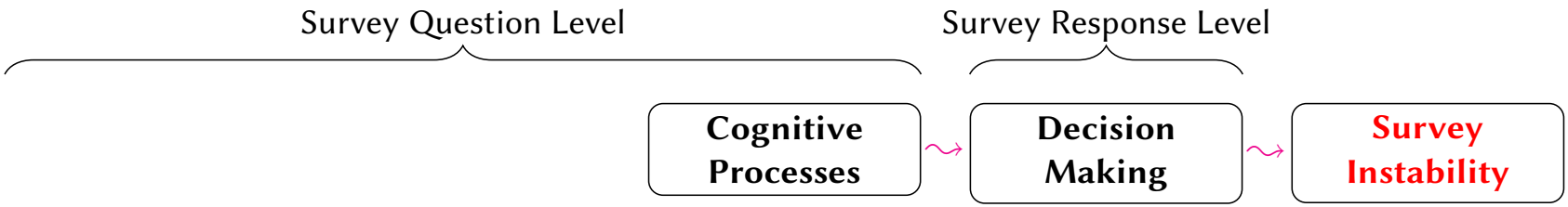

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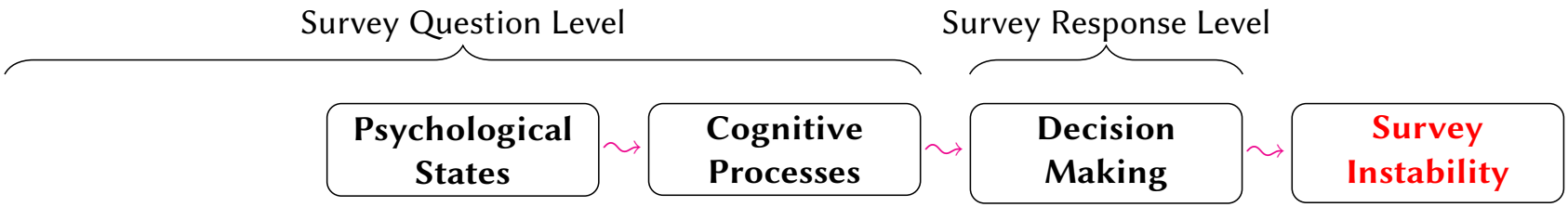

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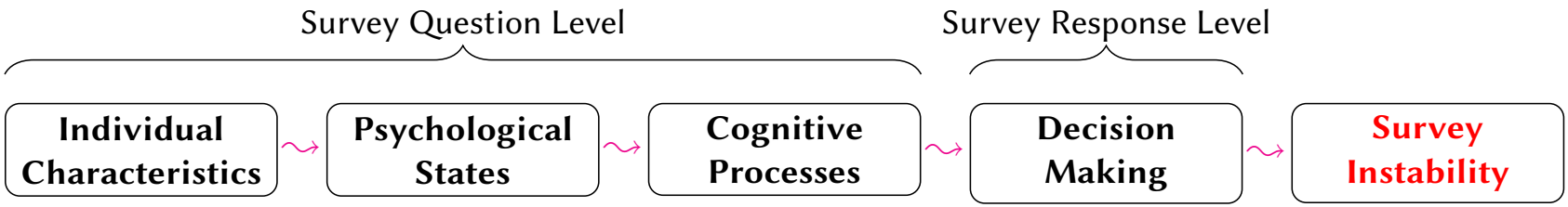

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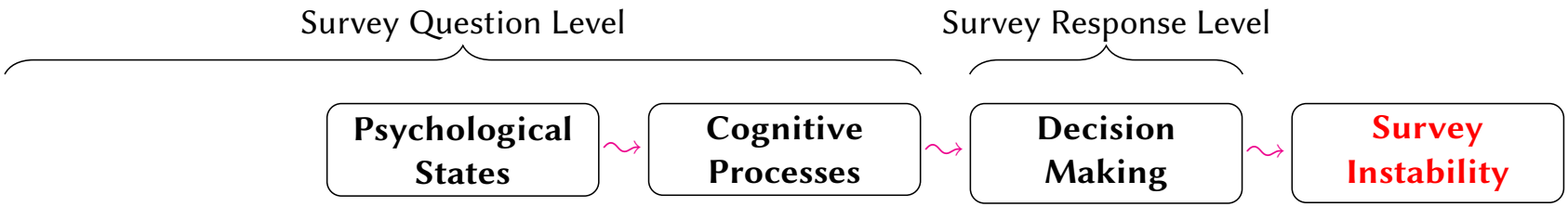

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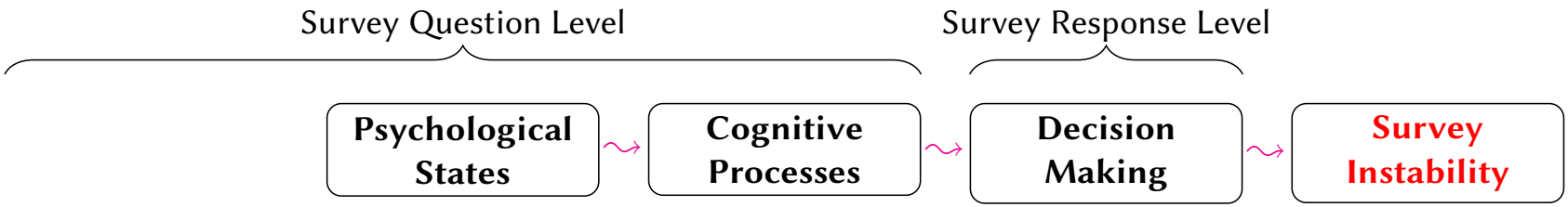

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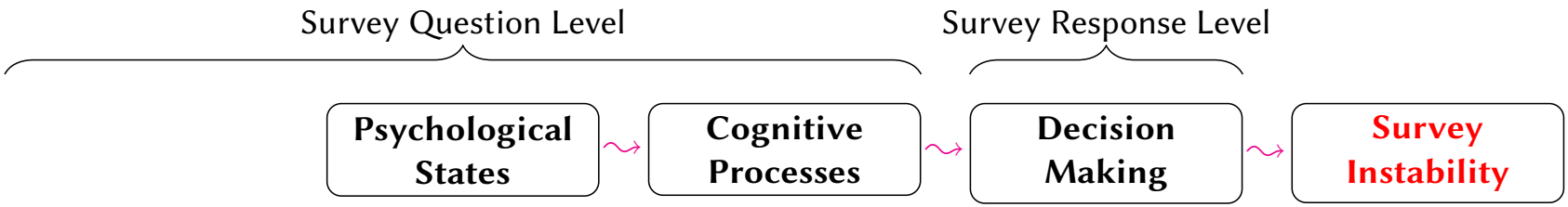
Stochasticity Sources: Psychological States



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  - Attention Checks ruin surveys

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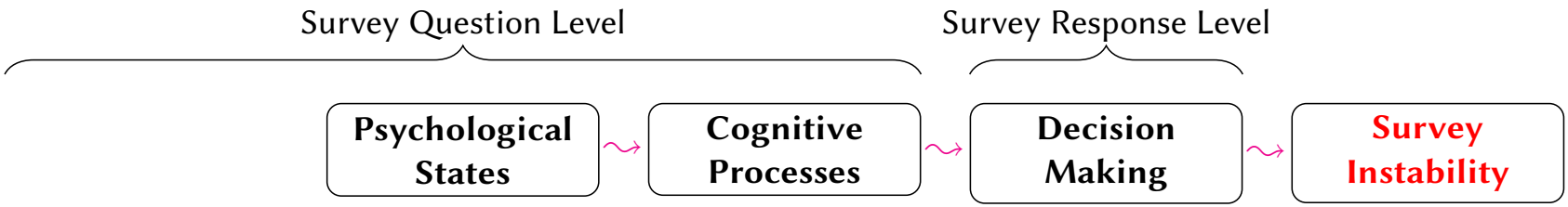

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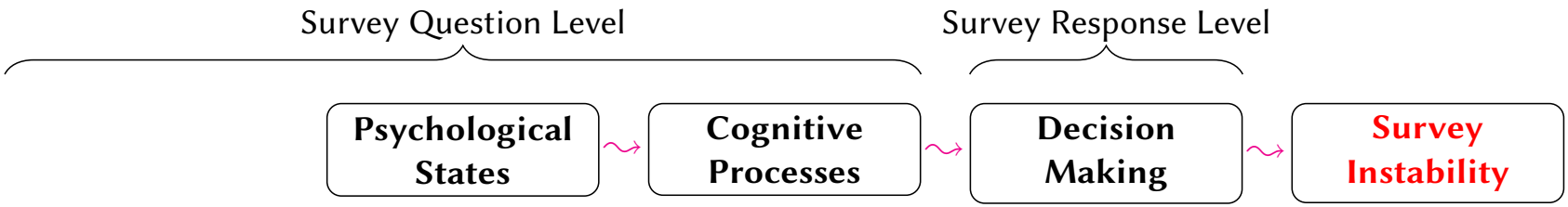

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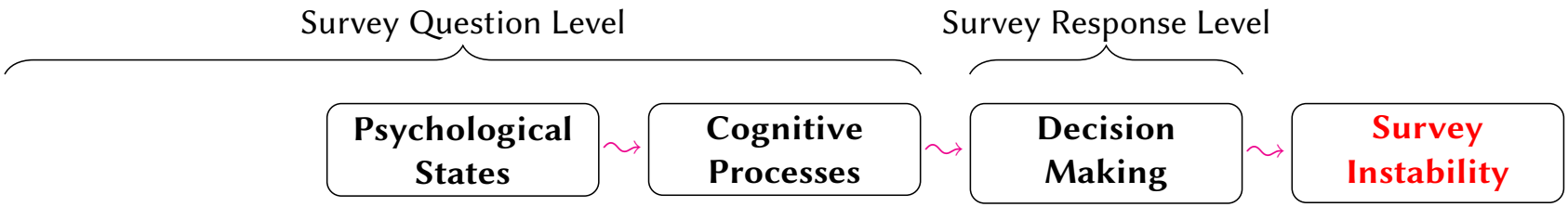

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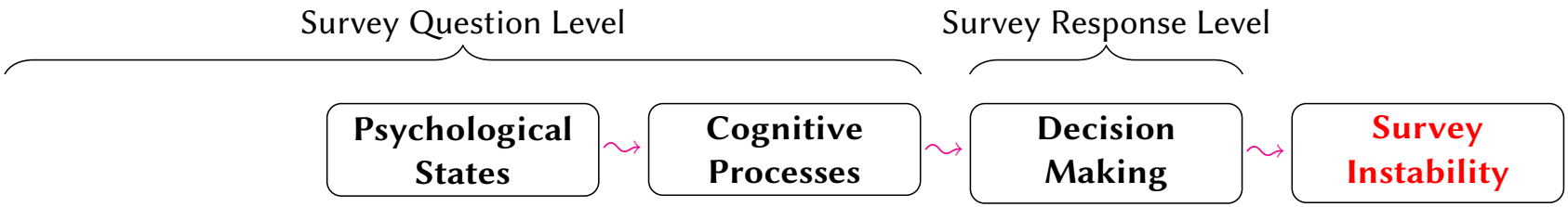
>
> {Very, Fairly, Slightly, Not at all} Preoccupied

Stochasticity Sources: Psychological States



- Psychological States Summary
  - Attention Checks ruin surveys
  - Use Preoccupation instead

> 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

⇒ Human Psychology: Adds Stochasticity

So Who's to Blame for Survey Instability?

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Explanations

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Explanations

Survey Instability
~25%

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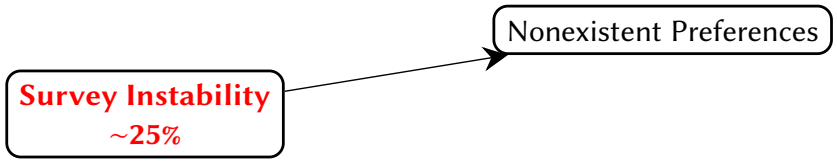

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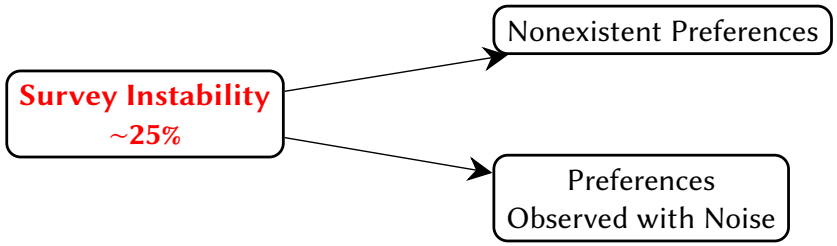

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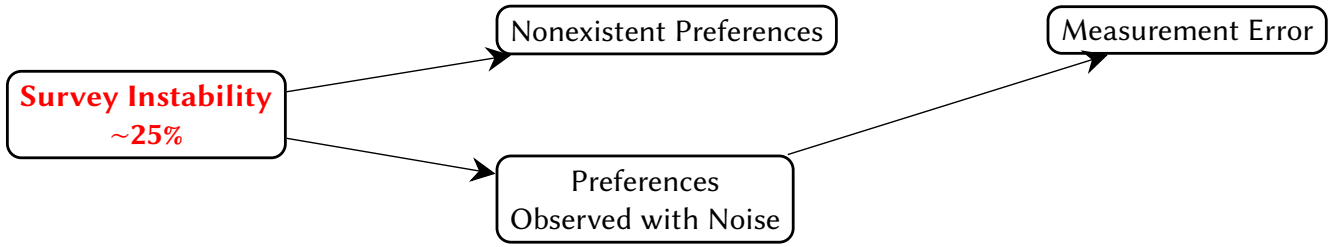

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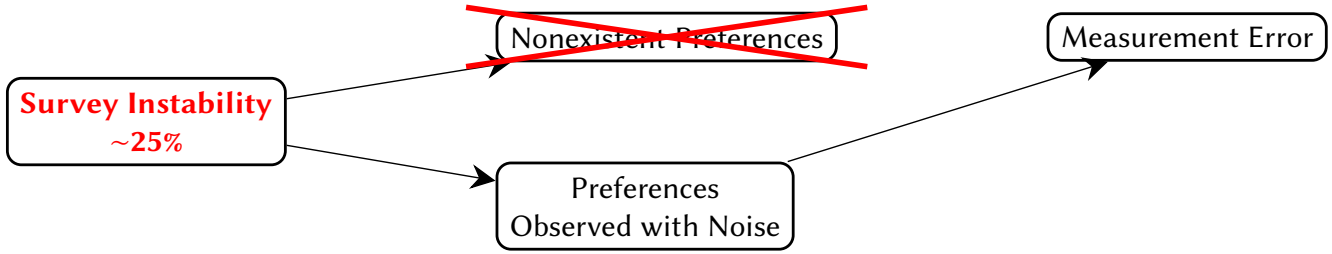

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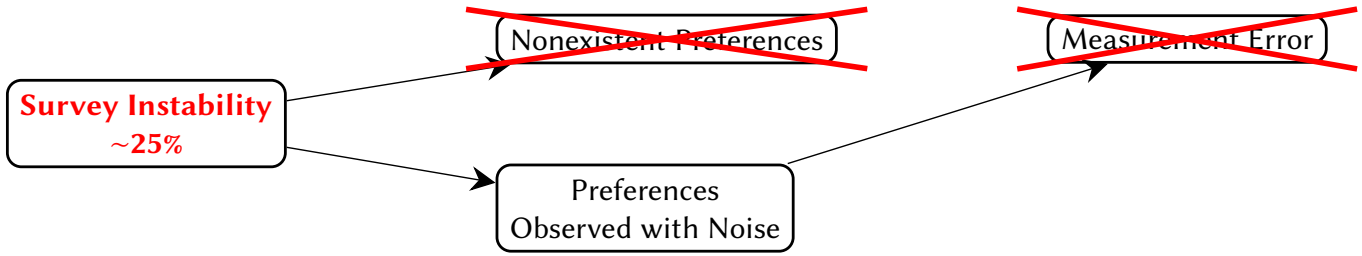

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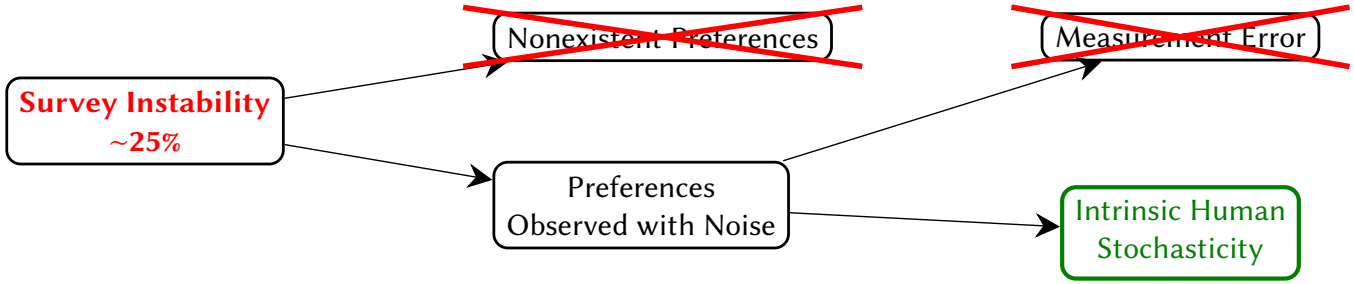

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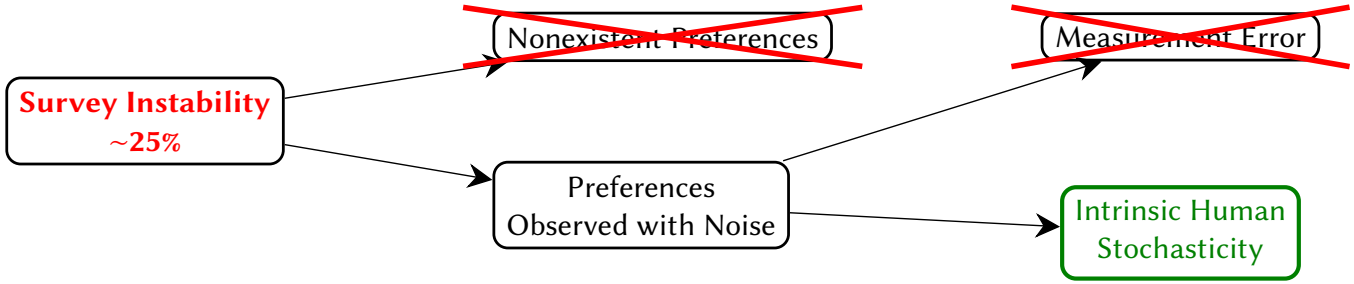

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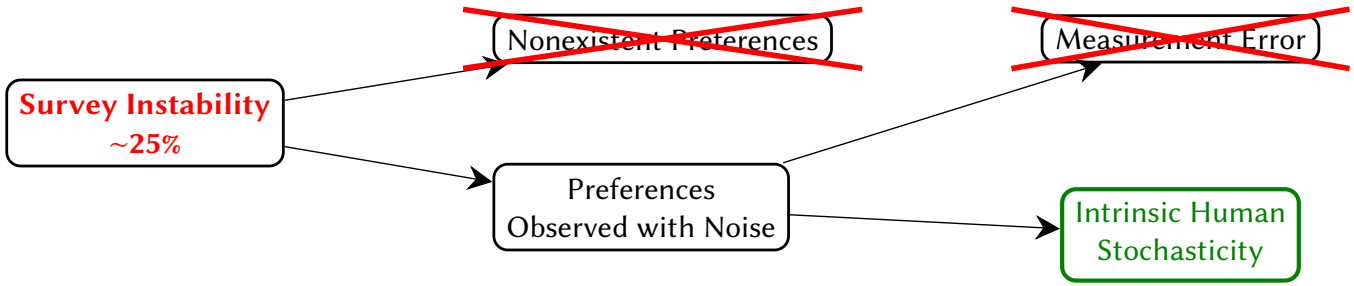

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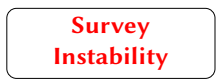

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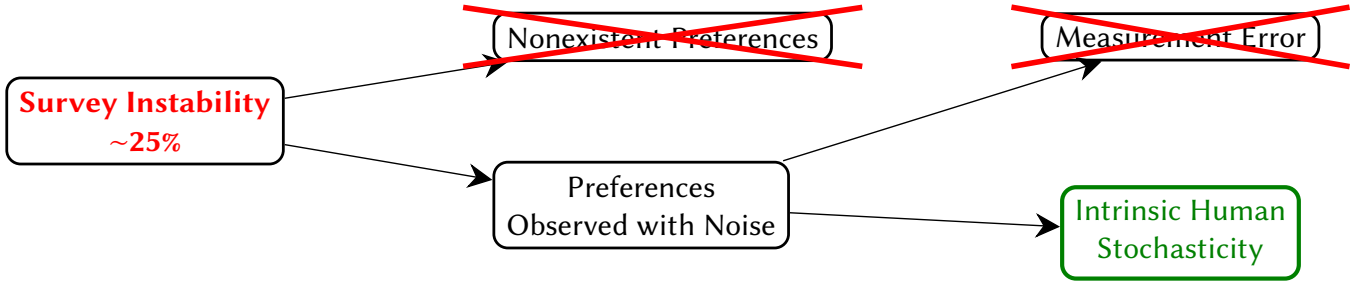

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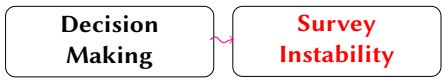

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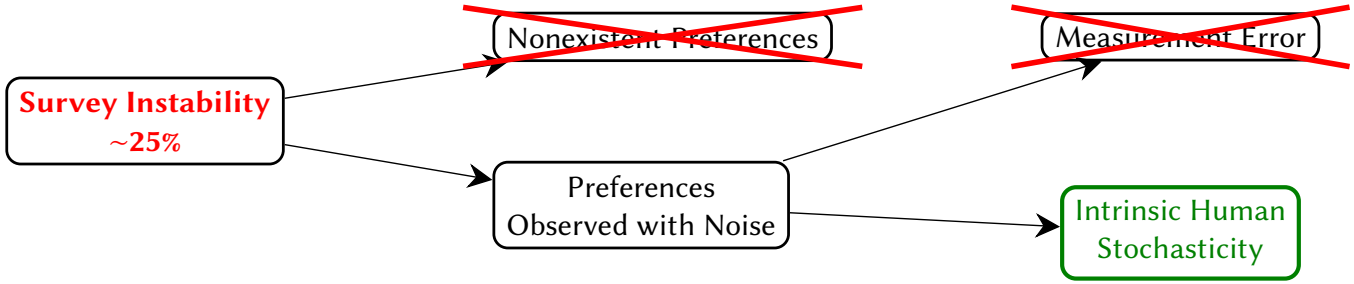

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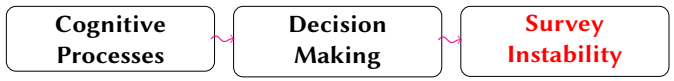

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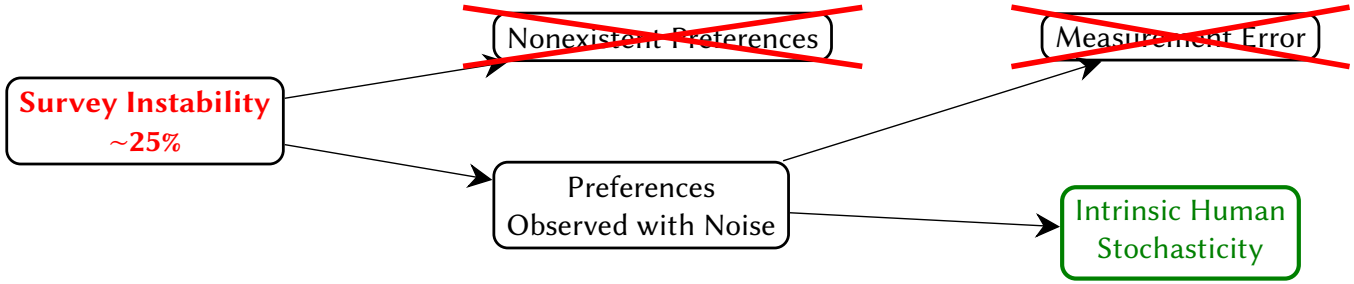

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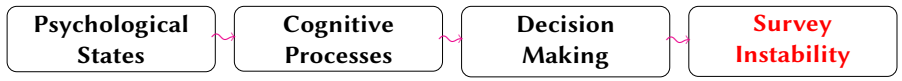

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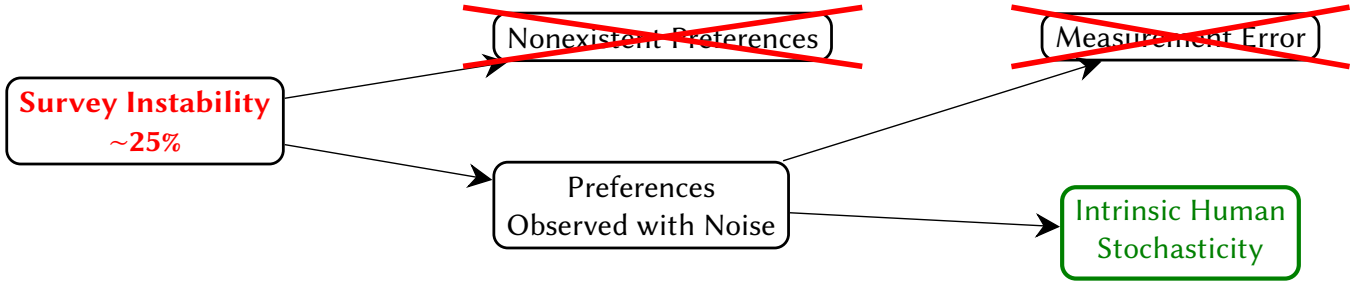

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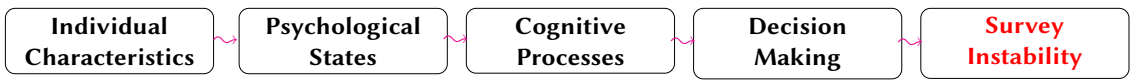

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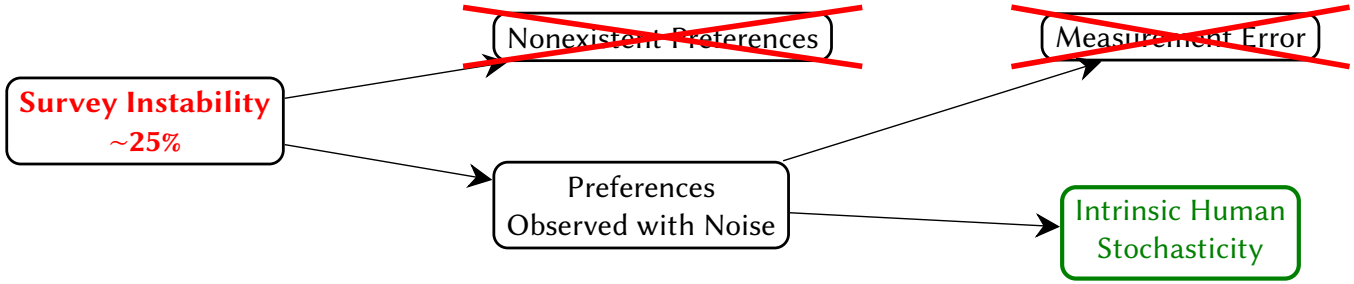

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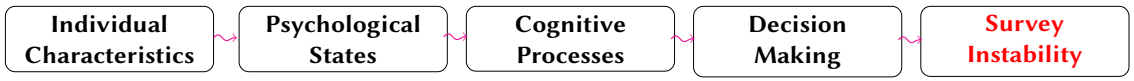

Practical Implications

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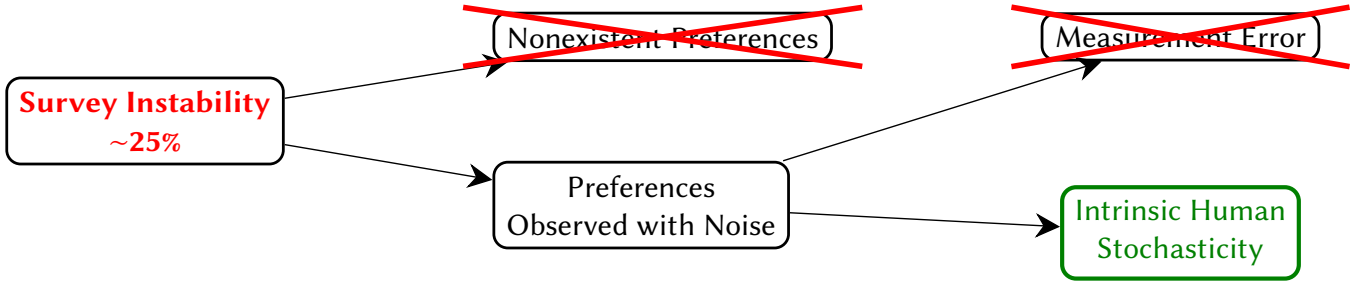

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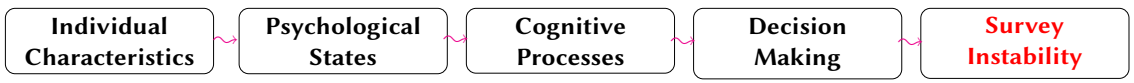

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- Improve survey instruments:

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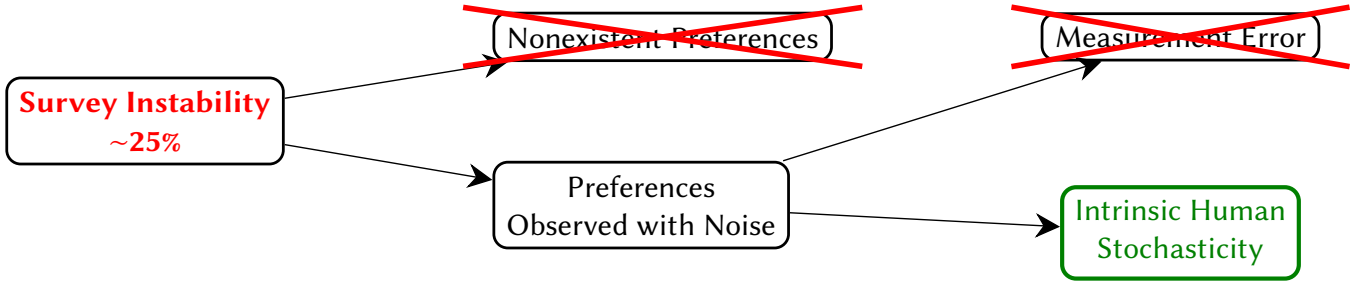

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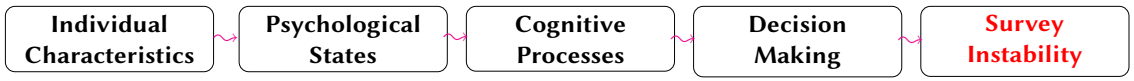

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- Improve survey instruments:
  - measure instability (one extra Q)

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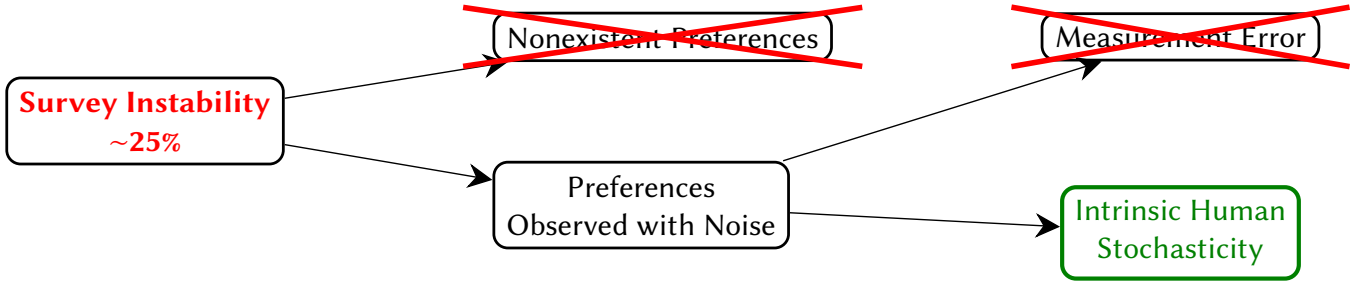

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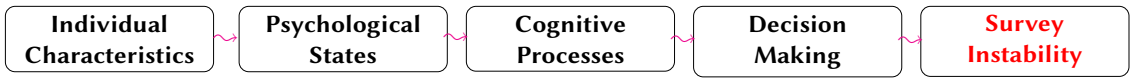

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- Improve survey instruments:
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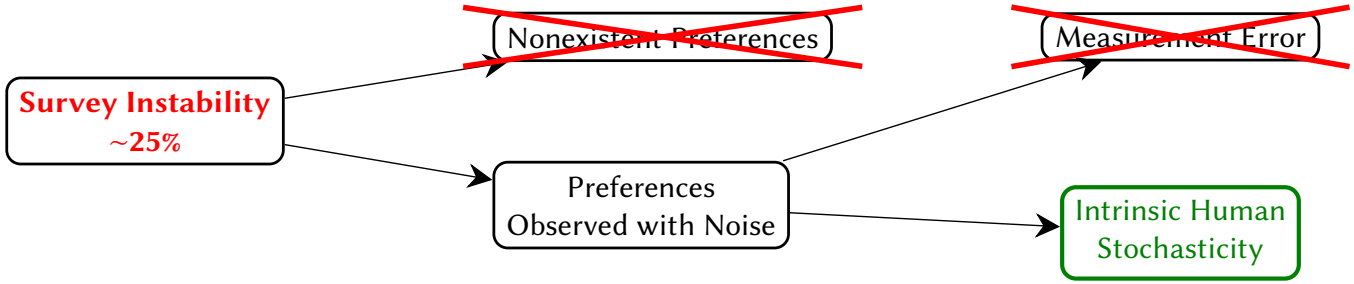

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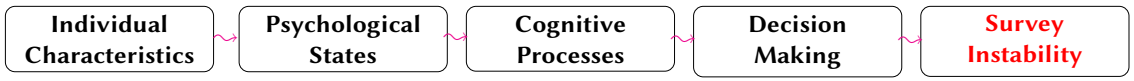

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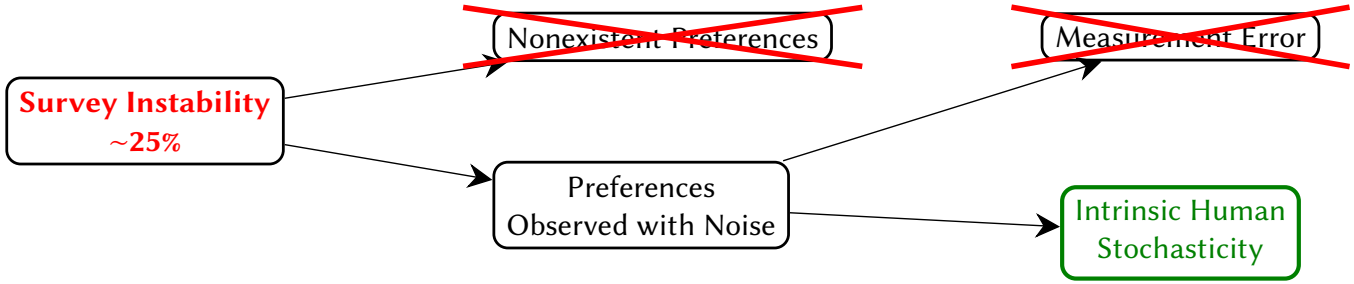

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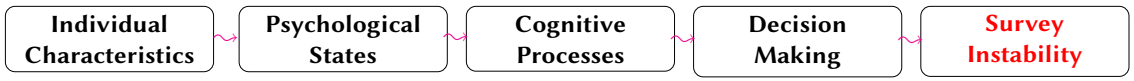

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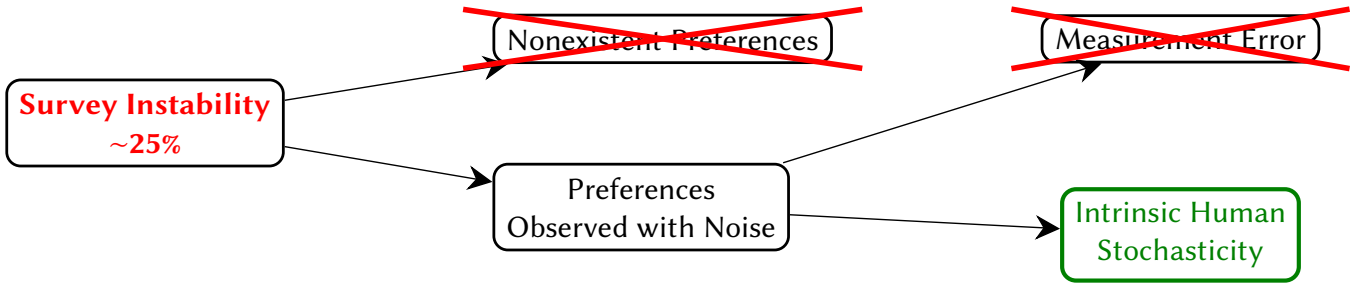

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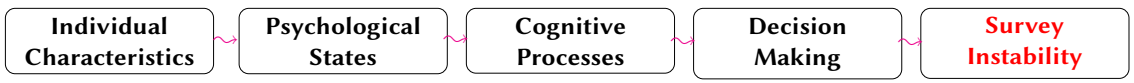

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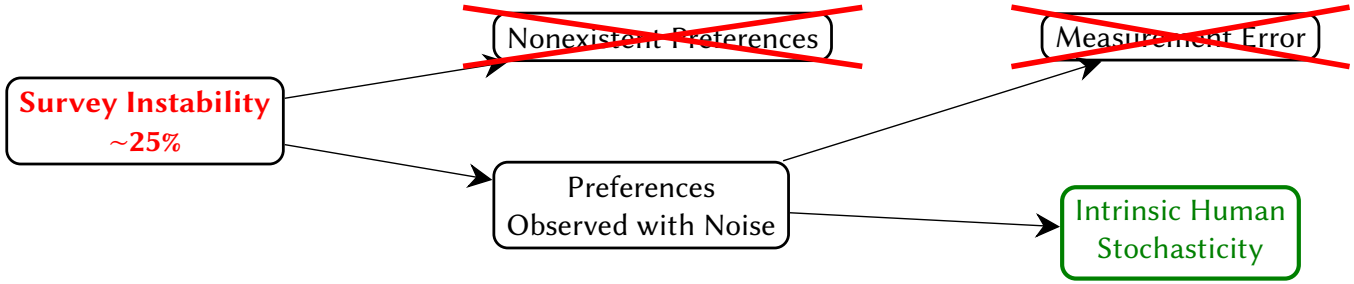

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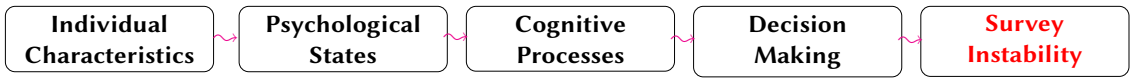

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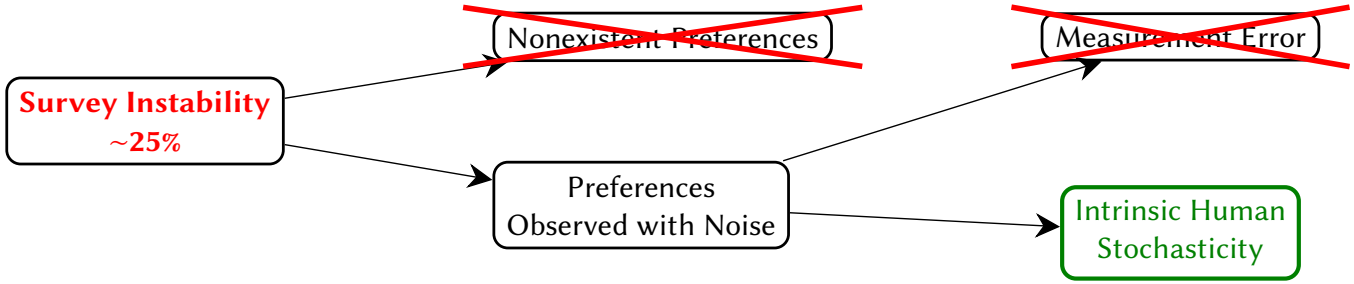

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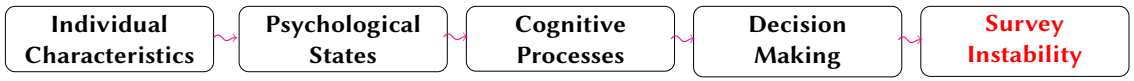

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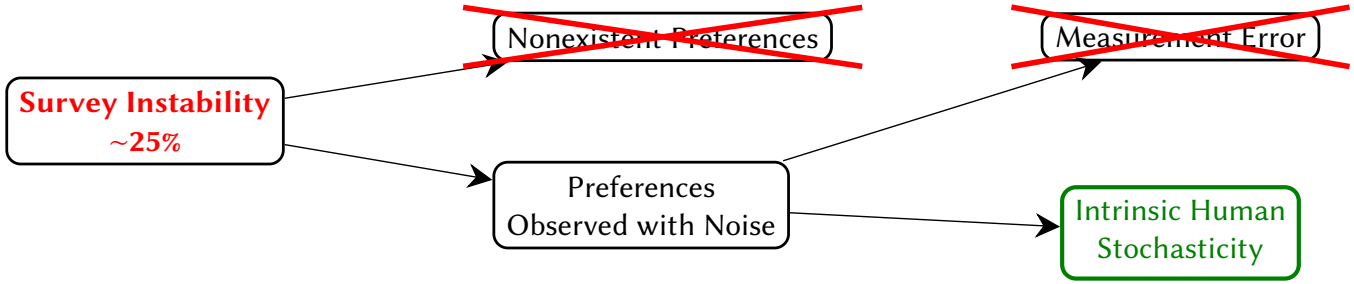

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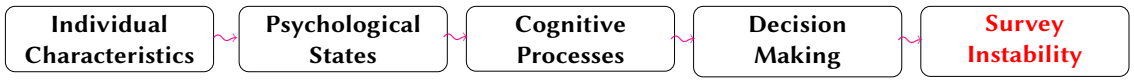

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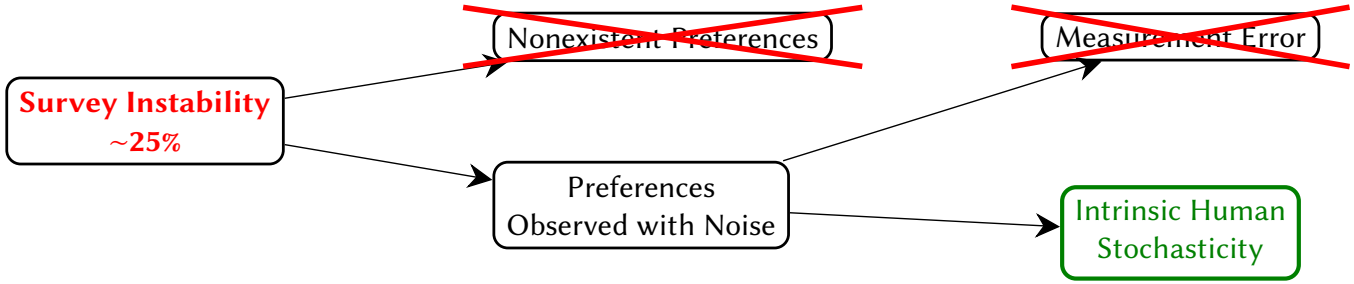

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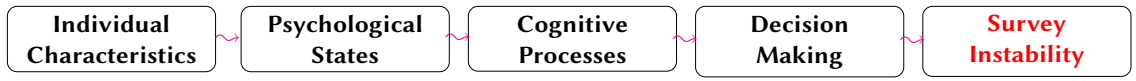

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Slides, data, paper: GaryKing.org