HOW TO ASK QUESTIONS

DUKE UNIVERSITY | BASS CONNECTIONS

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**Bass Connections in Education & Human Development**

BACKGROUND

Our political atmosphere is more divided than ever. Political polarization between parties, groups, and individuals is a detriment to democracy. Our team is investigating and developing interventions for better, more constructive political discourse.

We brought together philosophers, psychologists, statisticians, and political scientists in hopes of finding multidimensional solutions to an interdisciplinary problem.

We found political polarization between two groups to be primarily characterized by:

- Distance between group ideological means
- Isolation in geography and media choice
- Antagonism in internal attitude
- Incivility in external discourse
- Opacity as lack of understanding
- Rigidity as refusal to compromise
- Gridlock as inability to work together

Election Funding: Confidence

Our team's second replication
P-value = .017

Cap & Trade: Understanding
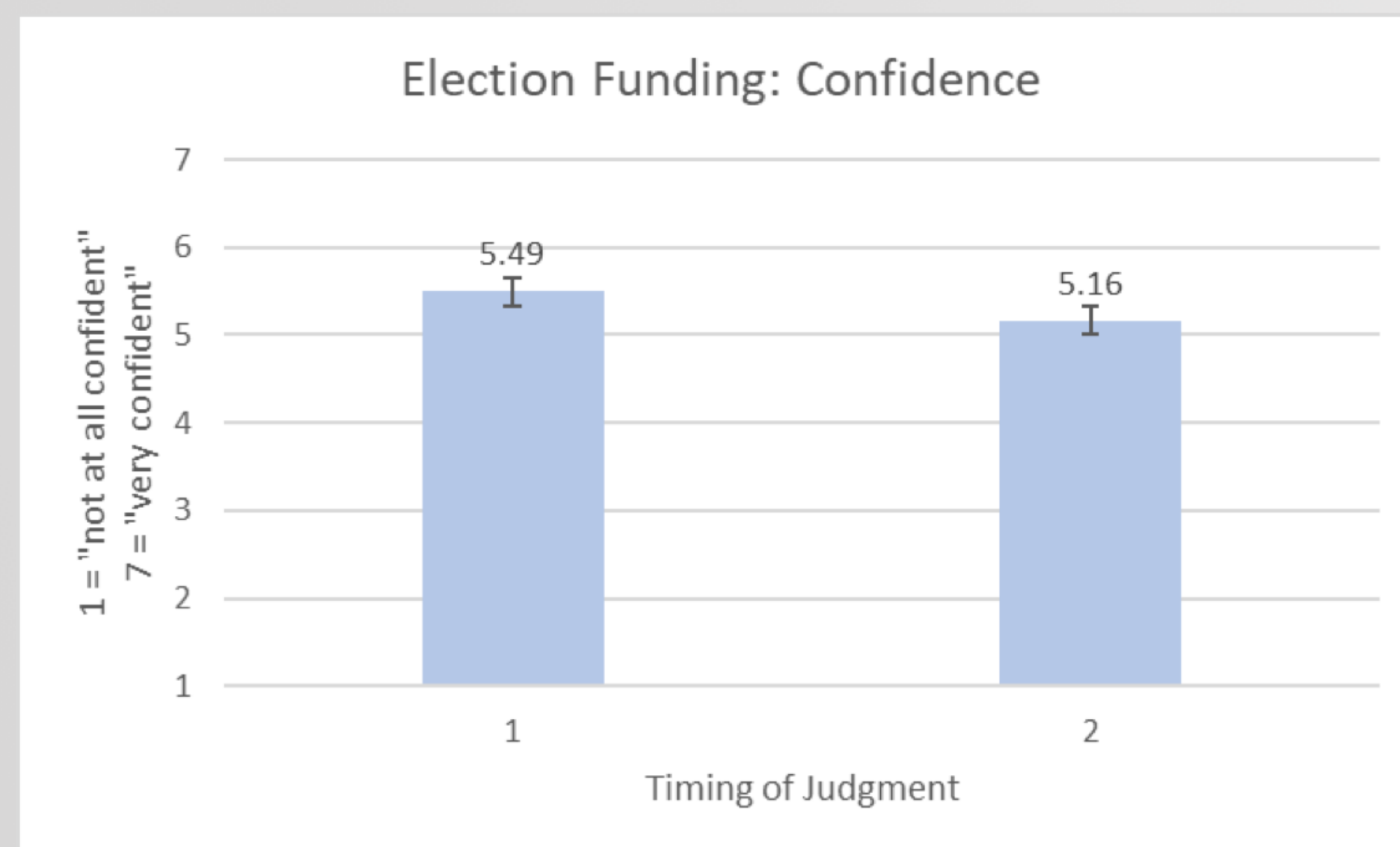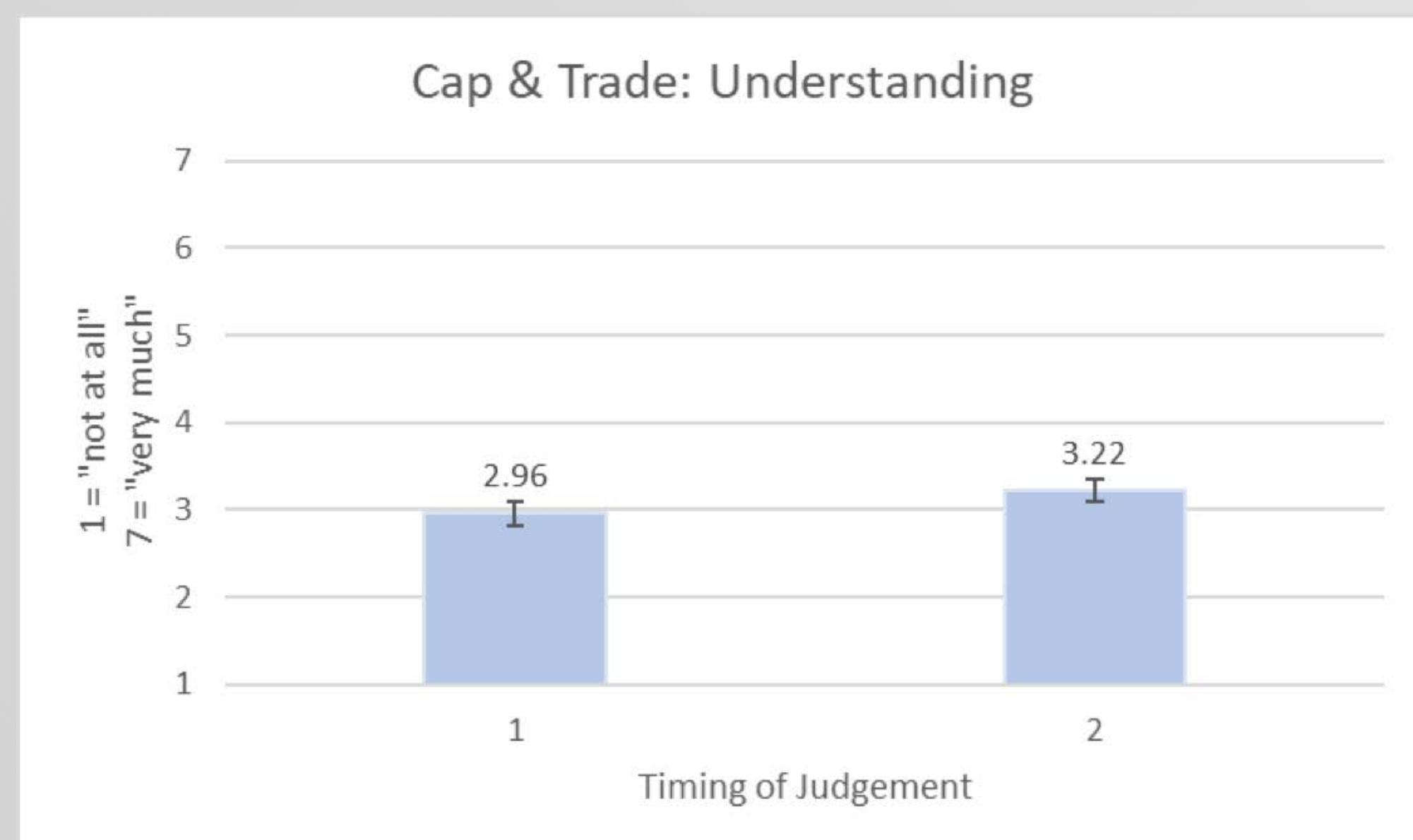
Our team's second replication
P-value = .006

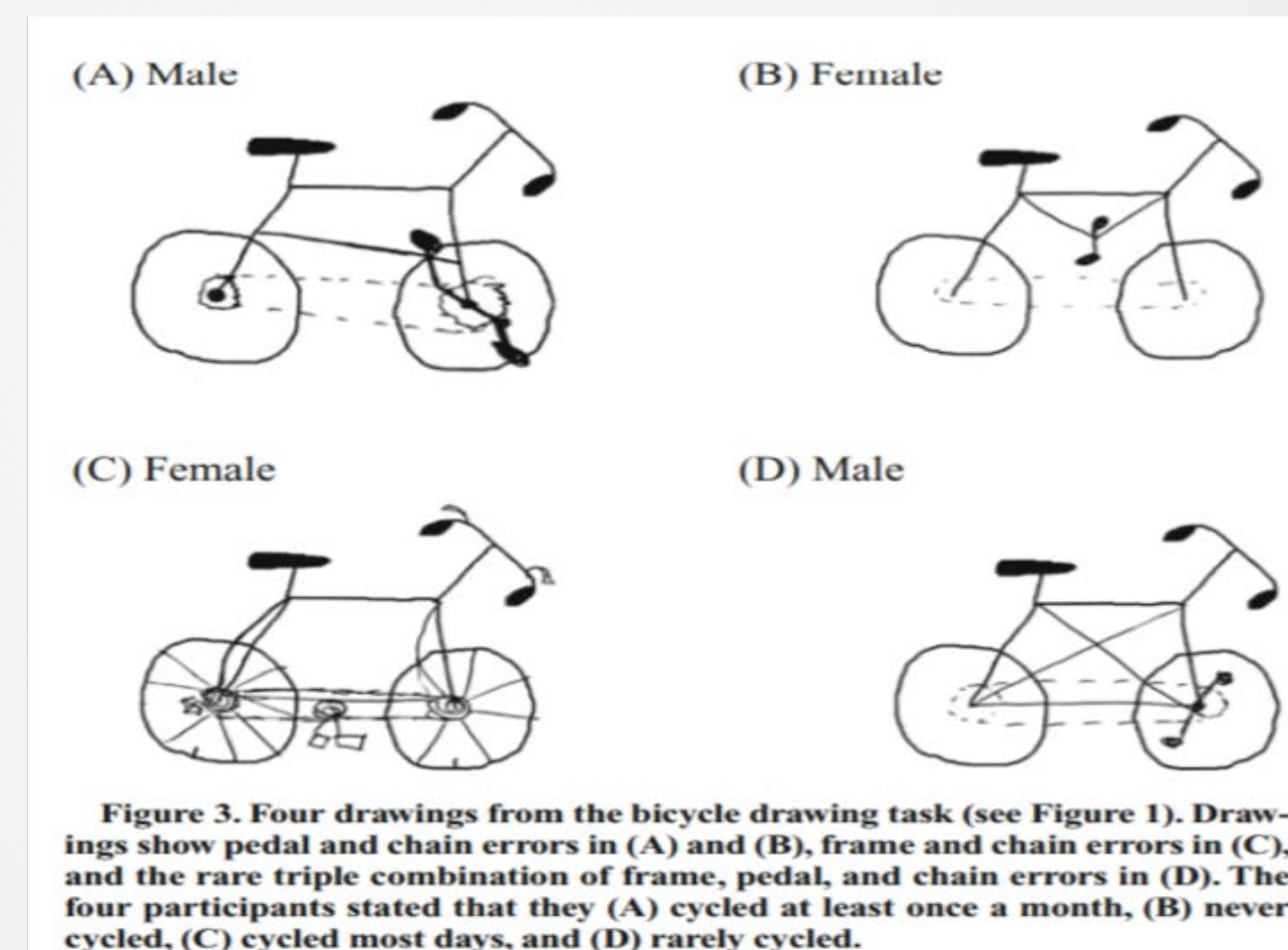## HOW SHOULD WE ASK QUESTIONS?

How vs. Why Questions:

In order to reduce this hostile and polarized political climate, conversations and productive political discourse are essential. Our research focuses on what types of questions should we ask to: better understand the other person's view better, better understand our own view, and have productive political discourse? We identified two types of questions to explore- mechanism (how) questions and reason (why) questions.

Illusion of Explanatory depth:

"Most people feel they understand the world with far greater detail, coherence, and depth than they really do," (Rosenblitz and Keil, 2002). When individuals are forced to confront their lack of knowledge by completing a mechanism task (writing down *how* a policy produces a specific result), we hypothesis that understanding and confidence about the policy will go down, and the individual's stance will become more moderate.
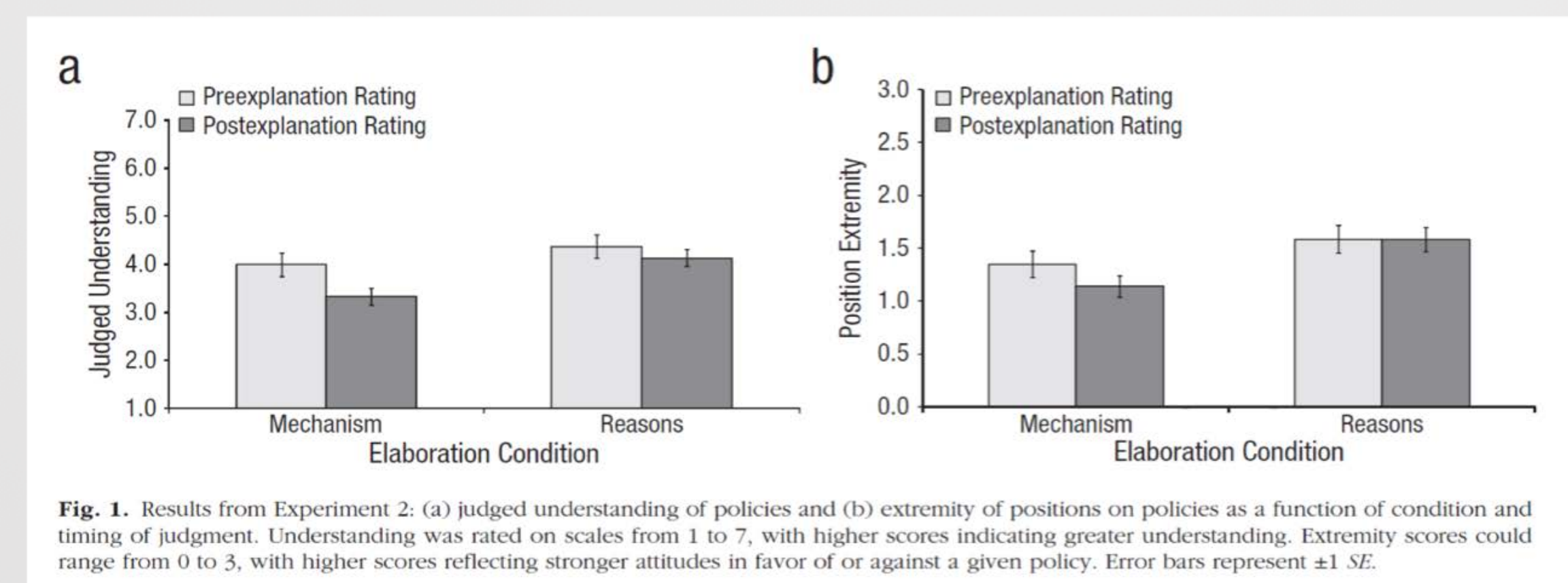
The Illusion of Explanatory Depth with <u>Common Objects</u> (Rosenblitz and Keil, 2002):

Participants were first asked to rate their knowledge on how a bicycle works on a scale from 1-7. Then they were given an unfinished picture of a bike and asked to complete the bike by adding the pedals, chain, and part of the frame. Most participants were unable to create accurate depictions of the bike despite giving high ratings of knowledge before the task.

Figure 3. Four drawings from the bicycle drawing task (see Figure 1). Drawings show pedal and chain errors in (A) and (B), frame and chain errors in (C), and the rare triple combination of frame, pedal, and chain errors in (D). The four participants stated that they (A) cycled at least once a month, (B) never cycled, (C) cycled most days, and (D) rarely cycled.

The illusion of Explanatory depth with <u>political policies</u>: (Fernbach et al (2013)

When individuals are forced to confront their lack of knowledge, we hypothesize that understanding and confidence about the issue would go down, and their stance will become more moderate. They found a decrease in understanding and also more moderate view following a mechanist explanation. However, for individuals who gave reasons there were no changes in understanding or extremity after giving reasons for their position.

Fig. 1. Results from Experiment 2: (a) judged understanding of policies and (b) extremity of positions on policies as a function of condition and timing of judgment. Understanding was rated on scales from 1 to 7, with higher scores indicating greater understanding. Extremity scores could range from 0 to 3, with higher scores reflecting stronger attitudes in favor of or against a given policy. Error bars represent ±1 SE.

Our Replication

We conducted multiple replications of this study and found the opposite effect that we hypothesized. For our original replication, five out of eight of the issues understanding of the topic *increased* after completing the mechanism task. However, for the issue of NAFTA participants reported less confidence in their view, while all other issues reported no difference.

Other Types of Questions

There are many different kinds of questions. They vary in their lexical features (the specific words one uses), and their intended goals (request for information, attack the opponent, signal civility)

We wanted to test two things: If certain types of questions were more likely to cause certain effects in the "question receiver," and if people are good at predicting the effects their questions will have on the "question receiver."
First, we crowdsourced questions from people on MTurk. We asked participants their stances on contentions issues. Then, we asked them to imagine themselves in a conversation with someone who disagrees with them. They were tasked with writing 3 questions to ask their opponent.

Participants were put in one of 4 conditions when writing their questions
1. Your goal is to increase the amount of understanding that both you and your opponent have about the issue and each other's viewpoints.'
2. 'Your goal is to increase the extent to which you and your opponent like each other, feel warm toward each other, and respect one another.'
3. Your goal is to prove your opponent wrong.'
4. Your goal is to win the conversation.'

We then had trained raters rate the questions on scales like abstract-specific, information-seeking, negative-framing, etc.

We posed the questions participants developed to new participants on MTurk.
The questions were posed to someone with an opposing viewpoint. After reading the questions, the new participants were asked:
1) to assess the questioners (warmth, respect, intelligence),
2) the extent to which they learned about the issue,
3) the extent to which they would be open to continuing the Conversation,
4) their confidence about the Issue, and their confidence the opponent's side is wrong.

specificity

improvement in understanding

Findings
Participants who were asked to write questions that increased "the extent to which you and your opponent like each other, feel warm toward each other, and respect one another," were low in specificity, and did not increase mutual understanding.