

When Decisions Require Consideration, People Give Up Control

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September 8, 2026

Abstract

Agents insist on agency for many reasons, including a desire to obtain their preferred choice and a desire for control. Agents may also forgo agency because they desire to avoid the costs of considering a decision. In a large experiment, we present decision-makers with a menu of investment options and investigate whether they insist on agency or let someone else choose for them. We find that requiring individuals to consider their choice makes them more willing to forgo agency. This consideration effect arises even among experienced decision-makers and across a range of decision-maker characteristics. While we observe few differences in participants' willingness to forgo agency across demographic groups, people expect many differences to arise, including that women would be more willing to forgo agency than men.

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1 Introduction

Individuals can often forgo agency by allowing others to make choices for them. For instance, when individuals select investment funds, retirement accounts, healthcare plans or insurance policies, individuals may forgo agency by following a recommendation, by adopting a default option, or by agreeing to let someone else or an algorithm—such as AI—make a choice for them. When they forgo agency in this way, their choices may reflect what is most commonly chosen, experts’ opinions, or even randomness. A common feature across the ways in which individuals forgo agency is that they often allow individuals to avoid the costs associated with *considering* their choices.

There are many reasons why individuals may be more or less insistent on agency. For very confident individuals who have concerns over what others would choose, insisting on agency is a way to ensure they implement their preferred choice (see, e.g., [Bartling and Srinivasan, 2025](#)). For less confident individuals who think others may make a more informed decision on their behalf, forgoing agency may naturally follow. In this paper, we examine how the *consideration costs* of decisions—holding fixed the informational content about one’s own ability and what occurs when they forgo agency—influences an agent’s willingness to forgo agency.

To examine the impact of consideration costs on agency preferences, we compare how often participants forgo agency across several treatments. Some treatments require participants to have, at least, a cursory consideration of the available choices if they insist on agency. Another treatment instead allows participants to largely sidestep consideration costs even if they insist on agency. Participants can always avoid consideration costs by forgoing agency.

More specifically, participants in our experiments face a series of investment problems. In each problem, participants choose which investment option, from a set of available options, to implement. Each investment problem appears once in each of the two blocks: the Baseline Block and the Agency Block. In the Baseline Block, participants decide which option to implement in an investment problem for a small fee, with no option to forgo agency. In the Agency Block, participants decide to either forgo agency in an investment problem (and accept the option chosen by the paternalist, Pat) or to insist on agency (and implement an option of their selection for the same small fee as in the Baseline Block). The fee ensures that individuals who select agency have a strict preference for doing so. While participants have information about Pat, they do not know Pat’s exact choices. In the main series of experiments, Pat is a participant from an earlier study, selected because they made the most common choice in as many of the investment problems as

possible.

We design the *Prior Choice* and *New Choice* treatments to examine the extent to which consideration costs may influence individuals' willingness to give up agency. In the *Prior Choice* treatment, participants first face the Baseline Block and then the Agency Block. This ensures that—when individuals make their agency decisions—they have already incurred the consideration costs associated with thinking about the exact same investment options. In addition, if participants insist on agency in an investment problem in the Agency Block, the option that will be implemented is already determined: it is their prior choice (i.e., the option they previously chose in the same investment problem in the Baseline Block). Importantly, participants do not have to re-select which option to implement in the Agency Block under the *Prior Choice* treatment. Hence, if participants insist on agency in the *Prior Choice* treatment, they do not actively select a specific investment option and do not incur related consideration costs. This design feature—coupled with the fact that participants have already had experience with considering all investment problems—implies that any consideration costs associated with insisting on agency are likely minimal.

In the *New Choice* treatment, insisting on agency requires participants to incur larger consideration costs. Participants first face the Agency Block and then the Baseline Block, which implies that—when they are making agency decisions—they are considering each investment option for the first time. Relatedly, if participants insist on agency, they are required to choose which option, out of all available options, to implement in the Agency Block.

Participants' willingness to forgo agency differs substantially across these treatments. In the *Prior Choice* treatment, when insisting on agency means participants can simply implement their prior choice without further consideration, participants forgo agency in a problem 31% of the time. In the *New Choice* treatment, when participants must actively select an option if they insist on agency, participants forgo agency 55% of the time. That is, requiring participants to consider their choice if they insist on agency makes participants 24 percentage points (or 77%) more likely to forgo agency. Importantly, since participants do not learn what Pat chooses nor the outcomes of selected investment problems, this *consideration effect* arises despite there being no difference in information about what happens when they forgo agency.

One may naturally wonder whether the consideration effect persists even among experienced participants. To consider this question, we design the *Experienced New Choice* treatment. As in the *Prior Choice* treatment, participants in the *Experienced New Choice* treatment first face the Baseline Block and then the Agency Block. However, as in the *New Choice* treatment, if participants

in the *Experienced New Choice* treatment insist on agency, they have to actively select which option to implement and at least pay some cursory consideration costs when selecting which investment option to implement in a problem they have previously considered. In the *Experienced New Choice* treatment, participants forgo agency in a problem 46% of the time, which is significantly larger than the aforementioned 31% observed in the *Prior Choice* treatment. That is, even among experienced participants, requiring participants to consider their choice if they insist on agency makes them more willing to forgo agency.

We present several robustness checks, including that our results persist across different types of decision problems, the order of decision problems, and when including demographic controls. We show that participants display some evidence of heuristic use and how that heuristic use affects consideration costs. We confirm that participants are attentive and responsive to what occurs when they forgo agency: they are substantially more reluctant to let someone else make their choice when that other person is known to make unusual choices. Finally, we run several additional experiments that conceptually replicate the consideration effect in various decision environments. We replicate the consideration effect in a new sample, when participants’ beliefs about what Pat will choose are fixed; when participants precisely know what Pat will choose; and via a design that allows us to consider only participants facing the investment decisions for the first time.

Extending beyond the consideration effect and our focus on *when* participants forgo agency, we further exploit our rich data—and collect new belief data—to consider two other underexplored questions. We ask whether participants’ willingness to forgo agency differs across demographic groups and whether people *expect* any demographic differences to arise. We consider differences according to participants’ age, gender, college education, political party affiliation, and race. We only observe robust evidence for a difference by age. This difference is accurately expected: participants expect that younger people are more willing to forgo agency. But, perhaps more notably, participants inaccurately expect that: (i) women are much more willing to forgo agency than men, (ii) people without college degrees are much more willing to forgo agency than people with college degrees, and (iii) Democrats are much more willing to forgo agency than Republicans.

This paper is related to several important strands of literatures. Our work complements the literature on individuals’ willingness to paternalize others ([Jacobsson, Johannesson and Borgquist, 2007](#); [Lusk, Marette and Norwood, 2014](#); [Gangadharan et al., 2018](#); [Ambuehl, Bernheim and Ockenfels, 2021](#); [Ackfeld and Ockenfels, 2021](#); [Stefan et al., 2022](#); [Bartling et al., 2023](#); [Buckle and Luhan, 2023](#); [Ambuehl et al., 2025](#); [Bartling and Srinivasan, 2025](#)). However, by focusing on in-

dividuals’ willingness to be paternalized and let someone else make their decisions, our paper is more closely related to the small but growing literature on agency preferences (Fehr, Herz and Wilkening, 2013; Bartling, Fehr and Herz, 2014; Owens, Grossman and Fackler, 2014; Pikulina and Tergiman, 2020; Afzal et al., 2022; Freundt, Herz and Kopp, 2023; Pikulina and Tergiman, 2024; Bartling and Srinivasan, 2025; Bakhtiar et al., 2025; Erkut and Kübler, 2026). We find that agency preferences are malleable; they depend on the extent to which agents are required to *consider* their options if they insist on agency. Simple changes to the choice environment can therefore have a large impact on the demand for agency.¹ Relatedly, while ample work exists that shows how easily individuals can be swayed in many contexts, there is also compelling work that documents how difficult it can be to affect individuals’ choices (for a review of this literature, see Jachimowicz et al., 2019, DellaVigna and Linos, 2022, and Dykstra, O’ Flaherty and Whillans, 2026). We provide a potential factor that may contribute to these differing results: when individuals have to incur consideration costs to implement their own choice, their choices are considerably more malleable. In contrast, when individuals can maintain agency without incurring consideration costs—e.g., by simply implementing their same prior choice again—their choices are considerably more stable.

Our work also connects to research in cognitive economics on how the cognitive costs of evaluating options shape choice (Sims, 2003; Caplin and Dean, 2015; Matejka and McKay, 2015; Enke and Graeber, 2023; Enke and Shubatt, 2023; Mackowiak, Matejka and Wiederholt, 2023; Shubatt and Yang, 2024). That work typically studies how individuals allocate scarce attention when acquiring or processing information about their options. In our setting, participants already have all payoff-relevant information in front of them, and what varies is whether they must actively work out and select a preferred option. Our results therefore speak to *which* margin of cognitive cost binds.

Finally, we contribute to a literature on believed gender differences, including inaccurate beliefs related to gender (Bordalo et al., 2019; Bohren, Imas and Rosenberg, 2019; Coffman, Exley and Niederle, 2021). While prior work often focuses on believed gender differences pertaining to ability, this paper highlights additional important beliefs to consider: beliefs about whether men and women want to be paternalized. Since we observe that people inaccurately expect that women are much more willing to forgo agency—or be paternalized—than men, future work may naturally investigate if this results in women experiencing undesirable paternalistic barriers.²

¹The demand for agency matters for many reasons, ranging from the outcomes secured to the extent to which people are held responsible for that outcome (Akbaş, Ariely and Yuksel, 2019; Bartling and Fischbacher, 2012).

²In a broader sense, our paper also contributes to literature that explores differences and believed differences

2 Design

This section describes our main experiment (see Appendix Section 4 for complete instructions).

2.1 Decision Environment

Our study involves 18 investment problems. In each one, participants receive an endowment of \$2.25 and decide how to invest \$2 of that endowment by selecting which investment option to implement.

The 18 investment problems are described in Table 1. There are twelve Eckel-Grossman (EG) problems—inspired by [Eckel and Grossman \(2002\)](#)—with five investment options each: one guarantees a fixed return, and four have returns that depend on a 50-50 lottery. There are also four High-Risk problems with three investment options: one guarantees a fixed return, and two involve small chances of high returns. Finally, there are two Attention Check problems with five investment options each, all with fixed returns, one of which strictly dominates the others. Participants do not receive any information about the outcome of their investment decisions until the end of the experiment. This design feature fixes information across participants.³

Participants face each investment problem twice: once in the Baseline Block and once in the Agency Block. Participants do not know the rules of the second block while completing the first block, and the order of the 18 problems in each block is random. In the Baseline Block, participants choose an investment option and incur a \$0.25 implementation fee. In contrast, in the Agency Block, participants can either implement the option chosen by themselves (which we describe as “insisting on agency” in this paper) or instead implement the option chosen by someone else (“forgo agency”) separately for each problem. If they insist on agency, they incur the same \$0.25 implementation fee as in the Baseline Block. If they forgo agency and opt for the investment option chosen by someone else, who we call “Pat,” they do not pay any implementation fee. This ensures that participants who insist on agency have a strict preference for doing so.

To prevent individuals from being influenced by Pat’s choice, they do not learn it. Therefore, we do not have to worry that individuals who make an investment decision in the Baseline Block after the Agency Block are influenced by Pat’s choices. Participants are only informed that Pat’s choices are determined by another MTurk worker, whom we describe as follows:

Because of anonymity, we cannot give you the true name of this MTurk worker. There-
according to gender, age, race, and political affiliation. For a review of this literature, see [Bursztyn and Yang \(2022\)](#).

³We consider the case where information about Pat’s choice is provided in Section 4.3.10.

fore, for simplicity, let’s refer to this MTurk worker as “Pat.” Pat will be chosen such that for as many decisions [investment problems] as possible out of the 18 decisions you are about to make, the following is the case: Pat made the choice that is the most common choice among all other MTurk workers in a prior version of this study. In this sense, Pat is usual for MTurk workers.

We chose the name Pat both because of its gender neutrality and as a nod to Pat’s paternalistic nature in our study. We select Pat to be someone who made the most modal choices and is thus “common” in order to capture individuals’ willingness to give up agency when doing so is “reasonable.” We examine the robustness of our results to other “Pats”—e.g., when Pat is instead known to be equally likely to select any of the available investment options—in Section 4.3.9.

Table 1: Investment Problems

	Option 1	Option 2	Option 3	Option 4	Option 5
EG 1	<i>2</i>	$\mathcal{L}(3, 1.50)$	$\mathcal{L}(4, 1)$	$\mathcal{L}(5, 0.50)$	$\mathcal{L}(6, 0)$
EG 2	<i>2</i>	$\mathcal{L}(3.50, 1.50)$	$\mathcal{L}(5, 1)$	$\mathcal{L}(6.50, 0.50)$	$\mathcal{L}(8, 0)$
EG 3	<i>2</i>	$\mathcal{L}(2.75, 1.50)$	$\mathcal{L}(3.50, 1)$	$\mathcal{L}(4.25, 0.50)$	$\mathcal{L}(5, 0)$
EG 4	<i>2</i>	$\mathcal{L}(2.50, 1.50)$	$\mathcal{L}(3, 1)$	$\mathcal{L}(3.50, 0.50)$	$\mathcal{L}(4, 0)$
EG 5	<i>2</i>	$\mathcal{L}(3.25, 1.50)$	$\mathcal{L}(4.50, 1)$	$\mathcal{L}(5.75, 0.50)$	$\mathcal{L}(7, 0)$
EG 6	<i>2</i>	$\mathcal{L}(3.75, 1.50)$	$\mathcal{L}(5.50, 1)$	$\mathcal{L}(7.25, 0.50)$	$\mathcal{L}(9, 0)$
EG 7	<i>3</i>	$\mathcal{L}(4, 2.50)$	$\mathcal{L}(5, 2)$	$\mathcal{L}(6, 1.50)$	$\mathcal{L}(7, 1)$
EG 8	<i>3</i>	$\mathcal{L}(4.50, 2.50)$	$\mathcal{L}(6, 2)$	$\mathcal{L}(7.50, 1.50)$	$\mathcal{L}(9, 1)$
EG 9	<i>3</i>	$\mathcal{L}(3.75, 2.50)$	$\mathcal{L}(4.50, 2)$	$\mathcal{L}(5.25, 1.50)$	$\mathcal{L}(6, 1)$
EG 10	<i>3</i>	$\mathcal{L}(3.50, 2.50)$	$\mathcal{L}(4, 2)$	$\mathcal{L}(4.50, 1.50)$	$\mathcal{L}(5, 1)$
EG 11	<i>3</i>	$\mathcal{L}(4.25, 2.50)$	$\mathcal{L}(5.50, 2)$	$\mathcal{L}(6.75, 1.50)$	$\mathcal{L}(8, 1)$
EG 12	<i>3</i>	$\mathcal{L}(4.75, 2.50)$	$\mathcal{L}(6.50, 2)$	$\mathcal{L}(8.25, 1.50)$	$\mathcal{L}(10, 1)$
High-Risk 1	(<i>1</i> , 100%)	(10, 2.50%)	(100, 0.25%)		
High-Risk 2	(<i>1</i> , 100%)	(5, 10%)	(50, 1%)		
High-Risk 3	(<i>2</i> , 100%)	(10, 5%)	(100, 0.50%)		
High-Risk 4	(<i>2</i> , 100%)	(5, 20%)	(50, 2%)		
Attention 1	<i>3</i>	1	1	1	1
Attention 2	<i>3</i>	1	1	1	1

Each EG problem involves a choice between one of five options: the first, X ($= \{2, 3\}$), indicates a 100% chance of receiving $\$X$; and each of the remaining options $\mathcal{L}(X, Y)$ indicates a 50% chance of receiving $\$X$ and a 50% chance of receiving $\$Y$. Each High-Risk problem involves a choice between one of three options: each described as (X, P) , which denotes a $P\%$ chance of receiving $\$X$. Each Attention Check problem involves a choice between one of five options: each option, described above as X ($= \{1, 3\}$), denotes a 100% chance of receiving $\$X$. Pat’s choices are in *bold*.

Table 1 details the 18 investment problems, where Pat’s choice is in *italics* and **bold**. Pat’s choice was determined by the *Reference Group* treatment, in which participants only had to make

decisions in the Baseline Block.⁴

2.2 Treatment Groups

Our experiment involves four treatments: *New Choice*, *Experienced New Choice–NR* (*No Reminder*), *Experienced New Choice–R* (*Reminder*), and *Prior Choice*. As shown in Table 2, these four treatments vary in the following three ways:

1. **Previously made a choice:** In the *New Choice* treatment, the Agency Block precedes the Baseline Block. In all other treatments, the Baseline Block precedes the Agency Block—implying participants have previously made a choice when they make agency decisions.
2. **Reminded of prior choice:** In the *Experienced New Choice–R* and *Prior Choice* treatments, participants are reminded of their prior choice in the Baseline Block when deciding whether to forgo agency in the same problem in the Agency Block. In the *Experienced New Choice–NR* treatment, participants are not reminded of this choice. In the *New Choice* treatment, there is no prior choice because participants complete the Agency Block before the Baseline Block.
3. **Prior choice implemented:** In the *Prior Choice* treatment, if participants insist on agency in a problem, the choice they previously chose in the same problem in the Baseline Block is implemented. In all other treatments, if participants insist on agency in a problem, they have to actively select which investment option they want to implement.

Table 2: Treatment Groups

	<i>Experienced New Choice</i>			
	<i>New Choice</i>	<i>–NR</i>	<i>–R</i>	<i>Prior Choice</i>
1. Previously made a choice		X	X	X
2. Reminded of prior choice			X	X
3. Prior choice implemented				X

We describe the conditions in which participants decide on agency in the Agency Block. In all but the *New Choice* treatment, the Baseline Block precedes the Agency block. In the *Experienced New Choice–R* and *Prior Choice* treatments, participants are reminded of their prior choice in a problem when deciding whether to forgo agency in that problem. In the *Prior Choice* treatment, if participants insist on agency in a problem, their prior choice in that problem is implemented.

We designed the *New Choice* and *Prior Choice* treatments to test our main *consideration effect*: that requiring participants to incur greater consideration costs makes them more likely to forgo

⁴We have 398 Amazon MTurk workers from August 2, 2018 in this *Reference Group* treatment, which was only used to determine Pat’s choices.

agency. The two *Experienced New Choice* treatments serve as additional control treatments. Section 3 formalizes the consideration costs each treatment generates and maps them to predictions.

2.3 Implementation Details

For our main study, we recruited Amazon Mechanical Turk participants who had a U.S. IP address and completed at least 100 HITs with an approval rating of 95%. We randomly assigned them to one of our four main treatments. Participants receive a \$2 completion fee plus additional payments from one randomly selected decision, which could result in additional payments from \$0 to \$100 (given the High-Risk problems).⁵

3 Conceptual Framework

Individuals may forgo agency because they believe Pat will make a better decision on their behalf or because of associated costs with insisting on agency. In this section, we provide a simple conceptual framework to formalize *consideration costs* associated with insisting on agency and how the extent of these costs may affect individuals’ willingness to forgo agency across our treatments.⁶

3.1 Set Up

Consider an individual i who faces a decision problem d . Since each problem is encountered twice, her preferences over the options in a given problem may change between the first and second encounter—perhaps because she originally made a mistake (trembling hand), acquired more information from experience, or because experience itself changed her preferences. In decision problem d , with multiple available options, the individual can choose between forgoing agency and accepting Pat’s choice or insisting on agency. If the individual forgoes agency, her utility in decision d is

$$U_{i,d}(P) = \mathbb{E}\left[\sum_{u \in \mathcal{U}_d} u(a_{P,d})p_{i,d}(u)\right],$$

where $a_{P,d}$ denotes Pat’s choice, $\mathcal{U}_d$ denotes individual i ’s (finite) set of possible utility functions for decision problem d , and $p_{i,d}$ denotes individual i ’s probability that her utility function is equal

⁵As detailed in the Online Appendix, within the Experimental Instructions for our main study and additional studies, we recruited participants on MTurk several years ago when data quality was still higher—likely allowing a sufficient sample even when we restrict to participants who pass our attention checks (as detailed in a following section).

⁶While consideration costs can affect welfare, we emphasize that our conceptual framework is intended to be positive: to predict when an individual forgoes agency. We do not take a stand on welfare, and the reason is related to the mechanism we study. If an individual’s preferred option may change once she deliberates, it is not clear which of her choices should serve as the welfare benchmark.

to u .⁷

If the individual instead insists on agency, her utility is

$$U_{i,d}(A) = V_{i,d}(a_{i,d}^*) - F - C_{i,d},$$

where $V_{i,d}(a_{i,d}^*)$ denotes the utility associated with implementing her preferred option $a_{i,d}^*$, which is $\sum_{u \in \mathcal{W}_d} u(a_{i,d}^*) p_{i,d}(u)$ for some $\mathcal{W}_d \subseteq \mathcal{U}_d$. F is the monetary implementation fee that is paid when insisting on agency, and $C_{i,d}$ denotes the *consideration costs* associated with insisting on agency in problem d . The individual therefore forgoes agency whenever

$$\mathbb{E}\left[\sum_{u \in \mathcal{U}_d} u(a_{P,d}) p_{i,d}(u)\right] > V_{i,d}(a_{i,d}^*) - F - C_{i,d}.$$

3.2 Consideration Costs

We decompose $C_{i,d}$ into two types of consideration costs, which naturally vary across our treatments:

- *Temptation cost* ($c_{i,d}^{\text{temptation}}$) is the cost of avoiding reconsidering one's past decisions. An individual may be tempted to reconsider her past decisions because she recognizes that her current preferred option may differ from what she previously chose—e.g., because she originally made a mistake (trembling hand), because she acquired more information from experience, or because experience itself changed her preferences.
- *Deliberation cost* ($c_{i,d}^{\text{deliberation}}$) is the cognitive cost of working out which option the individual prefers out of all of the options presented and additional time/effort costs of choosing that option over the available options. Its magnitude depends on how much of this work remains to be done, and we write $c_{i,d}^{\text{deliberation, small}}$, $c_{i,d}^{\text{deliberation, medium}}$, and $c_{i,d}^{\text{deliberation, large}}$ for the levels that arise across our treatments below.

Which of these two costs an individual incurs depends on the treatment and on whether she chooses to re-evaluate her options. When both routes are available, she takes the cheaper one, so that $C_{i,d} = \min\{c_{i,d}^{\text{temptation}}, c_{i,d}^{\text{deliberation}}\}$. Section 3.3 details how this maps to each of our treatments.

⁷We treat $\mathbb{E}[\sum_{u \in \mathcal{U}_d} u(a_{P,d}) p_{i,d}(u)]$ as the individual's expectation over Pat's choice given the information she has about Pat at the moment of decision. Because the description of Pat is held fixed across our treatments, $\mathbb{E}[\sum_{u \in \mathcal{U}_d} u(a_{P,d}) p_{i,d}(u)]$ does not vary across our consideration-effect comparisons.

3.3 Predictions and Mapping to Treatments

If participants insist on agency, they pay consideration costs across our treatments as follows:

- In the *Prior Choice* treatment, the participant pays no consideration costs. The participant does not need to pay the deliberation cost, because they can only select one option (i.e., their prior choice) if they insist on agency. They also do not pay the temptation cost because they are not given the chance to reconsider their past decision. Thus, in this treatment, $C_{i,d} = 0$.
- In the *Experienced New Choice-R* treatment, either the temptation or small deliberation costs are incurred. If the participant re-implements the option they chose previously without deliberation, they pay the temptation cost of avoiding reconsideration (i.e., $C_{i,d} = c_{i,d}^{\text{temptation}}$). If the participant instead chooses to re-evaluate the options, she can use the perfect information on her past choice as a signal of her current preferred option without having to pay any memory or recall costs—and hence pay a small deliberation cost when she redetermines which option she prefers out of all of the options presented and then selects her preferred choice (i.e., $C_{i,d} = c_{i,d}^{\text{deliberation, small}}$). Thus, in this treatment, $C_{i,d} = \min\{c_{i,d}^{\text{temptation}}, c_{i,d}^{\text{deliberation, small}}\}$.
- In the *Experienced New Choice-NR* treatment, either the temptation or medium deliberation costs are incurred. Under perfect and costless memory, the deliberation costs are exactly the same as in the *Experienced New Choice-R* treatment. But, if memory is imperfect and/or costly, the deliberation costs are higher because the participant has to exert more effort to redetermine which option she prefers out of all of the options presented from scratch or has to pay recall/memory costs to use their past choice as a signal of her current preferred option. Thus, in this treatment, $C_{i,d} = \min\{c_{i,d}^{\text{temptation}}, c_{i,d}^{\text{deliberation, medium}}\}$.
- In the *New Choice* treatment, the participant has not made any prior decisions. This means she cannot face any temptation costs associated with reconsidering her past decisions. This also means there is no past choice that could serve as a signal of her current preferred choice. That is, in this treatment, $C_{i,d} = c_{i,d}^{\text{deliberation, large}}$.

How the consideration costs vary across the treatments then allows us to immediately predict the relative likelihoods of participants forgoing agency across the treatments, as noted in P1.

P1 (The *consideration effect*). The probability of forgoing agency in treatment t , $P(t)$, is ordered across the treatments as follows:⁸

$$P(\text{Prior Choice}) < P(\text{Experienced New Choice-R}) \leq \\ P(\text{Experienced New Choice-NR}) < P(\text{New Choice}).$$

3.4 Relation to Other Frameworks

3.4.1 Rational Inattention and Cognitive Costs

The ordering in P1—that individuals become more willing to forgo agency as insisting on agency requires greater cognitive engagement with the decision problem—is what would be expected from the rational inattention and cognitive economics literatures (Sims, 2003; Caplin and Dean, 2015; Matejka and McKay, 2015; Enke and Graeber, 2023; Mackowiak, Matejka and Wiederholt, 2023).

Our set-up can be described in the spirit of those literatures: the individual is uncertain about which of her possible utility functions applies, and the deliberation cost is the cost of resolving that uncertainty. That said, our design does not separate the sources of that uncertainty, e.g., whether her preferences genuinely change over time or whether she is simply unsure of them, and we make no claims on that question.

Our setting, however, isolates a particular margin of cognitive costs. The uncertainty we describe is not about what the options are—the full set of options, with their payoffs and probabilities, is displayed in every treatment—but about which of them the individual prefers. Rather than incurring the cognitive costs associated with acquiring or processing information about what the options are, participants incur the cognitive costs associated with actively deliberating over those options and selecting one if they insist on agency. Both components of $C_{i,d}$ are of this second kind. The deliberation cost is the cost of working out which option is preferred; the temptation cost arises only because a past choice exists that could be revisited. Neither is a cost of learning what the options are.

To isolate the cost of deliberating from the cost of acquiring information, we hold the information environment fixed and vary whether insisting on agency requires actively selecting an option and

⁸The distribution in Figure 1 is bimodal: many participants always insist on agency and many always forgo. A simple type extension reconciles this with the prediction. Let $\Delta_{i,d} \equiv V_{i,d}(a_{i,d}^*) - U_{i,d}(P) - F$, so that the individual forgoes agency whenever $\Delta_{i,d} < C_{i,d}$. Participants with $\Delta_{i,d} > c_{i,d}^{\text{deliberation, large}}$ insist on agency in every treatment; those with $\Delta_{i,d} < 0$ forgo agency in every treatment; the remaining *marginal* participants drive the average treatment effects.

whether the participant has considered the problem before. Our results therefore speak to which margin of cognitive costs binds, rather than to whether cognitive costs matter at all. Section 4.3.5 takes up that question in our data.

3.4.2 Alternative Possibilities to the Consideration Effect

There are several reasons that may lead one to expect no differences across our treatments or the opposite pattern of results from what is suggested by the consideration effect.

Homo economicus predicts no difference in agency preferences between the *Prior Choice* and the *New Choice* treatments. If individuals have instant and free access to their complete preferences, their agency preferences should not depend on consideration costs.

Strong preferences for *diversification* makes the opposite prediction from what we find—namely, that participants are *more* likely to forgo agency in the *Prior Choice* than in the *New Choice* treatment (Agranov and Ortoleva, 2017; Dwenger, Kübler and Weizsäcker, 2018). This is because a preference for diversity or randomization predicts a preference to forgo implementing one’s previous choice and hence to forgo agency in the Agency Block in the *Prior Choice* treatment. A preference for diversity or randomization is less relevant when participants make agency decisions in the *New Choice* treatment, since the Agency Block occurs *before* the Baseline Block in that treatment (and since participants do not know the nature of the second block of problems they will face).

Finally, there are three literatures that are related to our environment but make no predictions as to how the strength of agency preferences may differ between treatments. First, a growing literature documents the existence and importance of agency preferences, but does not model how those would change between these two treatments—see, for example, excellent work in Fehr, Herz and Wilkening (2013), Bartling, Fehr and Herz (2014), Owens, Grossman and Fackler (2014), Pikulina and Tergiman (2020), Bursztyn and Yang (2022), Afzal et al. (2022), and Pikulina and Tergiman (2024).⁹

Second, there is an important literature that shows that the influence of information on subsequent choices depends on the timing of that information, see Babcock et al. (1995), Gneezy et al. (2020), and Saccardo and Serra-Garcia (2023). This literature does not apply to our environment because, by design, we eliminated effects related to the timing of information.¹⁰ As explained in

⁹A reluctance to accept responsibility is often considered in the literature on motivated reasoning, see, e.g., Bartling and Fischbacher (2012) and Falk, Neuber and Szech (2020). This literature also does not predict a difference across our treatments.

¹⁰In addition, this literature focuses on environments where individuals have a specific motive to justify their choice, e.g., they need to negotiate on one side of an issue or are incentivized to make a potentially unethical choice. We do not expect motivated reasoning to be relevant in our environment.

Section 2.1, participants are never informed of what choices Pat made. We made this design choice precisely in order to eliminate the possibility that learning about Pat’s choices could influence our results.

Third, prior literature documents the important role of experience and related preferences, such as a desire for consistency over time (see, e.g., [Yariv, 2005](#); [Agarwal et al., 2008](#); [DellaVigna, 2009](#); [Falk and Zimmermann, 2013, 2018](#)). Indeed, the relevance of such experience in our choice environment—absent any feedback on what Pat chose or what outcomes result from the investment problems—could be described as relating to whether people have previously *considered* a decision or not. For instance, if a participant has a eureka moment when selecting an option in a problem for the first time, she may then know with certainty that she should implement the same option again when facing a problem for the second time. That said, we emphasize that evidence for the consideration effect persists even when differences cannot be driven by such experience—that is, even when comparing experienced participants across the *Prior Choice* and *Experienced New Choice* treatments and even when comparing experienced participants who are perfectly informed of their prior choice across the *Prior Choice* and *Experienced New Choice–R* treatments.

4 Results

We focus on the 674 participants who correctly answer both attention checks in the Baseline Block. However, our results are robust to including those who answer either one incorrectly (see Appendix Figure 1 and Appendix Table 2).

4.1 The Consideration Effect

As seen in Figure 1 Panels A and B, out of the 16 problems, the average number of times participants forgo agency significantly increases from 5.0 problems in the *Prior Choice* treatment to 8.9 problems in the *New Choice* treatment. This difference is statistically significant ($p < 0.01$, two-sided t -test) and implies that participants are almost twice as likely to forgo agency when making their own choice involves larger consideration costs because they are facing the problem for the first time.¹¹ Similarly, the results of a linear probability model in Column 1 of Table 3 confirm that when moving from the *Prior Choice* to the *New Choice* treatment, the likelihood that a participant forgoes agency and accepts Pat’s choice significantly increases from 31% to 55%, an increase of 24 percentage points or 77%. The results in Columns (2) – (6) further show

¹¹All statistical tests about differences in the average number of times that participants forgo agency are from t -tests. All statistical tests about the willingness to forgo agency are from linear probability models of the likelihood to forgo agency in a problem, with standard errors clustered at the participant level.

the robustness of this finding to the inclusion of controls (for a participant’s age, gender, race, education level, and political affiliation) as well as to when we separately consider the EG problems and High-Risk problems.

To summarize, we find strong support for a consideration effect: participants are more willing to forgo agency when the consideration costs of decision-making are higher, as measured by the difference between the *Prior Choice* and *New Choice* treatments.

4.2 Comparing the Two Control Treatments

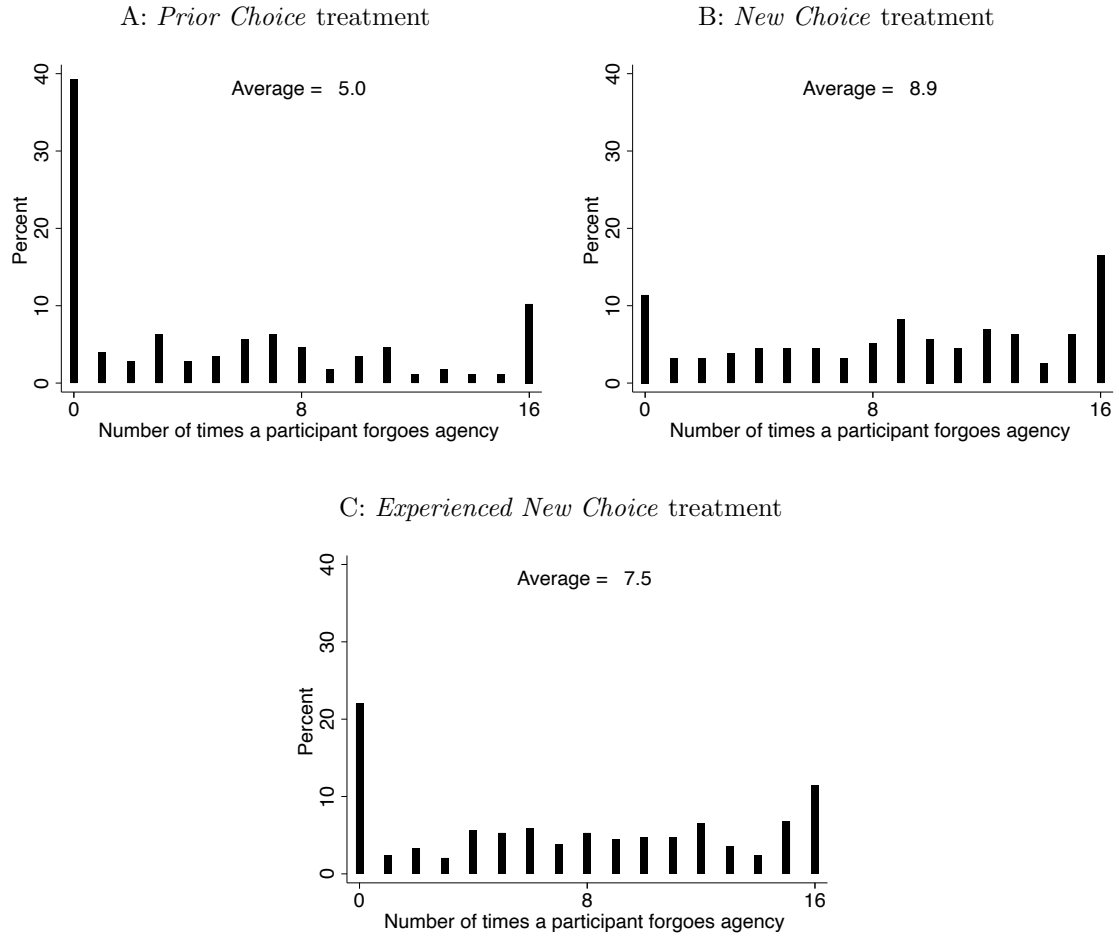
To explore the robustness of the consideration effect, we ask whether evidence for the consideration effect persists even among experienced participants by comparing results from the *Experienced New Choice* treatments to the *Prior Choice* treatment. The two *Experienced New Choice* treatments, with and without reminders, are very similar and do not significantly differ in how often participants insist on agency.¹² For simplicity, we therefore combine the results into a single *Experienced New Choice* treatment. We additionally read this as evidence that recall is not the binding friction in our setting.

Out of the 16 problems, the average number of times participants forgo agency significantly increases from 5.0 problems in the *Prior Choice* treatment to 7.5 problems in the *Experienced New Choice* treatment ($p < 0.01$, two-sided t -test). Similarly, the results of a linear probability model in Column 1 of Table 3 show that when moving from the *Prior Choice* to the *Experienced New Choice* treatment, the likelihood that a participant forgoes agency and accepts Pat’s choice significantly increases from 31% to 46%, an increase of 15 percentage points or 48%. The results in Columns (2) – (6) further show the robustness of this finding to the inclusion of controls as well as to when we separately consider the EG problems and High-Risk problems. Thus, even among experienced participants, we find robust evidence for the consideration effect. This 15 percentage point effect, moreover, is even larger than the impact of experience itself—9 percentage points—measured by comparing the *New Choice* and *Experienced New Choice* treatments.

That is, requiring experienced participants to consider their choice if they insist on agency—even if it is only a cursory consideration because they have previously considered the same investment problem before—makes them more willing to forgo agency.

¹²The average number of times that participants forgo agency is 7.8 (49% of the time) versus 7.2 (45% of the time) with and without reminder (two-sided t -test, $p = 0.29$). This is in contrast to work in guessing games; see Fragiadakis, Knoepfle and Niederle (2020).

Figure 1: Distribution of how often participants forgo agency



There are 176 in the *Prior Choice* treatment, 158 participants in the *New Choice* treatment, and 340 in the *Experienced New Choice* treatment (165 with and 175 without reminders).

Table 3: Linear probability model of likelihood to forgo agency

	All Problems		EG Problems		High-Risk Problems	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
New Choice	0.24*** (0.04)	0.25*** (0.04)	0.23*** (0.04)	0.23*** (0.04)	0.29*** (0.04)	0.29*** (0.04)
Experienced New Choice	0.15*** (0.03)	0.16*** (0.03)	0.14*** (0.03)	0.15*** (0.03)	0.18*** (0.04)	0.19*** (0.04)
Constant	0.31*** (0.03)	0.30*** (0.05)	0.31*** (0.03)	0.29*** (0.05)	0.34*** (0.03)	0.33*** (0.06)
N	10784	10784	8088	8088	2696	2696
Controls	no	yes	no	yes	no	yes

Results from a linear probability model of the likelihood to forgo agency. New Choice and Experienced New Choice are indicators for a participant being in the *New Choice* and *Experienced New Choice* treatments, respectively. Columns 1 and 2 use data on all 16 problems, while columns 3 and 4 restrict attention to the 12 EG problems, and columns 5 and 6 to the 4 High-Risk problems. Controls include indicators for whether the participant is male, has completed at least 4 years of college, identifies as a Republican, is under the age of 33, and identifies as white. * $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$. Standard errors are clustered at the participant level and shown in parentheses.

4.3 Robustness and Discussion

In Subsections 4.3.1 – 4.3.6, we provide additional analyses of our main experiment. In Subsections 4.3.7 – 4.3.11, we further explore the consideration effect in Experiments A1, A2, A3, and A4. For information on the timeline of these experiments, see Appendix Section 3. For full design details of these additional experiments, see Appendix Section 5. To facilitate comparison to our main results, we once more restrict attention to participants who correctly answered both attention checks in the Baseline Block, which leaves us with 2,027 additional participants. In each of the following subsections, we only compare individuals across treatments within the same experiment, since participants are randomized across treatments in each experiment.

4.3.1 Do Memory or Recall Costs Matter?

Motivated by prior work documenting the important role of memory and recall, we can examine if there is evidence for memory and recall costs in driving the consideration effect (Bordalo, Gennaioli and Shleifer, 2020; Bordalo et al., 2021, 2025; Conlon and Patel, 2026; Enke, Schwerter and Zimmermann, 2024; Graeber, Roth and Zimmermann, 2024). As reported in Section 4.2, the number of times participants forgo agency in the *Experienced New Choice-R* and *Experienced New Choice-NR* treatments does not significantly differ (see also Appendix Table 1). That is, providing a participant with perfect, costless information about her own prior choice does not significantly

change how often she gives up agency.¹³

4.3.2 Does the Kind of Problem Matter?

The cognitive difficulty of understanding risk and probabilities may be one of the reasons that we observe notable consideration costs.

Our study does not explicitly vary the cognitive difficulty of decision problems. However, the two types of problems in our study—i.e., the EG problems and the High-Risk problems—differ sharply along the dimensions that recent work identifies as the primary drivers of choice complexity (Enke and Shubatt, 2023; Shubatt and Yang, 2024). Relative to the EG problems, the High-Risk problems involve small and non-round probabilities (ranging from 0.25% to 20%, rather than a uniform 50-50), payoffs spanning two orders of magnitude (\$1 to \$100, rather than \$0 to \$10), and options that differ dramatically in skewness. In addition, the two risky options within each High-Risk problem have identical expected values, so no difference in value disciplines the comparison between them. Thus, on each of these dimensions, the High-Risk problems could be considered more complex than the EG problems.¹⁴

Consistent with consideration costs being higher when decisions are more complex, Appendix Table 1 shows that participants forgo agency more often in the High-Risk problems than in the EG problems and that they do so in every treatment. We emphasize that this comparison is descriptive: our problems were not constructed to vary complexity, and complexity covaries with other features of the two types of problems.

We also note that the consideration effect itself is identified holding the decision problem fixed—comparing the *Prior Choice* and *New Choice* treatments on identical lotteries—and so does not rely on cross-problem variation in complexity. We hope future work varies difficulty deliberately, using measures such as those developed by Enke and Shubatt (2023) and Shubatt and Yang (2024).

4.3.3 Do Agency Preferences Differ Over Time?

While participants could become more willing to forgo agency over time (e.g., if they become more fatigued from having to make many decisions), participants could instead become less willing to forgo agency over time (e.g., if experience helps them to form decision rules). We do not

¹³If anything, the point estimate runs opposite to the weak ordering in P1: participants forgo agency 49% of the time when reminded versus 45% when not. This difference is not significant. We read this as evidence that recall is not the binding friction in our setting, rather than as evidence that recall costs are zero: the difference is small and not precisely estimated.

¹⁴The one dimension along which the ordering reverses may be the number of options: the High-Risk problems present three options while the EG problems present five. Option count receives comparatively little weight in these measures relative to probability format, payoff scale, and the presence or absence of a difference in value between options.

observe any evidence to support order effects. Rather, as seen in Appendix Figure 2, across all treatments, participants forgo agency at somewhat constant rates as they progress through the decision problems.¹⁵ These findings are consistent with participants regularly applying a decision rule—rather than forming a decision rule—over time.

We can also characterize these dynamics within participants. Among participants who both insist on agency at least once and forgo agency at least once, Appendix Figure 4 shows where in the sequence they first and last switch between the two. They begin switching almost immediately: 40% first switch by their second decision, and 62% do so within their first three. They also keep switching to the end: 30% make their last switch on their final decision, and 58% do so within their last three. We thus find no evidence of a “delegate early, then settle” pattern; these participants appear to re-evaluate each problem as it arrives. What is stable over time is therefore the rule they apply, not the agency decision it yields. The consideration effect is present within this group as well, as shown in Appendix Table 3.

4.3.4 Do Participants Use Heuristics Beyond Forgoing Agency?

Beyond forgoing agency, we observe some evidence consistent with the use of other heuristics. As seen in Figure 2, some participants always select the safe option in EG lotteries during the Baseline Block (always-safe) while others never select the safe option (never-safe). We interpret always-safe participants as having a clear, internal heuristic and never-safe participants as not having an easily-identifiable heuristic.¹⁶

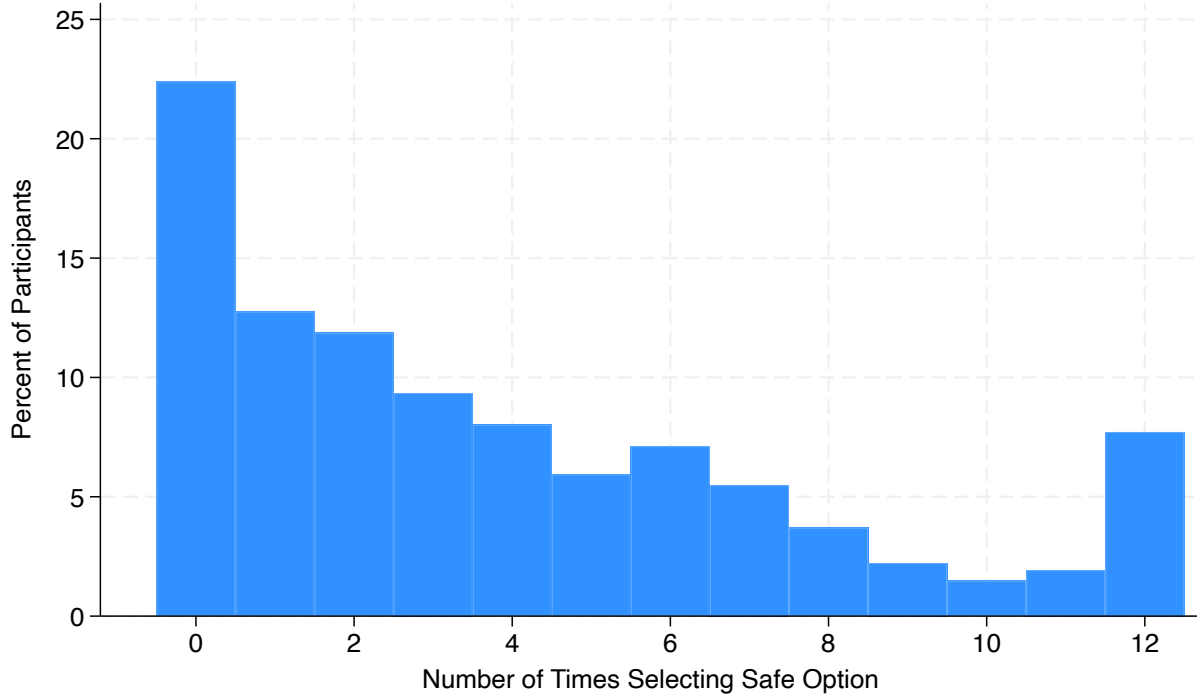
We also find evidence of heuristic use regarding the “EV gap”: the largest difference in expected value between any two available lotteries. In particular, we find that the consideration effect—the difference in the likelihood of forgoing agency between the *New Choice* and *Prior Choice* treatments—is larger in problems where the EV gap is moderate than in problems where it is zero or large.¹⁷

¹⁵While some may notice a few qualitative differences, we note that there is no linear trend and these differences are not statistically significant—that is, they appear to instead reflect noise.

¹⁶Per Section 3.2, a component of consideration costs is deliberation cost: the cognitive cost of working out which option the individual prefers out of all of the options presented and additional time/effort costs of choosing that option over the available options. Participants with a clear heuristic presumably have lower deliberation costs than participants without a clear heuristic. Based on this framework, if participants choose to re-evaluate their options in the Agency Block, the consideration costs for always-safe participants are lower than consideration costs for never-safe participants. Evidence consistent with this framework can be seen in Appendix Figure 3 and Appendix Table 4. Among the always-safe participants, we observe no evidence for a consideration effect when comparing the Prior Choice treatment to the Experienced New Choice treatments. But, among the never-safe participants, we observe evidence for a consideration effect when comparing the Prior Choice treatment to the Experienced New Choice treatments.

¹⁷When the EV gap is zero (the safe option may be more clearly attractive) or large (the risky option may be more clearly attractive), we interpret the deliberation cost (as defined in Section 3.2) as being lower than when the EV gap

Figure 2: Histogram of Participants by Number of Times Selecting Safe Option in EG Lotteries



4.3.5 What Type of Cognitive Costs Drives our Results?

As noted in Section 3.4.1, the consideration effect is broadly consistent with the view—central to the rational inattention and cognitive economics literatures—that individuals economize on cognitive engagement with a decision problem. Because our design holds the information environment fixed across treatments, we can ask a narrower question: what type of cognitive costs drives our results?

Two results point to the same answer. First, the incremental cost is not one of recall. If retrieving one’s prior choice were the binding friction, removing that friction should matter. It does not: as shown in Section 4.3.1, participants who are reminded of their prior choice give up agency at essentially the same rate as participants who are not. What matters instead is whether the prior choice is *implemented* rather than merely *recalled*. Participants in the *Experienced New Choice-R* treatment—who are shown their prior choice but must still actively select an option—

is moderate. Our conceptual framework would predict that this difference is driven by New Choice participants being more likely to give up agency, because New Choice participants pay deliberation costs and Prior Choice participants do not. This prediction can be seen in Appendix Table 5, in which the effect size of the EV gap is larger and more significant for New Choice rather than Prior Choice participants. The EV gap is moderate in EG 1, EG 3, EG 5, EG 7, EG 9, and EG 11, as well as in all four High-Risk problems. The EV gap is zero in EG 4 and EG 10—every option in those problems has the same expected value—and it is large in EG 2, EG 6, EG 8, and EG 12.

forgo agency 49% of the time, compared to 31% in the *Prior Choice* treatment, where that same prior choice is implemented automatically. Perfect and costless information about one’s own past decision does not substitute for being spared the act of choosing.

Second, the incremental cost appears to be one of working out a preferred option rather than retrieving one already worked out. As shown in Section 4.3.4, participants who always select the safe option in the Baseline Block show no consideration effect once experienced—their rate of forgoing agency in the *Experienced New Choice* treatments is indistinguishable from *Prior Choice*—while participants who never select it continue to show one. Both groups still forgo agency far more in the *New Choice* treatment, where the problem has not been considered at all. This is consistent with a simple rule making the cost of choosing low when a problem has already been seen, but not when there is a new problem. Note that this is a cost incurred within each decision problem, not one that accumulates across them: as Section 4.3.3 shows, participants forgo agency at roughly constant rates as they progress through the problems, consistent with applying whatever approach they have rather than developing one over the course of the study.

Taken together, these patterns suggest that what participants avoid when they give up agency is deliberation—the cognitive work of determining which option they prefer and selecting it—rather than the acquisition, processing, or retrieval of information. This is a statement about which cognitive margin binds in our setting, not a test of rational inattention as such.

4.3.6 Do Time Costs Contribute to the Consideration Effect?

An important component of the consideration effect could be the time associated with having to consider a decision.¹⁸ While our design does not seek to rule out the possibility that a desire to avoid time costs contributes to the consideration effect, additional results from our experiment suggest a limited role for time costs in driving our consideration effect results.

The average amount of time participants spend in the *Experienced New Choice* and *Prior Choice* treatments is very similar (17.0 min vs. 17.5 min, $p = 0.57$). In addition, excluding the 10% of participants who complete our study the fastest (and hence who may be most motivated to avoid time costs) does not change the consideration effect: participants are still 15 percentage points more likely to forgo agency in the *Experienced New Choice* treatment as compared to the *Prior Choice* treatment.¹⁹ That said, future work may further investigate the role of time costs by exogenously

¹⁸Time costs often occur due to administrative or procedural costs, e.g., as discussed in Giannella et al. (2024).

¹⁹Excluding the fastest 5%, 15%, and 20% of participants leads to a consideration effect of 14.8 pp, 13.2 pp, and 12.5 pp respectively. Excluded participants are fairly evenly distributed among the treatment groups, as seen in Appendix Table 6.

varying how long someone has to spend on a decision if they do not forgo agency.

4.3.7 Is the Consideration Effect Robust to Another Sample?

Our main study documents a strong and significant consideration effect. We find a 31% willingness to forgo agency in the *Prior Choice* treatment, which increases by 24 percentage points in the *New Choice* treatment ($p < 0.01$). We also provide several robustness checks of our main results in Sections 4.3.1 – 4.3.6.

Experiment A1 provides additional validation of the consideration effect with 386 more participants. Specifically, in Experiment A1, the likelihood that a participant forgoes agency significantly increases from 37% in the *Prior Choice* treatment to 56% in the *New Choice* treatment ($p < 0.01$).²⁰

4.3.8 Do Participants Pay Attention to the Information on Pat’s Choice?

As detailed in Section 2.1, we purposefully select Pat in a way to ensure that participants know Pat’s choices are “reasonable.” Pat is chosen to be the participant who made the most common choices in the *Reference Group* treatment. To verify that participants pay attention to the description of Pat, even when they are not directly informed of the exact choice Pat made, Experiment A1 (previously detailed in Section 4.3.7) has an additional 190 participants in a *New Choice (Unusual Pat)* treatment and 190 participants in a *New Choice (Pat Known)* treatment. Participants in the *New Choice (Unusual Pat)* treatment are informed that Pat is the participant who made the least common choices in the *Reference Group* treatment, while participants in the *New Choice (Pat Known)* treatment are shown the option Pat chose.

Compared to the 56% willingness to forgo agency in the *New Choice* treatment, participants in the *New Choice (Unusual Pat)* treatment are 17 percentage points less likely to forgo agency ($p < 0.01$). Participants in the *New Choice (Pat Known)* treatment instead forgo agency 68% of the time, 12 percentage points more than in the *New Choice* treatment ($p < 0.01$)—the same rate we observe in the *New Choice (Pat Known)* treatment of Experiment A3 (Section 4.3.10). Willingness to forgo agency thus moves monotonically with how attractive and how certain Pat’s choice is: 38% when Pat’s exact choice is unknown but Pat is known to be a participant who made the least common choices, 56% when Pat’s exact choice is unknown but Pat is known to be a participant who made the most common choices, and 68% when Pat’s exact choice is known and Pat is known

²⁰Experiment A1 was run before our main experiment but without the additional *Experienced New Choice* treatment. In this way, one could consider our main experiment a replication of the main results in Experiment A1. Beyond the 386 participants in the *Prior Choice* ($n = 189$) and *New Choice* ($n = 197$) treatments, Experiment A1 also included 190 participants in a *New Choice (Unusual Pat)* treatment and 190 participants in a *New Choice (Pat Known)* treatment, both discussed in Section 4.3.8, for 766 participants in total. Instructions for all four treatments are in Appendix Section 5.1.

to be a participant who made the most common choices. These results support participants paying attention to the description of Pat’s choices and being deliberate about giving up agency to avoid consideration costs.²¹ In terms of Section 3, these treatments vary $U_{i,d}(P)$, the value of what is implemented when a participant forgoes agency—the one term our main comparisons hold fixed.

4.3.9 Is the Consideration Effect Robust to Giving up Agency to Random Chance?

In all results discussed so far, participants are not informed of Pat’s choice, which is the option that is implemented if participants forgo agency. This ensures that there are no differential information effects across treatments. To fix participants’ beliefs about Pat’s choice—without informing them of Pat’s actual choice—we run *Random Choice* variations of our treatments. In Experiment A2, we have 531 participants in the *Random Choice* variations of the *Prior Choice* treatment, the *Experienced New Choice* treatments, and the *New Choice* treatment.²²

Overall, participants are less willing to forgo agency in the *Random Choice* variation of all treatments than in the original version with a common choice Pat. For instance, while participants forgo agency in the original *Prior Choice* treatment 31% of the time, they forgo agency 21% of the time in the *Prior Choice (Random Choice)* treatment. Therefore, as also observed via the evidence in Section 4.3.8, we find evidence for participants paying attention to the description of Pat’s choices and being deliberate about giving up agency to avoid consideration costs. This provides a second way of varying $U_{i,d}(P)$, as defined in Section 3, while holding consideration costs fixed.

While there are level effects in the *Random Choice* variations, we nonetheless replicate a strong consideration effect. The likelihood a participant forgoes agency significantly increases from 21% in the *Prior Choice (Random Choice)* treatment to 36% in the *New Choice (Random Choice)* treatment ($p < 0.01$). Evidence for the consideration effect also persists, to the same degree, among experienced participants. This is because the likelihood a participant forgoes agency is also 36% in the *Experienced New Choice* treatments.²³

4.3.10 Is the Consideration Effect Robust to Pat’s Choice Being Known?

As described in the prior Section 4.3.9, Experiment A2 allows us to document the consideration effect in an environment where we can fix participants’ beliefs about Pat’s choice without informing

²¹This result also dovetails with Beshears et al. (2021), where a less attractive default makes people less likely to accept it.

²²As in our main experiments, the two percentage point difference between the *Experienced New Choice–NR* and *Experienced New Choice–R* treatments is not significant, and we therefore combine the data into a single *Experienced New Choice* treatment.

²³In the *Experienced New Choice–R* treatment versus *Experienced New Choice–NR*, the likelihood is 37% versus 35%.

participants of Pat’s actual choice. To investigate if the consideration effect also persists in an environment in which Pat’s actual choice is known with certainty—even though it introduces the confound of information effects—we thus run Experiment A3.

In Experiment A3, we have 365 participants in *Pat Known* variations of the *Prior Choice* and *New Choice* treatments, where participants are informed of Pat’s choice (i.e., which option is implemented if they decide to forgo agency). As in our main experiment, we use the common Pat. We find that the consideration effect persists: the likelihood a participant is willing to forgo agency significantly increases from 60% in the *Prior Choice (Pat Known)* treatment to 68% in the *New Choice (Pat Known)* treatment.²⁴

4.3.11 Is the Consideration Effect Robust to Inexperienced Participants?

As explained in Section 4.2, by comparing participants’ willingness to forgo agency in the *Experienced New Choice* to the *Prior Choice* treatment, we find that the consideration effect persists among experienced participants.

To consider whether the consideration effect also arises among inexperienced participants, we needed to make more nuanced adjustments to our design. We thus design two new treatments, the *Avoidable Consideration* treatment and *Unavoidable Consideration* treatment, in Experiment A4. As in our main experiment, we use the common Pat. In both treatments, participants are inexperienced when making their agency decisions because they first face the Agency Block and then the Baseline Block. This Agency Block is modified: participants know that, after they make all of their agency decisions, two problems will be randomly chosen to be “required-own-choice” problems. In the required-own-choice problems, a participant is required to choose an investment option which will then be implemented, even if the participant initially opted to forgo agency. Our two treatments vary in how we elicit participants’ choices in these two required-own-choice problems. This variation will affect the participants’ ability to avoid *consideration costs* between the two treatments.

In the *Avoidable Consideration* treatment, a participant who forgoes agency in an investment problem only has to indicate which option she would choose if the investment problem turns out to be a required-own-choice problem.²⁵ Thus, in all but two problems, the participant in the

²⁴While evidence for the consideration effect is smaller when comparing these variations of our treatment, it is worth noting that many participants in the *Prior Choice* treatment decide between implementing their previous choice and that same choice made by Pat. Indeed, 49% of the time, a participant’s previous choice was the same as Pat’s choice, which is not surprising since Pat made common choices. Hence, it naturally follows that participants in the *Prior Choice (Pat Known)* treatment are more likely to implement that choice by forgoing agency and accepting Pat’s choice (rather than insisting on agency and hence paying a fee to implement that same choice).

²⁵That is, if the participant forgoes agency in an investment problem that is not one of the required-own-choice

Avoidable Consideration treatment can avoid consideration costs associated with making a decision by forgoing agency.

In the *Unavoidable Consideration* treatment, participants have to indicate which option they would choose in all investment problems regardless of whether they insist on agency. But, if the participant forgoes agency in a problem, the option she chooses is only implemented if that problem turns out to be a required-own-choice problem (and otherwise, the option Pat chose is implemented).²⁶ Thus, choosing to forgo agency does not allow a participant to avoid consideration costs.

We have data from 365 participants in Experiment A4. We find evidence for the consideration effect even with this more nuanced design and with inexperienced participants: the likelihood a participant forgoes agency increases from 43% in the *Unavoidable Consideration* treatment to 52% in the *Avoidable Consideration* treatment ($p < 0.05$).

5 Demographics and Beliefs

Our main study focuses on *when* participants forgo agency, specifically that requiring participants to consider their decisions makes them more willing to forgo agency and let someone else make their choice.

This section takes up a separate question, and one that can be read independently of our consideration effect. The contribution is to document a gap between expected and actual demographic differences in the willingness to be paternalized. Rather than asking what makes a given individual more or less willing to forgo agency, we ask whether certain demographic groups are more or less likely to insist on agency—and whether people expect such differences to arise. We thus design the Beliefs Study (Section 5.1) and compare results to the true likelihood of participants forgoing agency in our main study (Section 5.2).

5.1 Design of Belief Study

In the Beliefs Study, described in Appendix Section 6.1, participants are asked a belief question for 10 demographic groups across two treatments, for a total of 20 beliefs. We recruited 400

problems, she is never asked which option she would choose in that problem and the option Pat chose is implemented. Only if the participant forgoes agency in an investment problem that is one of the two required-own-choice problems is her experience more nuanced. Specifically, if the participant forgoes agency in an investment problem that is one of the two required-own-choice problems, she proceeds to the next investment problem without having to make a choice in that required-own-choice investment problem—but, she will be asked to make a choice in that required-own-choice investment problem at the very end of the experiment and that choice will be then implemented in that problem.

²⁶Note that, immediately after forgoing agency for the first time in the Agency block, participants, by design, are reminded that they have to select an option even if they opted to forgo agency.

participants on Prolific, of whom 399 passed the attention checks.²⁷ After describing the *New Choice* treatment and *Prior Choice* treatment, the study asks participants to predict the likelihood that men, women, white people, Black people, people who graduated college, people who did not graduate college, people over 33, people under 33, Democrats, and Republicans give up agency in a randomly selected investment problem. To provide a benchmark for these estimates, akin to the approach in DellaVigna and Pope (2018a) and DellaVigna and Pope (2018b), we inform participants of the average likelihood that a person forgoes agency for each treatment (55% and 31%, respectively) and then ask them about the average likelihood for a specific demographic group within that treatment. Participants are provided with sliders that allow them to select any number from 0% to 100%. Beliefs are incentivized for accuracy, following the process from Möbius et al. (2022).

5.2 Discussion of Demographic Results from Main Study and Beliefs Study

As shown via the first two columns in Table 4, the likelihood of participants forgoing agency in our main study in the *New Choice* and *Prior Choice* treatments does not robustly differ across gender, college education, political affiliation, or race.²⁸ The only robust difference that emerges relates to age: participants who are under 33 are 4 to 10 percentage points more likely to forgo agency than people who are older.

Despite observing little evidence of differences in agency decisions, the last two columns of Table 4 show that people *expect* participants’ willingness to forgo agency to vary in terms of their gender, college education, political party affiliation, and age. Only in the case of race are agency decisions not expected to substantially vary. Specifically, people expect that women are 11 to 12 percentage points more willing to give up agency than men, people who did not graduate college are 7 to 9 percentage points more willing to give up agency than college graduates, Democrats are 6 to 9 percentage points more willing to give up agency than Republicans, and people under 33 are 5 to 9 percentage points more willing to give up agency than people over 33. These believed differences persist between the *New Choice* treatment and *Prior Choice* treatment on average and across the distribution, as seen in Appendix Figures 5, 6, and 7.²⁹

²⁷The Beliefs Study was run on Prolific in 2025, whereas our main study and additional experiments were run on Amazon MTurk in earlier years; see the timeline in Appendix Section 3.

²⁸Here, we consider robust differences as differences that arise in both treatment conditions. That said, in the *New Choice* treatment we do observe significant evidence for women being more willing to forgo agency than men and for white people being more willing to forgo agency than Black people, and in the *Prior Choice* treatment we observe significant evidence for Democrats being more willing to forgo agency than Republicans.

²⁹That said, it is still the case that people (accurately) predict the consideration effect to persist across all demographic groups. Of course, this prediction is in part a feature of the design since we tell them the average likelihood

We note that our Beliefs Study asks about the willingness to forgo agency in investment decisions, which involve risk. Our results therefore speak to expected differences in the willingness to be paternalized within this domain. Whether people hold similar expectations about the willingness to forgo agency in other domains—such as decisions about health, education, or employment—is an open question.

Table 4: Average actual likelihood and believed likelihood of forgoing agency

	Decisions in Main Study		Beliefs about Decisions	
	<i>New Choice</i>	<i>Prior Choice</i>	<i>New Choice</i>	<i>Prior Choice</i>
Women	.58	.32	.60	.39
Men	.53	.31	.48	.28
Δ_{W-M}	0.05*** (.02)	0.00 (.02)	0.12*** (0.01)	0.11*** (0.01)
Did Not Graduate College	.55	.30	.60	.42
Graduated College	.56	.32	.53	.33
$\Delta_{DNGC-GC}$	-0.01 (0.02)	-0.02 (0.02)	0.07*** (0.01)	0.09*** (0.01)
Democrat	.57	.34	.55	.36
Republican	.54	.28	.47	.30
Δ_{D-R}	0.03 (0.02)	0.06*** (0.02)	0.09*** (0.01)	0.06*** (0.01)
Under 33	.62	.34	.59	.39
Over 33	.52	.30	.50	.34
$\Delta_{Under33-Over33}$	0.10*** (0.02)	0.04** (0.02)	0.09*** (0.01)	0.05*** (0.01)
White	.57	.31	.54	.35
Black	.44	.29	.53	.36
Δ_{W-B}	0.14*** (0.04)	0.02 (0.03)	0.01 (0.01)	-0.01* (0.01)

Results in “Decisions in Main Study” describe the mean likelihood to give up agency, in which each unit of analysis is an investment problem. Results in “Beliefs about Decisions” describe the believed likelihood to give up agency, in which each unit of analysis is a belief regarding the specific demographic group. Δ rows were calculated using a two-sided t -test. * $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$

6 Conclusion

Across several experiments and comparisons, we provide strong evidence for a *consideration effect*: requiring participants to consider their choice, separate from having to remember their choice, makes them more likely to forgo agency. Because all payoff-relevant information is displayed in every treatment, there is no information to acquire; and reminding participants of their prior choice does not change their behavior. What they avoid when they give up agency is therefore the deliberation required to determine and select a preferred option. We also find that, while there are few differences in participants’ willingness to forgo agency across demographic groups, people *expect* of participants forgoing agency in each treatment.

many differences to arise across demographic groups—including expecting women to be much more willing to forgo agency than men, people without college degrees to be much more willing to forgo agency than those with college degrees, and Democrats being much more willing to forgo agency than Republicans.

Our findings have policy implications, particularly given the increasing ease with which people can avoid consideration costs by accepting recommendations from AI.³⁰ Because the demand for agency depends heavily on the *consideration costs* of insisting on agency—a feature of the choice environment rather than of the options themselves—acceptance is a poor guide to endorsement: someone who takes a recommendation, a default, or an algorithm’s choice may simply be avoiding the work of choosing. This matters for managers, organizations, and governments that choose defaults and must interpret what acceptance of those defaults means. It also suggests a caution for interventions that require people to actively consider their options: raising what it takes to make one’s own choice may not produce more deliberate choosers, but instead more people who accept whatever happens absent their own action—in some settings a default, and in others no action at all.

Our paper suggests several avenues for future work, two of which we highlight here. The first avenue concerns when individuals’ decisions should be expected to be more or less malleable. Our results suggest that individuals’ decisions appear more malleable when they have not yet incurred consideration costs to determine their preferred selection. While we show this in the context of agency decisions, future work may investigate whether individuals are also more easily influenced by defaults, framing effects, the availability of AI, or other features of choice architecture (e.g., see [Dai et al., 2021](#)) before incurring consideration costs.³¹ This could serve as an explanation for a dichotomy in the behavioral literature: while some papers show that individuals are very malleable in their decisions (e.g., due to framing effects), other papers show that it is really difficult to change an individual’s decision (e.g., given habit formation). This may also naturally complement work on cognitive uncertainty surrounding one’s initial choice ([Enke and Graeber, 2023](#)).

The second avenue of future research relates to results from our Beliefs Study. A natural first step is to establish how far these beliefs extend beyond our setting. Our Beliefs Study asks about the willingness to forgo agency in investment decisions, and people may hold different expectations

³⁰In 2024, an estimated 29% of Python functions on GitHub made by developers in the US were generated with the help of AI, and an estimated 45% of the U.S. population age 18-64 uses generative AI ([Daniotti et al., 2026](#); [Bick, Blandin and Deming, 2026](#)).

³¹Prior to considering their decisions, individuals may also be more easily influenced by incentives (for a rich discussion on when incentives do and do not work, see [Gneezy, Meier and Rey-Biel, 2011](#)).

in domains that do not involve risk. We see considerable value in future work that elicits beliefs about the willingness to forgo agency across a broader range of decisions. Given that people expect that women are more willing to forgo agency than men, future work may naturally investigate if this contributes to the under-representation of women in leadership.³² Since we also find believed differences by other demographic groups in willingness to be paternalized, future work may further examine whether such beliefs contribute to the desire to restrict people’s choice sets, a practice that is prevalent in the setting of government welfare programs (e.g., [Ambuehl et al., 2025](#)). Indeed, an important question for future research relates to whether certain demographic groups are “over-paternalized.”

³²Potentially relatedly, prior work shows that people expect that women are more likely to agree to low promotability tasks, that people expect women to be more cooperative, and that people expect gender differences in performance according to gender stereotypes ([Babcock et al., 2017](#); [Bordalo et al., 2019](#); [Coffman, Collis and Kulkarni, 2024](#); [Fischbacher, Kübler and Stüber, 2024](#); [Exley et al., 2025](#)).

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