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The Effect of Voluntary Participation on Cooperation

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Abstract:

We study the effects of voluntary participation on cooperation in collective action problems. Voluntary participation may foster cooperation through a mechanism of assortative selection of interaction partners based on false consensus bias, or through a mechanism whereby the decision to not participate can be used as a threat against free-riders. We examine the effectiveness of these mechanisms in a one-shot public goods experiment. Voluntary participation has a positive effect on provision only through the threat of non-participation. Assortative selection of interaction partners seems to play a minor role in our setting, whereas the threat of non-participation is a powerful force to discipline free-riding.

Keywords: collective action; cooperation; voluntary participation; experiment.

JEL Classification Numbers: C91, D02, H41

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Highlights

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