The Similar and Distinct Effects of Political and Non-Political Conversation on Affective Polarization *

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Abstract

Media, politicians, and nonprofits promote conversation as a remedy to societal divisions along party lines. How do cross-partisan conversations impact the negative feelings Americans hold for outparty members, and might conversation's effects differ if partisans avoid or dive into the uncomfortable territory of talking politics? I investigate these questions by randomizing whether a Republican and Democrat engage in online conversation or not, and whether they discuss politics or not. Across two experiments, I find that conversation, whether politically-charged or not, decreases affective polarization. However, I find talking politics has distinct democratic benefits, providing greater opportunity to learn about the outparty and increasing willingness for future political conversations. I also make two contributions for conversation-based experimental research by designing (1) an algorithm to implement and benefit from a blocked cluster experimental design in this setting and (2) a publicly-available chat software for researchers to more easily conduct rigorous experiments involving conversation.

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1 Introduction

The American political climate is characterized by a pronounced division along party lines in the way ordinary Americans feel about each other. Partisans increasingly feel animosity towards those who identify with the opposing political party and perceive them to hold negative traits, such as mean and selfish (e.g., Iyengar, Sood and Lelkes 2012). As the body of evidence documenting partisans' negative feelings and perceptions of opposing party members grows (e.g., Iyengar, Sood and Lelkes 2012; Iyengar and Westwood 2015; Ahler and Sood 2018; Levendusky and Malhotra 2015), this animosity has been shown to affect the political system through voting behavior (Abramowitz and Webster 2016) and attitudes toward bipartisan cooperation (Bankert 2020). However, recent work is contending with whether this animosity goes so far as to affect support for democratic norms (e.g., Broockman, Kalla and Westwood N.d.).

Media, politicians, and nonprofits often promote conversation that crosses party lines as a means to combat "affective polarization"—the widening gap between positive feelings toward members of one's own party (the "inparty") and negative feelings toward members of the opposing party (the "outparty"). In part, a focus on cross-partisan conversation stems from conventional wisdom that conversation with "the enemy," despite disagreement, bridges understanding and respect. Indeed, the vast literature on intergroup contact finds that contact with outgroup members, such as direct interpersonal conversations, is largely an effective strategy for improving bias toward an outgroup (Paluck, Green and Green 2019; Pettigrew and Tropp 2006). However, the abounding evidence that partisanship leads to discrimination in non-political settings (e.g., Iyengar and Westwood 2015; Gift and Gift 2015; Huber and Malhotra 2017; McConnell et al. 2018) and can fracture interpersonal relationships (e.g., Chen and Rohla 2018), would seem to cast doubt on the hypothesis that conversation as a form of contact amongst partisans could improve negative feelings and perceptions of outparty members.

Political scientists often understand this body of evidence by taking a social identity perspective of partisanship (e.g., Green, Palmquist and Schickler 2004; Greene 1999). As a social identity, partisanship leads Americans to categorize the world into the inparty or the outparty (Tajfel and Turner 1979), which has triggered negativity toward the outparty as described above (Iyengar et al. 2019). Moreover, as the country continues to divide along party lines, inparty/outparty categories

have become more defined and outparty negativity is intensifying (Mason 2018, 2015), likewise suggesting it would be difficult for partisans to reap benefits from talking across party lines.

While it may seem as though social identity theory and theories of intergroup contact are in tension when it comes to explaining the effects of cross-partisan conversations, I argue that these theories are actually more complementary than is currently appreciated in the political science literature (e.g., Bond, Shulman and Gilbert 2018). Because social identity theory explains *why* partisans view outparty members negatively, it is a useful basis for understanding how these feelings and perceptions might *change* via contact.

Specifically, our social identities help us initially make sense of, and decrease uncertainty surrounding, any social interaction. At the outset of a cross-partisan conversation, a partisan initially categorizes the outparty member as such and relies on their (negative) representation of the outparty to make sense of the outparty member. Conversation as a form of contact, however, can alter a partisan's representation of "outparty member." Conversation allows opposing partisans to see each other as individuals rather than outparty prototypes as individuating information is exchanged. Furthermore, conversations invite partisans to experience the interaction through their personal, rather than their social, identities—meaning, they see the outparty member (and themselves) as individuals rather than as "a Democrat" and "a Republican." By disarming the power of the "outparty" label to make sense of another individual, I expect cross-partisan conversation can improve the biased, oversimplified representation of the outparty, reducing affective polarization.

A conversation that allows a partisan to see individuating features of an outparty member is fairly easy to imagine when conversation avoids overtly political topics—talking about work, family, or hobbies. However, it is unclear if *political* conversation provides an environment for sharing information that allows opposing party members to view each other as anything other than "the outparty." Nevertheless, even conversations that drift into political topics are a direct, interpersonal experience with an outparty member, which promotes an understanding of the interaction on an interpersonal, rather than intergroup, level. Yet, political conversation has been shown to strengthen partisan identity (Levendusky, Druckman and McLain 2016) and makes salient the inherent competition between partisan groups, which can interfere with the positive effects of contact (e.g., Lowe 2020). Therefore, I expect that political conversations are a less effective venue than non-political conversations for improving affective polarization.

However, social exposure to diverse perspectives has been shown to have important effects, for example on political tolerance, above and beyond a cross-partisan conversation that may lack political substance (e.g., Walsh and Cramer 2004; Mutz 2006). In this vien, I also expect that the discomfort of talking about salient political topics with the other side pays dividends on outcomes downstream of political conversation, namely willingness to engage in future political conversations and perceptions of common political goals with opposing party members.

In this article, I test these hypotheses across two experimental studies. In both, I manipulate whether a pair of opposing party members converse with each other or not and whether they discuss an overtly political topic or not. I am interested in two main outcomes to assess affective polarization—how partisans feel and think about opposing party members after the conversation. In the second study, which was preregistered, I probe these outcomes in addition to two outcomes to assess the scope of conversation's beneficial effects—willingness to engage in future cross-partisan conversations and perceptions of bipartisanship amongst fellow partisans and elites.[1] I also explore potential differing mechanisms of non-political and political conversation.

To rigorously assess my hypotheses, I made two innovations that contribute to the study of experiments involving social interaction amongst participants. First, I developed an algorithm to implement and reap the benefits of a blocked cluster design in experimental settings where the researcher controls what clusters (e.g., conversation partnerships or groups) form, which is common in the political discussion and deliberation literatures (e.g., Druckman and Nelson 2003; Klar 2014; Karpowitz and Mendelberg 2014). Second, I designed a publicly-available chat software called "Chatter" by which participants can have real-time, written conversations online. With Chatter, a researcher can relatively easily emulate a real social experience amongst a large sample of participants. Importantly, Chatter allows for experimental control over randomization, while also providing flexibility in the kinds of interventions researchers field. Taken together, the experimental design and chat software overcome a set of methodological and practical concerns to improve the experimental study of interpersonal political communications.

I find that cross-partisan conversation improves affective polarization by mitigating outparty animosity and a biased perception of outparty members' traits. Contrary to my expectations, I do

[1]Preregistration can be found here [redacted for review].

not find evidence that political conversation is any less effective than non-political conversation for improving these affective polarization outcomes. These results provide evidence that cross-partisan conversation, regardless of whether it is politically-charged or not, can work to undo the negative representation of outparty members held by many Americans. Despite the similar effects of political and non-political conversation on affective polarization, I find talking politics has distinct benefits. I find it provides greater opportunity to learn about the outparty and increases willingness for future political conversations. This article's findings that political conversation leads to more knowledge and openness toward outpartisans than conversations that avoid politics suggests that, even in the current political environment characterized by deep-seated polarization, a citizen's democratic duty of having political dialogue can still result in some of its important, ideal benefits.

2 How Americans Feel and Think about Outparty Members

Research shows that negativity toward outparty members manifests in many ways (see Iyengar et al. 2019). In particular, there is a well-documented affective response toward outparty members—Republicans and Democrats increasingly report feeling negative toward members of the outparty (e.g., Iyengar, Sood and Lelkes 2012). Additionally, there is a cognitive response toward outparty members—partisans hold a negative, over-generalized representation of the outparty. This outparty representation includes negative trait stereotypes (Iyengar, Sood and Lelkes 2012), an overestimation of the extent to which outparty members belong to groups stereotypically associated with the outparty (Ahler and Sood 2018), an overestimation of the extremity of outparty members' political views (Levendusky and Malhotra 2015), and even a dehumanization of outparty members (e.g., Martherus et al. 2019; Cassese 2019).

One explanation for this general trend is a partisan-ideological sorting—conservatives increasingly identify as Republican and liberals increasingly identify as Democrat (Mason 2015). Not only have ideological and partisan identities aligned, but race, religion, and more have sorted along the same partisan divide (Mason 2018). As identities that cut across party lines have decreased, the strength of Americans' partisan identities has increased, which has affective and cognitive consequences. Stronger partisans react with stronger emotion to perceived party threats, regardless of their ideological positions (Mason 2015, 2018). And, as clearer social distinctions are made

between the parties and as Americans hold stronger partisan identities, it becomes easier and more tempting to make (potentially inaccurate) generalizations about the outparty (Westfall et al. 2015).

Talking across party lines has repeatedly been cited as a solution to America's deep, bitter partisan divide. Not only do media (e.g., Grumet 2019) and politicians (e.g., Fang 2017) offer this advice, but nonprofits spend a great deal of money promoting this philosophy. But because the majority of political science research on the consequences of cross-partisan conversation until recently has focused on outcomes such as the sharing of political information and political participation (e.g., Berelson et al. 1954; Huckfeldt and Sprague 1991; McClurg 2003; Mutz 2006; Sinclair 2012; Druckman, Levendusky and McLain 2017), the consequences of talking with the political opposition on how Americans *feel* about the outparty remains less clear. How one's view of the outparty changes in reaction to cross-partisan conversation surely has downstream consequences for other political outcomes of social interaction, such as if information was distorted, if participation was hampered, and more. Therefore, it is important to also shed light on the immediate social psychological outcomes of conversation, such as how we feel and think about outparty members (Mutz 2002).

Additionally, it is important to study the consequences of cross-partisan conversation on the feelings and perceptions of the outparty because we can derive two plausible expectations about this process from the literature. Consider the view of American partisanship offered by Mason (2018), who calls partisanship, now aligned with many other identities, a "mega-identity" which heightens feelings of anger, competition, and a need to "win" not just in terms of political interests but in terms of protecting their partisan "team." On the one hand, it follows that these feelings of anger, competition, and threat might surface at the prospect of conversation with an opposing party member.

Thus, the drive to maintain a win for one's partisan team could lead to an interaction that fails to improve, or even worsens, one's negative view of the outparty. On the other hand, conversation with outparty members could offer an opportunity to improve negative outparty attitudes as a form of intergroup contact (Allport 1954), which is considered "one of psychology's most effective strategies for improving intergroup relations" Multiple meta-analyses have shown that contact has the tendency to improve negative outgroup evaluations (Pettigrew and Tropp 2006; Paluck, Green and Green 2019). However, partisanship is not typically the subject of intergroup contact research. For example, the recent meta-analysis by Paluck, Green and Green (2019) utilized 27 studies that

randomly assigned intergroup contact, none of which featured partisan groups.

Counter to this historic trend, two recent experimental studies have brought partisans together for conversation, finding positive effects. Levendusky and Stecula (2021) brought partisans together for a structured in-person discussion, finding heterogeneous (in terms of partisanship) group discussions decreases affective polarization relative to homogeneous group settings. In this article, I do not consider the effects of same-party conversastion and instead focus on explaining how the *content* of cross-partisan social interactions may have differential effects. Santoro and Broockman (2022) likewise focus only on the effects of cross-partisan conversation, finding that despite short-term positive effects on affective polarization, effects decay long term. Santoro and Broockman (2022)'s study focuses on making interlocutor's opposing partisan identity salient, whereas this article differs in that I theorize about what happens when partisans engage in conversation about salient, meaningful political issues—"political talk" they might have in their everyday lives.

3 Consequences of Cross-Partisan Political and Non-Political Conversation

In this section, I unpack the similarities and differences between conversations that discuss overtly political topics and those that do not. I posit hypotheses about how cross-partisan conversations might alter outparty feelings and perceptions. Moreover, I posit hypotheses that attempt to provide scope conditions for what kinds of downstream political outcomes may be affected by cross-partisan conversation.

Social identity theory (e.g., Tajfel and Turner 1979) presents one framework for understanding intergroup, including *interparty*, biases and prejudices (Greene 1999; Green, Palmquist and Schickler 2004; Iyengar, Sood and Lelkes 2012). According to this framework, individuals associate with groups as a cognitive tool to understand their place in a complex, social world. As a consequence of forming a social identity, an individual's sense of self becomes bound to the group, so maintaining a positive sense of self is tied to maintaining a positive view of the ingroup.

Because the ingroup is understood in comparison to the outgroup, social identity theory hypothesizes that individuals are motivated to positively differentiate the ingroup from the outgroup—I like "us" more than "them." Research supports this hypothesis in regard to partisan groups, showing

that partisans express explicit and implicit favoritism, or bias, for members of the inparty even in non-political settings (e.g., Iyengar and Westwood 2015). So while social identities need not induce "outgroup hate," American partisan identity has triggered this response (Iyengar et al. 2019), in part because political groups are defined by competition over political power (Brewer 1999). Moreover, Americans' partisan identities have strengthened as they have overlapped with other important identities, making Americans more emotional and hostile toward threats to their partisan identity (Mason 2015, 2018).

The social identity perspective of partisan identity explains what we might expect at the outset of a cross-partisan conversation. When partisan identity is a salient, individuals will initially categorize themselves and others as inparty or outparty members. There are two main consequences of this. First, when an individual self-categorizes, they comprehend and act in accordance with their social identity—how they see themselves as "a Republican" or "a Democrat." Second, when a partisan categorizes an outparty member as such, they depersonalize the outparty member, thus viewing the outparty member as an oversimplified prototype of the broader group (Tajfel 1981; Hogg and Reid 2006), which as discussed above, takes the form of negative affect and negative trait stereotypes.

However, Allport's influential "contact hypothesis" suggests that improved intergroup relations can result from intergroup contact if it meets several conditions—equal group status within the contact situation, common goals, intergroup cooperation, and the support of authorities, law, or custom (Allport 1954). Yet, cross-partisan conversation as a form of contact would presumably lack several of these conditions. For example, partisans engaging in an everyday conversation are not likely to be pursing a shared goal, nor does the current American political environment and its elites necessarily support positive interactions amongst partisans. However, a meta-analysis of 515 studies of intergroup contact suggest that while these conditions facilitate an optimal form of contact, they are not necessary for contact to have its positive effects (Pettigrew and Tropp 2006).

Another facilitating condition of contact has emerged in more recent empirical literature as particularly important——that contact ought to offer the opportunity to build personal acquaintances or even friendships (Pettigrew 1997, 1998). Building personal acquaintances is inherent in conversation, unlike other forms of direct and indirect contact often the subject of intergroup contact research. For example, learning about an outgroup member could be avoided throughout other forms of direct contact, such as sharing a classroom or sports team (e.g., Mousa 2020). Likewise,

indirect contact, such as vicarious or imagined contact (Dovidio, Eller and Hewstone 2011), lacks the dynamics of interacting directly with an outgroup member by definition. Moreover, the interpersonal nature of conversation is important because a number of studies find negative effects of exposure to outgroup members (Enos 2014) or their views (Bail et al. 2018) absent more meaningful interaction.

Conversation builds an outparty acquaintance as information is both shared and received. In regard to sharing information, presenting meaningful parts of yourself to another is important in developing interpersonal relationships (Jourard 1971), and research shows that self-disclosure to an outgroup member can reduce negative outgroup bias (Ensari and Miller 2002). In regard to receiving information, conversation allows a partisan to learn individuating information about an outparty member and view the outgroup with more heterogeneity, which decreases outgroup bias (Miller 2002; Wilder 1978).

Therefore, how a partisan processes information shared in an cross-partisan conversation conditions if and when the effects of contact will generalize from the outparty member to the outparty at large. When individuating information is shared, partisanship can shift from being the most useful, or even the only, dimension shaping an understanding of the outparty member and one's self. Instead of categorizing an outparty member as such, conversation allows the outparty member to be understood better as an individual person (Brewer and Miller 1984, 1988). Thus information is attended to on an interpersonal, rather than on an intergroup, level. Contact can then improve biased outgroup affect and perceptions because ingroup/outgroup categories, from which intergroup biases originate, are undermined as useful bases for understanding interparty interactions (e.g., Miller, Brewer and Edwards 1985; Bettencourt et al. 1992).

However, different types of conversations may lead to variation in how effective contact is at fostering an understanding of the outparty member on an interpersonal, rather than an intergroup, level. Consider *what* partisans talk about. It is relatively easy to imagine non-political conversations—talking about family or hobbies—providing individuating information about an outparty member. Even though conversation about family, hobbies, or even your pets at home can cue partisanship (Hetherington and Weiler 2018), non-political conversations encourage partisans to understand each other as individuals, beyond (potentially incorrect) stereotyped views, group associations, and traits (e.g., Ahler and Sood 2018; Levendusky and Malhotra 2015; Iyengar, Sood and Lelkes 2012).

On the other hand, conversations that delve into overtly political topics allow relatively less

opportunity to self-disclose individuating information. Discussing salient political events or policies in the news will inherently invoke political group-based identities, as such political conversation has been shown to strengthen partisan identity (Levendusky, Druckman and McLain 2016). Moreover, political conversations make groups' competition for political power more salient, which can dampen the positive effects of intergroup contact (Lowe 2020). So when talking about politics, it may be more difficult to move beyond an understanding of the outparty member based on an inparty/outparty categorization. This leads me to my first set of hypotheses regarding cross-partisan conversation's affect on partisans' outgroup animosity:

Hypothesis 1: Non-political cross-partisan conversation decreases affective polarization.

Hypothesis 2: Political cross-partisan conversation decreases affective polarization.

Hypothesis 3: Cross-partisan conversation decreases affective polarization more when the topic is non-political than political.

There is a futher nuance to my differing expectations regarding non-political and political conversations. While I do not expect that positive effects on affective polarization will be as large for political conversations as non-political conversations, I do expect that political conversations have distinct benefits. Namely, I expect that the gained information and personalized representation of an outparty member resulting from political conversation, relative to non-political conversations, will have more direct relevance to future political contexts. This expectation follows from research that shows it is difficult for the benefits of contact to generalize across situations (e.g., Mousa 2020). I am specifically interested in two downstream political outcomes that are particularly relevant to conversations: (1) willingness to have future cross-partisan political conversations and (2) perceptions of bipartisanship.

First, willingness to have future cross-partisan conversation is relevant because conversation may overcome some emotional and social obstacles that prevent partisans from wanting to have cross-partisan social interaction (Settle and Carlson 2019).The positive effects of a single social experience could promote a positive feedback loop, lowering the barrier for entering similar, future social interactions. Second, I have expectations for perceptions of bipartisanship, in terms of how conversation can affect perceptions that partisans and parties have compatible political goals. Engaging in a cross-partisan conversation requires social coordination and compromise, by speaking,

listening, and responding to an outparty member. Successfully coordinating across partisan lines, particularly if the conversation pertained to salient political topics, could increase perceptions that citizens and parties can cooperate in the broader political realm.

Hypothesis 4: Conversation increases willingness to engage in future non-political conversation more when the topic is non-political than political.

Hypothesis 5: Conversation increases willingness to engage in future political conversation more when the topic is political than non-political.

Hypothesis 6: Conversation increases perceptions of bipartisanship more when the topic is political than non-political.

In sum, I expect that both non-political and political conversations are both effective settings to personalize the outparty member, break down the usefulness of the outparty category, and improve a biased, overgeneralized view of the outparty. However, because partisan identities and the inherent competition between groups become more salient when conversation turns to politics, I expect non-political conversation will be more effective than political conversation at improving affective polarization. On the other hand, I expect political conversations will have be more effective at increasing willingness to have future political conversations and perceive partisans to have commonalities in their goals.

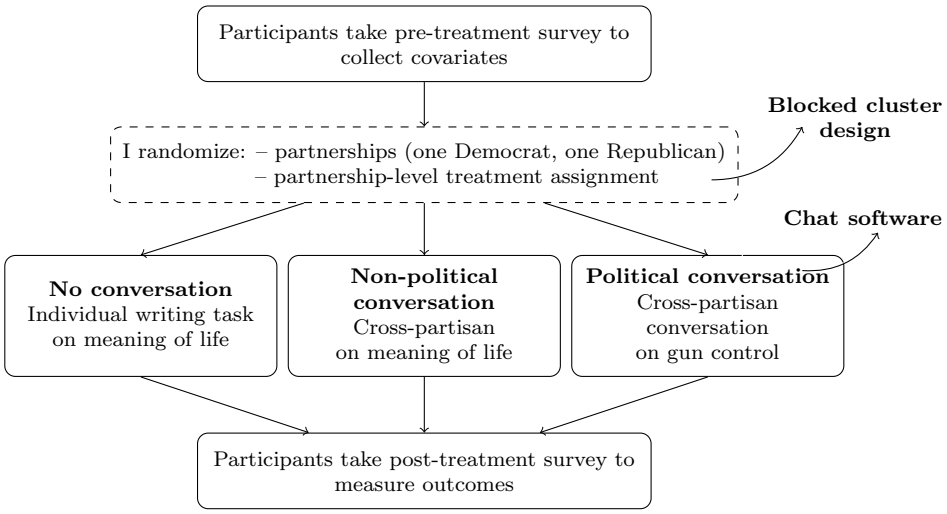
4 Experimental Design

To test my expectations about the consequences of political and non-political cross-partisan conversation, I conducted two experimental studies on Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk) involving conversation amongst Republicans and Democrats.[2] For ease of exposition, I will use the details of Study 1 to explain the experimental design and innovations these studies made to experimentally study cross-partisan conversation.

The experiments required four steps, outlined in Figure 1. First, a set of potential participants took a pretreatment survey to gather relevant pretreatment covariates. At the conclusion of the survey, participants were asked if they would be willing to return for a follow-up task involving an

[2]See Appendix A for a discussion of ethical considerations, including participant compensation details.

Figure 1: Experimental Stages



Note: Visualization of participants' and researcher's roles throughout the four stages of the experiment.

"online chat with another Worker or writing a short essay." Second, I used the pretreatment survey responses of participants willing to return for the follow-up task to randomize participants into partnerships, each containing one Republican and one Democrat. Then, in Study 1, I randomly assigned conversation partnerships to one of three experimental conditions: no conversation with partner (instead complete an individual writing task), (2) non-political conversation with partner, or (3) political conversation with partner. Participants selected for the experiment were invited via email through MTurk to complete the follow-up task.

Third, participants selected for the experiment returned at a pre-specified time to complete the follow-up task where they spent a minimum of eight minutes on the individual writing task or conversing with their assigned partner. Fourth, after completing their assigned task, participants proceeded to a posttreatment survey to measure outcomes.

In what follows, I discuss several of these steps' details for Study 1—the three experimental conditions, the measurement of outcome variables, how partnerships and treatment were randomly assigned via a blocked cluster experimental design, and finally, how conversation occurred via Chatter, the online chat app I designed for the experiments.

4.1 Experimental Conditions

Appendix E shows the exact wording of the individual writing task and conversation prompts, which are shown to participants throughout the duration of the exercise. Specifically, for partners assigned to have **no conversation** with their outparty partner, each individual wrote separately about the meaning of life. For those assigned to the **non-political conversation** condition, participants talked with their outparty partner about the meaning of life. I selected this topic because previous research has investigated how to foster a personal acquaintance in a laboratory experiment setting, finding that participants grow closer during a short interaction when communicating about "deep" (i.e., What is the meaning of life?) rather than "shallow" questions (e.g., What is your name? Where are your from?) (Sedikides et al. 1999; Tu, Shaw and Fishbach 2015). For those assigned to the **political conversation** condition, participants conversed with their outparty partner about gun control. I selected this topic because it is a political issue salient to the average American so most participants are likely to have opinions they can converse about for a few minutes. Importantly, since "contact" implies group membership is known, participants are told the partisanship of their conversation partner at the outset of the conversation, and it is displayed in the prompt throughout the entire exercise.

4.2 Outcome Measures

Study 1 uses two main outcomes to study affective polarization. First, I measure outparty affect using the standard 101-point feeling thermometer, where larger values indicate more favorable or "warm" feelings toward that person or group (e.g., Iyengar, Sood and Lelkes 2012).Respondents rate "[Republicans/Democrats] across the country," and my outcome of interest is the difference between posttreatment and pretreatment outparty ratings.

The second set of affective polarization outcomes assess how conversation can alter perceptions of the outparty, which I measure by asking participants to rate, using a five point Likert scale, how well eight traits (i.e., openminded, mean) describe members of the outparty (e.g., Levendusky 2018). Trait ratings were asked in the posttreatment survey only.

4.3 Design Innovations

Experiments involving social interaction amongst participants, like this one, are used across the political discussion and deliberation literature (e.g., Druckman and Nelson 2003; Klar 2014; Karpowitz, Mendelberg and Shaker 2012); however, several methodological and practical concerns arise with this type of experiment. Not only does social interaction complicate a researcher's design and subsequent data analysis, but small sample sizes, imbalance across experimental conditions, and more have implications for efficiency of estimation and the power of hypothesis tests. And as a practical matter, experimental studies involving participant interaction are resource-intensive, often prohibitively so, largely requiring an academic lab and existing subject pool.

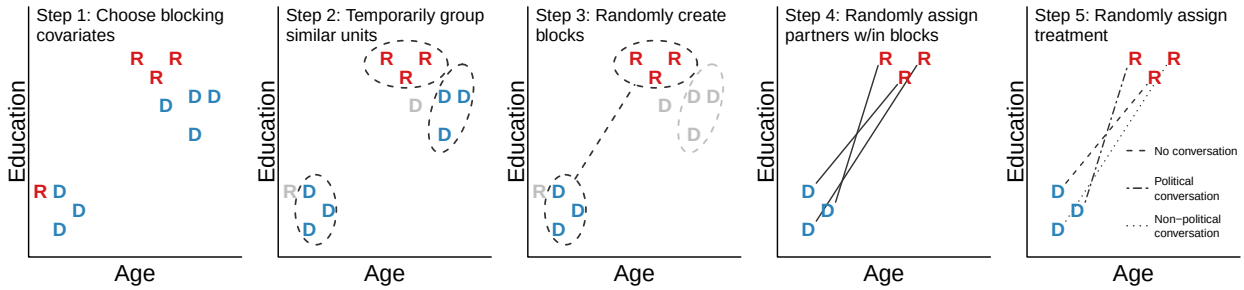
To rigorously test the hypotheses derived in Section 3, I sought to address several of these methodological and practical concerns through two specific approaches to the experiment. First, I implemented a blocked cluster experimental design to improve efficiency of my estimation. Second, I developed a chat software to more easily allow for participant social interaction. In what follows, I briefly discuss each of these approaches in turn.

4.3.1 Blocked cluster design

For this experiment, I chose to implement a blocked cluster design because (1) randomly assigning treatment at the *cluster*-level (here, conversation-level) is appropriate due to inherent interference between participants within a conversation, and (2) randomly assigning treatment within *blocks* of clusters can greatly improve efficiency in estimation and power of hypothesis tests (e.g., Moore 2012). However, a blocked cluster design is typically used for field experiments which feature preexisting clusters, such as cities or classrooms (e.g., Imai et al. 2009). To implement this design for an experiment without naturally-occuring clusters, the researcher must somehow assign units to clusters (i.e., individuals to groups or partnerships). While guidance and tools exist for blocking (e.g., Moore 2012) and blocking with preexisting clusters (e.g., Imai et al. 2009), it is less clear how to simultaneously create blocks and clusters. Therefore, I created an algorithm to construct a blocked cluster design.

Figure 2 outlines the five steps of my blocked cluster design algorithm, using Study 1 as an example. There are a few specifics about this example to highlight before explaining the steps of

Figure 2: Blocked Cluster Experimental Design Algorithm



Note: Visualization of the algorithm for constructing a blocked cluster design when the researcher controls the construction of the clusters.

the algorithm. Each block contains three partnerships because I have three experimental conditions, and each cluster has two participants to create a partnership—one Republican and one Democrat.[3] For this reason, I'll call partisanship my "clustering constraint"– the variable the created clusters will be constrained to reflect.[4]

The first step of the algorithm, demonstrated in the first plot of Figure 2, is to identify relevant blocking covariates and the clustering constraint, if any. For simplicity, I plot participants on only two dimensions—education and age. Because these variables likely affect the extent to which participants will change their outparty affect, I block on these variables to control for this variation. I also indicate if the participants are Republican or Democrat because every cluster will eventually have one Republican and one Democrat.

The second step is to identify temporary groupings of n similar units with respect to the

[3]This algorithm is generalizable to any number of experimental manipulations, any number of units per cluster, and any clustering constraint, such as disagreeable attitudes on the topic of discussion, different gender identity, or none at all.

[4]Importantly, the clustering constraint must apply to all clusters to ensure the benefits of balance achieved by blocking. A researcher may want to consider group composition as a treatment, such as creating same-party groups as a control condition for cross-party conversation. However, this may induce imbalance across experimental conditions on covariates likely to impact the outcome. For example, if shared partisanship also implied similar personalities, then treatment and control groups would have different levels of common personalities which could confound treatment effects.

clustering constraint, where n is the number of experimental manipulations.[5] The second plot in Figure 2 shows the temporary groupings of three similar units, conditional on partisan identification. Importantly, these groupings are **not** the clusters; rather, they are temporary groupings of similar units used to facilitate the creation of blocked clusters subsequent steps.

The third step finishes the process of creating the blocks. I randomly assign each temporary grouping to another temporary set of units, conditional on having different partisanship. For this example, one group of similar Democrats is randomly assigned to one group of similar Republicans. These six individuals represent one block. It may seem counterintuitive to finalize the blocks before finalizing the specific cluster assignments. However, creating the blocks first ensures cluster-level similarity within each block.

The fourth step is to randomly assign clusters, in this case partnerships for the conversation experiment. Within each block, I randomly assign one unit from each temporary grouping to a unit from the other grouping, again conditional on partisanship, the clustering constraint. The fourth plot of Figure 2 shows this process for one block—Democrats and Republicans are randomly assigned to each other. The result is three randomly assigned clusters grouped together in a block.Finally, with the created blocks and clusters in hand, treatment is randomly assigned at the cluster-level within each block as in any blocked cluster design. The fifth plot of Figure 2 demonstrates this step.

It is important to stress two features of this algorithm. First, cluster-level difference is minimized within each block, as is the goal of any blocked cluster design to control for important sources of variation at the design-stage. Second, cluster-level difference is randomized across the experimental blocks. Importantly, this ensures variation across blocks in how similar one is to their conversation partner. In summary, while the clusters in the block in Figure 2 feature partners who are all very different in the same ways, another block may feature partners who are all very similar.[6]

[5] I create these temporary groupings using the `blockTools` statistical software (Moore 2016) with the optimum greedy algorithm and the Mahalanobis distance metric (Moore 2012). Details on the specific variables used for this step are available in Appendix B.

[6] See Appendix C for a visualization.

4.3.2 Chatter Conversation software

In addition to addressing methodological concerns of conversation-based experiments via the blocked cluster experimental design, I sought to overcome practical concerns that arise in this setting. To do so, I designed a software called "Chatter," which is publicly available for other researchers to use.[7]

Chatter is a software where experimental participants can have real-time, written conversations online. Chatter has many benefits to the experimental study of conversation. First, researcher can relatively easily emulate a real social experience online with participants recruited online (or elsewhere), widening the pool of researchers able to conduct conversation-based experiments to include those without access to an existing academic laboratory and subject pool. A related practical advantage of Chatter is that a researcher can quickly conduct a large-n study involving conversations. Chatter allows for hundreds of conversations to happen simultaneously, which is difficult to achieve in the setting of an academic laboratory. Chatter also provides the researcher with full control over the randomization of participants into conversation groups and randomization of treatment, which allows for rigorous experimental research. Finally, Chatter's features are highly customizable, so researchers can implement various types of experimental interventions, such as the number of participants in a chatroom, the prompt provided at the participant- or chatroom-level, the group composition of the chatroom, and more. In sum, Chatter can help facilitate the experimental study of the fundamental political behaviors of political discussion and deliberation.

5 Study 1

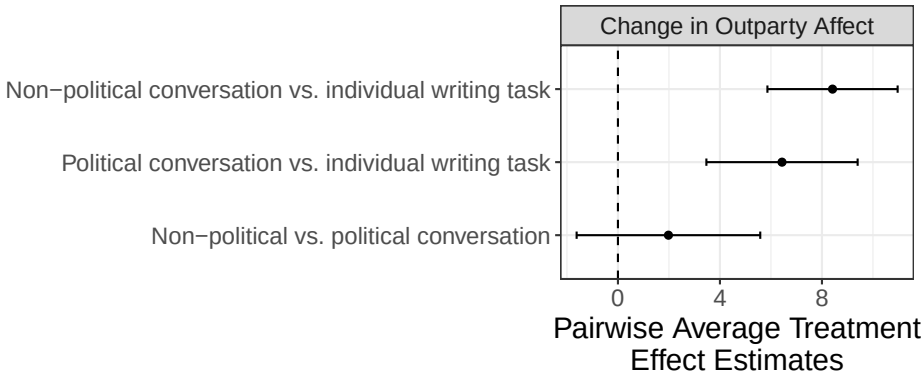
To test Hypotheses 1-3 about how non-political and political cross-partisan conversation affect affective polarization, I fielded Study 1 in the Fall of 2019. In total, 1,632 unique MTurk Workers took the pretreatment survey and a subset of 630 were selected via the blocked cluster experimental design algorithm.

Having participants return for the experiment at all, let alone at the same time, presented a difficult coordination task. Despite a quick timeline and reminders to participants,[8] participants

[7]Full details on Chatter are available in Appendix D.

[8]Participants took the pretreatment survey 10-30 minutes before the experiment. With the remaining 10 minutes, I randomized participants into partnerships, assigned partnerships to experi-

Figure 3: Conversation's Effect on Outparty Affect (Study 1)



Note: Figure reports difference-in-means estimates and 95% confidence intervals for pairwise comparisons of the experimental conditions in Study 1. The first estimate shows the average treatment effect of non-political conversation relative to the individual writing task control. The second estimate shows the average treatment effect of political conversation relative to the individual writing task control. Finally, the third estimate compares non-political and political conversation.

attritted between the pretreatment survey and returning for the experiment. Importantly, no participants attrited posttreatment, which could bias results if participants attrited as a function of treatment assignment, such as after seeing they were assigned to talk politics. In an experiment involving social interaction, a single participant's attrition impacts whether the partnership can have a conversation or not. Therefore, the analyses that follow include all *partnerships* in which both participants returned for the conversation or short essay. The sample contains 476 participants (24% attrition) –168 in the control condition, 154 in the non-political conversation condition, and 154 partnerships in the political conversation condition.

Before considering the effects of cross-partisan conversation, it is important to consider if the participants took the exercise seriously and engaged in their assigned exercise. I have read every individual short essay and conversation transcript, and the participants do indeed engage with each other and discuss their assigned topic. Appendix G provides an example from each of the three experimental conditions, and Appendix H presents summary statistics demonstrating that the participants engaged in the exercise and discussed their assigned topic.

I next assess my hypotheses regarding the consequences of conversation with an outparty

mental conditions, and emailed chosen participants 5 minutes before the experiment was live.

member.[9] For all Study 1 tests, I estimate the average treatment effect for all pairwise comparisons of the three experimental conditions using a difference-in-means estimator with standard errors clustered at the partnership level for individuals assigned to conversation. I first assess conversation's effects on outparty affect before turning to outparty trait stereotypes.

The first estimate in Figure 3 shows that non-political conversation significantly increased outparty affect, relative to the individual writing task, by about 8 degrees on the feeling thermometer scale. Improvement in outparty affect is notably similar across non-political and political conversations, with political conversations significantly increasing outparty affect relative to the individual writing task, as well. Thus, I find support for Hypotheses 1 and 2. However, as the third estimate in Figure 3 shows, I do not find support for Hypothesis 3. Contrary to my expectations, I do not find evidence to suggest that there are differing consequences of non-political and political conversation on outparty affect.[10]

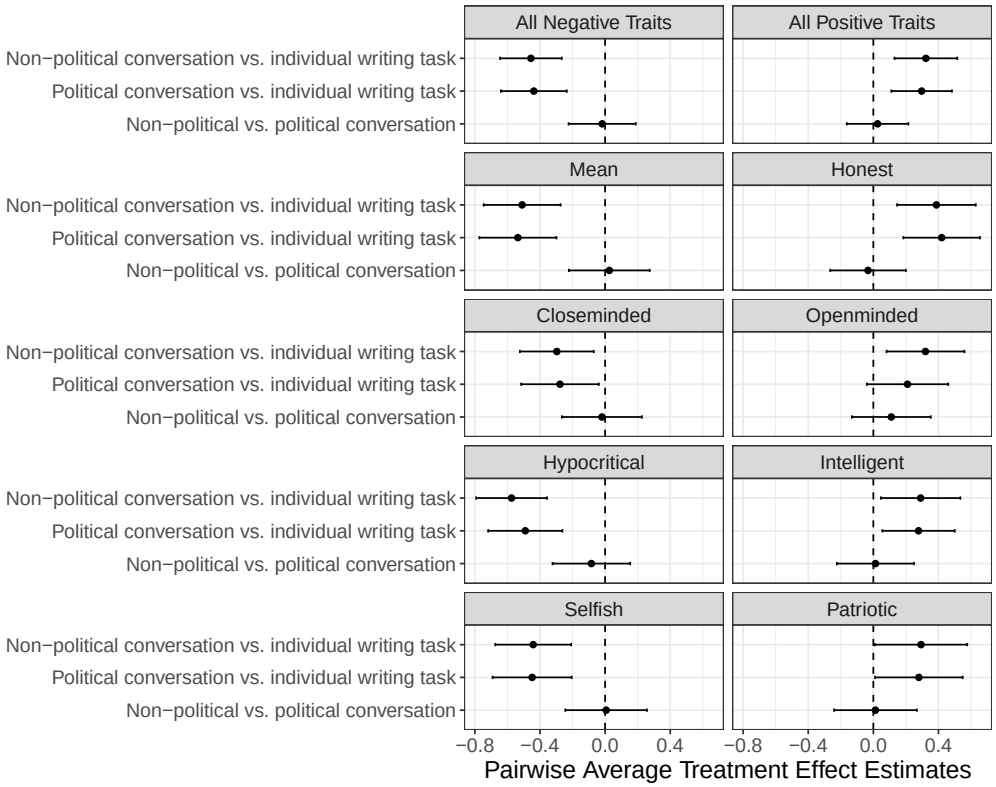
To help put these results into context, I summarize participants' posttreatment outparty feeling thermometer ratings relative to meaningful points on the scale (e.g., Levendusky 2018). First, consider the percentage of participants rating the outparty "warmly" after contact, or greater than or equal to 50 on feeling thermometer. 44% of those in non-political condition and 34% of those the political condition rated the outparty in this way, while only 24% of participants who did not experience cross-partisan conversation rated the outparty favorably posttreatment. Additionally, at the "cold" end of the feeling thermometer, consider a very unfavorable rating of less than or equal to 5. Only 12% of those in the non-political condition and 14% of those in political condition rated outparty in this way, while 26% of those who did not experience outparty contact rated the outparty with such an extremely unfavorable rating.

I've provided evidence that cross-partisan conversation can alter how partisans feel about the outparty, and I now turn to assess if conversation can alter how partisans think about, or perceive, outparty members. The outcomes of interest are respondents' level of agreement (on a five point scale, higher values indicating more agreement) with how well several traits, four negative and four

[9]Study 1 was not preregistered.

[10]Appendix I presents full table of results. Appendix J shows results are robust to analyzing only full experimental blocks.

Figure 4: Conversation's Effect on Perceptions of the Outparty (Study 1)



Note: Figure reports difference-in-means estimates and 95% confidence intervals for pairwise comparisons of the experimental conditions in Study 1. The first estimate in each panel shows the average treatment effect of non-political conversation relative to the individual writing task control. The second estimate shows the average treatment effect of political conversation relative to the individual writing task control. Finally, the third estimate compares non-political and political conversation.

positive, describe supporters of the outparty. Figure 4 plots difference-in-means estimates and 95% confidence intervals for pairwise comparisons of the experimental conditions in Study 1.

In line with my expectations, conversation with an outparty member, whether non-political or political, caused a disinclination to ascribe all four negative traits—closeminded, hypocritical, mean, and selfish—to the outparty. The same general pattern holds for the positive traits. Both non-political and political conversations have positive effects on viewing the outparty as honest, intelligent, and patriotic. Political conversation does not have a statistically significant effect on seeing the outparty as open-minded. Using stereotype-based measure of affective polarization, I again find support for Hypotheses 1-2, that both non-political and political cross-partisan conversation decrease the overgeneralized, negative view of the outparty. However, as with the outparty affect,

I find no evidence I find no support for Hypothesis 3. All estimates of the effect of non-political conversation relative to political conversation are close to zero and not significant. Therefore, I do not find evidence to suggest that there are differing consequences of non-political and political conversation on perceptions of the outparty.[11]

6 Study 2

I conducted a second study intended to replicate and extend Study 1 by addressing three main limitations. First, Study 1 was not a fully crossed design and omitted a condition where participants did not have conversation with an outparty member but still wrote or thought about a political topic. A second limitation of Study 1 is that it did not isolate the effect of the social experience of having a conversation. In other words, the results could be driven by participants *thinking* about an outparty member in the conversation condition, thus the effect of *conversing* with an outparty member remains unclear. A third limitation of Study 1 is that the political topic, gun control, could be a topic that features agreement in the conversations.[12] In both studies, I aimed to choose a topic that is salient and important to many Americans so the results could speak to conversations they may have in their everyday lives. I chose gun control in Study 1 for this reason, however the results of Study 1 may be limited to issues where Americans have higher potential for finding common ground, as is the case with gun control.

To address these limitations, I conducted a fully crossed 2x2 study in which partners were randomly assigned to have imagined or actual contact and were randomly assigned to discuss either a political or a non-political topic. In order to better isolate the effect of the social experience of having a conversation with an outparty member, Study 2 instructs participants to *imagine* conversation in the no conversation condition. By doing so, the treatment effects of conversation

[11]Appendix K presents full table of results. Appendix L shows results are robust to analyzing only full experimental blocks.

[12]Appendix T shows that partners who agreed pretreatment on the topic of gun control in Study 1 were no more likely to improve their affect than those who disagreed pretreatment. However, posttreatment disagreement within a conversation was correlated with less improvement in outparty affect.

in Study 2 can more reliably be interpreted as the benefit derived from the social experience of having a conversation. Finally, I ask participants assigned to a political topic to imagine or have a conversation on U.S. immigration policy, a more divisive topic than gun control.[13]

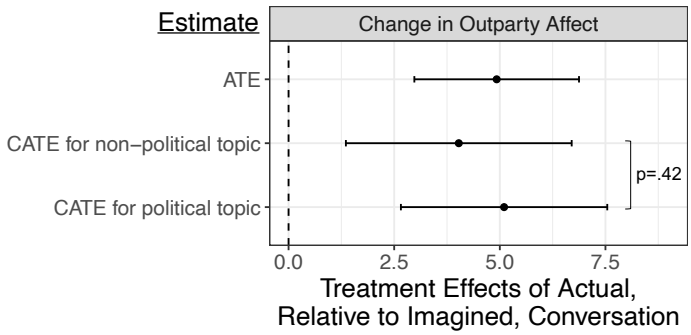
Following the same procedures used in Study 1, I conducted Study 2 in the fall of 2020. A total of 2876 participants took the recruitment survey and 1096 were used in the blocked cluster design. As with Study 1, participants attrited prior to the conversation-portion of Study 2, and 740 participants (68%) completed the full study. Because Study 2 is a 2x2 design, I will analyze and visualize results differently than with Study 1. First, I will report average treatment effect (ATE) estimates of actual cross-partisan conversation, relative to imagined conversation. Then, I will report *conditional* average treatment effect (CATE) estimates for actual, relative to imagined, conversation by topic to test Hypotheses 1-2. Then, to test whether the effects of actual, relative to imaged, conversation differ by topic, I will assess the difference between the CATEs. All models cluster standard errors for participants that had actual conversation.[14]

Figure 5 visualizes the treatment effects of actual, relative to imagined cross-partisan conversation on outparty affect. We see that actual conversation with an outparty member leads to more improvements in feelings toward outparty members, with an average treatment effect estimate of approximately 5 degrees on the feeling thermometer. As with Study 1, looking separately at the effects of non-political and political conversation, we see that each significantly increases affect, relative to imagining a conversation on the same topic, supporting Hypotheses 1-2. Finally, I expected that conversation increases outparty affect more when the topic is non-political verses political. Consistent with Study 1, I fail to find support for the interaction ($p = .42$). In fact, the

[13]Appendix F shows the full conversation prompts.

[14]This approach tests the preregistered hypotheses, but deviates from the preregistered estimation strategy, which intended to analyze only participants in which the entire block of eight participants completed the study using randomization inference for hypothesis testing. It increases power to use all participants in completed partnerships, and parametric tests are more justified with the larger sample size. Results using the preregistered estimation strategy for outparty affect are in Appendix N and perceptions of outparty traits are in Appendix P.

Figure 5: Conversation's Effect on Outparty Affect (Study 2)



Note: Figure reports difference-in-means estimates and 95% confidence intervals comparing actual, relative to imagined, conversation. The first estimate in each panel shows the average treatment effect, thus pooling across topics. The next two estimates report conditional average treatment effects for non-political and political conversation, respectively. The p-values indicate whether conversation has heterogeneous treatment effects across topics.

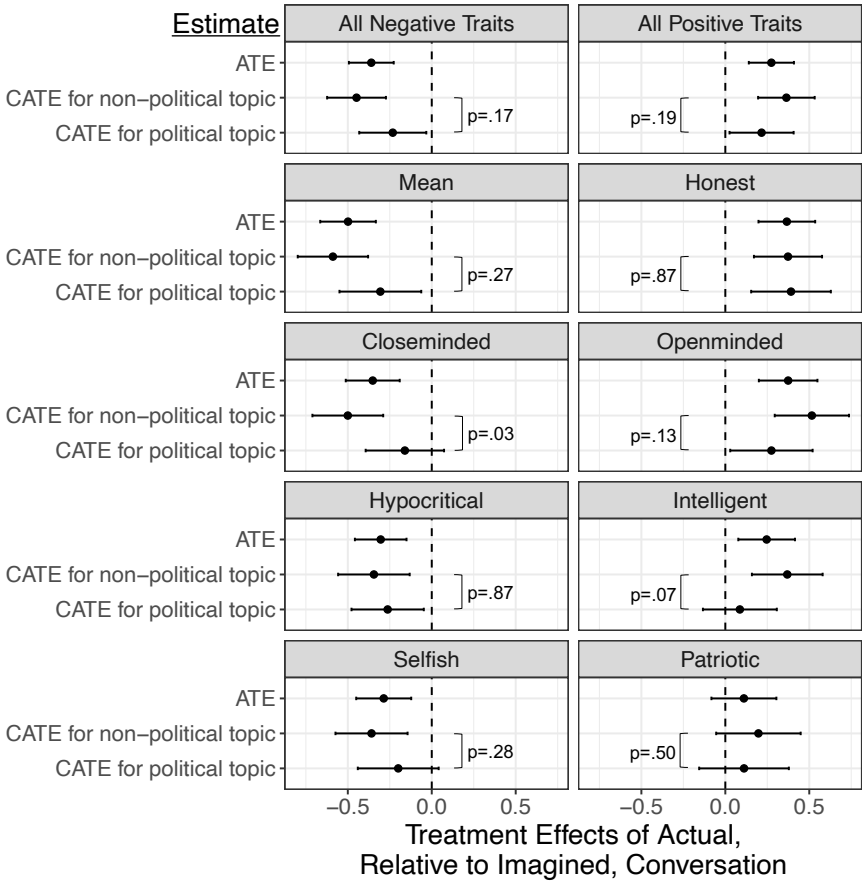
benefits of actual conversation are slightly more pronounced when the topic is political.[15]

I next turn to how conversation's effects on how members of the outparty are perceived. Figure 6 also plots estimates of the average treatment effect of conversation and effects condition on topic. The average treatment effect estimates of actual conversation, relative to imagined conversation are all significant except for increasing perceptions of "patriotism," meaning actual conversation decreases negative perceptions and increases positive perceptions of the outparty. Considering the effects of conversation condition on topic, there is a general pattern of non-political conversation decreasing negative perceptions and increasing positive perceptions more than political conversation, which is the expectation of Hypothesis 3. However, only one the p-values for the heterogeneous treatment effects is significant ("Closeminded", p=0.03), thus future research would be needed to suggest non-political and political conversation have different effects.

Across two experimental studies, I find strong, consistent evidence that cross-partisan conversation decreases affective polarization, measured as outparty affect and outparty trait perceptions. When allowed to connect beyond partisan identities, actual conversation leads partisans to feel more warmly toward, be less inclined to use negative traits, and be more inclined to use positive traits to describe outparty members. Contrary to my expectations, conversations that dive into

[15]Appendix Q shows Study 2's treatment effects on outparty affect are not durable at seven days.

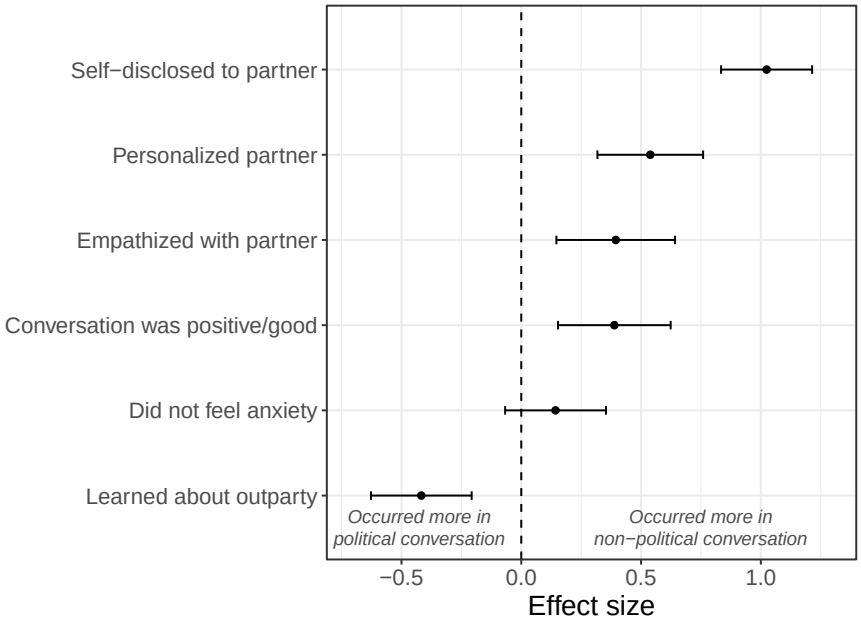
Figure 6: Conversation's Effect on Perceptions of the Outparty (Study 2)



Note: Figure reports difference-in-means estimates and 95% confidence intervals comparing actual, relative to imagined, conversation. The first estimate in each panel shows the average treatment effect, thus pooling across topics. The next two estimates report conditional average treatment effects for non-political and political conversation, respectively. The p-values indicate whether conversation has heterogeneous treatment effects across topics.

salient, divisive political topics—making more salient to the interlocutors they are competitors from different partisan teams—fare no worse than conversations that avoid political issues. While I find the immediate social psychological effects of cross-partisan conversation are similar for political and non-political conversations, I next turn to the ways in which political and non-political conversations differ by exploring potential differing mechanisms and differential effects on downstream political outcomes.

Figure 7: Potential Differing Mechanisms of Non-Political and Political Conversation



Note: Figure reports difference-in-means estimates and 95% confidence intervals comparing non-political and political conversation for six preregistered, exploratory mechanism tests, clustering standard errors for conversation partners. For comparability, all outcome measures are standardized to have a mean of zero and a standard deviation of one, thus effect sizes can be interpreted as standard deviations.

6.1 Potential Mechanisms

The intergroup contact literature posits many mechanisms by which contact with an outgroup member can improve one's attitudes toward the outgroup. In Study 2, I preregistered exploring whether several of these mechanisms occurred at different rates in political and non-political conversations. While Studies 1 and 2 showed non-political and political conversations similarly decreased affective polarization, these different topics of conversation may provide different conduits for their positive effects.

I preregistered six mechanisms that may be operating in an interpersonal setting with an outparty member. Conversation might improve attitudes toward outpartisans by (1) sharing, or self-disclosing, information about oneself, (2) personalizing outpartisans by individuating them their group, (3) empathizing with outpartisans, (4) being a positive, enjoyable experience, (5) reducing anxiety, or (6) learning about the outparty, and I asked survey questions in the posttreatment survey to

measure these concepts.[16]

In Figure 7, I plot difference-in-means estimates and 95% confidence intervals of the effect of non-political (N=178) verses political (N=172) conversation on each potential mechanism. I examine all full conversation partnerships and cluster standard errors for partners.[17] Therefore, positive (negative) coefficients indicate the potential mechanism was more present in non-political (political) conversation than political (non-political) conversation. For comparability, all outcome measures are standardized to have a mean of zero and a standard deviation of one, thus effect sizes can be interpreted as standard deviations.

Figure 7 shows that non-political conversations promoted more self-disclosing, personalizing of outpartisans, empathizing, and positively valenced experiences than political conversations.[18] Self-disclosures about oneself, akin to the concept of perspective-giving, an important mechanism of attitude-changing conversation in door-to-door canvassing studies (Kalla and Broockman 2021), are especially more likely in non-political conversations. In line with my argument, avoiding overtly political topics can disarm inparty/outparty labels and create opportunities for partisans to share information that individuates them from a perception of a homogeneous, extreme outparty. Political conversations, however, promote more learning about the outparty than non-political conversations. Despite people feeling anxious at the prospect of political conversation (Settle and Carlson 2019), I have no evidence to suggest that talking politics led partisans to be more or less anxious during the social experience.

In sum, this assessment of potential mechanisms at play in cross-partisan interpersonal settings suggests that non-political and political conversations create different experiences for partisans. In particular, these results suggest that political conversations, despite partisans wanting to avoid them (Settle and Carlson 2019), have unique benefits as opportunities to learn about the outparty.[19]

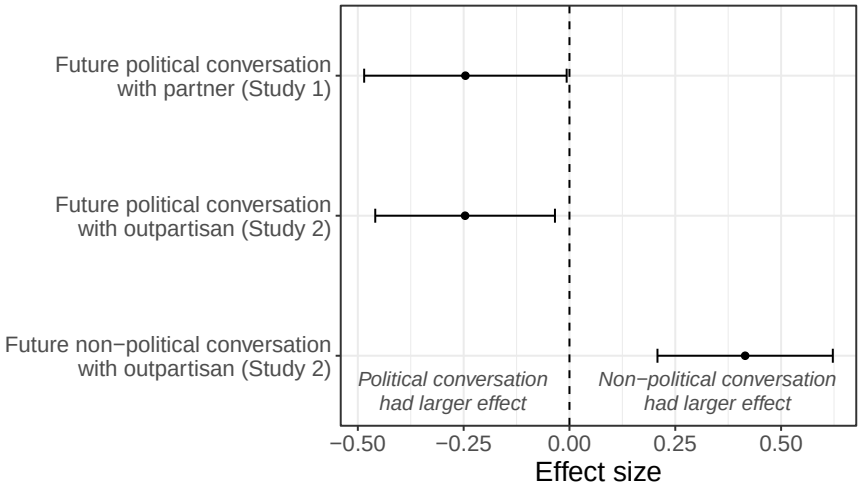
[16]Exact question wordings are available the preregistration.

[17]The questions pertain to the study's conversations, so I only asked these questions to participants assigned to real conversation. Therefore, I cannot examine the extent to which conversation may have affected these outcomes relative to not having a conversation.

[18]The full table of results is in Appendix R.

[19]I caution readers from concluding these features of conversation mediated the positive effects I observed on affective polarization in this study. Future work should explore the extent to which these

Figure 8: Topic of Conversation's Effect on Willingness to Have Future Cross-Partisan Conversation



Note: Figure reports difference-in-means estimates and 95% confidence intervals comparing non-political and political conversation, clustering standard errors for conversation partners. For comparability, all outcome measures are standardized to have a mean of zero and a standard deviation of one, thus effect sizes can be interpreted as standard deviations.

6.2 Downstream Outcomes

I find in both studies that both non-political and political conversation can improve outparty affect and overgeneralized, negative perceptions of the outparty. In Study 2, I assess the scope of effects conversation might have on two specific downstream outcomes that I expected conversations with outpartisans could affect: willingness to have future cross-partisan conversation (both political and non-political) and perceptions of bipartisanship. In an attempt to bound conversation's effects, I ask about perceptions of bipartisanship amongst fellow democratic citizens as an outcome more likely to be affected by conversation, and I also ask about perceptions elite bipartisanship as an outcome theoretically further downstream.

In short, I find no support for the Hypotheses 4-6 as pregistered. Neither political and non-political conversation have a positive effect on these outcomes, relative to imagined conversation, and thus the magnitude of the effects do not differ depending on topic. Appendix S discusses these results in more detail.

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differential features of non-political and political conversation are causal channels of conversation's power to reduce outparty animosity.

While I do not the effect of actual conversation (relative to imagined conversation) is statistically significant, I do find that the *topic* of actual conversation differentially affected these outcomes. Figure 8 shows the average treatment effects of topic (non-political relative to political) conditional on actual conversation. Figure 8 support for my general argument that political conversations in particular have some unique benefits for downstream political outcomes. First, in Study 1, I find that non-political conversation, relative to political conversation, *decreased* willingness to have future political conversations with one's conversation partner conversation. The second model in Figure 8 provides consistent evidence from Study 2, but asking about any outpartisan rather than the participant's specific partner. Therefore, in both studies, having a political conversation leads participants to be more willing to have a future political conversation with an outpartisan, relative to those who had a non-political conversation.

My findings that conversation does not affect perceptions of bipartisanship join recent work questioning the link between affective polarization and support for democratic norms (Broockman, Kalla and Westwood N.d.), and in particular the role that conversation-based interventions might play in improving these outcomes (Santoro and Broockman 2022). However, rather push partisans deeper into their habits of avoiding cross-partisan interaction, I find that political conversation disarmed the idea of future political cross-partisan conversation more than an apolitical cross-partisan interaction, thus increasing the democratic behavior of being willing to engage with diverse perspectives.

7 Conclusion

The ideal democratic citizen is consuming an array of political perspectives and engaging in dialogue to better inform their own. In this sense, political conversation amongst opposing viewpoints is a democratic duty, but today's political climate of heightened affective polarization begs the question of whether political conversations will be beneficial to citizens or will backfire. With two experimental studies involving actual conversation amongst opposing partisans, this paper shows that cross-partisan conversation–i-ncluding conversation on topics like gun control and immigration—can result in a sizable increase in outparty affect, a disinclination to describe outparty members as mean, hypocritical people, and a willingness to describe outparty members positively.

Beyond joining recent evidence that cross-partisan conversation can improve affective polarization (Santoro and Broockman 2022; Levendusky and Stecula 2021), this article provides new evidence about the distinctions between cross-partisan social interaction that either directly discusses politics, thus placing the source of partisans' differences at the forefront of the interaction, or avoids politics, instead possibly allowing more room in the social exchange for partisans' common humanity to strike a chord.

First, though political and non-political conversations similarly improved affective polarization by bringing people together, I found they may do so via different routes. Non-political conversations may bridge divides by providing an opportunity to share about one's self and likewise learn individuating information about someone else, but political conversations may bridge divides as an opportunity to learn corrective information about the opposing side. Understanding the differential experiences provided by political and non-political conversations is also important to practitioners who craft interventions that bring partisans together. Second, the avoidance and discomfort associated with political conversation demonstrates the potential value of overcoming these barriers. Across both studies, I found that having a conversation with political substance increased willingness to have *future* cross-partisan political conversations more than if partisans had avoided the difficult task of confronting political difference, These results contribute to literatures on political discussion, cross-partisan social interaction more generally, and interventions to decrease affective polarization.

The two experimental studies in this article also have their limitations. First, while I have found that conversation *can* improve how partisans feel about and think about outparty members, a question left for future research is *when* conversations improve affect and perceptions outside of the environment constructed for this research. In particular, this experiment featured online conversation, limiting the external validity of these findings as applied to in-person interactions where physical appearance and body language are additional guides to social interaction. Moreover, computer-mediated communication has been shown to have higher levels of self-disclosure than face-to-face communications (e.g., Joinson 2001). These factors certainly influence how a conversation unfolds and what effects it has on subsequent outcomes.

A second limitation is that this experimental design involved only two individuals, one from each party. While this helps satisfy one of Allport's conditions for contact to improve outgroup prejudice—equal status in the contact situation—not all conversations will avoid having a minority

group or minority opinion apparent in the interaction. This is an important consideration because research shows that when politics arises in a discussion, people tend to conform to the majority opinion and shield their own views (Carlson and Settle 2016). Relatedly, this research does not account for the role social sanctioning may play in political and non-political interactions that occur in Americans' everyday lives. It is left for future research to speak to how different group compositions and preexisting relationships may impact the effectiveness of conversation as a strategy for combating negative intergroup attitudes.

A third limitation is that this research does not reflect the role of self-selection into cross-partisan conversation. Research shows that anticipating political discussion makes people anxious (Carlson and Settle 2016). It follows that people prefer to avoid political discussion, especially when it is disagreeable (Gerber et al. 2012) or with an outparty member (Settle and Carlson 2019). On the other hand, sometimes these interactions occur beyond our control. A recent large-scale, full-network study supports the idea that talking politics is more an *incidental* than it is a *purposive* exercise (Minozzi et al. 2019). If we take the incidental model of political discussion seriously, then talking politics is often unanticipated, it is hard to avoid altogether, and everyone is subject to experiencing some political talk in their daily lives, and this paper illustrates that such political talk with outparty members can improve how we feel and think about them.

More broadly, this research speaks to a vein in the polarization literature that works to accurately characterize the extent to which the electorate is affective polarized (Lelkes and Westwood 2017; Westwood, Peterson and Lelkes 2019; Druckman et al. 2019; Druckman and Levendusky 2019; Klar, Krupnikov and Ryan 2018). While this article relies on previous work demonstrating the power of Americans' political identities to form an overgeneralized, and potentially inaccurate view of the outparty, this article also provides additional evidence on the limits of our partisan identities by showing conversation has the power to interfere with our inclination to interpret social situations through the lens of partisanship and correct for heightened outparty negativity. In this sense, this paper plays a role in illuminating a further limitation of partisan biases, as partisanship did not have the power to derail the largely congenial conversations that unfolded in this experiment.

Finally, if cross-partisan conversations can improve feelings and perceptions of the outparty, it begs the question of why negativity toward the outparty continues to rise. However, there are many countervailing forces that work to fortify the walls of our inparty/outparty categories, such

as ideological polarization (e.g., Rogowski and Sutherland 2016; Webster and Abramowitz 2017), hostile political campaigns (Iyengar, Sood and Lelkes 2012), and an increase in partisan news (Lelkes, Sood and Iyengar 2017). Future research should dig deeper into the interplay between everyday cross-partisan social interaction and partisan pressures from the broader political climate, and how they together shape a partisans' view of the outparty.

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