

# Interacting as Equals: How Contact Can Promote Tolerance Among Opposing Partisans

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## Abstract

In many contemporary democracies, political polarization increasingly involves deep-seated intolerance of opposing partisans. The decades-old contact hypothesis suggests that cross-partisan interactions might reduce intolerance if individuals interact with equal social status. We test this idea by implementing collaborative contact between more than one thousand pairs of citizens with opposing partisan sympathies, using the online medium to credibly randomize participants' relative social status within the interaction. Interacting as equals enhanced tolerant behaviors towards opposing partisans three weeks after contact, compared to interacting under conditions of inequality or to not interacting. These results demonstrate that a simple, scalable intervention that puts people on equal footing can reduce partisan intolerance and make online contact into a prosocial force.

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# Introduction

In recent years, many countries have experienced partisan polarization severe enough to undermine trust in institutions and threaten the stability of democracy (Carlin and Love, 2018; Iyengar et al., 2019; Finkel et al., 2020; Baldassarri and Page, 2021). In such environments, political cleavages can align with preexisting social status differences, decreasing cross-partisan interaction and exacerbating mutual intolerance, a form of polarization often called “affective polarization” (Mason, 2018; Iyengar et al., 2019). Could creating opportunities for people from opposing political camps to interact under conditions of equal status increase tolerance?

We test this idea by inducing contact between participants with opposing partisan sympathies while experimentally varying their social status within the contact situation. Social standing is central to the contact hypothesis from social psychology, which suggests that intergroup collaboration under conditions that endow participants with equal status can lastingly reduce intolerance (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew and Tropp, 2008; Enos, 2014). Yet the hypothesized role of status equality within the contact interaction lacks experimental validation, and observational research has yielded mixed findings (Pettigrew and Tropp, 2006; Paluck, Green and Green, 2019; Paluck et al., 2021).<sup>1</sup>

Within a political environment characterized by heightened affective polarization, we bring together pairs of citizens with opposing partisan sympathies to collaborate online on non-political tasks for ten minutes. The first task asks participants to decide whether fellow citizens in general value friendship or professional success more highly; the second task consists of trivia questions about popular culture. Paired participants are provided with a chat window and encouraged to communicate with each other while completing these tasks. For our main analysis, we manipulate the participants’ relative status within the interaction. In the equal-status condition, participants are informed that their respective answers to the tasks will count equally towards pair-level rewards. In the unequal-status condition, one participant is designated Leader and the other Follower, with only the Leader’s answers determining pair-level rewards.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Lowe (2021) experimentally manipulates payment equality in an Indian cricket league, and finds that it does not undermine the beneficial effects of contact. Our design differs from Lowe’s in that it directly manipulates relative status while maintaining payment equality across pair members, thereby holding constant incentives to collaborate. We discuss the complementary relationship between Lowe’s and our approach and results in the Supplementary Materials (S-1.8 Main Results).

<sup>2</sup>Social psychologists use similar rule-based manipulations of status to study social interactions (Fast, Halevy and Galinsky, 2012)

Our main finding is that the experience of intergroup contact under conditions of status equality—but not under status inequality—enhances tolerant behavior towards opposing partisans three weeks after the interaction. Participants assigned to the equal-status condition were willing to share 14% more of their own cash points with an anonymous study participant of opposing partisanship in a dictator game, compared to those in the no-contact control group ( $p < 0.01$ ). Participants in the equal-status condition were also 5 pp more willing to accept an invitation to a future 30-minute meeting to discuss the country’s problems with a group of people that they were told would include opposing partisans ( $p < 0.01$ ). A standardized index combining these two measures of tolerant behavior was .17 standard deviations greater under equal status contact compared to no contact ( $p < 0.01$ ), and .13 standard deviations greater compared to unequal contact ( $p < 0.01$ ). In fact, contact under unequal status did not improve tolerant behavior for either Leaders or Followers compared to no contact. Analysis of chat content suggests that the overall quality of interaction was lower between participants assigned to the inequality condition in relation to the equal-status one.

Moving beyond the contact hypothesis, we additionally test whether knowledge of real-world socioeconomic status (SES) moderates the effect of equal-status contact. Staging intergroup contact online allows us to suppress—or reveal—real-world status cues that would be readily perceived in person (Desmichel and Rucker, 2022). The effect of equal status contact remained unchanged when informing participants about their paired partners’ real-world socioeconomic status.

Our study builds on prior work on the contact hypothesis. Existing experimental studies demonstrate that prolonged and intense contact between ethnic or religious groups, for instance in sports leagues, can lessen discriminatory behaviors (Scacco and Warren, 2018; Mousa, 2020; Burszty et al., 2021; Lowe, 2021). Shorter interventions have also reduced some kinds of nonpolitical prejudice (Broockman and Kalla, 2016). Intergroup contact experiments that focus specifically on political prejudice have yielded mixed findings about effect persistence beyond treatment day (Rossiter, 2023; Rossiter and Carlson, 2023; Santoro and Broockman, 2022). In contrast with the present study, these and related approaches do not induce variation in participants’ relative status while interacting (Paluck, Green and Green, 2019).

Our study also connects with the literature on interventions to reduce affective polarization (Hartman et al., 2022). By implementing actual contact, our study differs from interventions that do not use contact, but instead provide corrective information about out-partisans (Voelkel, Ren and Brandt, 2021), give participants the opportunity to observe

warm relations among opposing elites (Huddy and Yair, 2021; Voelkel et al., 2023), or prime self-affirmation, empathy, and other feelings (Levendusky, 2018; Santos et al., 2022; Voelkel et al., 2023). Our study also differs from related interventions that simulate cross-partisan contact by describing such contact in survey vignettes (Wojcieszak and Warner, 2020), simulating discussion environments (Voelkel, Ren and Brandt, 2021), or having participants meditate and imagine contact (Simonsson, Narayanan and Marks, 2022).

**Context.** We fielded our experiment in Mexico, where affective polarization has risen sharply in recent years (Moreno, 2020; Castro Cornejo, 2022). The party system now features two poles, one in support of the current president, Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO), and his political party, Movimiento Nacional de Renovación Nacional (MORENA), and another that combines previous adversaries in opposition (Castro Cornejo, 2023). These pro- and anti-incumbent camps segregate into distinct social networks (ITESO, 2019) and divide over core political issues, including assessments of democracy and electoral integrity (Hernández-Huerta and Cantú, 2022) (Supplementary Materials Figure F-8). They are also increasingly identified with social class. Although AMLO assembled a cross-class coalition to support his 2018 presidential bid, he has since stoked divisions by blaming “immoral” elites and the middle class for political corruption. By the 2021 midterms, sociodemographic cleavages mapped onto support for MORENA or the opposition to a notable extent (Sánchez-Talanquer and Greene, 2021; Moreno, 2022). As in the United States, affective polarization is marked by low levels of trust and deep-seated intolerance across the partisan divide (Carlin and Love, 2018).

To operationalize affective polarization, we divide participants into pro- and anti-MORENA groups by asking them which party they would vote for if presidential elections were held today. We use this measure for the following reasons. First, research in other new democracies shows that vote choice performs better than traditional party identification questions that rely on prolonged exposure to the same party labels (Brader and Tucker, 2001; Dinas, 2014; Baker, Ames and Rennó, 2020, p.53). At the time of our study in 2021, MORENA had competed in just one presidential election in 2018. Second, a validation analysis using a separate 2018 survey shows that views on core political issues such as evaluations of corruption, incumbent performance, and the economy are virtually identical when classifying voters according to vote choice or partisan identification (Figure F-9 in the Supplementary Materials). However, the large proportion of respondents who do not identify or sympathize with any party means that the vote choice measure is usable in a much larger proportion of

our sample. Finally, there are substantial differences in socioeconomic traits and political views between those who would vote for MORENA and those who would vote for other parties (Table T-9 and Figure F-9 in the Supplementary Materials).

## Methods

**Research design and sample.** Ours is among the largest experimental studies of inter-group contact to date. From a survey panel of over 150,000 citizens in Mexico, we invited 3,120 individuals to join the study, in batches of several hundred, at specific dates and times. Upon connecting, they were asked the vote choice question that we used to form pairs of citizens with opposing partisan sympathies. We formed such pairs in the background while participants completed the remainder of a baseline survey. We then assigned pair-level treatments randomly, using blocking to improve statistical power (see Supplementary Materials S-1.2 Randomization Procedure for details). Pairs within a block were randomly assigned to equal status during contact ( $E$ : 780 pairs), unequal status contact ( $U$ : 390 pairs with random assignment of pair members to Leader ( $U_L$ ) or Follower ( $U_F$ )), or no-contact control ( $C$ : 390 pairs). To probe robustness of equal-status contact to information about real-world status differences, we exposed a random subset of pairs in the equal status condition  $E$  to information about their pair partner’s socioeconomic status ( $E_S$ : 390 pairs). The remaining pairs were not exposed to such information ( $E_N$ : 390 pairs).

Our main analysis sample consists of the 2,454 individuals (79% of those invited to the study) that remained after dropping those who did not complete the study and their paired partners. Attrition is statistically indistinguishable across treatment arms assigned to contact ( $E_S$ ,  $E_N$ ,  $U_F$ , and  $U_L$ ). Moreover, all experimental conditions including the no-contact control are well balanced on pre-treatment covariates including turning out to vote in the 2018 presidential election, political interest, party identification, age, sex, and SES among others (Supplementary Materials S-1.4 Balance).<sup>3</sup>

Participants were asked to complete an endline survey directly after the intervention and a follow-up survey approximately three weeks later. Everyone received a participation fee upon completing the study. Additional incentives were provided within the study conditional on participant responses (see Supplementary Materials S-2.1 Ethical Considerations). All

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<sup>3</sup>There is no differential attrition between equal ( $E$ ) vs. unequal status ( $U$ ) treatment arms. Attrition is slightly greater for participants assigned to the contact conditions compared to the no-contact control  $C$  (about 3% for  $E$  and 1% for  $U$ ), but all treatment arms and the no-contact control are balanced on observables (Supplementary Materials S-1.5 Attrition).

incentives were provided at the end of the study, no deception was used, and all protocols obtained IRB approval from the University of Texas at Austin and ITAM in Mexico City. We preregistered the trial at the Social Science Registry.<sup>4</sup>

**Pair-level intervention.** After informing paired participants of their partner’s partisanship (and, in the inequality condition, of whether they were designated Leader or Follower), we asked members of a pair to complete two nonpolitical tasks. In the first task, participants were asked to decide whether Mexicans in general value friendship or professional success more highly. The second task asked participants to answer three trivia questions about popular culture.<sup>5</sup> Figure 1 provides a flavor for the interface and the interaction by showing screenshots of the first task and the first few real messages of a chat between participants assigned to contact under status equality. Communication between paired participants was civil and on topic.

Paired participants were invited to communicate in an open-ended manner with their partner while completing the tasks. Communication took place in an anonymous text-chat window on the same screen, powered by Chatter, a purpose-built application (Rossiter, 2023). Each member of the pair entered responses to the tasks’ questions individually and their responses could not be observed by their partner in any treatment condition. We informed participants that both members of the pair would qualify for entry into drawings, one for each task, if they provided answers to the values question and at least two of three correct answers to the trivia questions. The reward for the values task was the use of responses in teaching about Mexicans’ values in universities in the United States and Mexico. The reward for the trivia task was a lump-sum of cash points that could be exchanged for goods in an online store.<sup>6</sup>

We manipulated relative status by informing participants about their experimentally assigned status at the beginning of the first task and reminding them of it before the second task. In the *equal status* treatment, participants were told that their respective answers would count equally. Specifically, one set of answers would be selected at random with equal probability to determine pair-level rewards. In the *unequal status* treatment, participants were told that one member of the pair was randomly designated the ‘Leader’ and the other member the ‘Follower,’ and only the Leader’s answers would count for determining

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<sup>4</sup><https://www.socialscienceregistry.org/trials/8143>.

<sup>5</sup>A full description of the tasks appears in the Supplementary Materials (S-2.3 Chat Instructions and S-2.4 Control Instructions).

<sup>6</sup>Roughly equivalent to 315 Mexican pesos or about US\$15.

pair-level rewards. In both treatment conditions, we adopted team pay, meaning that both pair members would receive exactly the same rewards independent of their status assignment (DeMatteo, Eby and Sundstrom, 1998; Barnes et al., 2011; Lowe, 2021).<sup>7</sup> We designed the intervention to hold constant across contact treatment arms the presence of common goals and the incentive to collaborate, both of which Allport hypothesized as contributing to the effectiveness of intergroup contact (Allport, 1954).<sup>8</sup> We also designed the tasks to be accessible to participants independent of education, income, age, gender, and political views.<sup>9</sup> Collaboration between pair members lasted ten minutes. Personal identifying information was never displayed. In the unequal-status condition, chat handles read “Leader” and “Follower.”

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<sup>7</sup>Individuals in the control condition completed the tasks individually, without interpersonal contact. Their rewards accrued individually.

<sup>8</sup>For an experimental test of these conditions see Lowe (2021). See Pettigrew and Tropp (2006) for meta-analysis.

<sup>9</sup>The contact hypothesis does not prescribe the substance of the content interaction, as reflected in the wide variety of tasks the literature has utilized, ranging from sports (Lowe, 2021; Mousa, 2020), to vocational training (Scacco and Warren, 2018), to conversations with trained interlocutors about the prejudice in question (Broockman and Kalla, 2016), to solving puzzles (Katz and Zalk, 1978)

Figure 1: Chatter interface: sample chat

Please **take 2-3 minutes** to chat about which of the following values are more important to Mexicans in general (not just to you):

- "Having money and being successful at work" or
- "Having meaningful friendships"

**Take this opportunity to get to know the other person by exchanging a few messages with them.** Write in the boxed area at the bottom of this screen.

When you have finished chatting, choose your response:

**Your responses and the other person's will count equally.**

Please coordinate with the other person to move to the next screen at the same time.

[Next page](#)

**userY4B8J:** Success improves the quality of life

I agree with that

**userY4B8J:** If we, as Mexicans, don't pursue our goals, our corrupt politicians aren't going to do it for us

I think intelligence and how you use it is important

**userY4B8J:** I think intelligence together with values, and that's what we need to teach our children

Yes, exactly. But it seems like values are no longer taught in school, much less at home

**userY4B8J:** Exactly. These days, values aren't a priority and that's why our society is so divided and indifferent about what's happening

Write reply...

You see a person living on the street and just walk by. I feel a little guilty, but right now I can't help

[Send](#)

Time until finished: 0:00:04:24

Notes: This example pertains to the first task. Chat contents display part of a real conversation of a pair assigned to equal status. The instructions above the chat window were visible to participants during chat. Instructions and chat contents shown here were translated from Spanish by the authors.



**Outcome variables.** We measured tolerance using incentivized behaviors. *Sharing* was measured through a dictator game where participants could choose to donate cash points, exchangeable for goods at an online store, to an anonymous participant with opposing political sympathies. *Willingness to dialogue* was measured as the response to an invitation to take part in a future online meeting with other participants, which we indicated would include opposing partisans and last 30 minutes.

We selected these measures for three reasons. First, intolerant behaviors are likely more dangerous to democratic life than intolerant attitudes that much of the research literature has used to measure affective polarization (Iyengar et al., 2019; Finkel et al., 2020; Baldassarri and Page, 2021). Second, the specific behaviors we measure are vital to democracy. Democratic theorists view willingness to dialogue across partisan lines as key to problem solving and to elucidating a society’s priorities (Habermas, 1991; Barber, 2003). And sharing with out-group members, for example via taxation and redistribution, implies that people perceive the interests of others as legitimate (Alesina and Giuliano, 2011). Finally, incentivized behaviors are less susceptible to social desirability biases and experimenter demand effects than survey questions about attitudes because they make tolerant behavior costly (Bauer, Chytilová and Miguel, 2020). We aggregated the two measures into a simple additive index, standardized for expository ease (details in the Supplementary Materials S-2.8 Outcome Variables).

## Results

Our evidence suggests that participants were attentive to the experience of interpersonal contact. Three weeks after treatment, 87% of participants assigned to a contact condition recalled having chatted; only 9% of those assigned to the no-contact control reported (erroneously) having chatted (Supplementary Materials T-12). In addition, Followers used fewer words and expressed lower levels of trust and positive feelings in the chat than either Leaders ( $p=0.14$ ,  $p=0.14$ , and  $p=0.21$ , respectively) or those assigned to equal status ( $p<0.05$ ,  $p<0.05$ , and  $p<0.10$ , respectively) (Supplementary Materials Table T-20).

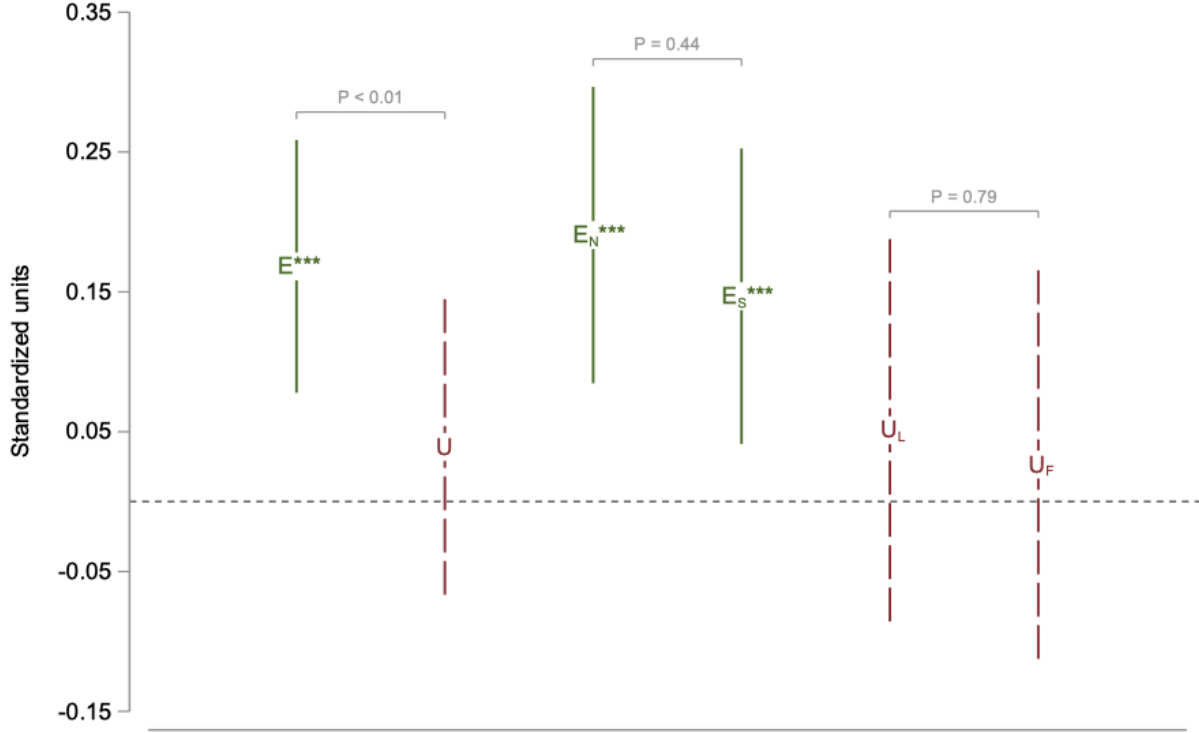
Figure 2 displays intent-to-treat effects three weeks after treatment (Supplementary Materials T-13). The figure shows that assignment to inter-group contact under equal status increased the tolerant behavior index by 0.17 standard deviations compared to no contact (first estimate from the left,  $p < .01$ ), and .13 sd ( $p < .01$ ) compared to assignment to contact under unequal status (second estimate from the left). Assignment to contact under

unequal status did not affect tolerant behaviors in comparison with the no-contact control (0.04 sd,  $p = .21$ ). In fact, tolerant behavior did not improve for either Leaders or Followers in the unequal status condition (Figure 2, rightmost estimates).<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup>Like other studies of intergroup contact (Paluck, Green and Green, 2019; Scacco and Warren, 2018; Mousa, 2020; Lowe, 2021), we find positive effects on tolerant behavior without consistent change in related attitudes. In our study, warmth of feeling towards outparty sympathizers (the dominant measure of affective polarization in the literature) decreased at followup for those assigned to unequal contact, but registered no statistically detectable change for those assigned to equal contact, compared to no contact (Supplementary Materials T-15). This pattern is consistent with research in psychology that finds that attitudes are frequently inaccurate predictors of behavior (Ajzen et al., 2018). We thank a Referee for suggesting an alternative interpretation where both the equal and unequal status conditions have short-run effects on tolerance (Supplementary Materials T-17), but such effects only persist under equal status, which would qualify Allport’s claim that equal status is necessary for contact’s effectiveness. We chose to focus on the long-term results because they are more policy-relevant and novel (Paluck, Green and Green, 2019), and potentially less prone to experimenter demand effects.

Figure 2: Index of Tolerant Behavior Three Weeks After Contact



Note: Point estimates of intent-to-treat effects are represented by treatment assignment indicators:  $E$ =equal status,  $U$ =unequal status,  $E_N$ =equal status without revealing SES,  $E_S$ =equal status with SES revealed,  $U_L$ =unequal status, assigned as Leader,  $U_F$ =unequal status, assigned as Follower. Bars represent 95% confidence intervals. Standardized units imply that effect magnitudes multiplied by 100 correspond to percentage-point changes in comparison with assignment to the no-contact control condition. P-values correspond to difference-of-means tests between adjacent estimates. Stars denote the statistical significance of tests of coefficient equality between assignment to the corresponding treatment arm vs. to no contact ( $C$ ). \*\*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\* $p < .05$ ; \* $p < .1$ .

Participants in equal-status contact experienced higher quality interactions with opposing partisans. Phrases expressing agreement (such as “you are right,” “yes,” and “I agree”)<sup>11</sup> were 10% more common under equal vs. unequal-status assignment ( $p = .06$ ), and the number of words in chat was more evenly distributed across members of a pair assigned to equal status, compared to unequal status ( $p = .07$ ) (Supplementary Materials Table T-20).

The literature on the contact hypothesis in social psychology has suggested three major categories of mechanisms through which high-quality contact might increase tolerance: learning that the outgroup is more similar to the ingroup than one thought, reduced anxiety about the outgroup, and perspective taking or empathy (Pettigrew and Tropp, 2008). While a full analysis of the mechanisms linking equal-status contact with tolerance is beyond the scope of our study, we report the implications of our results for such mechanisms. Inconsistent with the learning mechanism, we detected no difference in perceptions about commonality of values with the outgroup nor in beliefs about outgroup honesty or intelligence across the equal-vs. unequal-status treatment arms ( $p=0.83$ ,  $p=0.43$ , and  $p=0.47$  respectively) (Supplementary Materials T-16). Our findings, however, are consistent with the latter two mechanisms. While estimates are imprecise, participants assigned to equality, compared to those assigned to inequality, found it more palatable to imagine chatting with an out-party stranger while waiting in line for a routine task (anxiety reduction) ( $p=0.17$ ) (Supplementary Materials Table T-15). Consistent with both anxiety reduction and perspective taking, respondent’s opinions of a typical outparty voter became more negative among those assigned to unequal status ( $p = 0.10$ ) (Supplementary Materials T-15).

We probed the robustness of our main findings by revealing the real-world socioeconomic status of partner pairs—one of the personal attributes we muted by staging the research online—to a random subset of pairs assigned to equal-status contact (treatment arm  $E_S$ ).<sup>12</sup> Introducing information on real-world SES could in principle reinforce partisan animus (e.g., when pair members have unequal SES), undercutting the potential for contact to enhance political tolerance.<sup>13</sup> The salutary effect of equal status contact, however, proved robust to the revelation of a pair partners’ SES information (Figure 2) (the effects of  $E_N$  and  $E_S$ ,

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<sup>11</sup>Chat text was analyzed in the original Spanish and then translated into English.

<sup>12</sup>We elicited SES information, prior to contact, by asking participants to choose, among five sets of images of house facades, kitchens, and bedrooms corresponding to different socioeconomic strata, those that best represented their own homes (Supplementary Materials F-7). Exposure to real-world SES information increased participants’ ability to correctly predict their paired partner’s SES by 19% ( $p < .05$ ) (Supplementary Materials T-11).

<sup>13</sup>Alternatively, revealing real-world SES differences could strengthen the impact of equal status contact by rendering the latter more salient and powerful.

compared to  $C$ , are statistically indistinguishable).<sup>14</sup> The effect of equal-status assignment also did not change significantly when separately examining individuals whose real-world SES was higher, equal, or lower than their partner’s (Supplementary Materials Tables T-14 and T-22).<sup>15</sup>

Finally, we consider whether the difference in outcomes between the equal vs. unequal status conditions might be driven by the displeasure of participants assigned to be Followers. To study this possibility, we tested for differences between Leaders and Followers in willingness to complete the followup survey three weeks after treatment, as well as in dictator-game donations to outparty participants. Inconsistent with the displeasure alternative explanation, we find no differences in these variables (available upon request).

## Discussion

Intensifying partisan polarization in many countries is straining democracy’s moorings. Sympathizers of opposing parties frequently self-sort into different neighborhoods, absorb news from different sources, and participate in different online social circles. When cross-partisan contact does occur, it is often brief and bitter, with intolerance exacerbated by social status differences. Nearly 200 years ago, Alexis de Tocqueville wrote that democracy thrives when citizens interact in the public square as equals (de Tocqueville, 2015). Our design put a modern version of de Tocqueville’s idea—and a decades-old conjecture that is central to the contact hypothesis—to the test by experimentally manipulating status within the interaction.

As it turns out, relative status in the interaction plays a key role in moderating the effects of intergroup contact on political tolerance, consistent with Allport’s conjecture (Allport, 1954). When we place people in a situation of status equality, tolerant behaviors rise meaningfully and durably because of interpersonal contact. Methodologically, our simple shift to studying online interaction makes it possible to study the moderating effect of real-world socioeconomic status. We find that the revelation or withholding of real-world SES makes no difference to the salutary effects of contact under equality.

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<sup>14</sup>An alternative interpretation of this finding is that the procedure we used was not effective at memorably conveying information about a partners’ SES (see Footnote 12).

<sup>15</sup>See Supplementary Materials Table T-9 and Figure F-8 for evidence on the relationship between real-world socioeconomic indicators and partisan sympathies. Note that drawing attention to real-world SES inequality could undercut experimentally-induced status equality even if SES were uncorrelated with partisanship.

Our findings suggest practical ways of increasing mutual tolerance among opposing partisans. A version of intensive and costly in-person deliberation has recently been shown to improve cross-partisan understanding (Fishkin et al., 2021). We believe that online spaces for cross-partisan contact that put people on equal footing can generate prosocial and democracy-supporting behavior affordably and at large scale using a medium that is increasingly popular for political speech. Our results indicate that such spaces require only mild curation: conversations need not be orchestrated around political topics nor do opposing partisans have to be steered away from disagreement. Even under severe political polarization, enhancing tolerance of out-groups is within reach.

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**Data materials and availability:** All data needed to evaluate the conclusions in the paper and the Supplementary Materials will be deposited in a public repository upon publication.

**References in Supplementary Materials:** Moore (2012); Santoro and Broockman (2022); Mohammad and Turney (2010, 2013); Lee (2009)