

Electoral Threat and the Impact of Interparty Contact on Affective Polarization¹

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Abstract

Recent evidence suggests that interparty conversation can reduce affective polarization. Yet, this evidence comes from experiments that mute the features of a competitive political environment. In particular, elections *uniformly* intensify partisan identity, but *differentially* foster feelings of electoral threat, both of which contribute to outparty animosity. We argue that interparty contact is less effective at reducing outparty animosity for partisans who experience threat in the form of an electoral loss. We test our theory using a pre-registered experiment in which Democrats and Republicans discussed the outcome of the 2020 presidential election immediately following inauguration. We find that interparty conversations reduced outparty animosity with effects durable up to three days. However, we do not find evidence that Republicans, who experienced electoral threat, benefitted any less than Democrats from conversation. Our results have broader implications when considering interventions to reduce affective polarization and for understanding differential effects of political discussion more generally.

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One of the most salient features of American politics today is the intense animosity between Republicans and Democrats (e.g., Iyengar, Sood and Lelkes 2012; Mason 2018; Huber and Malhotra 2017). In response to widespread concern about outparty animosity, scholars have taken interest in finding ways to reduce it. Drawing on decades of research in social psychology pointing to the effectiveness of intergroup contact at healing intergroup tensions, political scientists ask whether engaging in meaningful contact with outpartisans will make Democrats and Republicans more tolerant toward the other side, finding often that it can (Mutz 2006; Rossiter 2020; Wojcieszak and Warner 2020; Warner and Villamil 2017; Huddy and Yair 2020; Levendusky 2020).

In this letter, we ask whether the effectiveness of interparty contact on reducing outparty animosity depends on how one's party fared in a partisan competition. Because partisans react expressively - and differently - depending on how their party performs, we argue that in the face of political competition, interparty contact might not be equally effective for both sides. Immediately following Joe Biden's inauguration as President of the United States, we conducted an experiment bringing Republicans and Democrats together for an online conversation about the election outcome. The timing of our study allows us to leverage naturally induced feelings of threat prompted by the electoral loss among Republicans and feelings of reassurance prompted by the electoral win among Democrats. This creates an important opportunity to examine the (potentially) heterogeneous effects of interparty contact on reducing outparty animosity.

In the experiment, partnerships of one Democrat and one Republican were randomly assigned to engage in a conversation about the election (contact) or individually write a short essay about the election (no contact). We find that interparty political conversations reduce outparty animosity. This result is notable given the context of presidential party turnover characterized by an extreme sense of partisan competition and thus heightened partisan identity salience. Specifically, we find that participants who engaged in interparty contact reduced their negative outparty affect by about 6 points on the 101 point feeling thermometer, compared to those who did not engage in contact. We do not find evidence to support the expectation that Republicans and Democrats differentially responded to interparty contact. These results are robust to other operationalizations of experiencing electoral threat and reassurance, as well as alternative measures of affective polarization (Druckman et al. Forthcoming), and are durable for at least three days.

Our results make several important contributions to social science scholarship on intergroup

contact. From a theoretical standpoint, this is the first study to examine heterogeneous treatment effects by party, pushing our collective understanding on the conditions most suitable for effective interparty conversation. Although we expected to find stronger treatment effects among Democrats, who experienced positive emotions associated with their electoral victory, we did not find that interparty contact had differential effects across partisan groups. From an empirical standpoint, it is still relatively rare to experimentally assess the effects of interpersonal political communication by bringing real partisans together without confederates or vignettes. Our study utilizes an online chat software to accomplish this task, without relying on the effective (Rossiter 2020), but limited, imagined contact as an intervention.

While future research is needed to replicate and extend our results, we view this, cautiously, as good news for the effectiveness of interparty contact. Our findings suggest that even when interparty contact occurs in situations where it may be least likely to work—discussing electoral politics when partisan identities are strongly held in the heat of partisan competition (Michelitch 2015; Michelitch and Utych 2018)—partisans still walk away from the conversation feeling warmer toward the other party than they did before.

Competition, Electoral Threat, and Affective Polarization

Group competition is a key concept for understanding intergroup attitudes in social psychology (Sherif 1961). While not necessary for discrimination (Tajfel 1970), competition can fan the flames of negative outgroup attitudes (Lowe 2020). Moreover, perceived threat and competition over *political* power are particularly strong seeds of outgroup hostility (Brewer 1999, p. 456). Yet, competition has been largely overlooked in our understanding of affective polarization.

Because partisan groups are defined by their competition with each other, we expect that interpersonal partisan relations will be affected by reactions to salient competition. We theorize that around elections and political events that make partisan competition salient, partisan identities intensify (Michelitch 2015; Michelitch and Utych 2018), which means that individuals cling to their partisan identities most strongly. Moreover, the outcomes of competition fundamentally shift partisans' emotional experiences, as well as the dynamics of their interactions. Partisan "losers" are likely to experience electoral threat and anger, whereas partisan "winners" are more

likely to experience electoral reassurance and enthusiasm (Huddy, Mason and Aarøe 2015). The "winners" have the upper-hand. When "winners" and "losers" connect, their unique reactions to the competition clash, and this clash might structure whether—and to what extent—their connection affects subsequent political outcomes. We specifically focus on three outcomes that could be differentially affected by interparty contact: affective polarization, social polarization, and perceptions of election integrity.

Although several studies suggest that interparty conversation can reduce outparty animosity (Mutz 2006; Rossiter 2020; Levendusky 2020), these studies were not conducted within the context of salient partisan competition nor were heterogeneous treatment effects by party examined. Partisan "losers" experience electoral threat, which can make strong partisans more likely to vilify those in their outgroup (Huddy, Mason and Aarøe 2015). This suggests that the electoral context should not universally affect partisans' interpersonal experiences with outparty members: electoral "winners" who experience reassurance may be less likely to vilify the other side and be more receptive to meaningful contact, while "losers" might become even more likely to vilify the other side. We build on prior findings of unique expressive reactions to electoral competition (Huddy, Mason and Aarøe 2015) and hypothesize that while all partisans will improve their outparty attitudes as a result of interparty contact, "losers" will be less likely than "winners" to improve their attitudes.

Recent work has investigated whether interventions designed to reduce affective polarization can also reduce anti-democratic values. Although most of the evidence so far suggests that these interventions *do not* also reduce anti-democratic values (e.g., Voelkel et al. 2021; Santoro and Broockman 2021), we expect that the interventions might be more effective among some groups than others, which could mask overall treatment effects. Because our study was conducted against the backdrop of the 2020 U.S. presidential election, which faced allegations of voter fraud, we examined whether interparty contact could increase perceptions of election integrity. We expected that interparty contact would indeed increase perceptions of election integrity for everyone, but especially for Republicans ("losers") who might have been less likely to think that the election was fair prior to contact.

Building on this theoretical framework, we test the following pre-registered hypotheses:

Main Effects of Treatment

- H1: Political conversation as contact, relative to no contact, with an outparty member increases outparty affect.
- H2: Political conversation as contact, relative to no contact, with an outparty member decreases social polarization.
- H3: Political conversation as contact, relative to no contact, with an outparty member increases perceptions of election integrity.

Heterogeneous Treatment Effects Based on Electoral Threat

- H4: Conversation as contact increases outparty affect more among "winners" than "losers."
- H5: Conversation as contact decreases social polarization more among "winners" than "losers."
- H6: Conversation as contact increases perceptions of election integrity more among "losers" than "winners."

Research Design

We tested our hypotheses using an experiment in which Republicans and Democrats engaged in a synchronous online conversation with an outpartisan. Following similar research, we conducted our study on Amazon's Mechanical Turk (Rossiter 2020). Our study consisted of four parts: a pre-treatment survey, random assignment to treatment, a post-treatment survey, and a follow-up survey three days later. We recruited 3,483 participants to complete an initial pre-treatment survey, 1,032 participants were randomized to treatment conditions and invited back to participate in a conversation or essay task, and 689 participants returned for the task. Finally, 410 participants completed our follow-up survey three days later.⁴

Pre-treatment survey

Participants first completed a brief pre-treatment survey where we collected measures of demographic characteristics, preferences for political conversations, perceptions of the election, and our outcomes of interest (outparty affect, social polarization, and election integrity). We used the pre-treatment

⁴See Appendix B for information about attrition and sample sizes.

survey data to randomly pair participants with an outparty member and simultaneously create blocks of two partnerships each.⁵ Within each block, we randomly assigned treatment at the partnership level.⁶

Contact Treatment

Partnerships were randomly assigned to one of two conditions. Participants in the treatment group were told their partner's partisanship, were asked to read a brief overview of the 2020 election, and were asked to discuss any of four discussion question prompts about the election. Appendix J shows the full prompt shown to participants in this condition. After reading the prompt upon entering the chat software, partners engaged in an 8 minute written conversation. Participants in the control group had a nearly identical prompt (see Appendix J), but were simply asked to complete a short essay in isolation. Participants in the treatment group experienced interparty contact and participants in the control group did not experience interparty contact, but did reflect upon the same election topic. Appendix L provides an example conversation and short essay from the experiment.

Post-treatment and Follow-up Surveys

After completing their conversations or short essays, participants were asked to complete a brief survey where we measured outparty affect, social polarization, and perceptions of election integrity. Three days later, we followed up with participants one more time to examine the durability of any treatment effects for our main outcome of interest: outparty affect.

Dependent Variable Measurement

In this study, we focused on three main outcomes: outparty affect, social polarization, and perceptions of election integrity. For all three variables, we examine the *change* between each participant's pre-treatment measure and each participant's post-treatment measure to increase precision (Clifford, Sheagley and Piston 2021).

⁵Because treatment assignment is at the partnership level, we created blocks with similar levels of within-partnership variation.

⁶We created blocks using demographic variables, all of our outcomes of interest, perceptions of the 2020 election, and more, outlined in Appendix A.

We measure *outparty affect* using a standard feeling thermometer, ranging from 0 (very cold) to 100 (very warm). Recent work demonstrates that measures of outparty affect can vary depending on the type of partisan the respondent is thinking about when answering the question (Druckman and Levendusky 2019; Druckman et al. Forthcoming). In an effort to orient respondents toward everyday partisans, we ask participants to think about "ordinary people and not elected officials or candidates" when completing the partisan group feeling thermometer items and used the phrase "Republicans/Democrats across the country." However, as we show in Appendix D, our results are robust to measuring outparty affect referring to outpartisans who are "ideologically liberal/conservative and very active in politics," as well as "ideologically moderate, but not active in politics."

We measure social polarization using a slightly modified scale as that used by Mason (2018). Specifically, we asked participants to rate how likely they would be to engage in five activities: spend occasional social time with an outpartisan, be next door neighbors with an outpartisan, marry an outpartisan, talk about politics with an outpartisan, and talk about sports or pop culture with an outpartisan. Here, "outpartisan" was replaced with "ordinary Democrat" for Republican participants, and with "ordinary Republican" for Democrat participants. The likelihood scale ranged from 0 (very unlikely) to 3 (very likely) for each question. We then calculated the average likelihood across the five items to create a social polarization score.

Finally, we measure perceptions of election integrity using a question utilized by Pew Research Center (Pew Research Center 2020). We asked participants: "Do you think the elections this November in the United States were run and administered...very well, somewhat well, not too well, or not at all well?" We code "very well" as 0 and up to "not at all well" as 3.

Estimation Strategy

We test our hypotheses using linear regression with cluster-robust standard errors at the partnership-level and blocked fixed effects to reflect the design's randomization of treatment. We estimate the sample average treatment effect of contact, relative to no contact, for our three outcomes using a dummy variable for treatment to test Hypotheses 1-3. We then examine our Hypotheses 4-6, which focus on the heterogeneous treatment effects by partisanship, by looking at the interaction between treatment and party identification.

To be powered to detect this treatment-by-covariate interaction, we preregistered to analyze

the sample of all *partnerships* that complete the conversation or short essay task as well as the post-treatment survey.⁷ This sample has 578 participants, 284 participants in the control condition and 294 in the contact condition.

Results: Interparty Conversations Reduce Outparty Animosity

First, we show in Appendix I as a "manipulation check" that the election prompted Democrats and Republicans to experience the expressive reactions we would expect them to given electoral threat and reassurance. We show that Democrats indeed felt like "winners," Republicans felt like "losers," and nearly all partisans felt that Democrats had higher political status at the time.

We assess Hypotheses 1-3 by examining the main treatment effects for our three outcomes of interest, displayed in Table 1. We find that interparty conversations led to a 6.22 point increase in positive affect toward the outparty, relative to no contact ($p < .05$), therefore supporting Hypothesis 1. We also find that conversation as contact, relative to no contact, caused a .09 unit decrease in social polarization ($p < .05$), lending support to Hypothesis 2. These results add more evidence to the debate over the effectiveness of interparty contact for reducing affective polarization, siding with the optimistic view. Even under conditions that should make it difficult for interparty contact to reduce outparty animosity, we observe that it does indeed reduce affective and social polarization. We do not find evidence of a treatment effect for perceptions of election integrity, meaning that we do not find evidence to support Hypothesis 3.

At the core of our inquiry is the idea that interparty conversations do not affect all partisans equally, particularly when electoral competition prompts different expressive reactions among partisan groups. We expected that the electorally reassured Democrats would be more strongly affected by interparty contact than Republicans who experienced threat. We did not find evidence of a heterogeneous treatment effect by partisanship, therefore finding no support for Hypotheses 4-6. In Appendix C, we show that these results are consistent when using alternative pre-registered operationalizations of electoral threat, such as voting for Trump or Biden, as well as when subsetting to only respondents who perceived Democrats as having higher political status. In Appendix H, we discuss interpretations of the null result for outparty affect—our main outcome of interest. We

⁷Appendix A shows the full-partnership sample achieves balance on all but one pre-treatment covariate.

Table 1: Interparty Contact Improves Affective and Social Polarization

| | Outparty Affect | | Social Polarization | | Election Integrity | |
|-------------------------------------|-----------------|---------|---------------------|--------|--------------------|--------|
| Contact | 6.22*** | 7.51*** | 0.09* | 0.09* | 0.01 | 0.00 |
| | (1.41) | (1.82) | (0.03) | (0.04) | (0.03) | (0.05) |
| Partisanship (Republican) | | 0.31 | | -0.05 | | 0.02 |
| | | (1.35) | | (0.03) | | (0.04) |
| Contact x Partisanship (Republican) | | -2.58 | | -0.02 | | 0.01 |
| | | (2.11) | | (0.05) | | (0.07) |
| N | 578 | 578 | 578 | 578 | 578 | 578 |
| R2 | 0.45 | 0.45 | 0.34 | 0.35 | 0.34 | 0.34 |

Note: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$. The model includes blocked fixed effects to reflect the design’s randomization of treatment. HC2 robust standard errors are clustered at the partnership level for individuals assigned to the contact condition.

designed our study to be powered to detect an interaction of size -4.00, an effect size we *a priori* decided was a substantively important difference between partisans based on coefficient sizes from previous studies, coupled with our intense treatment. Ultimately, we were not powered to detect an effect as small as what we observed (-2.58). We encourage future research into conditions that may lead to impactful differences in the effectiveness of interparty contact.⁸

Durability

Although we did not find evidence of a heterogeneous treatment effect of contact for Republicans and Democrats, the effect of contact on outparty affect has shown to be strongly robust. We surveyed respondents three days after their conversation or short essay and repeated the outparty affect measures. We find that the treatment effect remains statistically significant. Interparty conversations caused a 4.5 degree increase ($p < .05$) in positive attitudes toward the outparty three days later.⁹

⁸See Appendix G for pre-registered exploratory mechanism checks. We assess the transcripts and short essays using text analysis tools, and we find that both more engagement and positive engagement are correlated a greater reduction in negative outparty affect.

⁹Appendix E presents full model results and Appendix B shows evidence that attrition was largely random.

Discussion

In this letter, we examined whether interparty conversations can reduce outparty animosity and whether experiencing electoral threat conditions the effectiveness of contact. Pushing beyond previous intergroup contact research that utilizes imagined (rather than actual) contact and is tested under politically bland conditions, we fielded this study immediately after an intense competition—the 2020 election—came to a close at inauguration, and we amplified partisan identity and feelings of electoral threat by asking participants to discuss the election outcome. We found that even under these conditions that should have pushed participants deep into their partisan corners, interparty contact reduced outparty animosity by about 6 points, and these warmer outparty feelings held for at least three days following the conversation. In contrast to our expectations, despite the different feelings we expected Republicans and Democrats to walk into the conversation with, we lack evidence to suggest that Republicans and Democrats reduced their outparty animosity to a different degree.

Our results join previous work pointing to the importance of interacting across the aisle to increase tolerance for the other side (Mutz 2006; Warner and Villamil 2017; Huddy and Yair 2020; Levendusky 2020; Rossiter 2020). Looking specifically at interparty contact and affective polarization, our results contrast with previous work that finds null effects of interparty contact in which political differences are made salient (Santoro and Broockman 2021). However, we note that previous work on interparty contact has tested several different forms of interparty contact (i.e. imagined, in-person, online), different topics (i.e. political, non-political), and has made different comparisons (i.e. interparty vs. intraparty, political vs. nonpolitical). Given the importance of understanding affective polarization in the United States, adding more evidence to this conversation is an important contribution in and of itself.

While our study makes important contributions to our understanding of intergroup discussion and affective polarization in the United States, it is not without its limitations. First, our study relied on an opt-in sample recruited from Mechanical Turk, which is not representative of U.S. adults. Second, our positive treatment effects could be exaggerated due to demand effects. Recent experimental work reassures us that our sample is not likely to adjust behavior in the direction of our expectations (Mummolo and Peterson 2019). Additionally, the persistence of our treatment

effects leads us to discount demand effects, as our follow-up survey did not remind participants about their prior participation and only asked a single question.

From an external validity standpoint, we view the biggest weakness of our experiment as the forced exposure design. In reality, many people prefer to avoid political discussions (Carlson and Settle 2022), avoid politics (Klar and Krupnikov 2016), or discuss politics only with those who agree with them (Settle and Carlson 2019; Huckfeldt, Johnson and Sprague 2004). Our design made this choice for participants. We do not find that willingness to have interparty conversation moderates the effect of contact (see Appendix K); however, given the important influence selection can have on political behavior (De Benedictis-Kessner et al. 2019), we encourage consideration of self-selection when designing future studies.

Conclusion

How does the electoral competition inherent in partisan relations affect the relationship between interparty contact and outparty animosity? In some ways, our results suggest that it doesn't. First, while we expected "winners" and "losers" to respond differently to interparty contact in the wake of salient partisan competition, we lack evidence to support this expectation. Instead, we find robust, durable evidence that interparty contact is a powerful tool to reduce outparty animosity for all partisans, even in an environment of salient electoral competition. Second, we fail to find that the effects of interparty conversation generalize beyond reducing outparty animosity to broader political attitudes. Even when election integrity and democracy are the topic of conversation, we fail to find strong evidence that discussion on these topics affects perceptions of election integrity and anti-democratic values (See Appendix F). This is consistent with recent work (Voelkel et al. 2021; Santoro and Broockman 2021), lending more evidence to question the conditions under which reducing affective polarization may also reduce anti-democratic values.

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