

Cross-Partisan Conversation Reduced Affective Polarization for Republicans and Democrats Even After the Contentious 2020 Election

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Abstract

Recent evidence suggests that cross-partisan conversation can reduce affective polarization. Yet, this evidence comes from experiments that dampen the contentious features of political environments like elections. We argue that cross-partisan conversation will be less effective at reducing affective polarization for partisans who experience partisan group threat from an election loss. We test our theory using a pre-registered experiment where Democrats and Republicans chatted via text online. Participants discussed the 2020 presidential election immediately following Biden's inauguration, a contentious context that we show differentially amplified feelings of group threat amongst Republicans. However, for both sides, cross-partisan conversations reduced outparty animosity for at least three days, reduced social polarization, but did not increase perceptions of election integrity. Our results suggest that cross-partisan conversation can effectively reduce affective polarization among both Republicans and Democrats even in contentious contexts that amplify group threat.

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Recent experimental evidence shows that cross-partisan conversations can reduce affective polarization (e.g., Santoro and Broockman 2022; Levendusky and Stecula 2021). However, this evidence comes from contexts that are more favorable for reducing animosity. Most studies were conducted during relatively calm political environments. We know less about cross-partisan conversation during and about contentious political environments, which may be when partisans need to come together the most.

In this article, we examine whether cross-partisan conversation can reduce affective polarization in one of the most contentious political environments in modern American politics. We bring Republicans and Democrats together in the heated moments following Joe Biden’s contested inauguration to discuss the 2020 U.S. presidential election. We argue that this political context amplifies partisan identity (Michelitch and Utych 2018), which increases the intensity of feelings partisans have for the other side (Huddy, Mason and Aarøe 2015). Perhaps more importantly, this context likely marked a shift in group status, elevating Democrats to a higher status as winners and demoting Republicans to a lower status as losers. As a result, Republicans may have experienced threat to their group status, while Democrats felt reassured. Threat prompts partisans to vilify the other side, whereas reassured partisans experience enthusiasm and are less likely to express outparty animus (Huddy, Mason and Aarøe 2015). We argue that these differential experiences of group threat triggered by the political environment will clash in cross-partisan conversations, making conversations less effective at reducing affective polarization for those experiencing threat.

We test our argument with an experiment in which we randomly assigned partnerships of one Democrat and one Republican to have a text chat conversation (treatment) or write an individual short essay (control) about the 2020 election. While others have manipulated signals of partisan group threat with vignettes (Huddy, Mason and Aarøe 2015; Mason 2016), the 2020 election provided an opportunity to examine naturally induced feelings of partisan group threat. This allowed us to understand how partisanship, prompting differential experiences of group threat, may moderate the effectiveness of conversation to reduce polarization and downstream outcomes, such as perceptions of election integrity, democratic values, and willingness to engage with the other side.

For our pre-registered primary hypotheses, we find that cross-partisan conversation causes a 6.22 point increase in positive outparty affect, a .09 unit decrease in social polarization, but has no effect on perceptions of election integrity. The effect of cross-partisan conversation on outparty

affect persists for at least three days. We also find that conversation had no effects on support for democratic norms, but increased willingness to talk to outparty members about the 2020 election.

We do not find evidence to support our expectation that Republicans and Democrats responded differently to cross-partisan conversation, despite the contentious context and differential feelings of group threat. This null finding is robust to three operationalizations of group threat beyond partisanship. Our study is consistent with previous research that finds cross-partisan conversation can reduce affective polarization, however we add that conversation operates equally well for Republicans and Democrats even in a context where we would not expect it to.

We make three contributions. First, we created a harder test for finding positive effects of conversation. We asked participants to discuss the 2020 election after priming the Republican loss and Democrat victory and making their partner's outparty membership explicit, all during one of the most politically contentious moments in recent American history. Second, we directly theorize about when and why we might observe heterogeneous treatment effects of cross-partisan conversation by partisanship, though our results reveal that cross-partisan conversation is equally beneficial for both parties. Third, our null results for downstream outcomes like perceptions of election integrity further question the link between affective polarization and anti-democratic attitudes (Voelkel et al. 2021).

Our finding that both partisan groups' outparty animosity decreased indistinguishably due to cross-partisan conversation suggests that cross-partisan conversations have the power to overcome negative effects of partisan group threat and improve attitudes amongst all involved. Future research is needed to replicate our results, but we view this, cautiously, as good news. Even when partisans perceive partisan group threat, those perceptions may have a limited ability to interfere with the positive effects of cross-partisan conversation.

Can Group Threat Undermine Benefits of Cross-Partisan Conversation?

In this section, we explain why we expect group threat to moderate the effect of cross-partisan conversation on affective polarization, social polarization, and perceptions of election integrity. As we detail below, we focus on partisan group threat, referring to the partisans' feelings when they perceive their ingroup's status to be challenged by an outgroup (Blumer 1958; Busby 2021).

Groups perceive threat when their social or political status is challenged, such as when the size or influence of subordinate groups grows (Blumer 1958). We focus on partisan groups and elections as an important source of threat (Huddy, Mason and Aarøe 2015), as partisan groups' political

power, resources, and social standing are at stake. The dynamics of the electoral environment are key to understanding when and how partisan groups experience threat. For example, elections intensify partisan identities (Michelitch and Utych 2018), leading partisans to react with stronger emotions to threats and reassurances (Huddy, Mason and Aarøe 2015). In line with theories of intergroup threat that predict negative outgroup attitudes increase when members perceive threats to their group's superior status (Busby 2021), electoral "losers" respond to threat with anger and a tendency to vilify the other side (Huddy, Mason and Aarøe 2015).

We expect these feelings of threat, experienced outside the immediate context of a conversation, to have effects within interpersonal settings. When "winners" and "losers" connect, their different reactions to the political environment will clash, and this clash might structure whether their connection affects subsequent political outcomes. Having a political conversation with an outpartisan will make it hard for a loser to dispel the emotional reactions to threat discussed above, thus we expect losers will benefit less from the interaction. Additionally, if perceptions of unequal status trickle into the interpersonal setting, intergroup contact theory suggests that this could hinder improvement in intergroup attitudes (Allport 1954). Taken together, because election outcomes alter partisan groups' status, and elections can produce *differential* feelings of threat, we expect threat experienced by electoral losers to decrease how much cross-partisan conversation reduces affective and social polarization relative to electoral winners.

Finally, recent work examines whether interventions designed to reduce affective polarization can also improve democratic values, failing to find support for these downstream effects (e.g., Voelkel et al. 2021; Santoro and Broockman 2022; Broockman, Kalla and Westwood Forthcoming). Consistent with our broader theoretical point, we expect cross-partisan conversation to asymmetrically affect these potential downstream consequences of affective polarization. Specifically, because voter fraud allegations were salient at the time, we investigated election integrity perceptions. The social, humanizing experience of engaging with an outpartisan about the contested election could lead all partisans to have more faith in their fellow democratic citizens and the electoral process. Yet, since Republicans were less likely than Democrats to think the election was fair, we expect conversations could bridge this gap with Republicans increasing their perceptions of election integrity more than Democrats. We also pre-registered exploratory analyses examining cross-partisan conversation's effects on broader support for democratic values and willingness to have future conversations.

Building on this theoretical framework, we test six pre-registered, primary hypotheses. We hypothesize that political conversation with an outparty member increases outparty affect (H1), decreases social polarization (H2), and increases perceptions of election integrity (H3). However, we expect heterogeneous treatment effects based on threat. We hypothesize that political conversation increases outparty affect (H4) and decreases social polarization (H5) more among winners than losers, but increases perceptions of election integrity (H6) more among losers than winners (H6).¹

Research Design

We tested our hypotheses using an experiment on Amazon’s Mechanical Turk in which Republicans and Democrats engaged in an online conversation. We discuss ethical considerations in Appendix A. We recruited 3,483 participants to complete the pre-treatment survey, we randomized 1,032 participants to cross-partisan partnerships and treatment conditions, and 578 participants were in a partnership that completed the study (289 Republicans and 289 Democrats). Finally, 410 participants completed our follow-up survey three days later.²

Pre-treatment Survey: Participants first completed a 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 survey data to randomly pair participants with an outparty member, collapsing "leaners" into their respective partisan groups, and simultaneously create blocks of two partnerships each.³ Within each block, we randomly assigned treatment at the partnership level.

Conversation Treatment: Partnerships were randomly assigned to one of two conditions. Participants in the treatment group were told their partner’s partisanship, read a brief overview of the 2020 election, and discussed the election for eight minutes. Participants in the control group had an identical prompt, but were asked to complete a short essay alone. Appendix D shows both prompts and justifies the short essay task as a control condition. Appendix E provides example conversations and short essays from the experiment.

Post-Treatment Surveys: After their conversation or short essay, participants completed a survey to measure our outcomes. Three days later, we followed up with participants to examine the

¹Our pre-registration further discussing these hypotheses can be found here (redacted for review).

²Appendix B has information about sample sizes and shows attrition was largely random.

³Because treatment assignment is at the partnership level, we created blocks with similar levels of within-partnership variation on several pre-treatment covariates, outlined in Appendix C.

durability of treatment effects for outparty affect.

Outcome Measurement

We examine the change between each participant’s pre-treatment and post-treatment responses. All question wording is in our pre-analysis plan. We measure outparty affect, asking about "Republicans/Democrats across the country," using a feeling thermometer ranging from 0 (very cold) to 100 (very warm). Our results are robust to other descriptions of outpartisans (Appendix F) or using the difference between inparty and outparty affect (Appendix G). We measure social polarization using average responses to a battery similar to Mason (2018). On a scale from 0 (very unlikely) to 3 (very likely), participants rated how likely they would be to spend social time, be next door neighbors, marry, talk about politics, and talk about sports or pop culture with an outpartisan. Finally, we measure perceptions of election integrity by asking how well they thought the 2020 elections were run (Pew Research Center 2020) from 0 (not well at all) to 3 (very well).

For our exploratory analyses, we measured support for democratic values post-treatment using the average response to a seven-item battery used by Wolak (2020). The scale ranged from 0 (strong disagreement) to 4 (strong agreement) for each value. We also measured willingness to talk to an outpartisan about the 2020 election on a scale from 0 (definitely would not) to 3 (definitely would).

Estimation Strategy

We test our hypotheses using linear regression with cluster-robust standard errors for conversation partners and blocked fixed effects. We estimate sample average treatment effects (SATE) of conversation, relative to no conversation, to test Hypotheses 1-3. We then test Hypotheses 4-6 by estimating the interaction between treatment and party identification. We analyze all participants in partnerships that completed the experimental task and post-treatment survey. This sample has 578 participants, 284 assigned to control and 294 assigned to treatment.⁴ Appendix H and our preregistration discuss our power analysis.

Partisanship and Threat

We theorized conversation would affect partisans differently, largely due to differential feelings of group threat. Therefore, our main analyses examine heterogeneous treatment effects by partisanship. Rather than randomize a threat stimulus to estimate the causal effect of threat, we capitalized

⁴Appendix C shows this sample achieves balance on all but one pre-treatment covariate.

on naturally occurring emotions in response to the real political environment. Here, we validate partisanship as our primary way to capture threat using three pre-treatment survey items. Our measures focus on proximate events (the election and inauguration) to align closely with the conceptual framework of threat used by previous research (see explanation in Appendix I), but other measures, such as how participants feel about their party’s longterm fate, could have been used.

First, we asked respondents: "Politics is often compared to sports. After the 2020 presidential election, did you feel more like a “winner” or more like a “loser” in politics?" Using our experimental sample, 85% of Republicans reported feeling more like a "loser" and 93% of Democrats reported feeling more like a "winner," providing evidence that partisans felt as we expected. Second, we asked participants about their perception of the parties’ political status. An equal percentage (92%) of Republicans and Democrats felt that Democrats had a higher political status at the time of the survey. Third, we explicitly asked participants whether they felt a variety of emotions, including threat, when Biden was inaugurated. We observe that Republicans were significantly more likely to report feeling threatened, with less than one percent of Democrats reporting threat. While this does not necessarily mean that Republicans experienced threat in the moment of our experiment, it suggests that the election outcome and inauguration, as primed in our experimental stimuli, induced the feelings as expected. Despite these robustness checks, conditioning on partisanship could also be conditioning on other characteristics that correlate with partisanship. In Appendix J, we show that our results are robust to using each of these three distinct measures of threat.⁵

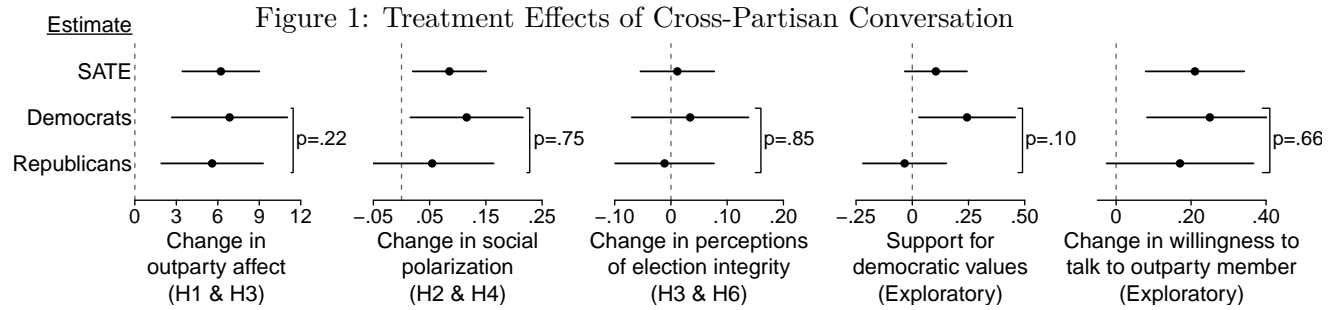
Results

We test H1 and H2 by examining the sample average treatment effects for our polarization outcomes, displayed in Figure 1. Appendix N shows full table of results. We find that cross-partisan conversation caused a 6.22 point increase in outparty affect, relative to no conversation ($p < .05$, Cohen’s $d = .55$), therefore supporting H1. Conversation also caused a .09 unit decrease in social polarization ($p < .05$, Cohen’s $d = .26$), meaning that partisans became more willing to engage socially with outpartisans, lending support to H2.⁶ Figure 1 also shows we find no evidence to support H3; we do not find an effect of conversation on perceptions of election integrity.

As with perceptions of election integrity, in our first exploratory analysis, we do not find evidence

⁵Appendix J also reports robust results using Trump vote choice rather than partisanship.

⁶Appendix K visualizes raw means by condition over time for polarization outcomes.



Note: Figure displays estimates of the sample average treatment effect (SATE), conditional average treatment effects by partisanship, and p-values assessing heterogeneous treatment effects by partisanship, estimated with blocked fixed effects to reflect the design’s randomization procedure and HC2 robust standard errors clustered at the partnership level for those assigned to conversation. The scales of the outcome measures are the following: outparty affect is measured using a 101 point feelings thermometer; social polarization is measured as the average response to four items using four-point Likert scales, perceptions of election integrity is measured using a four-point Likert scale, support for Democratic values is measured using the average response to seven items using a five-point Likert scale, and willingness to talk is measured using a four-point Likert scale.

that cross-partisan conversation increases democratic values on average in our sample. However, our second exploratory analysis finds evidence that cross-partisan conversation can increase willingness to talk about the 2020 election in the future with outpartisans. Taken together, consistent with recent evidence, we find that cross-partisan conversation can reduce affective and social polarization, but these benefits do not extend to broader democratic attitudes on average (Santoro and Broockman 2022). However, we do find evidence that conversation about a salient, heated topic can increase willingness to engage in similar future conversations—one important democratic behavior.

At the core of our inquiry is whether cross-partisan conversations affected partisans differently. Figure 1 reports p -values for heterogeneous treatment effects for each outcome. We fail to reject the null for each, therefore we find no support for H4-H6 or our exploratory outcomes.⁷

Because outparty affect is the most common affective polarization outcome examined in the literature, we conducted pre-registered durability and mechanism checks for H1 and H4. Appendix M shows that cross-partisan conversation increased outparty affect by 4.5 degrees three days later ($p < .05$, Cohen’s $d = .24$). Appendix O explains how we used the text of the conversations and short essays to explore what aspects of the election participants talked about and evaluate possible mechanisms, noting that this is post-treatment and needs to be interpreted cautiously. In Appendix

⁷While Figure 1 shows conversation causes Democrats to decrease social polarization and increase our exploratory outcomes, we caution readers from interpreting this as evidence of heterogeneous effects which are assessed using the *difference* between treatment effects by partisanship.

L we show that more engagement and more positive engagement in a conversation both correlate with increased outparty affect, but these patterns do not hold for short essays, suggesting two possible mechanisms that facilitate positive outcomes from politically-charged conversation.

Discussion

In this article, we examined whether cross-partisan conversations can reduce outparty animosity, even in contentious political moments that make partisan group threat salient. Pushing beyond previous research that tests cross-partisan conversation under more congenial conditions, we amplified perceptions of threat by asking partisans to discuss the 2020 election outcome immediately after inauguration of President Biden. Even under these conditions, we found that cross-partisan conversation improved outparty affect for at least three days, reduced social polarization, and increased willingness to discuss heated, salient political topics with outpartisans in addition to more benign socializing about sports or pop culture (see Appendix Q). However, conversation did not affect perceptions of election integrity or support for democratic values.

In contrast to our expectations, we found that cross-partisan conversation reduces outparty animosity equally well for Republicans and Democrats, suggesting that it can be powerful enough to overcome threat in contexts that asymmetrically amplify threat across groups. While partisans may see outpartisans gloating or complaining about election outcomes online or in the media, amplifying winner-loser dynamics, we expect this to be less likely in one-on-one, humanizing conversations with ordinary outparty members. Therefore, direct social interactions could dampen the consequences of partisan group threat that is stimulated in one’s broader political environment.

Our results should be interpreted in light of some limitations. Our study relied on an opt-in sample recruited from Mechanical Turk, which is not representative of U.S. adults. Our treatment effects could also be exaggerated due to demand effects, though we discount this because our treatment effects persist for at least three days. From an external validity standpoint, our experiment omits some important features of real world conversations. Conversations occurred between strangers over text; in-person conversations between friends could have different effects. Our study also used a forced-exposure design, leading people to discuss politics even when they otherwise might prefer to avoid it (Klar and Krupnikov 2016), although we do not find that willingness to have cross-partisan conversation moderates our treatment effects (see Appendix P). Finally, we only assess partisan group threat stemming from a contentious, salient power transition following an election. Future

research is needed to better understand the extent to which an electoral context is a necessary or sufficient condition for partisan group threat to develop.

Although we designed a contentious conversation environment, some features of the stimulus could have softened the experience. We accurately told participants that their partner belonged to or leaned toward the other party, which could allow people to hedge if chatting about their partisanship; we provided information about the topic, giving partners common information on which to draw; and we created partnerships based on partisanship, not opinions about the election, so it is possible that there was more agreement than if we used other topics or partnership configurations.

Conclusion

Altogether, we make three contributions in this article. First, we find robust, durable evidence that cross-partisan conversation can improve outparty affect, even during one of the most contentious times in modern American politics, and regardless of different experiences of partisan group threat. Indeed, it is a contribution in and of itself to empirically demonstrate Democrats' and Republicans' perceptions of their relative group status, finding dramatic differences during the tumultuous transition of power in early 2021. Our results join previous work on the importance of interacting across the aisle to increase political tolerance (Mutz 2006; Levendusky and Stecula 2021; Rossiter 2022), even during a time when it might be harder for cross-partisan conversation to work (see Appendix R for a more detailed discussion of this experiment's novelty).

Second, we present a theoretically-driven analysis of heterogeneous effects of cross-partisan conversation. While our study focused on partisan groups, we hope it encourages future work on how some groups may have different experiences and reactions to cross-cutting political discussions, especially those who may not experience equal status outside or within the interaction. Future work could also investigate other theoretically important moderators, such as environments that prime individuating characteristics over group memberships (West and Iyengar 2020).

Third, we fail to find strong evidence that cross-partisan conversation affects downstream outcomes like perceptions of election integrity and democratic values. However, we find conversation increases respondents' willingness to have future cross-partisan conversations. These results lend more evidence to question the conditions under which reducing affective polarization may also improve democratic values specifically (Voelkel et al. 2021; Santoro and Broockman 2022), nonetheless we find it encouraging that conversation opens partisans to talking across the aisle.

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