International Journal of Communication 12(2018), 4332–4352 1932–8036/20180005

Does Having a Political Discussion Help or Hurt Intergroup Perceptions? Drawing Guidance From Social Identity Theory and the Contact Hypothesis

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This experiment (*N* = 238) tested propositions from social identity theory alongside the intergroup contact hypothesis to examine whether having a political discussion with an in-group (politically similar) or out-group (politically different) member affects subsequent evaluations of these social groups. Although several experimental results provide strong support for the antisocial predictions proposed by social identity theory, ultimately it was found that having a political discussion with an out-group member led to more positive moral and affective evaluations of out-group members than having a discussion with an in-group member. This result is consistent with the contact hypothesis and supports the notion that political discussions across party lines can produce positive social outcomes.

Keywords: contact hypothesis, intergroup relations, political discussions, political polarization, social identity theory

Some of the earliest theorizing in political communication argued that face-to-face interaction is more influential than the media in shaping political attitudes (Berelson, Lazarsfeld, & McPhee, 1954; Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955). This influence was predicated on peoples' interpersonal knowledge of their partner as well as their ability to modify political information during a conversation. By tailoring a message in ways that comports to their partners' knowledge, interests, and identities, the message stands a greater chance of being accepted. Now, almost 75 years later, communication scholars continue to research the effects of political discussions (e.g., Gamson, 1992; Kim & Kim, 2008; Morey, Kleinman, & Boukes, 2018; Mutz, 2006; Wyatt, Katz, & Kim, 2000). However, the view of these discussions is also more nuanced (e.g., Torcal & Maldonado, 2014). To explore these nuances, this experiment focused on how political discussions influence moral and affective evaluations of partisan in-group and out-group members. Although political discussions may succeed in social influence (e.g., Atkin, 1972; Huckfeldt & Sprague, 1991; McClurg, 2003) or in transmitting political information (e.g., Eveland, 2004; Mutz, 2002, 2006), this investigation examined what social costs are incurred by these intergroup interactions.

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Date submitted: 2018–03–03

We used social identity theory (SIT; Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and the intergroup contact hypothesis (Allport, 1954) as a lens to examine the group dynamics at play following a political discussion. Although SIT is a theory of intergroup dynamics with foundations in intergroup conflict (Campbell, 1965; Sherif, 1966; Tajfel & Turner, 1979), at this particular time in political history, conflict is an apt characterization of the political climate (Han & Wackman, 2017; Iyengar, Sood, & Lelkes, 2012; Iyengar & Westwood, 2015). To substantiate this point, a study by the Pew Research Center in 2016 reported that 91% of Republicans and 86% of Democrats held unfavorable or very unfavorable views of the opposing party, up from 74% and 59%, respectively, in 1994. Democracy requires debate and acceptance of competing perspectives. With this feature of democracy in mind, the question asked here is whether informal political discussions serve to improve or degrade moral and affective evaluations of out-group members.

Social Identity Theory

Social identity theory examines instances in which social behavior is driven by social categorization (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Social categorization occurs when individuals systematize the world through a group-oriented structure that provides information about (a) who a person is based on his/her group affiliations (in-group) and (b) who a person is not (out-group). These group categorizations underscore the term *social identity* (Stets & Burke, 2000).

Social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) is predicated on three assumptions. The first is that people need to have a positive self-concept. The second is that because social identities are valenced, social groups carry positive or negative connotations. And third, the evaluation of one's social group is a relative process that is best understood by comparing one's in-group relative to one's out-group. With these assumptions in place, the primary hypothesis of SIT "is that pressures to evaluate one's own group positively through in-group/out-group comparisons lead social groups to attempt to [positively] differentiate themselves from each other" (Tajfel & Turner, 1979, p. 41). More contemporary iterations of SIT refer to this process as the *metacontrast principle*, which functions to "maximize the ratio of perceived intergroup differences to intra-group differences and thus accentuates similarities within groups and differences between groups" (Hogg, 2006, p. 116). Given the need for positive distinctiveness, SIT predicts that in intergroup situations, people demonstrate favoritism toward in-group members and punish out-group members when group norms support this behavior (Abrams & Hogg, 1988; Brewer, 2001; Hertel & Kerr, 2001; McKinley, Mastro, & Warber, 2014; Roozen & Shulman, 2014; Sherif, 1966; Tajfel, 1970; Tajfel & Turner, 1979, 2004).

Originally, work on intergroup relations was used to explain intergroup hostility and conflict, such as in World War II (e.g., Campbell, 1965). This lens drove scholars to conclude that when there are limited resources, or an unequal distribution of power, social categorization was necessary to challenge or maintain the status quo (realistic conflict theory; Campbell, 1965). However, later research using the minimal groups paradigm (Tajfel, 1970) found that even when social identities were formed ad hoc and from attributes considered minimally important, people still displayed behaviors consistent with in-group favoritism and out-group discrimination (Diehl, 1990; Hornsey, 2008). These findings suggest that social categorization is more pervasive than originally thought.

This history of intergroup processes informs our discussion of partisan affiliation as a distinct and important social identity. Work by Green, Palmquist, and Schickler (2002) and more recently Kinder and Kalmoe (2017) have argued that partisan identity is strong and stable overtime. As a testament to this stability, Green et al. found that the stability of partisan identity was comparable in strength and variability to other established and less mutable identities such as religion, ethnicity, and social class. Because partisan identification is an important and stable self-identification, partisan group categorizations are susceptible to negative intergroup processes given the presence of antagonistic group norms (Achen & Bartels, 2016; Han & Wackman, 2017). In support of this, research by Iyengar et al. (2012) found that, in the United States, a majority of respondents reported they would be "somewhat or very unhappy" at the prospect of their child marrying someone from the opposing party. Follow-up research (Iyengar & Westwood, 2015) corroborated this antagonistic relationship by showing that affective polarization based on party was as strong as polarization based on race. Given the current hostile political culture in the United States, our first hypothesis predicted the following:

H1: Participants will evaluate partisan in-group members more positively than partisan out-group members.

An important component of SIT is that within intergroup situations, people tend to report that all members from the same group possess the same prototypic set of characteristics (McKinley et al., 2014; Stets & Burke, 2000). This tendency describes the process of *depersonalization* (Brewer, 2001; Hogg, 2006; Roozen & Shulman, 2014; Stets & Burke, 2000; Turner & Oakes, 1989). Level of depersonalization is a moderator within SIT. When depersonalization processes are salient, out-group moral and affective evaluations should be more negative than when depersonalization processes are less salient. To test this expectation, in this experiment we produced variance in depersonalization by varying the referent of evaluation. This variability allowed for a test of our second hypothesis:

H2: Participants' evaluations of typical out-group members will be rated more negatively than known (friend or family) out-group members.

Although level of depersonalization is one factor that should qualify the negative consequences of social categorization in SIT (e.g., Brewer, 2001; Hogg, 2006), there is another possibility as well. Allport's (1954) intergroup contact hypothesis argues that intergroup relations could be improved if members from opposing groups could interact with one another. As such, we examined whether having a political discussion with an in-group or out-group member would improve or degrade the intergroup outcomes predicted by SIT.

The Effects of Political Discussions

Being exposed to "the other side" of an argument, or to members of an out-group, can be invaluable. Without this exposure, people remain ignorant of others' beliefs and experiences, and instead rely on false, stereotypic, or logically flawed perceptions of the other point of view (Mutz, 2006). Moreover, when other sides of an argument are not compellingly argued for, out-group members' beliefs can be easily misrepresented as foolish, heartless, or wrong. The intergroup contact hypothesis (Allport,

1954) proposes a communication strategy to rectify this problem. If ignorance perpetuates intergroup hostility, then this ignorance can be combatted through positive intergroup contact. This communication strategy has received recent empirical support (e.g., Eveland, 2004; Mutz, 2006; Warner & Villamil, 2017). For example, Mutz's (2002, 2006) line of research on cross-cutting conversations (i.e., conversations with others who are politically different) revealed that exposure to the other side is positively associated with understanding the other side's arguments and political tolerance. This work extends these ideas by examining the affective, rather than informational, consequences of these discussions. Specifically, we examined how having a political discussion impacts the moral and affective evaluations of in-group and out-group members. The decision to use these outcome measures extends work in this area because, to our knowledge, they have not been previously paired with these theories or within this intergroup context.

Recent research by Warner and Villamil (2017) is instructive in guiding our predictions. In their experiment, participants were asked to imagine an interaction with a partisan out-group member. Following this imagined interaction, participants reported their affective feelings toward political out-group members. Consistent with the contact hypothesis and from Mutz's (2006) research, imagined intergroup contact reduced reports of negative affect. The current work builds on these findings to examine whether an actual political discussion with a member of an individual's social network, as opposed to a discussion with a stranger in a lab-based setting, can improve moral and affective evaluations of out-groups as well. Guided by logic from the contact hypothesis (Allport, 1954), we expected the following relationship:

H3: Moral and affective evaluations of out-group members will be more positive for those assigned to the out-group discussion condition compared with those assigned to the in-group discussion condition.

Although the contact hypothesis purports that contact is the mechanism that can lead to positive affective evaluations (Allport, 1954) or informational benefits (Mutz, 2006), communication scholars would expect that features of the discussion itself, such as discussion enjoyment, might serve to explain subsequent evaluations. This expectation dovetails nicely with SIT's assumptions. In SIT, if people are driven by the need for positive distinctiveness, then communication with other in-group members should better facilitate these needs. In the group communication literature, this is referred to as *mutual enhancement* (Wittenbaum & Bowman, 2004). Mutual enhancement is a communication style that serves to validate the in-group's opinion. By validating this opinion, group members feel better about their group membership and also report higher levels of discussion satisfaction (Stromer-Galley & Muhlberger, 2009).

Mutual enhancement processes should also logically associate with contact hypothesis processes. According to the contact hypothesis, positive contact is more likely when the following conditions are met: equal status, common goals, intergroup cooperation, external support, and personal interaction. Although enjoyment is not directly specified in these conditions, it stands to reason that the presence of these conditions helps facilitate a more enjoyable discussion by cultivating a more productive climate at the onset of the discussion. To our knowledge, however, this assertion has not been previously tested. Thus, adding discussion satisfaction to our consideration of intergroup contact can serve to theoretically contribute to our understanding of what makes contact successful:

H4: *Participants assigned to the in-group discussion condition will report more discussion enjoyment than those in the out-group discussion condition.*

H5: *Discussion enjoyment will moderate the relationship between discussion condition and evaluations of out-group members.*

Considering SIT and the Contact Hypothesis

The final set of hypotheses explored the interplay among discussion condition, level of depersonalization, and intergroup evaluations. SIT (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) proposes that in-group members should be rated more positively than out-group members. Moreover, we expected that this relationship would be moderated by level of depersonalization such that evaluations of in-group and out-group members should be more discrepant when referents are depersonalized. Despite this straightforward premise, the literature diverges with regard to expectations surrounding the outcomes following a political discussion. In the case of SIT, it is expected that intergroup contact, by way of a discussion, would serve to augment group differences based on the metacontrast principle and the need for positive distinctiveness. Conversely, the contact hypothesis (Allport, 1954) proposes that a discussion should reduce feelings of animosity toward partisan out-group members because of gains in tolerance and understanding (Mutz, 2006). Given these divergent processes, different outcomes are expected depending on which psychological process is prioritized. By testing different processes alongside one another, theory in political communication can be advanced. As such, the SIT-guided hypothesis based on the metacontrast principle proposed the following relationship:

H6a: *The discrepancy between in-group and out-group evaluations will be larger for those assigned to the in-group discussion condition compared with those assigned to the out-group discussion condition.*

Conversely, expectations driven by the contact hypothesis led to the following expectation:

H6b: *The discrepancy between in-group and out-group evaluations will be smaller for those assigned to the in-group discussion condition compared with those assigned to the out-group discussion condition.*

Method

Participants

Participants in this study were recruited through Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk; N = 446). This sample was 45% female and had an average age of 35.84 years (SD = 10.04).[1] To be eligible for the

[1] A question regarding participants' ethnicity was mistakenly removed from the survey. We sincerely regret this error. Although it would be preferable to have these data, our intention was never to generalize study findings to the broader population. For descriptive purposes, the average demographic makeup of

study, MTurk workers must have been based in the United States and to have completed at least 100 previous assignments with an approval rating of at least 90% from previous tasks.

Procedure

This experiment was a 2 (discussion condition: in-group, out-group) × 2 (level of depersonalization: high or low) × 2 (question referent: in-group party member, out-group party member) mixed design. The between-subjects factor was assignment to discussion condition, whereas group categorization (in-group vs. out-group member) and level of depersonalization were repeated measures so that within-subject discrepancies between in-group and out-group evaluations could be obtained (Morey et al., 2018).

Participation consisted of a two-wave survey with an experimentally assigned treatment (discussion condition) between waves. The study took place in April to May 2017. Wave I included a survey that asked questions about demographics, political knowledge, political preferences and affiliation, and social relationships. In total, 700 participants completed Wave I of the survey and were compensated $1. At the end of the Wave I survey, participants were asked whether they would be willing to have a 15-minute conversation with someone who had generally similar political views to them (in-group discussion), had generally different political views from them (out-group discussion), or were willing to abstain from political discussions during the duration of this study.[2] Only participants who agreed to participate to any of the three conditions were contacted for a follow-up (N = 446, 63.7%).

Those who agreed to participate in Wave II were contacted through MTurk via an electronic message through the interface approximately one week after the Wave I survey and were randomly assigned to experimental condition. This method of contact maintained the anonymity of participants in the study and conformed to the terms of service of MTurk (see Christenson & Glick, 2013). In both discussion conditions, participants were asked to find a social contact meeting the discussion condition requirement and converse about politics for 15 minutes in a setting of their choosing. Participants were informed that they would be expected have this discussion within the next day or so, and that a follow-up survey would be offered soon after. Following this period of time, we invited remaining participants to take part in Wave II of the study. Of the 446 who were contacted after Wave I, 392 (87.9%) agreed to have a discussion based on their condition assignment.[3] Participants who agreed to have the 15-minute discussion were compensated $3. Of these 392 participants, 369 (94.0%) completed the Wave II follow-

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MTurk workers are as follows: 71.8% were White, 7.1% were Black, 5.6% were non-White Hispanic/Latino, 8.6% selected other, and 7.1% did not reply (Levay, Freese, & Druckman, 2016).

[2] For this experiment, the no-discussion control condition was dropped from all analyses (n = 131) for statistical and theoretical reasons. Results for this condition were not statistically different from those for the in-group discussion condition. Theoretically, there was no reason to collapse participants from the control condition into the in-group discussion condition. Given that no hypotheses directly addressed the absence of a discussion, we decided to directly compare the two discussion conditions with one another.

[3] Eleven participants were mistakenly assigned to multiple treatment conditions. We removed these participants from all analyses.

up survey. Participants who completed Wave II were compensated an additional $3 for their participation. Participants who completed all three phases of the study received a total of $7.

Intent-to-Treat Experimental Design

This experiment is considered an intent-to-treat (ITT) experimental design because we did not strictly control assignment to experimental condition and compliance with the treatment. Although ITT designs are less common in communication research, they have been broadly used in field experiments in disciplines such as political science and economics (Gerber & Green, 2012). Although such designs reduce the experimenter's ability to control the way the treatment is administered and to know, with certainty, whether the intended treatment reaches a participant, these designs also enable researchers to increase the external validity of their induction. Here, the strength of this methodology was the ability to allow discussions to take place between individuals who know one another, are in a time and setting of their choosing,[4] and who would be more likely to have this discussion without experimental instruction. The primary drawback of ITT designs is noncompliance with treatment. Although we attempted to design the study such that compliance with the assigned discussion was likely, the nature of the treatment made it impossible to know with certainty whether participants had the discussion as assigned. Admittedly, in this experiment, our design risked the possibility that individuals who agreed to have a conversation would fail to do so and lie about it. Importantly, however, in these cases, any effect observed should have been attenuated and made it less likely to identify significant differences between groups. Nevertheless, to minimize these risks, we included instructions and measures designed to assess and improve experimental compliance, as described next.

Evaluation of Experimental Compliance

We assessed compliance with the treatment in multiple ways. First, our instructions eliminated any financial incentives to be dishonest by stating,

> I understand that circumstances may have affected your ability to follow through on what I asked of you previously. It is important for the study to have an accurate measurement of who was able to have such a conversation and who was not. Your answer to this question will not affect whether you are compensated for this HIT or whether or not you will be asked to complete future HITs.

Thus, participants were compensated for Wave II regardless of whether they had the discussion. Second, to assess whether self-reported compliance did not vary across condition, we found that 94% of

[4] Participants were able to choose the mode of the conversation. We found that those assigned to similar discussion partners (82%) were more likely to have a face-to-face discussion than those assigned to different discussion partners (59%), $t(206) = 3.83$, $p < .01$). Those who were assigned to different discussion partners (8%) were less likely to have their discussion via the phone than those assigned to similar discussion partners (21%), $t(206) = -2.75$, $p < .01$). We found no differences in the likelihood that a discussion took place via text message or online messaging across conditions.

participants reported that they had the discussion as assigned. Furthermore, completion rates indicate that there was no significant difference in self-reported compliance between those assigned to the in-group discussion condition (96%) and out-group condition (92%), $\square^2(1, N = 231) = 1.128$, $p = .29$. Despite these self-reports, however, all participants who completed a follow-up survey were included in analyses. By analyzing all participants, the treatment effects should produce unbiased estimates of the ITT effects even in the event of noncompliance (Gerber & Green, 2012).

To further assess compliance with treatment, we asked participants to describe their experiences while having the discussion. Although a qualitative evaluation of participants' responses was beyond the scope of this research, the vast majority of participants wrote a large number of words on average across five open-ended questions ($M = 239.99$ words, $SD = 169.96$). Importantly, the number of words written did not vary by condition, $t(236) = -0.22$, $p = .83$. In addition to total word counts, we separately evaluated word counts for the five open-ended questions using a t test to assess whether word counts differed by condition. The first question asked participants to provide a brief (two or three sentences) description about what they discussed, $t(236) = 1.20$, $p = .05$. The second question asked participants to describe how the discussion made them feel, $t(236) = 1.77$, $p = .08$. The third asked participants to provide a brief description (two or three sentences) about how they felt at the end of the discussion, $t(236) = -0.07$, $p = .95$. The fourth asked participants to give a thorough description of the discussion they had and to describe how it progressed from start to finish, $t(236) = -0.52$, $p = .60$. Finally, participants were asked whether there were things that they chose not to express during the discussion and why they chose not to express them, $t(236) = -1.09$, $p = .28$. In sum, these null results suggest that participants did not differ in the seriousness with which they took completing the postdiscussion survey. Furthermore, these results do not show any evidence of a difference between groups in the level of detail in how they described their discussions.

In addition to providing a compliance check, these questions also helped to enhance recall accuracy and render the discussion more vivid and salient before soliciting responses to the intergroup evaluation measures. Also, to address the primary limitation with ITT designs, this recall task intended to account for the possibility that a participant did not have a discussion. Based on the imagined interaction literature (e.g., Warner & Villamil, 2017), we hoped that even if the discussion did not take place, the imagined interaction would put participants in the frame of mind of someone who had such a discussion. In this way, we hoped to observe effects that were similar to treatment among noncompliers. In sum, this combination of instruction, task, and quantitative indicators of similarity between conditions bolsters our confidence that the induction functioned as intended, despite our lack of strict experimental control.

Independent Variables

Assignment to Discussion Condition

Discussion condition was randomly assigned through a Qualtrics survey via MTurk. At the conclusion of the study, there were 125 participants in the in-group condition (94% completion rate) and 113 in the out-group condition (92% completion rate). To confirm that participants followed experimental instructions, we conducted two one-item manipulation checks. The first asked participants, "On a scale

from 0 to 10, where 0 means *very dissimilar* and 10 means *very similar*, how would you rate your similarity to your conversation partner?" Consistent with experimental instructions, a *t* test confirmed that those in the in-group condition rated their discussion partner as more politically similar (M = 7.56, SD = 2.86) than those assigned to the out-group condition (M = 2.93, SD = 2.64), $t(183) = 12.04$, $p < .01$, d = 1.68, illustrative of a large effect (Cohen, 1992). Importantly, participants were not reminded of their randomly assigned condition prior to answering these questions. For evaluations of general similarity in attitudes, participants in the in-group condition also reported more similar attitudes to their discussion partner (M = 7.82, SD = 2.45) compared with participants in the out-group condition (M = 6.33, SD = 2.69), $t(206) = 4.20$, $p < .01$, d = 0.59.

In-Group and Out-Group Categorizations

To categorize in-group and out-group members, we recorded participants' own political affiliations. Participants identifying as independents were removed (n = 42, 11%). Partisan affiliations were solicited during Wave I using the item, "Generally speaking, do you consider yourself a . . ." with *Democrat*, *Republican*, *Independent*, and *Other party* as response options. Participants who responded with Democrat were coded as a 1 (n = 147, 71%), and otherwise were coded as a 0 (n = 60, 29%) for the Democrat variable. Participants who responded with Republican were coded as a 1 (n = 60, 29%), and otherwise were coded as a 0 (n = 147, 71%) for the Republican variable. In-group evaluations occurred when participants evaluated members of their own party and out-group evaluations occurred when evaluating members from a different party (Morey et al., 2018).

Level of Depersonalization

Level of depersonalization was varied through referent use within the in-group and out-group evaluation questions. A high level of depersonalization was characterized by questions soliciting evaluations about a typical Democrat/Republican. A low level of depersonalization asked about friends or family ("known") who are Democrat/Republican. Because this was a repeated-measures factor, participants responded to all four scales, yielding scores for a typical in-group and out-group member and for a known in-group and out-group member.

Outcome Measures

Moral Evaluations

To assess moral evaluations, we exposed participants to 15 morally latent scenarios and asked how a Democrat or Republican would behave within different moral contexts (adapted from the Visions of Morality Scale; Shelton & McAdams, 1990). An example item includes "A [Democrat/Republican] read in the paper about a family who has lost all their belongings in a fire. The [Democrat/Republican] anonymously sends a ten dollar check to a fund set up for the rest of the family." Response options were on a 6-point scale that ranged from 1 (*definitely would not*) to 6 (*definitely would*), with higher scores indicating more positive moral evaluations. We averaged these 15 measures into a single measure of moral evaluations. Both the Democrat moral evaluation scale (M = 4.19, SD = 0.82, α = .92) and the

Republican moral evaluation scale (M = 3.63, SD = 0.53, α = .93) showed high reliability. Using these scales, we created a measure of in-group moral evaluations and out-group moral evaluations.

Affective Evaluations

Participants were asked to rate the extent to which nine traits applied to each of the four referents (typical Republican/Democrat, known Republican/Democrat). These nine traits were identical except for the referent targeted. The nine traits were honest, knowledgeable, prejudiced (reverse coded), smart, immoral (reverse coded), humble, open-minded, warm, and selfish (reverse coded). Response options were on a 5-point scale that ranged from 1 (*disagree*) to 5 (*agree*), with higher scores reflecting more positive evaluations. These nine traits were combined to form an affective evaluation score for each of the four target groups. Each of the four scales, the typical Democrat scale (M = 3.38, SD = 0.60, α = .93), the known Democrat scale (M = 3.62, SD = 0.57, α = .91), the typical Republican scale (M = 2.83, SD = 0.72, α = .93), and the known Republican scale (M = 3.11, SD = 0.75, α = .92) showed evidence of high reliability.

Discussion Enjoyment

Participants were asked eight items assessing their discussion enjoyment. The eight items included "The conversation was enjoyable," "the conversation left me feeling frustrated" (reverse coded), "the conversation left me feeling angry" (reverse coded), "I felt satisfied with the conversation," "the conversation was tense" (reverse coded), "I thought the conversation went well," "I would like to have a similar conversation in the future," and "I thought the conversation went poorly" (reverse coded). Response options were on a 7-point scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). These items were averaged to form a single, reliable measure of discussion enjoyment, with higher scores reflecting more enjoyment (M = 4.99, SD = 1.53, α = .93).

Results

Hypothesis Tests

To test Hypothesis 1 that evaluations toward in-group members would be more positive than out-group members, we conducted three paired-sample t tests. For the moral evaluation outcome, participants provided more positive ratings for in-group members (M = 4.32, SD = 0.60) than out-group members (M = 3.50, SD = 0.65), $t(176) = 11.85$, $p < .01$, d = 0.90, consistent with expectations. Participants also reported more positive affective evaluations for typical in-group members (M = 3.57, SD = 0.44) than typical out-group members (M = 2.64, SD = 0.63), $t(176) = 15.58$, $p < .01$, d = 1.17. This pattern was also observed for the affective evaluations of known in-group members (M = 3.77, SD = 0.49) compared with known out-group members (M = 2.97, SD = 0.68), $t(174) = 12.63$, $p < .01$, d = 0.95. These results proffer strong evidence (Cohen, 1992) in support of Hypothesis 1.

To test Hypothesis 2 that participants would provide more positive evaluations for known out-group members (low depersonalization) relative to typical out-group members (high depersonalization),

we performed a paired-sample *t* test. The expected pattern emerged when affective evaluations were solicited, $t(177) = 7.83$, $p < .01$, $d = 0.59$, such that known out-group members ($M = 2.97$, $SD = 0.68$) were evaluated more positively than typical out-group members ($M = 2.64$, $SD = 0.63$). This again provides strong support (Cohen, 1992) for the impact of depersonalization on affective out-group evaluations.

To test Hypothesis 3 that those in the out-group discussion condition would improve evaluations toward out-groups, we conducted three linear models. The complete results from these analyses are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Regression of Discussion Assignment on Out-Group Evaluations.

	Model 1: Moral Evaluations of Out-group Members			Model 2: Affective Evaluations of Typical Out-group Members			Model 3: Affective Evaluations of Known Out-group Members		
	B	*SE*	*t*	*B*	*SE*	*t*	*B*	*SE*	*t*
Intercept	3.28	0.16	20.19***	2.14	0.16	13.79***	2.57	0.18	14.57***
Discussion Condition	0.26	0.13	1.99*	0.44	0.13	3.46***	0.33	0.14	2.32*
Perceived Similarity	0.03	0.02	1.08	0.05	0.02	3.07	0.04	0.02	2.06
F		2.04			6.52***			2.92**	
df		2, 165			2, 167			2, 167	
R^2		.01			.06			.02	
N		168			170			170	

Note: Discussion condition was coded such that in-group discussions were 0 and out-group discussions were 1.

In each model, the key coefficient was the discussion condition predictor (in-group coded as 0, out-group coded as 1). Each model testing for the effect of experimental condition (H3–H6) also included the perceived political similarity (manipulation check) measure to control for varying degrees of political difference in these discussions.[5] Consistent with this hypothesis, discussion assignment was a positive predictor of the moral evaluations of out-group members, $B = 0.26$, $SE = 0.14$, Model 1, $F(2, 165) = 2.03$, $p = .134$, $R^2 = .01$; typical out-group affective evaluations, $B = 0.44$, $SE = 0.13$, Model 2, $F(2, 167) = 6.52$, $p < .05$, $R^2 = .06$; and a significant predictor for known out-group affective evaluations, $B = 0.33$, $SE = 0.14$, Model 3, $F(2, 167) = 2.92$, $p < .05$, $R^2 = .06$. In sum, these models all reveal that discussion condition was a significant predictor of affective evaluations of out-group members. These findings provide support for Hypothesis 3.

[5] We conducted regression analyses for all regression models (Models 1–10) that also included control variables for age, gender, party identification, education, political interest, and political knowledge. In all cases, models that included these covariates showed substantively similar results to the more parsimonious models presented in the text. Full models containing covariates are available on request.

To test Hypothesis 4 that participants assigned to the in-group discussion condition would report higher rates of enjoyment than those assigned to the out-group discussion condition, we conducted a linear model (see Table 2).

Table 2. Regression of Discussion Assignment on Relative Preference for In-Group Members to Out-Group Members.

	Model 4: Discussion enjoyment		
	B	*SE*	*t*
Intercept	4.68	0.32	14.76***
Discussion Condition	–0.84	0.24	–3.45***
Perceived Similarity	0.10	0.03	3.01**
F		29.12***	
df		2, 203	
R^2		0.22	
N		206	

Note: Discussion condition was coded such that in-group discussions were 0 and out-group discussions were 1.
* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

The results suggest that discussion enjoyment was significantly impacted by discussion condition, $B = -0.08$, $SE = 0.24$, Model 5, $F(2, 203) = 29.12$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .22$, such that having a discussion with an out-group member was less enjoyable than having a discussion with an in-group member in support of Hypothesis 4.[6]

To test Hypothesis 5 that evaluations toward out-group members would be moderated by discussion enjoyment, we conducted three linear models (see Table 3). Overall, the model predicting moral evaluations failed to reach statistical significance, Model 5, $F(4, 162) = 1.513$, $p = .200$, $R^2 = .01$. However, omnibus models did reach statistical significance when predicting affective evaluations for typical out-group members, Model 6, $F(4, 164) = 5.44$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .10$, and known out-group members, Model 7, $F(4, 164) = 3.47$, $p = .009$, $R^2 = .06$. Although the omnibus models were significant, none of the predictors germane to this hypothesis (discussion condition, discussion enjoyment, Condition × Enjoyment) reached statistical significance. Interestingly, this suggests that discussion enjoyment does not explain moral and affective evaluations of out-group members.

[6] We investigated the moderating role that discussion mode (i.e., face-to-face, phone, text message, online messaging, other mode) had on the effect of experimental condition on all outcome variables, and found that those who were assigned to have a discussion with a politically different discussion partner via the phone reported significantly lower enjoyment compared with those who had a face-to-face discussion. No other moderation tests showed a significant moderating role of the mode of the conversation. The full results for the moderating role of conversation mode across all dependent variables is available on request.

Table 3. Regression of Discussion Assignment Moderated by Discussion Enjoyment on Out-Group Evaluations.

	Model 5: Moral Evaluations of Out-group Members			Model 6: Affective Evaluations of Typical Out-group Members			Model 7: Affective Evaluations of Known Out-group Members		
	B	*SE*	*t*	*B*	*SE*	*t*	*B*	*SE*	*t*
Intercept	2.92	0.35	8.42***	1.84	0.32	5.81***	2.24	0.37	6.06***
Discussion Condition	0.45	0.40	1.13	0.29	0.36	0.79	0.15	0.42	0.42
Discussion Enjoyment	0.07	0.06	1.20	0.06	0.05	1.18	0.07	0.06	0.06
Condition X Enjoyment	–0.03	0.07	-0.39	0.04	0.07	0.63	0.05	0.08	0.02
Perceived Similarity	0.02	0.02	0.90	0.05	0.02	2.82**	0.03	0.02	0.08
F		1.51			5.44***			3.47***	
df		4, 162			4, 164			4, 164	
R^2		0.01			0.10			0.06	
N		167			169			169	

Note: Discussion condition was coded such that in-group discussions were 0 and out-group discussions were 1.
* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

There were competing predictions reflected in Hypothesis 6a and Hypothesis 6b. These predictions focused on the size of the discrepancy (i.e., numeric difference) between evaluations of in-group and out-group members following a discussion. If the size of this discrepancy were larger in the out-group discussion condition compared with the in-group condition, support would be offered for Hypothesis 6a (SIT) and illustrative of the metacontrast principle. Conversely, if this discrepancy were smaller in the out-group condition relative to the in-group condition, support would be offered for Hypothesis 6b (contact hypothesis). To test these hypotheses, we conducted three linear models (see Table 4). The results from all three models seem to support contact hypothesis predictions (H6b) such that the discrepancy between in-group and out-group evaluations was smaller in the out-group condition. This was the case for the moral evaluation discrepancy, $B = –0.63$, $SE = 0.19$, Model 8, $F(2, 163) = 8.39$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .08$; typical group member discrepancy, $B = –0.55$, $SE = 0.16$, Model 9, $F = (2, 164) = 12.58$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .12$; and known group member discrepancy, $B = –0.55$, $SE = 0.18$, Model 10, $F(2, 162) = 8.09$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .08$. These findings support the notion that having a political discussion with an out-group member attenuates rather than augments negative perceptions of out-group members relative to in-group members. This finding is in line with the contact hypothesis and proffers an optimistic assessment of the value of cross-cutting conversations.

Table 4. Regression of Discussion Assignment on Relative Evaluations of In-Group Members to Out-Group Members.

	Model 8: Moral Evaluations (In-group - Out-group)			Model 9: Affective Evaluations of Typical: (In-group - Out-group)			Model 10: Affective Evaluations of Known: (In-group - Out-group)		
	B	*SE*	*t*	*B*	*SE*	*t*	*B*	*SE*	*t*
Intercept	1.73	0.23	7.44***	1.81	0.19	9.48***	1.68	0.22	7.63***
Discussion Condition	–0.63	0.19	-3.34**	–0.55	0.16	–3.54***	–0.55	0.18	–3.09**
Perceived Similarity	–0.10	0.03	–4.00***	–0.11	0.02	–5.00***	–0.10	0.02	–3.98***
F		8.39***			12.58***			8.09***	
df		2, 163			2, 164			2, 162	
R^2		0.08			0.12			0.08	
N		166			167			165	

Note: Discussion condition was coded such that in-group discussions were 0 and out-group discussions were 1.
* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, ***$p < .001$.

Discussion

This experiment examined how political discussions affect perceptions of partisans in a hostile political environment. To this end, we randomly assigned MTurk participants to have a political discussion with someone from their social network who was either politically similar or politically different. Although many of the predictions guided by SIT were corroborated, ultimately it was found that having a political discussion with an out-group member improved affective outcomes. Although this finding lends credence to the contact hypothesis (Allport, 1954), there were interesting and counterintuitive psychological trends that accompanied this result.

In this experiment, we found support for both SIT and the contact hypothesis. For instance, the results relating to Hypothesis 1 revealed strong support for SIT's primary hypothesis, which posits that people will report more positive evaluations of in-group members than out-group members. To underscore this point, we conducted a post hoc paired-samples *t* test, and found that even generic in-group members garnered significantly more positive affective evaluations than known out-group members, $t(176) = 9.27$, $p < .01$, $d = 0.70$. These findings strongly support the antisocial axioms of SIT. What was additionally surprising was that antisocial predictions were supported after a discussion with someone from a participants' own social network. One would think that this induction would set up a difficult test for SIT propositions because people should be less likely to conform to group norms and less likely to evaluate known others based on these norms. The fact that SIT was unequivocally supported, however, evidences the psychological influence of thinking motivated by social categorization within America's political context.

Moreover, these findings illustrate the existence of antagonistic partisan relations and hostile normative perceptions of political out-group members, most evident in the moral evaluation scale. An

important nuance, often not reflected in scholarship guided by SIT (for a discussion of common SIT misconceptions, see Jetten, Spears, & Manstead, 1996, 1997; Mols & Weber, 2013), is that intergroup relations are likely to be hostile when norms about out-group members support these negative attitudes. The moral evaluation scale provided a direct test of this conceit by asking participants to predict the moral behavior of in-group and out-group members. The fact that participants reported it more normal for political out-group members to behave more immorally than in-group members provides support for the notion that harmful group norms exist within this intergroup context. Given this to be the case, it is no surprise that Hypothesis 1 (and H2) comported with SIT.

Hypothesis 2 provided support for the depersonalization mechanism operating within SIT. When people were asked questions about typical out-group members, their evaluations were more negative than when asked about known out-group members. Although this finding is socially intuitive, this result provides evidence in support of depersonalization as the mechanism that facilitates negative affect toward out-group members and illustrates the existence of problematic political group norms.

Consistent with SIT, participants also reported less discussion enjoyment in the out-group discussion condition compared with the in-group condition (H4). This finding is consistent with work in psychology (e.g., Festinger, 1957) and communication (e.g., Eveland, 2004; Mutz, 2006; Stromer-Galley & Muhlberger, 2009; Wittenbaum & Bowman, 2004) that finds having discussions with similar others is more pleasant, polite, validating, better for one's self-esteem, better for group cohesion, communicatively easier, and less psychologically demanding. Rather than focus on this rather straightforward finding, however, what becomes interesting is how results diverge from SIT with regard to Hypothesis 3, Hypothesis 5, and Hypothesis 6. The aforementioned psychological and communicative mechanisms lead to the same logical conclusion: Having a less enjoyable discussion should lead to more negative out-group evaluations. Interestingly, however, this was not the case. Results from our experiment suggest that a bad or less enjoyable experience did not make out-group evaluations more negative, and vice versa (H5). In fact, findings were just the opposite such that even though participants reported lower levels of discussion enjoyment with out-group members, out-group perceptions were higher relative to the in-group condition. This suggests that out-group discussions do not need to be enjoyable to benefit from the experience. Despite the provocative nature of this assertion, more work needs to be done.

Hypotheses 3 and 6 provided support for the benefits of intergroup contact. This is noteworthy given that, due to the unobtrusive nature of our ITT design, we could not take strides to ensure that the prerequisite conditions for positive contact were upheld. Therefore, our design set up a difficult test for these hypotheses. Nevertheless, findings from Hypothesis 3 and Hypothesis 6 found that participants exposed to an out-group discussion reported more positive evaluations of out-group members than participants in the in-group condition (H3). In addition to these between-subjects effects, we also found within-subject support for this assertion (H6b). Namely, the discrepancy between in-group and out-group evaluations was smaller following an out-group discussion than following an in-group discussion. These findings provide support for intergroup contact as a way to improve evaluations of partisan out-groups. Despite this trend, it is important to emphasize that overall political out-groups were still evaluated more negatively than in-groups.

Overall, our findings appear consistent with work on cross-cutting exposure (e.g., Eveland, 2004; Mutz, 2006). This is noteworthy given the current, polarized political environment. Although previous work on this was conducted only a decade ago (with the exception of Warner & Villamil, 2017), the U.S. political system has undergone significant changes in terms of the polarization of the political parties (Abramowitz, 2015; Han & Wackman, 2017). Because of this, that our results show that intergroup contact can improve out-group affective evaluations is notable and socially important.

Despite these positive implications, this experiment has limitations. Some arise from the decision to have participants have discussions on their own time as opposed to within a researcher-controlled environment. This feature of the ITT design ceded researcher control over the duration, topic, mode, and discussion partner, but did so in an effort to enhance ecological validity. Researchers have critiqued lab-based discussions, arguing that oftentimes controlled experiments fail to capture the essence of natural conversation (e.g., Eveland, Morey, & Hutchens, 2011). To combat this criticism, we strove to design a more naturalistic experiment by using an ITT methodology.

ITT designs are not without limitations. For example, there is the possibility of differential compliance with the assigned treatments. Problematically, it could have been the case that participants assigned to the in-group condition would be more likely to comply than those assigned to the out-group condition (although the opposite is also possible, it seems less likely). Despite this possibility, we found no evidence that this was the case. The two treatment groups were equally likely to report having had the discussion even when prompted to answer honestly and with no financial penalty. Furthermore, across a range of quantitative measures related to the length of descriptions of the discussions, there was no evidence of a difference between the treatment and control groups. For these reasons, we believe that, although the possibility for differential compliance exists, and that true compliance cannot be known, we found no evidence that this occurred.

Other limitations come from MTurk, which tends to draw certain subsets of the population over others. For example, the sample pool tends to lean more liberal than the average population. This was true of our sample. Although this may be the case, other research has shown that MTurk data are generalizable in terms of behavior even if the samples are not demographically identical to the general population (Berinsky, Huber, & Lenz, 2012). Whether the relationships identified here would replicate using a different sample, however, is unknown. Future work should endeavor to better understand these relationships across a range of people and populations. In addition, MTurk users have been criticized for being motivated to complete the greatest number of studies in the shortest amount of time, and that this motivation harms data quality. Although we acknowledge this limitation, in our experiment we provided compensation for anyone completing Wave II regardless of whether they engaged in the required discussion. As such, we are more confident that those who stated they had the discussion actually did. Moreover, if people were deceptive in their behaviors, this dishonesty would likely function to attenuate our experimental effects, not strengthen them.

Discussions about politics affect how citizens process the political environment. In a socially polarized environment, it is critical to understand how intergroup discussions impact our evaluations of not only our discussion partners, but also of broader social groups. Findings from this research suggest that

discussions with those who are politically different can yield affective gains even in conversations that are viewed as less enjoyable. This finding offers compelling support for the contact hypothesis (Allport, 1954) and implicates a viable communication strategy to reduce hostility across party lines.

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