

Partisan Group Threat and the Consequences of Cross-partisan Conversation¹

Erin Rossiter² & Taylor Carlson³

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Abstract

Recent evidence suggests that cross-partisan conversation can reduce affective polarization. Yet, this evidence comes from experiments that mute the contentious features of political environments like elections. Because elections uniformly intensify partisan identity but differentially foster feelings of partisan group threat, we argue that cross-partisan conversation is less effective at reducing outparty animosity for partisans who lose an election and experience threat. 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 cross-partisan conversations reduced outparty animosity (effects durable for at least three days) and social polarization, but had no effect on downstream democratic values. We do not find evidence that Republicans, who we show perceived threat, benefitted any less than Democrats from conversation. Our results have implications for interventions to reduce affective polarization and for understanding differential effects of political discussion more generally.

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²Assistant Professor, University of Notre Dame, erinrossite@nd.edu, erossiter.com

³Assistant Professor, Washington University in St. Louis, tncarlson@wustl.edu, sites.wustl.edu/tncarlson

Cross-partisan conversations can be a powerful means to reduce affective polarization, a trend characterized by the animosity Americans feel toward outpartisans (Iyengar et al. 2019). Randomized experiments show that cross-partisan conversation can reduce affective polarization across different discussion topics and contexts, such as in-person, online, or in a video chat (Rossiter 2022; Santoro and Broockman 2022; Levendusky and Stecula 2021). However, the evidence supporting positive effects of cross-partisan conversation to date has assessed contexts that are favorable for reducing animosity *on both sides* of the partisan aisle. For example, most studies were conducted during relatively calm political environments, rather than in the midst of a salient election where one side wins and the other loses. Moreover, experimental interventions have used topics that might generate policy agreement or friendliness, rather than remind partisans about their group’s political victories and losses.

In this letter, we theorize about the effects of cross-partisan political conversations when partisans talk about contentious topics during contentious times. Drawing on theories of group threat, we expect that during contentious political contexts, *one side* perceives threat to their group status, while the other does not. As a result, the effectiveness of cross-partisan conversation for reducing outparty animosity may not be uniform for both sides.

We specifically draw attention to the environment surrounding elections, where one partisan group experiences threat to their group’s status in the wake of electoral loss (losers), while the other partisan group’s status is reassured given an electoral victory (winners). Threat prompts losers to be more likely to vilify the other side, whereas partisan winners experience enthusiasm and are less likely to express such outparty animus (Huddy, Mason and Aarøe 2015). We argue that these unique experiences of threat in response to electoral outcomes will clash in cross-partisan conversations, leading losers to be less receptive to meaningful conversation. In sum, we hypothesize that conversations will be less effective at reducing affective polarization for partisans experiencing threat.

To test our argument, we conducted a pre-registered experiment involving online cross-partisan conversation in one of the most contentious moments in modern American history. Amidst a global pandemic, a racial justice crisis, and a democratic crisis following the November 2020 election, we brought Republicans and Democrats together for a conversation. We fielded our experiment immediately following Joe Biden’s inauguration as president of the United States, the moment that

sealed the new political status of Republicans and Democrats. While others have manipulated signals of partisan group threat artificially with vignettes (Huddy, Mason and Aarøe 2015; Klar 2013; Amira, Wright and Goya-Tocchetto 2021), the contentiousness of the 2020 election provided an important opportunity to examine naturally induced feelings of partisan group threat. We intentionally timed our study to leverage feelings of threat prompted by the electoral loss among Republicans to assess whether partisan group threat moderates the effects of cross-partisan conversation on outparty animosity and its downstream consequences.

In the experiment, we randomly assigned partnerships of one Democrat and one Republican to have a conversation (treatment) or write an individual short essay (control) about the 2020 election. 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 downstream democratic values. The effect of cross-partisan conversation on outparty affect persists for at least three days and is robust to several operationalizations of experiencing threat. Although these average treatment effects are powerful and consistent with previous research, we do not find evidence to support our expectation that Republicans and Democrats responded differently to cross-partisan conversation.

Our experiment makes three important contributions, which we return to in the conclusion. First, we created a hard test for finding positive effects of conversation via four elements of our study: we fielded at a time in which partisan identities were made particularly salient due to the election, we chose the topic of conversation to be about the election, we primed the Republican loss and the Democrat victory multiple times before the conversation began, and we made the outparty membership of one's discussion partner salient at the start of the conversation. Second, from a theoretical standpoint, this is the first study to directly theorize and test for heterogeneous treatment effects of cross-partisan conversation by party. Third, our null results for democratic values further question the link between affective polarization and anti-democratic attitudes (Voelkel et al. 2021).

Taken together, our finding that both partisan groups' outparty animosity decreased indistinguishably due to cross-partisan conversation is noteworthy because it suggests that cross-partisan conversations have the power to overcome negative effects of partisan group threat and improve attitudes amongst all involved. While future research is needed to replicate and extend our results, we view this, cautiously, as good news for the effectiveness of cross-partisan conversation. Our

findings suggest that even when partisans perceive partisan group threat, those perceptions may have a limited ability to interfere with the overwhelmingly positive effects of cross-partisan conversation.

1 Can Threat Undermine the Benefits of Cross-Partisan Conversation?

Recent work has examined both the immediate effects of cross-partisan conversation on reducing affective polarization and whether these effects extend to improving democratic values. In this section, we explain why we expect threat to moderate the effect of cross-partisan conversation on affective polarization, social polarization, and democratic values.

We focus on elections as an important source of threat to partisan groups (Huddy, Mason and Aarøe 2015). Elections prompt feelings of threat because partisan groups' political power, resources, and social standing are at stake. Theories of intergroup threat predict that negative outgroup attitudes can increase when members perceive threats to their group's superior status (Busby 2021). Specifically within the context of politics, threat can increase the strength and salience of partisan identities (Klar 2013). The dynamics of the electoral environment further structure when some groups experience threat and others do not. 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) during contentious political times. For electoral losers, those emotions manifest as anger and a tendency to vilify the other side. 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.

Next, we expect these feelings of threat, experienced outside the immediate context of a conversation, to have effects within the interpersonal setting. When "winners" and "losers" connect, their unique reactions to the political environment will clash, and this clash might structure whether—and to what extent—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, when partisans feel threatened, efforts to reduce outparty animosity may be especially difficult.

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 that interventions to reduce affective polarization might be more effective among some groups than others, which, in this case, could mask overall treatment effects on democratic values. Specifically, because our study was conducted against the backdrop of the 2020 U.S. presidential election, which faced allegations of voter fraud, we examined whether cross-partisan conversations could increase downstream perceptions of election integrity. We expected that cross-partisan conversation would 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 at baseline. We also pre-registered an exploratory analysis examining how cross-partisan conversation would affect broader support for democratic values.

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

Average Treatment Effects

- H1: Political conversation with an outparty member increases outparty affect.
- H2: Political conversation with an outparty member decreases social polarization.
- H3: Political conversation with an outparty member increases perceptions of election integrity.

Heterogeneous Treatment Effects Based on Threat

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

2 Research Design

We tested our hypotheses using an experiment on Amazon’s Mechanical Turk in which Republicans and Democrats engaged in a synchronous online conversation with an outpartisan. We discuss ethical considerations in Appendix A. 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 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. Finally, 410 participants completed our follow-up survey three days later.⁴

2.1 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.⁵ Within each block, we randomly assigned treatment at the partnership level.

2.2 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 Appendix E provides an example conversation and short essay from the experiment.

⁴Appendix B has information about attrition and sample sizes.

⁵Because 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.

2.3 Post-treatment and Follow-up Surveys

After their conversation or short essay, participants completed a survey to measure our outcomes of interest. Three days later, we followed up with participants to examine the durability of treatment effects for outparty affect.

2.4 Outcome Measurement

For our main outcomes, we examine the *change* between each participant's pre-treatment and post-treatment responses. All question wording is available in our pre-analysis plan. We measure outparty affect using a feeling thermometer ranging from 0 (very cold) to 100 (very warm). We asked participants to think about "ordinary people and not elected officials or candidates" when evaluating "Republicans/Democrats across the country." However, our results are robust to other characterizations of outpartisans (see Appendix F) (Druckman et al. 2022).

We measure social polarization using 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 engage in five activities with an ordinary outpartisan: spend occasional social time, be next door neighbors, marry, talk about politics, and talk about sports or pop culture. We calculated a social polarization score using the respondent's average response.

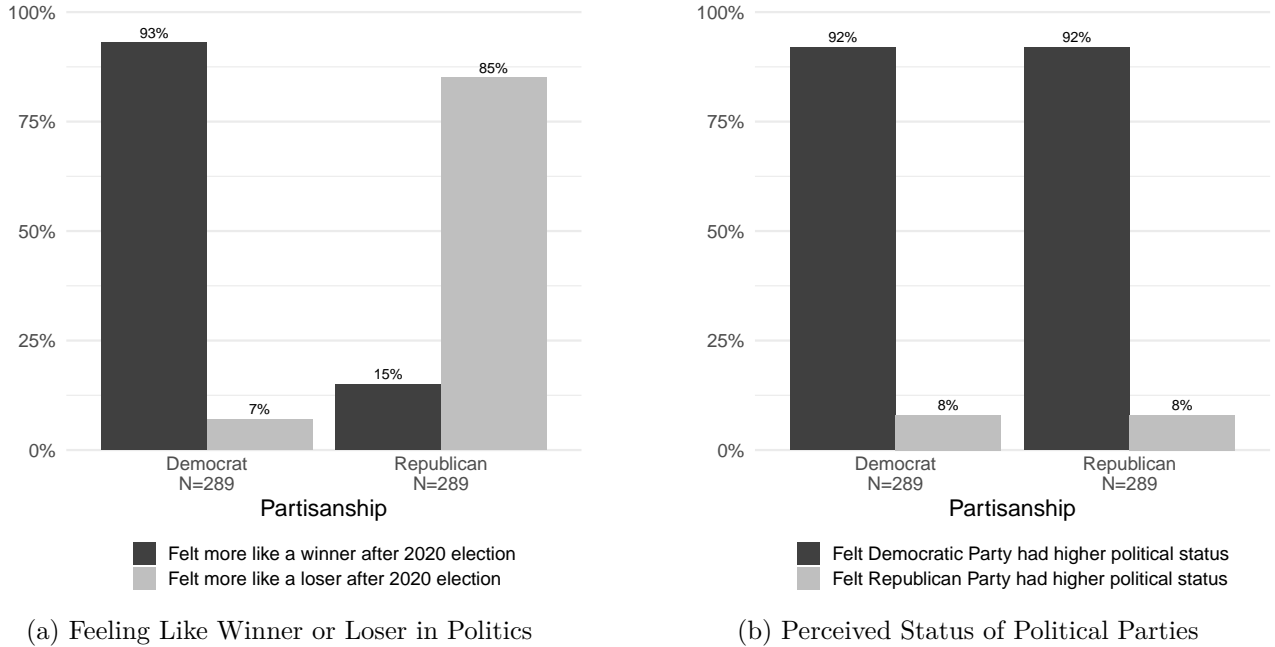
Finally, we measure perceptions of election integrity using a question from Pew Research Center (Pew Research Center 2020). Participants rated how well they thought the 2020 elections were run and administered. The scale ranged from 0 (not well at all) to 3 (very well).

For our exploratory analysis, we measured support for democratic values using the average response to a seven item battery administered by Wolak (2020). The scale ranged from 0 (strong disagreement) to 4 (strong agreement) for each value. This battery was only asked post-treatment.

2.5 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 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.

Figure 1: Perceptions of Partisan Group Threat



Note: Pre-treatment perceptions of threat amongst experimental sample.

To be powered to detect this interaction, we preregistered analyzing 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.⁶ Appendix G and our preregistration discuss our power analysis.

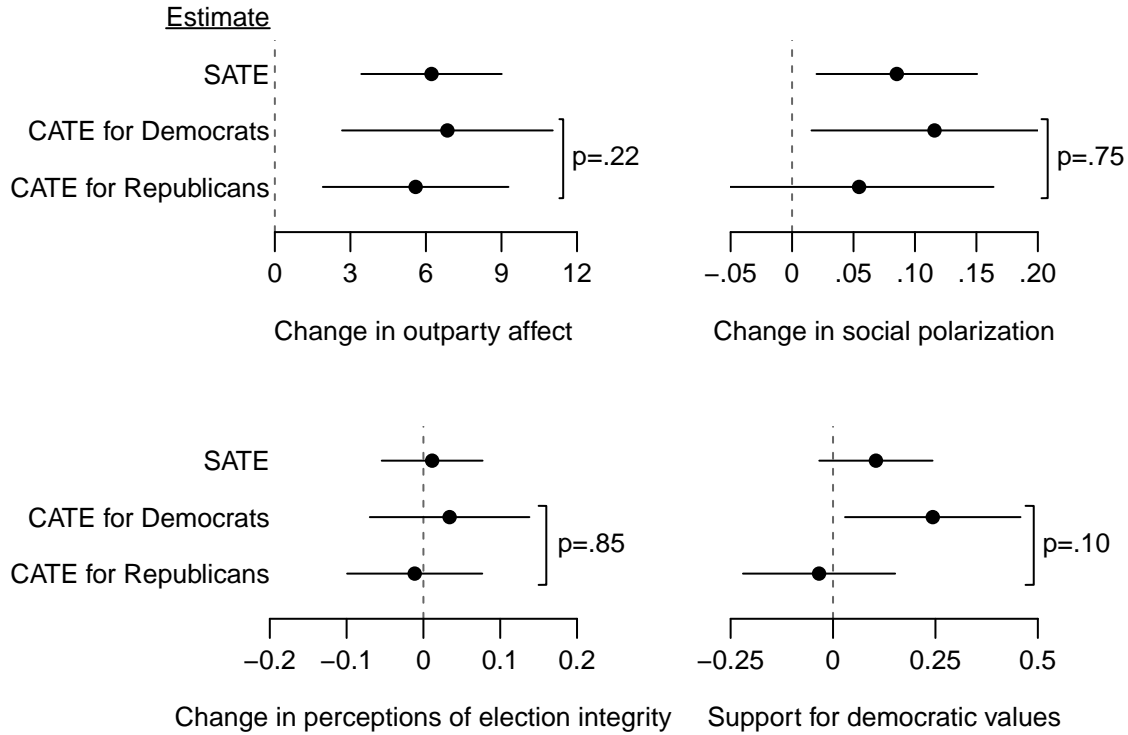
2.6 Threat Manipulation Checks

Our main analyses examine heterogeneous treatment effects of conversation by partisanship, which assumes that partisanship is a good operationalization of group threat. We validate this assumption using two pre-treatment survey items as "manipulation checks."

First, we asked respondents if they felt more like a "winner" or more like a "loser" in politics at the time. Using our experimental sample, Figure 1a shows that 85% of Republicans reported feeling more like a "loser" and 93% of Democrats reported feeling more like a "winner," providing evidence that the election affected partisans as we expected. Second, we asked participants about their perception of the parties' political status. Figure 1b shows that an equal percentage (92%) of

⁶Appendix C shows this sample achieves balance on all but one pre-treatment covariate.

Figure 2: Treatment Effects of Cross-Partisan Conversation



Note: Figure displays estimates of the sample average treatment effect (SATE) and conditional average treatment effects (CATEs) by partisanship. Treatment effects are estimated with blocked fixed effects to reflect the design’s randomization of treatment and HC2 robust standard errors clustered at the partnership level for individuals assigned to the conversation condition.

Republicans and Democrats felt that Democrats had a higher political status at the time of the survey. These analyses provide evidence that respondents reacted to the election as we expected. We test our main hypotheses with these operationalizations of threat and find consistent results (See Appendix H).

3 Results

3.1 Conversations Reduce Affective and Social Polarization

We test Hypotheses 1 and 2 by examining the sample average treatment effects for our polarization outcomes, displayed in the top row of Figure 2. Appendix K shows results in table form. We find that cross-partisan conversation caused a 6.22 point increase in outparty affect, relative to no contact ($p < .05$, Cohen’s $d = .55$), therefore supporting Hypothesis 1. 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 Hypothesis 2. Even under conditions that should make it difficult for cross-partisan conversation to reduce outparty animosity, we observe that it does indeed reduce affective and social polarization on average.⁷

3.2 No Evidence of Effects on Democratic Values

Next, the bottom row of Figure 2 shows we find no evidence to support Hypothesis 3; we fail to find a sample average treatment effect of conversation on perceptions of election integrity. Similarly, in our exploratory analysis, we do not find evidence that cross-partisan conversation increases democratic values on average in our sample. 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).

3.3 No Evidence of Heterogeneous Treatment Effects by Partisanship

At the core of our inquiry is whether cross-partisan conversations affected partisans differently. Figure 2 reports p -values for heterogeneous treatment effects for each outcome. We fail to reject the null for each, therefore we find no support for Hypotheses 4-6 or our exploratory analysis on support for democratic values.⁸

3.4 Durability

The treatment effect of cross-partisan conversation is robust. We surveyed respondents three days after their conversation or short essay and repeated the outparty affect measure. The treatment effect remains statistically significant. Cross-partisan conversations caused a 4.5 degree increase ($p < .05$, Cohen’s $d = .24$) in outparty affect three days later.⁹

⁷Appendix I presents pre-registered exploratory mechanism checks. We assess the transcript and short essay text and find that both more engagement and positive engagement are correlated with increased outparty affect.

⁸While Figure 2 shows conversation causes Democrats to decrease social polarization and increase support for democratic values, we caution readers from interpreting this as evidence supporting our hypotheses of heterogeneous effects which can only be assessed by looking at the *difference* between treatment effects amongst Democrats and Republicans.

⁹Appendix J presents full model results. Appendix B shows that attrition was largely random.

4 Discussion

In this letter, we examined whether cross-partisan conversations can reduce outparty animosity, even in the presence of partisan group threat. Pushing beyond previous cross-partisan conversation research that is tested under politically bland and congenial conditions, we amplified perceptions of threat by asking partisans to discuss the 2020 election outcome with the other side immediately after inauguration of President Biden. Even under these conditions that could have pushed participants into their partisan corners, we found that cross-partisan conversation improved outparty affect for at least three days, reduced social polarization, but did not affect perceptions of election integrity or support for democratic values. In contrast to our expectations, we also lack evidence that cross-partisan conversation differentially affected partisans.

Our results should be interpreted in light of some limitations. First, our study relied on an opt-in sample recruited from Mechanical Turk, which is not representative of U.S. adults. Second, our treatment effects could be exaggerated due to demand effects. We discount demand effects because our treatment effects persist for at least three days, and recent work shows MTurk respondents are unlikely to adjust behavior in light of researcher expectations (Mummolo and Peterson 2019).

Third, from an external validity standpoint, we view the biggest weakness of our experiment as the forced-exposure design. Many people prefer to avoid political discussions (Carlson and Settle 2022), especially with outpartisans (Settle and Carlson 2019), or avoid politics altogether (Klar and Krupnikov 2016). Our design made these choices for participants. We do not find that willingness to have cross-partisan conversation moderates the effect of conversation (see Appendix L); however, given the important influence selection has on political behavior (De Benedictis-Kessner et al. 2019), we encourage consideration of self-selection in future studies.

5 Conclusion

Altogether, we make three contributions in this letter. First, we find robust, durable evidence that cross-partisan conversation is a powerful tool to improve outparty affect, even during one of the most contentious times in modern American politics, and regardless of unique experiences of partisan group threat. Our results join previous work on the importance of interacting across the aisle to increase political tolerance (Mutz 2006; Warner and Villamil 2017; Levendusky and Stecula 2021;

Rossiter 2022), adding reassurance that both partisans in a conversation can become more tolerant, despite any imbalances in perceptions of threat.

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, such as members of politically disadvantaged or marginalized groups (e.g. Karpowitz, Mendelberg and Shaker 2012).

Third, we fail to find strong evidence that cross-partisan conversation affects downstream outcomes like perceptions of election integrity and democratic values. However, we do find robust results that conversation increases respondents' willingness to have future cross-partisan conversations, even about contentious issues (see Appendix M). 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.

In sum, our results emphasize the power of cross-partisan conversation to reduce outparty animosity, even in the face of partisan group threat. We rely on theories of intergroup threat, partisanship, and intergroup contact to expect threat to moderate the effect of cross-partisan conversation on outparty animosity, making our null heterogeneous treatment effects important to several literatures. Perhaps theories of group threat are incomplete, or more likely, cross-partisan conversation is capable of muting the effects of threat.

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