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## Essay 2: Final Project Proposal

### Introduction

Political polarization in America is worse today than it has ever been before. Demographic characteristics – who we are, where we live, how we identify – predict our political beliefs more than they ever did before, so we are likely to be part of in-person communities who mostly believe the same things as us. At the same time, online content algorithms increasingly target specific content to individuals, ensuring that we see mostly content that we are prone to agree with (and only the most dramatic or inflammatory content that we don't agree with). A two-party political system with checks and balances requires that people with opposing views can work together for the good of the union, and increased political polarization prevents people from doing that.

With this motivation, I propose that a group conduct an experiment to answer the following question: Does experiencing empathy for a political opponent make us more open to their political views? The underlying assumption in this question is that individuals' views towards the political beliefs of their opponents can be impacted by their view of those opponents in realms that aren't explicitly political. If that assumption holds, then it seems possible that pairing non-political, empathy-engaging content about an author with political content could make a reader with opposing beliefs view that author with more goodwill; that's precisely what this experiment will test.

### Theoretical Framework

Empathy is a crucial theoretical concept for this experiment, as we must

- 1) design a treatment to induce empathy, and
- 2) determine an appropriate measure of the subjects' empathy towards the author.

In order to do this, we should consider the relationship between empathy and related concepts. According to [Greater Good magazine](#), empathy has different definitions, but can generally be separated into affective empathy, which deals with a variety of responses to seeing others' emotions, and cognitive empathy, which deals with "perspective taking" and the identification and understanding of others' emotions. Many survey methods for measuring empathy focus on subjects' general proclivity to empathy. The most relevant studies in the literature, relative to the study we're interested in, use measures designed to capture "situational empathy," or the experience of empathy in a particular situation, usually triggered by an experiment treatment. Empathy is also deeply intertwined with sympathy, which is characterized by feeling sorry for someone.

For the purposes of this experiment, we're not particularly concerned with unpacking different definitions of empathy. Our main question is fundamentally whether we can create an

intervention that triggers greater goodwill towards a political opponent, which we suspect is tied to our ability to understand their perspective and view them as acting in good faith, even if we disagree with them politically.

### Recruiting Subjects

When recruiting subjects, the experimenters should aim to get a sample of individuals whose political beliefs are all across the political spectrum. For this reason, it would be best to do targeted advertising for subjects on Facebook or other social media sites, taking advantage of those sites' identification of users' likely political beliefs. Relying on experimenters' personal networks to recruit subjects would be an especially poor tactic for this particular study, as social networks tend to be made up of people who share and reinforce similar political beliefs. Some type of financial incentive would be useful for appealing to potential subjects in the ads, like a small stipend or an entry into a raffle for a gift card.

Once a subject enrolls in the study, he or she will fill out a pre-survey which is used to identify the key covariates that will be used for blocking and for treatment selection, as well as other covariates that might be useful. Since the experiment involves exposing subjects to content that contradicts their own political views, it is important to know up front how they self-identify politically. A 5-point scale should be used to gauge political leanings, asking participants to choose whether, based on their political beliefs, they identify as strongly Democrat, somewhat Democrat, neither Democrat nor Republican, somewhat Republican, or strongly Republican. Survey respondents who identify as "neither Democrat nor Republican" will not be enrolled as experiment subjects, as the experiment assumes that subjects have at least some identification with a particular political leaning.

In both the treatment and control groups, a subject's party leaning will determine which set of content they receive. The subjects' political leanings will also be used for blocking the participants. Potential outcomes on questions of empathy to a political opponent could very likely be correlated with whether a person identifies as Democrat or Republican, as well as with whether they identify as strongly or somewhat allied with either party. For that reason, the subjects who choose a particular option on the five-point scale (for instance, the "somewhat Republican" respondents) should be treated as a block and completely randomized within that block, ensuring that the treatment and control groups each get an approximately even numbers of subjects of each political leaning and intensity. In this pre-survey, we would also collect information about additional covariates that are likely tied to political beliefs, such as gender, age, race/ethnicity, and location category (rural/suburban/urban, etc.).

### Treatment and Control Groups

Subjects will be divided into treatment groups A and B, and control groups C and D, and provided with their treatments as a survey a couple weeks after the initial pre-survey. In all groups, subjects will be given an article that argues for a partisan policy associated with the party the subject does not support. There will be one article for the subjects who lean Democrat, and a different article for the subjects who lean Republican.

Each group will also see some type of paired content, which will differ between the treatment and control groups. The treatment groups will see non-political social media content by the author of the article which relates to experiences that portray them in a positive, empathy-inducing light. Ideal posts would highlight challenging experiences in their lives, like battling a serious illness, losing a loved one, or getting through a period of financial instability. A sentence or two of context will be provided before each piece of content, explaining that the article and the social media content are by the same author. The control groups will see similar paired content (perhaps the exact same content), but with different context: they will be told that the social media posts are from members of their community. The separate treatment vs control groups would allow for variations in the ordering of the content pairs – treatment group A and control group C would see the article, then the paired content, whereas treatment group B and control group D would see the paired content, then the article. The variations will allow us to understand if there are differences in the potential outcome based on the ordering of the content, but if our number of subjects ends up being too small, we can combine them into a single treatment group and a single control group (or treat them separately, but analyze them together) to strengthen the power of our analysis.

### Outcome Measures

The outcome measures will come from a second phase of the survey, administered immediately after exposing the subjects to the content. The key observation will be a question or set of 2-3 questions measuring the subject's empathy towards the author. The questions will use a 5-point Likert scale and ask subjects to rate their level of agreement with statements about the author and their viewpoint. The key outcome statements will get at cognitive empathy towards the author's political perspective ("I understand where he or she is coming from") and feelings of goodwill towards the author ("I view him or her positively"). The character scale from James C. McCroskey's *Scales for the Measurement of Ethos* provides some good statements that could be used, with slight modification as secondary outcome variables: relevant examples include "the speaker is an honorable person" and "I would like to have the speaker as a personal friend." More work should be done to elaborate a good set of statements to measure. It should be a short set of statements, to avoid the perception of the experimenters fishing for some value that could just be different by chance; 3-5 total statements would be appropriate. The experiment designers should consult reputable surveys about empathy to get inspiration for the phrasing of the outcome questions.

In analyzing the results of this experiment, we will be able to look at overall treatment effect estimates between the treatment and control groups, but also at the varying effects between the blocks, as well as the varying effects between the groups who saw their paired content before or after their articles.

### Potential Pitfalls

The selection of the content pairs is crucial to the efficacy of this study, and the two sets of partisan content pairs being mismatched represents the greatest threat to the experiments'

results. The articles should be balanced, as much as possible, in terms of the quality of their argumentation and their overall tone, and should be representing opposing views on the same issue. The paired content should be similar as well, if not the exact same (just with different contextual framing). It would be best for the content pairs to come from lesser-known authors who the subjects are not likely to be familiar with prior to participating in the experiment. It might be worthwhile to invent all or part of the content in order to meet this criteria.