How does visual information influence social interactions?

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ABSTRACT Though political deliberation benefits those often excluded from politics, many individuals avoid such situations in an age of hyper-partisanship and affective polarization. Existing literature on this topic argue that individuals often seek to avoid uncomfortable situations that are caused by disagreement about politics. The outcomes of such motivations are often thought to increase affective polarization and to have negative participatory impacts for those who are often excluded or feel unwelcome in politics. Much of this work assumes that people know the partisanship of potential discussion partners and avoid those who are known to be out-partisans. For those that are strangers, we often can rely on cultural stereotypes of the other party to help us assume the partisanship of this potential discussion partner. This project argues that even more simple visual information can and is used by individuals to decide whether or not to engage in a discussion with another and can shape the outcomes of a conversation. It lays out a cognitive mechanism explaining how individuals make decisions to engage in a conversation and the limits by which deliberation may buffer political polarization.

Introduction

Do politically-relevant colors predict political behavior? The existing literature in political science demonstrates that social groups, and particularly partisanship, motivate vast amounts of political behavior. One primary way that this manifests is the degree to which we interact with those in our group versus outside of our group. Rooted in classic social identity theory, the argument is that we have these tendencies out of a motivation to defend our pre-existing beliefs (Kunda 1990; Jost, Baldassarri, and Druckman 2022). Evidence of this occurring manifests in a number of political (see Iyengar and Westwood 2015) and even non-political contexts (Nicholson et al. 2016).

One critical way that this tendency to avoid views we disagree with manifests is through whom we choose to have conversations with. Political deliberation is often considered to be a central component of political behavior in American democracy (Huckfeldt 2007). It is often thought to encourage many different forms of participation in politics (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995; Klofstad 2007), increase one's levels of political knowledge (McClurg 2003) and to buffer the animosity toward out-partisans (Levendusky and Stecula 2021). Despite its benefits, there are a number of limitations. First, many of our networks for whom we talk to regularly are constructed of close friends and family and we are often reluctant to harm those relationships through disagreement (Mutz 2002, 2006). Second, even outside of our family and close friends, our networks are quite politically homogenous (Huckfeldt and Sprague 1987; Butters and Hare 2022). Third, evidence suggests that even if are offered information from other political perspectives, we either do not try to integrate it with our prior beliefs (Kunda 1990; Lodge and Taber 2013) or the benefits of such information do not last very long (Levendusky and Stecula 2021).

We do not always enter a political conversation having complete information, however. If we have conversations, that may start out about politics or evolve into it, with those that we have limited information on about their political views, we do not know whether to avoid having a political conversation. At least that is a common assumption underlying the more optimistic perspectives on our capacity to buffer polarization. There are some that have begun to suggest that we can rely on visual information about others to guess what their political beliefs are before we initiate a conversation. For example, Carlson and Settle (2022) argue that we can use the clothing of others to make an informed guess about the partisanship of a potential discussion partner. For example, it would probably be reasonable to assume that someone wearing a Patagonia jacket would be a Democrat and someone wearing a Carhart jacket would be Republican. Just these assumptions based on the appearance of another person can lead someone to avoid a potential political conversation with others (Carlson and Settle 2022).

I argue that the visual information required to encourage such behavior need not necessarily be that complex. Colors convey significant amounts of information. Visual information such as color is among the fastest types of information that humans process (see Ames, Fiske, and Todorov 2012). Colors in particular are deeply embedded into a number of schemas that organize our previous experi-

ences which enable the processing and reacting to new information (see Cimbalo, Beck, and Sendziak 1978). Colors not only have strong associations with our affective state (see Mehta and Zhu 2009; Elliot and Maier 2012), but they also convey significant amounts of information about social groups (Pietraszewski et al. 2015).

I argue that politically-relevant colors, red and blue, are important informational cues that individuals can rely upon to evaluate others and their ideological positions when politics is salient to them. The implication of this argument is that when individuals make such connections, we can predict behavioral motivations and outcomes depending on one's valanced associations with those colors in a political context. This project elaborates on how this occurs and then uses experimental data to test my argument.

How colors convey membership to social groups

How the connection to social group membership motivates political behavior

Empirical evidence

Data

Methods

Results

Discussion

For many folks, participating more in politics and buffering affective polarization share one requirement in common: talking to others (**brady_et-al_1995**; see Levendusky and Stecula 2021). While this sounds like a relatively simple fix for an era of American politics seeing more hyper-polarization (Iyengar and Westwood 2015) and more efforts to disenfranchise large groups of voters (**grumbach_2022_oup**), organic political deliberation can be relatively hard to come by for the folks that may benefit from it the most (see Mutz 2006).

The existing literature suggests that those generally averse to and excluded from politics or those averse to particular political viewpoints are much less likely to participate in deliberative politics. Political participation, in all of its forms often requires some material or opportunity cost (**aldrich_1993**; **brady_et-al_1995**). As participation is quite costly, those often ignored in politics are less likely to participate (**fraga_2018**). Further, the cost of potentially ruining a close relationships or experiencing the deeply uncomfortable feeling of disagreement in viewpoints often encourages fewer conversations with non-partisans (Mutz 2006; Carlson and Settle 2022).

The literature is clearer on how organic political deliberation is less likely for those averse to and excluded from politics. Children are often taught that those who are not a middle-class or wealthy white man are an "aberration" or are

a "trailblazer" in politics [TIMES FOR KIDS PAPER]. Many state legislatures actively target these populations when writing laws that supress voter turnout from those who do not identify as white and male (**grumbach__2022__oup**). What remains less clear is how individuals identify potential discussions as being potentially containing varied political viewpoints that lead to disagreement.

This project discusses one possible mechanism that explains how individuals make assumptions about the partisan affiliation of a potential discussion partner they have no prior information on. This project argues that politically-relevant colors – such as red and blue – can convey important information about the political viewpoints of others when one is making the fast choice to spark a conversation with someone they do not know. Cognitive schemas enable individuals to connect seemingly innocuous visual information about an individual to their political orientations. As a result of this snap-judgment, individuals predict whether there will be disagreement in a conversation and can choose whether to avoid or engage in the conversation. Furthermore, this project argues how this information inhibits the potential buffering effects of deliberation on polarization.

Deliberation's benefits if we can overcome its challenges

While evidence suggests that cross-partisan conversations *can* occur due to our limited capacities to exclude out-partisans from our lives (Huckfeldt, Morehouse Mendez, and Osborn 2004), it is relatively common for individuals to avoid political discussions with those we disagree with (Mutz 2006; see Huckfeldt 2007; Huckfeldt and Sprague 1987). Furthermore, conversations about politics can generate an invite for those low in political efficacy and are relatively unlikely to participate in politics; which once invited, often spurs higher rates of participation (**brady__et-al__1995**; **mcclurg__2003**; **klofstad__2007**).

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