**Pre-Work - Brief Topic Description**

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**1) What is your topic?**

* My topic revolves around researching the question of how voters at opposite ends of the political spectrum connect with other people's beliefs. A recent Yahoo News/YouGov poll indicates that 26% of Democrats and 24% of Republicans say they have had a friendship or family relationship end because of a disagreement over politics. This topic can yield answers on how we calm political hostilities in America, and best reach people who hold diametrically opposing viewpoints.

**2) What intrigues you about this topic? And why?**

* Political strife has caused division within friendships, communities, houses of worship, and even families. I want to explore the effective strategies for *how* to connect with individuals who harbor vastly different political beliefs, while also exploring *what* these individuals need in order to be open to such a discussion. I believe the applications of these research findings can include helping Democrats win elections, while also aiding people across the nation in re-connecting with loved ones and restoring more civility to our political discourse.

**3) What intrigues you about this topic? And why?**

* I’m intrigued by this topic because I believe political division is an existential threat to our nation’s democracy. I host a political talk show every day where I hold space for Republicans and Democrats to both share their beliefs, and so many people have expressed their heartfelt appreciation for this format as it’s so rare to find. What has stuck out to me the most in the past months is when I had a young caller who asked me for the best strategies to re-build a bridge with his father, a MAGA Republican, whom he had a strained relationship with over political differences. I gave him the best advice I could, including listening with empathy, showing respect and deference, and keeping a calm and patient tone. He called in the next day and told me, with tears in his eyes, that this worked - and he and his father were having lunch the next week. This moved me deeply. and I want to go deeper here, working to find new strategies to make stories like this one more common across the nation.

**4) What work, if any, have you already done on this topic?**

* I am interested in this topic and I’m starting my research from scratch. I held a brainstorming session with Jerry and was sharing my concerns about the future of American democracy, and I’m hoping this topic can help heal our nation. If we as Americans don’t even *talk* to those with whom we disagree, we will never be able to *reconcile* our political differences to move progress forward.

**5) What do you hope to gain personally and professionally by studying this topic?**

* I have served in elected office since I’m 18 years old, and I’m committed to continuing to influence public life - this time outside of elected office. I want to make a positive difference for our country, and I believe this is a strong way I can pursue this goal. Moreover, I want to learn the best strategies to bridge this gap so I can take these research findings across the nation and help mend fences in our communities. Lastly, I believe that many people will be interested in my research findings, and I hope that these answers will glean interest from America’s top political programs.

**6) What biases and assumptions do you bring with you that relate to this topic?**

* First, my clear and evident bias stems from my political affiliation: I am a proud Democrat, and not a Republican. I’ve never voted for Donald Trump, and believe many ultra-conservatives who support Trump are currently threatening our democracy. And secondly, I am personally biased in my own understanding of what *works* and what *doesn’t* from my experience on my talk show in this arena. In terms of my assumptions, I first assume from my experience serving in elected office that the most pressing research issue will be figuring out how Democrats can best reach MAGA Republicans, as opposed to vice versa. And secondly, I assume that more MAGA Republicans would openly identify as having hostility to Democrats, and express a potential unwillingness to communicate with those on the opposite political spectrum.

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* AI shared that there is an existing wealth of information where the literature is strongest on this topic. I was first advised to explore the topic of Affective Polarization, which looks at the topics of partisan *distrust* and how there is an increasing level of hostility between partisans that expands *beyond* just basic policy disagreements. In terms of what’s referred to as Contact Theory, AI suggested I look into research which has found intergroup contact - or the direct contact *between* Republicans and Democrats - has actually *reduced* prejudice, and observed voters actually adapt their political psychology. Next, AI discussed the existence of research on Political Deliberation, where scholars have studied *cross-ideological discourse,* and best practices of speaking to those across the aisle. And in terms of contemporary topics, AI spoke about the need to research Echo Chambers & Social Media, looking at existing literature about how these new online platforms have *exacerbated* the political separation of those who disagree.
* AI also identified multiple gaps within the existing research, which makes this topic both important and research-worthy. First, AI identified a gap regarding “Empirical Models for Reconnection”, suggesting that there are fewer available studies which center around the concept of *reconciliation* in our personal lives, specifically in everyday settings like in our families and at work. Secondly, there is an existing research gap in terms of the differences of *partisan outreach* strategy*,* where more research is needed on *how* these different groups approach topics like building trust among one another, and finding ideological common ground. Lastly, AI suggested I look at the role of identity and emotion, sharing that while major focus has already been paid to cognition or attitude change, there is less research on the concepts of “emotional repair, shame, pride, and belonging”.