Interacting as Equals: How Contact Can Promote Tolerance Among Opposing Partisans

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Abstract

In many contemporary democracies, political polarization increasingly involves deep-seated intolerance of opposing partisans. The decades-old contact hypothesis suggests that cross-partisan interactions might reduce intolerance if individuals interact with equal social status. We test this idea by implementing collaborative contact between over one thousand pairs of citizens with opposing political sympathies, using the online medium to credibly randomize participants' relative social status within the interaction. Interacting as equals enhanced tolerant behaviors towards political opponents three weeks after contact, compared to interacting under conditions of inequality or to not interacting. These results demonstrate that a simple, scalable intervention that puts people on equal footing can reduce political polarization and make online contact into a prosocial force.

Introduction

In recent years, many countries have experienced partisan polarization severe enough to undermine trust in institutions and threaten the stability of democracy (Carlin and Love, 2018; Iyengar et al., 2019; Finkel et al., 2020; Baldassarri and Page, 2021). In such environments, political cleavages can align with preexisting social status differences, decreasing cross-partisan interaction and exacerbating mutual intolerance (Mason, 2018). Could creating opportunities for people from opposing political camps to interact under conditions of equal status increase tolerance?

We test this idea by inducing cross-partisan contact while experimentally varying participants' social status within the contact situation. Social standing is central to the contact hypothesis from social psychology, which suggests that intergroup collaboration under conditions that endow participants with equal status can lastingly reduce intolerance (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew and Tropp, 2008; Enos, 2014). Yet the hypothesized role of status equality within the contact interaction lacks experimental validation, and observational research has yielded mixed findings (Pettigrew and Tropp, 2006; Paluck, Green and Green, 2019; Paluck et al., 2021).

Within a highly polarized environment, we bring together pairs of citizens with opposing partisan sympathies to collaborate on non-political tasks for ten minutes. We manipulate the participants' relative status within the interaction by having their work on these tasks count either equally or unequally towards pair-level rewards.[1] Staging intergroup contact online allows us to cleanly manipulate relative social status in the interaction because we can suppress cues that would be readily perceived in person (Desmichel and Rucker, 2022).

Our main finding is that the experience of intergroup contact under conditions of status equality—but not under status inequality—enhances tolerant behavior towards opposing partisans three weeks after the interaction. Participants assigned to the equal-status condition were willing to share 14% more of their own cash points with an anonymous study participant of opposing partisanship in a dictator game, compared to those in the no-contact control group. Participants in the equal-status condition were also 5 pp more willing to accept an invitation to a future 30-minute meeting to discuss the country's problems with a group of people that they were told would include opposing partisans. A standardized index combining these two measures of tolerant behavior was .17 standard deviations greater under equal status contact compared to no contact and .13 standard deviations greater compared

[1]Social psychologists use similar rule-based manipulations of status to study social interactions.

to unequal contact. In fact, contact under unequal status did not improve tolerant behavior for either person in the pair compared to no contact. Analysis of chat content suggests that the overall quality of interactions was lower between participants assigned to the inequality condition in relation to the equal-status one. The effect of equal status contact proved robust to informing participants about their paired partners' real-world socioeconomic status.

Recent experimental research demonstrates that prolonged and intense contact between ethnic or religious groups, for instance in sports leagues, can lessen discriminatory behaviors (Scacco and Warren, 2018; Mousa, 2020; Bursztyn et al., 2021; Lowe, 2021). Shorter interventions have reduced some kinds of prejudice (Broockman and Kalla, 2016), yet those aimed at reducing partisan polarization have proven less effective (Dimant, 2021), and some even exacerbate political intolerance (Enos, 2014). These and related studies do not induce variation in participants' relative status while interacting (Paluck, Green and Green, 2019). In contrast, by manipulating the relative status of participants within the contact interaction, we credibly test a key element of the contact hypothesis. Our findings provide proof of concept of a scalable intervention that can make online contact—frequently associated with undesirable outcomes (Bail et al., 2018)—into a prosocial force.

Context. We fielded our experiment in contemporary Mexico. As in the United States, rising political polarization in Mexico (Moreno, 2020) looks less like traditional issue disagreements and more like deep-seated intolerance. Supporters and opponents of the current president, Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO), and his political party, Movimiento Nacional de Renovación Nacional (MORENA), are starkly divided over many political issues that coincide with sociodemographic cleavages, are segregated into distinct social networks (ITESO, 2019; Moreno, 2022), and frequently demonize each other in traditional and online media.

Methods

Research design and sample. Ours is among the largest experimental studies of intergroup contact to date From a survey panel of over 150,000 citizens in Mexico, we invited 3,120 individuals to join the study, in batches of several hundred, at specific dates and times. Upon connecting, they were asked a partisan-sympathy question that we used to form pairs of citizens with opposing leanings. We formed such pairs in the background while participants completed the remainder of a baseline survey. We then assigned pair-level treatments

randomly, using blocking to improve statistical power (see Supplementary Materials for details). Pairs within a block were randomly assigned to equal status during contact (E: 780 pairs), unequal status contact (U: 390 pairs with random assignment of pair members to Leader (U_L) or Follower (U_F)), or no-contact control (C: 390 pairs). To probe robustness of equal-status contact to information about real-world status differences, we exposed a random subset of pairs in the equal status condition E to information about their pair partner's socioeconomic status (E_S: 390 pairs). The remaining pairs were not exposed to such information (E_N : 390 pairs).

Our main analysis sample consists of the 2,454 individuals (79% of those invited to the study) that remained after dropping individuals and the pair partners of those who did not complete the study. Attrition is statistically indistinguishable across treatment arms assigned to contact (E_S, E_N, U_F, and U_L). Moreover, all experimental conditions including the no-contact control are well balanced on pre-treatment covariates including turning out to vote in the 2018 presidential election, political interest, party identification, age, sex, and SES among others (Supplementary Materials).[2]

Participants were asked to complete an endline survey directly after the intervention and a follow-up survey approximately three weeks later. Everyone received a participation fee upon completing the study. Additional incentives were provided within the study conditional on participant choices (see Supplementary Materials). All incentives were provided at the end of the study, no deception was used, and all protocols obtained IRB approval from UT Austin and ITAM in Mexico City. We preregistered the trial at the Social Science Registry.[3]

Pair-level intervention. After informing paired participants of their partner's partisanship (and, in the inequality condition, of whether they were to be Leader or Follower), we asked members of a pair to collaborate on two tasks. In the first task, participants were asked to decide whether Mexicans in general value friendship or professional success more highly. The second task asked participants to answer three trivia questions about popular culture. During the tasks, paired participants were invited to communicate with their partner via Chatter, a purpose-built chat application that maintains participants' anonymity. Each member of the pair entered responses to the tasks' questions individually. We informed participants that the answers they selected could qualify both members of the pair

[2]There is no differential attrition between equal vs. unequal status treatment arms. Attrition is slightly greater for participants assigned to the contact conditions compared to the no-contact control C (about 3% for E and 1% for U), but all treatment arms and the no-contact control are balanced on observables (Supplementary Materials).

[3]`https://www.socialscienceregistry.org/trials/8143`.

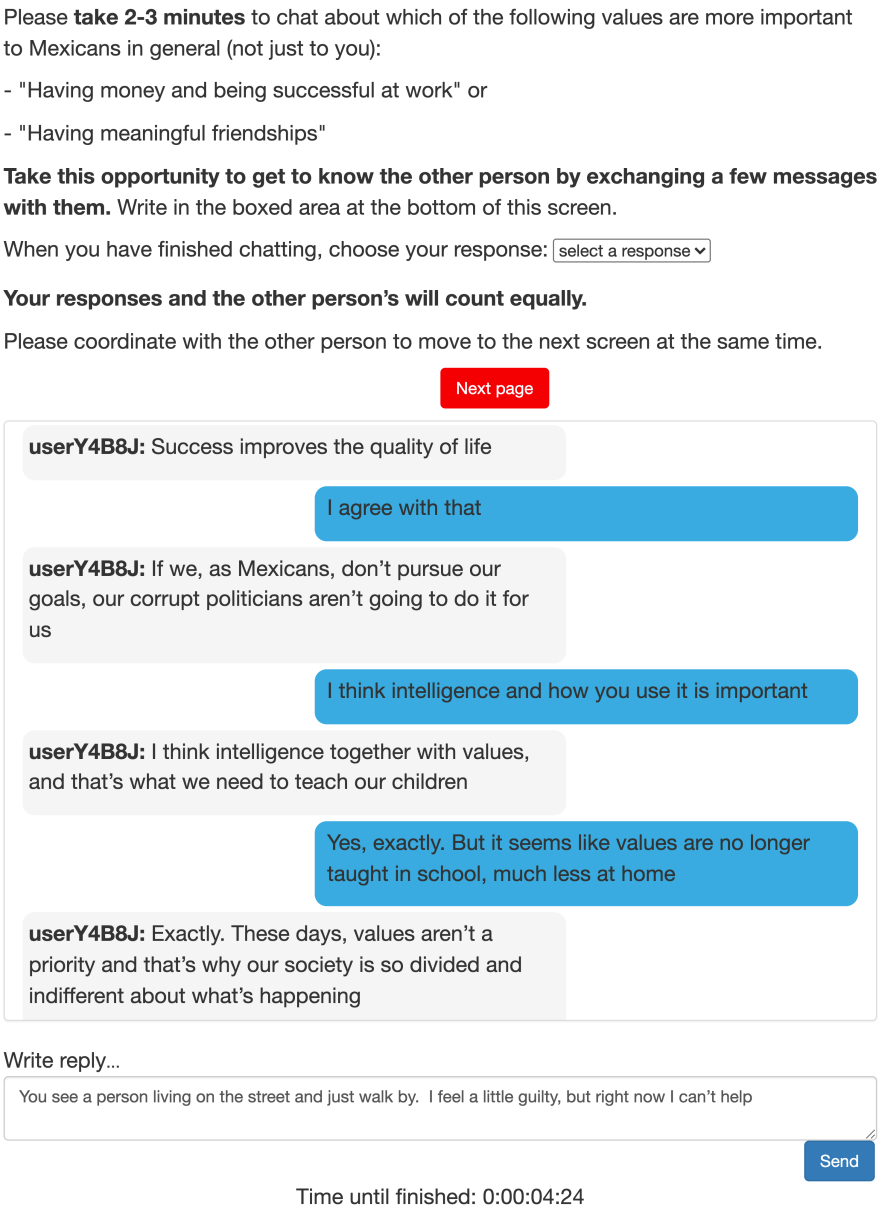
for rewards.

We manipulated status by informing participants how their individual answers to the tasks would be used to determine rewards for their pair. In the *equal status* treatment, one member of the pair would be selected by a fair coin toss, and her answers would be used to determine the pair's rewards. In the *unequal status* treatment, one member of the pair was randomly designated the 'Leader' and the other member the 'Follower' at the outset, and only the Leader's answers would count for determining rewards. Participants were informed that, in all cases, rewards would accrue equally to both members of a pair, regardless of the process used to determine these.[4]

Our intervention held constant the presence of common goals and the incentive to collaborate, both of which Allport hypothesized as contributing to the effectiveness of intergroup contact (Allport, 1954). Collaboration between pair members lasted ten minutes. Figure 1 shows screenshots of the first task and the first few messages of an associated chat between participants assigned to contact under status equality. Personal identifying information is never displayed. In the unequal-status condition, chat handles read "Leader" and "Follower."

[4]Individuals in the control condition completed the tasks individually, without interpersonal contact. Their rewards accrued individually.

Figure 1: Chatter interface: sample chat



Notes: This example pertains to the first task. Chat contents display part of a real conversation of a pair assigned to equal status. The instructions above the chat window were visible to participants during chat. Instructions and chat contents shown here were translated from Spanish by the authors.

Outcome variables. We measured tolerance using incentivized behaviors. *Sharing* was measured through a dictator game where participants could choose to donate cash points, exchangeable for goods at an online store, to an anonymous participant with opposing political sympathies. *Willingness to dialogue* was measured as the response to an invitation to take part in a future online meeting with other participants, which we indicated would include opposing partisans and last 30 minutes.

We selected these measures for three reasons. First, intolerant behaviors associated with political polarization are more dangerous to democratic life than affective or attitudinal polarization where much of the literature has focused (Iyengar et al., 2019; Finkel et al., 2020; Baldassarri and Page, 2021). Second, the specific behaviors we measure are vital to democracy. Democratic theorists view willingness to dialogue across partisan lines as key to problem solving and to elucidating a society's priorities (Habermas, 1991; Barber, 2003). And sharing with out-group members, for example via taxation and redistribution, implies that people perceive the interests of others as legitimate (Alesina and Giuliano, 2011). Finally, incentivized behaviors are less susceptible to social desirability biases and experimenter demand-effects than survey questions about attitudes because they make tolerant behavior costly (Bauer, Chytilová and Miguel, 2020). We aggregated the two measures into a simple additive index, standardized for expository ease (details in the Supplementary Materials).

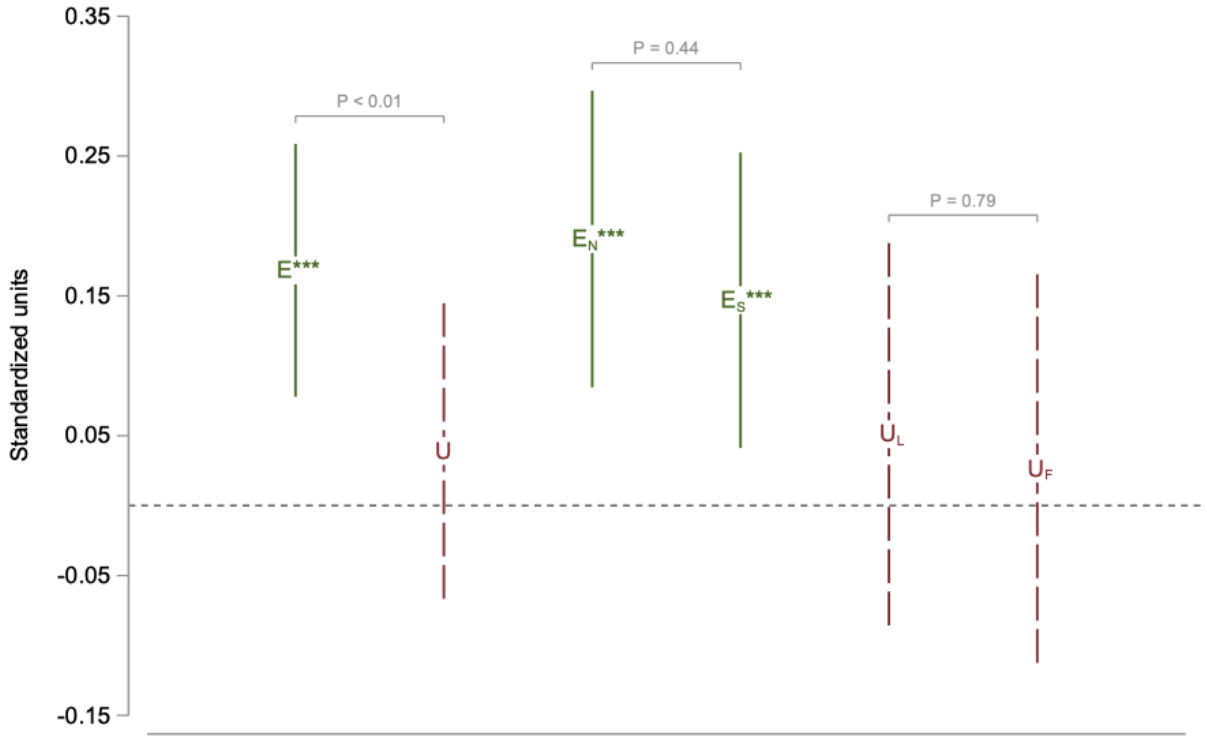
Results

Our evidence suggests that participants were attentive to the experience of interpersonal contact. Three weeks after treatment, 87% of participants assigned to a contact condition recalled having chatted; only 9% of those assigned to the no-contact control reported (erroneously) having chatted. In addition, consistent with their experimental assignment, Followers used fewer words in the chat and expressed lower levels of trust and positive feelings than either Leaders or those assigned to equal status (Supplementary Materials).

Figure 2 displays intent-to-treat effects three weeks after treatment. The figure shows that assignment to inter-group contact under equal status increased the tolerant behavior index by 0.17 standard deviations compared to no contact (first estimate from the left, $p < .01$), and .13 sd ($p < .01$) compared to assignment to contact under unequal status (second estimate from the left). Assignment to contact under unequal status did not affect tolerant behaviors in comparison with the no-contact control (0.04 sd, $p = .21$). In fact, tolerant behavior did not improve for either Leaders or Followers in the unequal status

condition (Figure 2, rightmost estimates).

Figure 2: Index of Tolerant Behavior Three Weeks After Contact



Note: Point estimates of intent-to-treat effects are represented by treatment assignment indicators: E=equal status, U=unequal status, E_N=equal status without revealing SES, E_S=equal status with SES revealed, U_L=unequal status, assigned as Leader, U_F=unequal status, assigned as Follower. Bars represent 95% confidence intervals. Standardized units imply that effect magnitudes multiplied by 100 correspond to percentage-point changes in comparison with assignment to the no-contact control condition. P-values correspond to difference-of-means tests between adjacent estimates. Stars denote the statistical significance of tests of coefficient equality between assignment to the corresponding treatment arm vs. to no contact (C). $^{***}p < .01$; $^{**}p < .05$; $^{*}p < .1$.

Participants in equal-status contact experienced higher quality interactions with opposing partisans. Phrases expressing agreement (such as "you are right," "yes," and "I agree") were 10% more common under equal vs. unequal-status assignment ($p = .06$), and the number of words in chat was more evenly distributed across members of a pair assigned to equal status, compared to unequal status ($p = .07$).[5]

The literature on the contact hypothesis in social psychology has suggested three major categories of mechanisms through which high-quality contact might increase tolerance: learning that the outgroup is more similar to the ingroup than one thought, reduced anxiety about the outgroup, and perspective taking or empathy (Pettigrew and Tropp, 2008). Inconsistent with the learning mechanism, we detected no difference in perceptions about commonalty of values with the outgroup nor in beliefs about outgroup honesty or intelligence across the equal- vs. unequal-status treatment arms. Our findings, however, are consistent with the latter two mechanisms. While estimates are imprecise, participants assigned to equality found it more palatable to imagine chatting with an out-party stranger while waiting in line for a routine task (anxiety reduction), and reported being better able to understand why somebody might choose to vote for the out-party (empathy or perspective taking). Consistent with both anxiety reduction and perspective taking, respondent's opinions of a typical outparty voter became more negative among those assigned to unequal status ($p = .1$).

We probed the robustness of our main findings by revealing the real-world socioeconomic status of partner pairs—one of the personal attributes we muted by staging the research online—to a random subset of pairs assigned to equal-status contact.[6] Because socioeconomic status and partisan preferences tend to be aligned (Przeworski, 2019), information about real-world SES could reinforce partisan animus, undercutting the effectiveness of experimentally assigned status equality. The salutary effect of equal status contact, however, proved robust to the revelation of a pair partners' SES information (Figure 2) (the effects of E_N and E_S, compared to C, are statistically indistinguishable). The effect of equal-status assignment

[5]Like other studies of intergroup contact (Paluck, Green and Green, 2019; Scacco and Warren, 2018; Mousa, 2020; Lowe, 2021), we find positive effects on tolerant behavior without consistent change in related attitudes. In our study, warmth of feeling towards outparty sympathizers (a common measure of affective polarization in the literature) decreased at followup for those assigned to unequal contact, but registered no statistically detectable change for those assigned to equal contact, compared to no contact. This pattern is consistent with research in psychology that finds that attitudes are frequently inaccurate predictors of behavior (Ajzen et al., 2018).

[6]We elicited SES information, prior to contact, by asking participants to choose, among five sets of images of house facades, kitchens, and bedrooms corresponding to different socioeconomic strata, those that best represented their own homes. Exposure to real-world SES information increased participants' ability to correctly predict their paired partner's SES by 18% ($p < .05$).

also did not change when separately examining individuals whose real-world SES was higher, equal, or lower than their partner's (Supplementary Materials).

Finally, we consider whether the difference in outcomes between the equal vs. unequal status conditions might be driven by the displeasure of participants assigned to be Followers. To study this possibility, we tested for differences between Leaders and Followers in willingness to complete the followup survey three weeks after treatment, as well as in dictator-game donations to outparty participants. Inconsistent with the displeasure alternative explanation, we find no differences in these variables, nor in willingness to complete the followup survey in the equality vs. inequality conditions.

Discussion

Intensifying partisan polarization in many countries is straining democracy's moorings. Sympathizers of opposing parties frequently self-sort into different neighborhoods, absorb news from different sources, and participate in different online social circles. When cross-partisan contact does occur, it is often brief and bitter, with intolerance exacerbated by social status differences. Nearly 200 years ago, Alexis de Tocqueville wrote that democracy thrives when citizens interact in the public square as equals (de Tocqueville, 2015). Our design put a modern version of de Tocqueville's idea—and a decades-old conjecture that is central to the contact hypothesis—to the test by experimentally manipulating status within the interaction.

As it turns out, relative status in the interaction plays a key role in moderating the effects of intergroup contact on political tolerance, consistent with Allport's conjecture (Allport, 1954). When we place people in a situation of status equality, tolerant behaviors rise meaningfully and durably because of interpersonal contact. Methodologically, our simple shift to studying online interaction eliminates status markers that are all but unavoidable during in-person contact and helps to provide a clean test of an intuitive hypothesis that lacked rigorous supporting evidence.

Our findings suggest practical ways of increasing mutual tolerance among opposing partisans. A version of intensive and costly in-person deliberation has recently been shown to improve cross-partisan understanding (Fishkin et al., 2021). We believe that online spaces for cross-partisan contact that put people on equal footing can generate prosocial and democracy-supporting behavior affordably and at large scale using a medium that is increasingly popular for political speech. Our results indicate that such spaces require only

mild curation: conversations need not be orchestrated around political topics nor do opposing partisans have to be steered away from disagreement. Even under severe political polarization, enhancing tolerance of out-groups is within reach.

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Data materials and availability: All data needed to evaluate the conclusions in the paper and the Supplementary Materials will be deposited in a public repository upon publication.

References in Supplementary Materials: Moore (2012); Santoro and Broockman (2022); Mohammad and Turney (2010, 2013); Lee (2009)