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A test of imagined contact as a means to improve cross-partisan feelings and reduce attribution of malevolence and acceptance of political violence

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ABSTRACT

In this study, we test the depolarizing potential of intrapersonal communication through imagined intergroup political contact. A randomized experiment was embedded into a quota-stratified online survey distributed to 583 U.S. adults drawn from an online panel proportioned to match the U.S. population. Structural equation modeling was used to test the direct, indirect, and conditional effects of imagined contact. We found that imagined contact with a political outgroup directly reduced negative affect toward the political outgroup regardless of the primed valence of the imagined interaction. Furthermore, we found that imagined contact indirectly reduced attribution of malevolence to the political outgroup as well as the acceptance of political violence. Implications for intergroup theory and political polarization are discussed.

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The 2016 presidential election featured a toxic political climate that fueled hostility and, at times, violence. Chants of “Lock Her Up!” and worse were regularly directed at Democratic nominee Hillary Clinton (Johnson, 2016), Clinton herself referred to half of Trump’s supporters as deplorable and irredeemable (Chozick, 2016), and threats of violence (Viser & Jan, 2016) and even revolution (Parker & Corasaniti, 2016) emerged from Trump’s supporters. The political animosity that surfaced during the 2016 election has been building for over a decade (Abramowitz, 2010; Iyengar, Sood, & Lelkes, 2012; Iyengar & Westwood, 2015). Hostility toward members of the political outgroup is corrosive to democratic culture because it devalues cross-partisan cooperation, rewards incivility, and can incite violence (Iyengar et al., 2012; Iyengar & Westwood, 2015; Levendusky, 2013; Sunstein, 2009). It is therefore no surprise that scholars have devoted considerable attention to the causes of political polarization. Affective polarization has been linked to partisan media use (Dvir-Gvirsman, 2014; Garrett et al., 2014; Levendusky, 2013; Stroud, 2010), campaign ads (Iyengar et al., 2012), and presidential debates (Cho & Ha, 2012; Warner & McKinney, 2013). Though the causes of affective polarization are therefore well documented, there is a paucity of research exploring the most troubling consequences and less that identifies potential solutions.

Research on the consequences of political polarization is relatively limited when compared to the rapidly maturing literature on its causes. Though Iyengar et al. (2012, 2015) have warned that a growing hostility toward the partisan outgroup could undermine governance and, in the worst case, result in violence, most empirical work has situated political polarization as the terminal outcome of analysis (e.g. Garrett et al., 2014; Stroud, 2010), thereby leaving the consequences of polarization to future research. The present study addresses this limitation by assessing the link between hostility toward the political outgroup and two normatively problematic attitudes: attribution of malevolence and acceptance of political violence. Furthermore, by bringing research about political polarization into further conversation with intergroup contact theory, this study is one of very few to identify a remedy to polarization.

Intergroup theory is emerging as a dominant framework to understand political behavior (cf. Achen & Bartles, 2016) and yet the intergroup literature has devoted substantially fewer pages to partisanship when compared to other identity categories. This is unfortunate because political identities are voluntary and therefore theoretically unique in the intergroup context. The present study extends intergroup contact theory by testing imagined contact as a mechanism to reduce inter-partisan hostility. This study further extends the intergroup literature by considering the effects of negative contact. Pettigrew and Tropp (2006) have identified this as a critical gap in the literature because, unlike experiments on intergroup contact, actual intergroup interactions are not overwhelmingly positive. Though some have tested the effects of negative contact (Barlow et al., 2012; Harwood et al., 2017; Joyce & Harwood, 2014; Paolini, Harwood, & Rubin, 2010; Paolini et al., 2014), the results are mixed, with one study finding that negative contact increased prejudice (Barlow et al., 2012), another finding that prejudice declined (Harwood et al., 2017), and third that showed no effect of negative contact (Joyce & Harwood, 2014). In the current study, we review relevant literature on polarization and intergroup contact before presenting an online experiment designed to test whether imagined contact can reduce hostility toward the political outgroup and, in so doing, reduce attribution of malevolence and acceptance of political violence.

An intergroup perspective on political polarization

The most enduring definition of partisanship is as an affective attachment to a social group (Campbell, Converse, Miller, & Donald, 1960). Though this definition places both affect and social identity at the forefront of partisanship, political polarization had primarily been discussed as an ideological phenomenon – that is, in terms of the division between extremely liberal and extremely conservative policy preferences (Fiorina, Abrams, & Pope, 2011). The extent to which the U.S. is ideologically polarized is the subject of scholarly debate (Abramowitz, 2010; Fiorina et al., 2011). However, Iyengar et al. (2012, 2015) have presented clear evidence of affective polarization in the U.S. In other words, the distance between how positively people feel toward the ingroup and how negatively they feel toward the outgroup is increasing. Affective polarization results when favorability toward the ingroup increases, when favorability toward the outgroup declines, or when both attitudes move in opposite directions. In the U.S., favorable attitudes toward the ingroup have remained stable over time; polarization has resulted from growing hostility toward the outgroup (Iyengar et al., 2012). To

understand why, scholars have turned to the social identity framework (e.g. Garrett et al., 2014; Iyengar et al., 2012; Levendusky, 2013).

According to the social identity framework (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), people naturally self-categorize into groups based on shared identity. Because people are inclined to view themselves favorably in comparison to others, the mere act of identifying with an ingroup often results in group polarization. This polarization has been demonstrated in numerous contexts (Hornsey, 2008). However, partisanship is unlike most intergroup contexts to which SIT has been applied (e.g. age, ethnicity, gender, and gender orientation) because it is voluntary. The only thing that makes a person partisan is that the person thinks of him/herself as belonging to a social group composed of people with a similar identification (Green, Palmquist, & Schickler, 2004). Despite the ease with which partisanship can be adopted or discarded, it functions as a stable social identity, not a temporary preference for a candidate or set of policies (Green et al., 2004).

The implications of the voluntary nature of partisan group identification are significant. Iyengar and Westwood (2015) argue that because the decision to adopt a partisan identity is optional, people are more likely to blame others for their partisanship. They found that implicit polarization based on partisanship was stronger than implicit polarization based on racial identity and that people were more willing to discriminate against members of a partisan outgroup than members of a racial outgroup. They conclude that, “while Americans are inclined to ‘hedge’ expressions of overt animosity toward racial minorities, immigrants, gays, or other marginalized groups, they enthusiastically voice hostility for the opposing party and its supporters” (2015, p. 705). This finding, when placed in context of increasing hostility toward the partisan outgroup (Iyengar et al., 2012), necessitates strategies that reduce outgroup hostility. We identify Mutz’s (2006) work on network diversity as a promising starting point. She found that those who were exposed to cross-cutting views learned more legitimate reasons for political disagreement and were more tolerant of the political outgroup as a result. Following Mutz (2006), we turn to intergroup contact as a remedy for increasing affective polarization in the U.S.

Intergroup contact

In Allport’s (1954) *The nature of prejudice*, he argued that contact between groups is critical to disrupting prejudice. Just as intergroup bias results from unfamiliarity and competition with members of an outgroup, mutual knowledge and collaboration improve intergroup relations (Brown & Hewstone, 2005). Intergroup contact allows people to learn about members of the outgroup, reduces anxiety about intergroup interactions, increases empathy with members of the outgroup, and improves attitudes toward the outgroup (Hewstone & Swart, 2011).

More than 50 years after Allport’s original assertion of the contact hypothesis, Mutz (2006) observed that, “intergroup contact theory has not generally been applied to contacts involving those of differing political views” (p. 64). Intergroup political contact is limited because interpersonal networks tend to be politically homogenous (Mutz, 2006). Nevertheless, Mutz (2006) found that when intergroup contact was initiated in experimental settings, group bias was reduced. Mutz’s (2006) experiments focused on the cognitive mechanism of intergroup contact, that is, people became more familiar with plausible rationales for opposing viewpoints, because, “at least within the context of a

short-term laboratory experiment, one cannot prompt people to forge cross-cutting friendships and evaluate the effects of their intimacy” (p. 80). However, when compared to the affective mechanism of intergroup contact, cognitive processes are less influential in reducing intergroup bias (Brown & Hewstone, 2005). Furthermore, intimate friendships should not be necessary to trigger the affective mechanism of contact. As Allport (1954) argued, contact can work at the “fantasy level” (p. 453). In other words, even imagined interactions with a member of the political outgroup can reduce intergroup bias.

Imagined interactions

Imagined interactions are a common and powerful form of intrapersonal communication in which people indirectly experience themselves communicating with others (Honeycutt, 2003). Few have studied imagined interactions in political contexts (see Madison, Rold, & Honeycutt, 2015 for an exception), perhaps because imagined interactions are typically initiated by the imaginer as a form of mental rehearsal. Partisans can be expected to avoid attitude-incongruent cognitions so there is little reason to suspect that they will voluntarily initiate imagined scenarios that feature members of the political outgroup. However, imagined interactions in which people are prompted to engage in a hypothetical interaction with a member of the outgroup can override the natural inclination of partisans to avoid ruminating about the outgroup. Imagined intergroup contact (Crisp & Turner, 2009) may thus reduce intergroup bias.

Imagined contact is an ideal solution to political polarization because it can improve intergroup relations in contexts where actual contact is unlikely and because it can prepare people for future intergroup interactions (Miles & Crisp, 2014). Furthermore, imagined contact does not require individuals to form the longstanding intimate friendships that are rare among members of the political outgroup (Mutz, 2006). Finally, imagined contact offers researchers considerable control over the internal validity of the intervention and therefore allows a more precise and direct test of the theoretical process.

Imagined contact works primarily because people’s imaginations are able to mimic the experience of actual interpersonal interaction (Crisp & Turner, 2009; Honeycutt, 2003). A meta-analysis on imagined contact found compelling evidence that hypothetical interactions improve attitudes toward the outgroup (Miles & Crisp, 2014). As with actual contact (Brown & Hewstone, 2005), imagined contact appears to work by reducing negative feelings toward members of an outgroup (Miles & Crisp, 2014; Turner & Crisp, 2010). Imagined contact has been examined primarily with inherited rather than voluntary identity categories including age (Chen, Joyce, Harwood, & Xiang, 2017; Harwood et al., 2017; Husnu & Crisp, 2011), ethnicity (Husnu & Crisp, 2010), and sexual orientation (Lau, Lau, & Loper, 2014). Not only are partisan identities voluntary, but people hold more strongly to their partisan biases when compared to racial identities (Iyengar & Westwood, 2015). Political polarization is therefore an especially conservative test of imagined contact. Nevertheless, the evidence suggests that imagined contact can reduce even the most resilient prejudices (Miles & Crisp, 2014). We thus hypothesize: *H1: Imagined intergroup contact will reduce negative affect toward the partisan outgroup.*

In addition to being a chosen identity, partisanship is also a largely invisible identity. This distinguishes partisan intergroup interactions from many others where group identity is demarcated by visible physical characteristics. An imagined scenario circumvents

this because participants are primed with the political identity of the imagined interaction partner. However, this does not require that politics be central to the interaction. A traditional imagined interaction leaves the content and valence of the imagined scenario to the discretion of the imaginer. This allows considerable variability within imaginers about the content of the imagined interaction. If people choose to imagine interactions without political content, the benefits of the imagined interaction may be reduced because the imaginer can rationalize the interaction as not being relevant to their political views and therefore not adjust their attitude toward the outgroup. To test this possibility, participants can be prompted to imagine an interaction that is political in content. In this way, imagined contact can be manipulated to operate similar to classic studies in forced compliance (e.g. Festinger & Carlsmith, 1959) in which participants adopted a more favorable evaluation of an unpleasant task to justify (to themselves) their compliance with the experimental prompt. By prompting participants to discuss politics with the partisan outgroup, we may induce them to view the exchange as more pleasant because they must rationalize their behavior to themselves. Hence, *H2: The effect of imagined contact will be stronger when the conversation is directed toward political controversies when compared to imagined political contact without a specified topic of conversation.*

If imagined intergroup interactions are stronger when political identity is prompted to be the focal point of the interaction, this may be restricted to cases in which the imagined interaction is positive. Imagined interactions that reinforce negative views of the outgroup should strengthen intergroup bias. Much research on intergroup contact has focused on interactions with a positive valence, a gap in existing research that limits the generalizability of experimental findings (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). However, Paolini et al. (2010) tested contact with positive valence against negative valence and found that negative contact made group identity more salient, creating what they called a “valence-salience effect” (p. 1724). This valence-salience effect is especially prominent when people do not have an extensive history of positive interactions with the outgroup (Paolini et al., 2014), a circumstance that is the norm for political intergroup dynamics (Mutz, 2006). Though Paolini et al. (2010, 2014) did not explicitly test the connection between this valence-salience effect and increased outgroup bias, Barlow et al. (2012) found that negative contact was more influential than positive contact and resulted in more prejudice toward the outgroup.

Based on the above, we would expect negative contact to reinforce negative stereotypes about an outgroup. However, Harwood et al. (2017) found that negative imagined contact increased intentions to interact with the outgroup in the future. This result was most associated with those who had attitudinal ambivalence about the outgroup based on positive past experiences. People with positive prior interactions with the outgroup, they argue, should find the negative intergroup contact atypical and would experience a contrast effect in which the interaction demonstrated that “the rest of the group does not possess the unappealing characteristics” (p. 19). Regarding partisan intergroup contact, a contrast effect is unlikely because intergroup friendships are rare (Mutz, 2006) and partisan outgroup attitudes are highly negative (Iyengar & Westwood, 2015). We therefore expect, *H3: The effect of imagined contact will depend on the suggested valence of the imagined interaction such that (a) positively primed interactions will reduce negative affect more than interactions without a valence prime and (b) negatively primed interactions will increase negative affect.*

Malevolence and violence

To this point, all hypotheses have focused on the effects of imagined intergroup contact on negative affect toward the outgroup. However, affect is an intermediate variable that mediates the effect of intergroup contact on other outcomes (Islam & Hewstone, 1993). Often these outcomes include behavioral intentions such as future interaction intent (Crisp & Husnu, 2011). In a political context, concern about polarization arises because hostility toward the outgroup can have deleterious effects on the health of democratic culture. If members of the partisan outgroup are deemed illegitimate actors, there is no incentive to collaborate with them and governance is undermined as a result (Levendusky, 2013). In the most extreme cases, political polarization can result in acts of violence (Sunstein, 2009). The primary objective of reducing negative affect toward the political outgroup is to avoid these outcomes.

Attribution of malevolence: According to Jamieson and Hardy (2012), a healthy democratic culture requires people to grant members of the political outgroup the presumption that “their views are legitimate even if not correct,” that differences are “philosophical not personal,” and that “all sides are persons of good will and integrity motivated by conviction” (p. 412). However, when people possess strong negative affect toward the partisan outgroup, they are more likely to attribute ulterior motives to outgroup political actors (Munro, Weih, & Tsai, 2010). This is a function of intergroup attribution error: people are more likely to interpret anti-social and undesirable behaviors to innate character flaws when considering the behavior of outgroup members (Pettigrew, 1979). Because intergroup bias is grounded in the need to enhance positive social esteem, poor behavior by members of an ingroup are often excused as mistakes or resulting from circumstances whereas poor behavior by members of an outgroup is attributed to bad intentions (Hewstone, 1990). In political contexts, people with outgroup opinions are assumed to have less altruistic reasons for their beliefs (Reeder, Pryor, Wohl, & Griswell, 2005). If imagined intergroup contact reduces negative affect toward the outgroup, it should also reduce the incentive to impute ulterior motives to outgroup members. Hence, *H4: negative affect toward the political outgroup will (a) be associated with greater attribution of malevolent intention toward outgroup political actors and (b) imagined intergroup contact will indirectly affect attribution of malevolence through negative affect.*

Acceptance of political violence: Motive attribution bias is especially important given the political consequences of attribution of malevolence. The intractability of intergroup conflict, especially the unwillingness to compromise, is grounded in a fundamental mistrust in the motives of the political outgroup (Waytz, Young, & Ginges, 2014). People tend to attribute outgroup behavior to hate of the opposition (i.e. “they hate us”), whereas they attribute ingroup behavior to ingroup love (i.e. “we do this for us”). Because attribution of malevolence entails, “the belief that the other is bad in nature (i.e. is essentially evil), it leads to an inclination not to change the other but to separate from and destroy the other” (Waytz et al., 2014, p. 15688). It is therefore possible that hostility toward the political outgroup will result in more permissive attitudes about political violence. Acceptance of political violence is problematic because it can, “create a toxic political environment that tolerates violence by others. Even when most citizens refrain from violence, citizens with less restraint may be encouraged to act in an atmosphere that accepts violence in response to frustrating political outcomes” (Kalmoe, 2014, p. 557). Acceptance of political violence

should be highest among those who attribute malevolent intentions to the political outgroup because they have reason to doubt the efficacy of compromise and persuasion when engaging with members of the political outgroup (Warner et al., 2017; Waytz et al., 2014). Thus, if imagined intergroup contact can reduce the extent to which people attribute malevolence to the outgroup, it may also reduce acceptance of political violence. We therefore expect *H5: attribution of malevolence to the political outgroup will (a) be associated with greater acceptance of political violence and (b) imagined intergroup contact will reduce acceptance of political violence through the association between negative affect and the attribution of malevolence.*

To summarize, imagined contact with a member of the political outgroup should reduce negative affect toward the outgroup. This effect should be stronger when the imagined interaction is primed to be explicitly political. Furthermore, the effect should be strongest in scenarios primed to be positive and should backfire, increasing negative feelings, in scenarios primed to be negative. Negative affect toward the political outgroup should be associated with greater attribution of malevolence. Furthermore, greater attribution of malevolence should be associated with greater acceptance of political violence. The effects of imagined intergroup contact on negative affect should result in indirect influence on both attribution of malevolence and acceptance of political violence. These relationships are summarized in Figure 1.

Method

Participants

The hypotheses were tested with a randomized between-groups experiment that was embedded in an online survey. Participants were recruited through Qualtrics' online panel aggregator using a quota-stratified sampling procedure in which age, gender, and race/ethnicity were used to match the sample to the latest census data. In total, 613

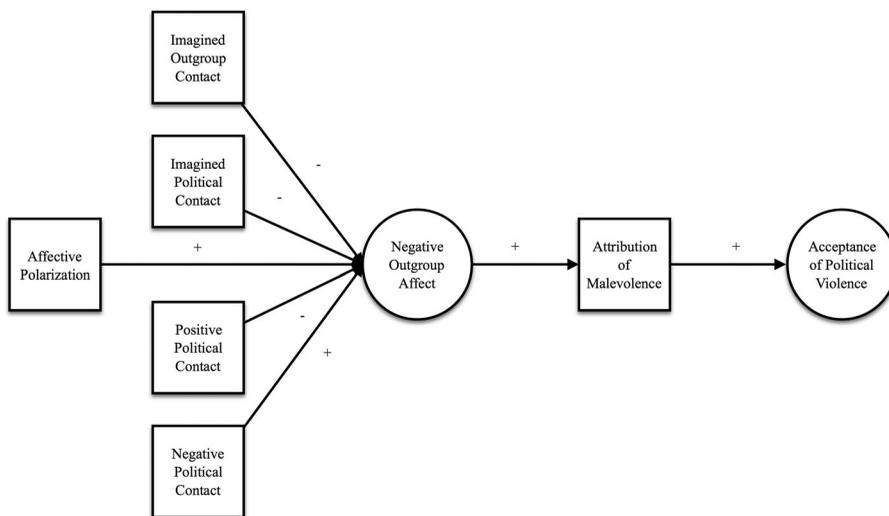


Figure 1. Hypothesized effects of imagined contact.

participants completed the experiment of which 583 were retained. The age of the participants ranged from 18 to 84 ($M = 47.01$, $SD = 16.89$). More participants were female ($n = 298$, 51%) than male ($n = 285$, 49%), and more white/Caucasian ($n = 444$, 76.2%) than black/African American ($n = 55$, 9.4%), Hispanic/Latinx ($n = 54$, 9.3%), Asian ($n = 24$, 4.1%), or another race/ethnicity ($n = 4$, 0.6%). A plurality reported an annual household income ranging from \$80,000 to \$90,000 ($n = 88$, 15.1%), shortly followed by those reporting \$20,000–30,000 ($n = 84$, 14.4%), though there was a fairly equal distribution across nine income categories. A majority of respondents reported not having earned a four-year college degree ($n = 314$, 53.9%) compared to those with an undergraduate ($n = 181$, 31%) or graduate degree ($n = 87$, 14.9%). Of respondents, 44.6% ($n = 260$) identified with the Democratic Party, 33.8% ($n = 197$) with the Republican Party, and 21.4% ($n = 125$) with neither major party. A plurality (41.1%, $n = 239$) identified as at least somewhat conservative compared to liberal (37.6%, $n = 219$) or moderate (21.4%, $n = 125$).

Procedure

Participants were provided a link to an online survey that directed them to a statement of informed consent. If they consented to participate, they were asked to provide basic demographic information, party identification, and feeling thermometer ratings for *Democrats in general* and *Republicans in general* prior to random assignment to an experimental or control condition. The experiment was collected in two contiguous phases. The first few hundred responses were collected the last week of July and the first week of August 2015. The remaining responses were collected the second and third weeks of August 2015. The first phase included the experimental prompt for H1 (imagined contact, $n = 105$) and the control condition ($n = 95$). The second phase included the additional experimental prompts for H2 and H3 (imagined political contact, $n = 93$; imagined negative political contact, $n = 94$; imagined positive political contact, $n = 95$) and additional control responses ($n = 101$).¹ Wording for the stimuli was modeled after previous imagined contact research (Crisp & Husnu, 2011; Husnu & Crisp, 2010). Those assigned to the imagined political contact condition were provided the following prompt:

I would like you to take a minute to imagine yourself meeting a [Democratic/Republican] stranger and striking up a conversation. While imagining this think specifically of when (e.g., next Thursday) and where (e.g., the bus stop) this conversation might occur. During the conversation imagine you find out some interesting and unexpected things about the stranger. I would like you to picture the scenario from a third-person visual perspective. In other words, imagine seeing the conversation from the visual perspective of an observer. That is, you watch yourself talking to the [Democratic/Republican] stranger. Now please close your eyes and imagine the scene from the third person perspective for a full minute.

Those assigned to the control condition received an identical prompt with the partisan identifier omitted. Participants in a treatment condition were assigned to imagine interacting with a member of the political outgroup based on responses to the partisan identification question in the pretest. Participants were asked to adopt a third-person visual perspective (i.e. the omniscient perspective, Honeycutt, 2003) because Crisp and Husnu (2011) found that this produces stronger effects, perhaps because people are more inclined to attribute motivation to their actions when they see themselves acting. Participants were asked to envision a specific time and place because Husnu and Crisp (2010) found that

these prompts increased elaboration about the imagined scenario. Participants in the first condition were instructed to imagine that they learned interesting and unexpected things because, though Stathi and Crisp (2008) found that this prompt did not change the effects of imagined contact, including the prompt ensures that the manipulation is directly comparable to past studies on imagined contact. A timer was placed on the prompt that did not allow participants to advance for 90 seconds.

To test H2, the instruction about learning interesting and unexpected things was replaced with the following language:

During the conversation imagine discussing Barack Obama's performance as a president and what you think America's priorities ought to be going into the 2016 Presidential Election.

To test the influence of valence (H3), the prompt from H2 was modified such that respondents were asked to imagine the conversation proceeding to either a positive or negative result. Participants were provided either the top (negative) or bottom (positive) prime:

Imagine the conversation becomes heated and you walk away frustrated and angry with the stranger.

Imagine that the conversation is pleasant and that you find yourself laughing and smiling often.

Manipulation check

Two manipulation checks were used to monitor compliance with the experimental prompt. First, respondents were asked with whom they imagined interacting (response options: a stranger, a family member, a famous athlete). Participants who provided an incorrect response were terminated from the study. Second, participants were asked to respond to open-ended prompts: (1) *Where did your encounter take place? What did the scene look like?*; (2) *What did the person look like?*; and (3) *What did you talk about?* Open-ended prompts such as these are often used to reinforce the imagined task (e.g. Chen et al., 2017).

Similar open-ended responses have been used to code category salience (e.g. Paolini et al., 2010) such that earlier references to the identity category indicated greater group salience. However, few respondents (only 15 participants, or less than 5% of participants in one of the treatment conditions) mentioned partisanship in describing the imagined interaction partner. This is likely because, first, partisanship was specified by the prompt and therefore may have been considered redundant information, and second, participants were specifically asked to describe the physical appearance of the interaction partner. It was much more common for people to describe the age, race, gender, and clothing of interaction partners.

Respondents who did not comply with the prompts were removed, given that their noncompliance suggests that they did not engage in the imagination exercise and were thus invalid tests of the hypotheses. Invalid responses included random letter entry, words or phrases that could not be interpreted as coherent answers to the prompts, or explicit admissions that participants did not follow the prompt. Thirty cases (4.9%) were removed because invalid responses were provided to the open-ended prompts.

Because people assigned to the control group were also asked to engage in an imagined interaction and the manipulation check was applied equally to all groups, noncompliance was not inherently more likely in an experimental condition. A chi-square analysis confirmed that respondents in the control condition were no less likely to be excluded based on noncompliance ($\chi^2(4) = 0.75, p > .05$).

Measures

Partisan affiliation was measured by asking respondents to place themselves on a 7-point scale with response options: *strong Democrat*, *Democrat*, *lean Democrat*, *no preference*, *lean Republican*, *Republican*, and *strong Republican*. Respondents who selected *no preference* ($n = 125, 21\%$) were directed to a follow-up question: *I know you don't have a preference between the political parties, but based on everything you know, who would you be more likely to vote for?* with response options: *A true Democrat* ($n = 62$) or *A true Republican*? ($n = 63$). This procedure classified 323 (55.4%) respondents as Democrats and 260 (44.6%) respondents as Republicans. Results were tested to determine if party identification moderated any of the observed effects. However, there were no partisan differences in the observed relationships.

A pretest assessment of affective polarization was generated using feeling thermometer evaluations of *Democrats in general* and *Republicans in general*. Respondents were asked to rate each group on a 101-point feeling thermometer from 0 (very unfavorable) to 100 (very favorable). Affective polarization was computed from these ratings by taking the absolute value of the evaluation of Republicans less the evaluation of Democrats ($M = 34.61, SD = 28.85$).

Negative affect toward the political outgroup was measured by asking respondents to evaluate the political outgroup using a set of bi-polar adjectives adapted by Husnu and Crisp (2010) (anchored from 1 to 9): *cold-warm*; *positive-negative*; *friendly-hostile*; *suspicious-trusting*; *respectful-contempt*; and *admiration-disgust*. The measure was coded such that higher responses indicated more negative affect ($M = 6.04, SD = 1.58, \alpha = .908$).

Attribution of malevolence was measured by asking respondents the extent to which they agreed with the statement, *I worry that the [Democratic/Republican] Party is deliberately trying to hurt America*, using a 5-point Likert-style scale ($M = 3.34, SD = 1.22$). This item was drawn from Warner and Banwart's (2016) candidate image measure and was originally designed as a reverse-marker of perceived benevolence. An expanded scale using this item has been subsequently developed and validated in a similar context (Warner et al., 2017).

Acceptance of political violence was measured with a scale adopted from Warner et al. (2017) that asks participants the extent to which they agreed with the following statements (on a 5-point Likert-style scale): *I can foresee a day when violent measures may need to be taken to protect the United States from itself*; *The tree of liberty needs to be nourished with the blood of revolution*; *If we can't find a peaceful solution to the problems facing America, we may need to take matters into our own hands*; *When politics fail, violence is sometimes necessary*; and *I can see why some people support violent revolution* ($M = 2.59, SD = 1.00, \alpha = .861$). All research was conducted in compliance with the institutional review board at the host university.

Results

The hypothesized model was tested in path analysis with structural equation modeling using the Lavaan package for R (Rosseel, 2012). The analysis included two latent variables (negative outgroup attitude and acceptance of political violence) and two manifest variables (pretest affective polarization and attribution of malevolence) as well as dummy variables indicating whether participants were placed in one of four experimental conditions (with the control condition serving as the reference). Little, Rhemtulla, Gibson, and Schoemann (2013) argue that over-identified latent variables should be parceled to ensure all variables are just-identified (i.e. contain only three indicators). In keeping with this recommendation, the affect variable was parceled by averaging the first and fifth, second and third, and fourth and sixth indicators and the acceptance of political violence variable was parceled by averaging the first and third as well as second and fifth indicators.² Parceling decisions were based on modification indices such that items with correlated residuals were joined. Kline (2005) recommends a two-step process in which latent variables are tested for global and regional fit with a measurement model prior to the estimation of the structural path model. The measurement model achieved adequate fit, $\chi^2(8) = 44.5$, $p < .001$, RMSEA = .088 (.065–.114), CFI = .969, NNFI/TLI = .942, SRMR = .043.

To investigate the hypothesized paths, a structural model was fit using a robust maximum likelihood estimator. Age, gender (1 = female), race/ethnicity (1 = non-white/Caucasian), education, income, religiosity (1 = born again Christian), and party identification (1 = strong Democrat to 7 = strong Republican) were included as control variables. All variables in the model were regressed on each control variable. The structural model achieved sufficient fit, $\chi^2(60) = 149.46$, $p < .001$, RMSEA = .051 (.041-.061), CFI = .955, NNFI/TLI = .912, SRMR = .024. Paths were tested for statistical significance through a series of nested model comparisons in which each path was iteratively constrained to zero and the resulting change in chi-square was evaluated relative to the unconstrained model. To verify the results of the chi-square difference test, the 95% confidence intervals from 5000 bootstrapped resamples were investigated. A confidence interval that does not contain zero is evidence of a statistically significant path. The results are depicted in Figure 2. Standardized path coefficients along with unstandardized bootstrapped confidence intervals for all paths are presented in Table 1.

As should be expected, pretest polarization was strongly associated with negative affect in the post-test ($\beta = .569$, $p < .001$). Consistent with H1, imagined contact was negatively associated with negative affect in the post-test in all four experimental conditions. In other words, those who were asked to imagine contact with a partisan stranger expressed less hostility toward the political outgroup when compared to those who imagined contact with a generic stranger.

The second hypothesis predicted that explicitly political contact would more effectively reduce negative affect than imagined contact in which the imaginer was not prompted to imagine any particular content for the interaction. To compare the effects, a nested model was fit in which the regression coefficient associated with the first condition (no content specified) was constrained to equal the coefficient associated with the second condition (political content prompt). The results of the nested model comparison suggested that there was no difference in the effect of the second condition when compared to the first condition ($\Delta\chi^2(1) = 0.13$, $p > .05$). Hence, imagined outgroup contact that was

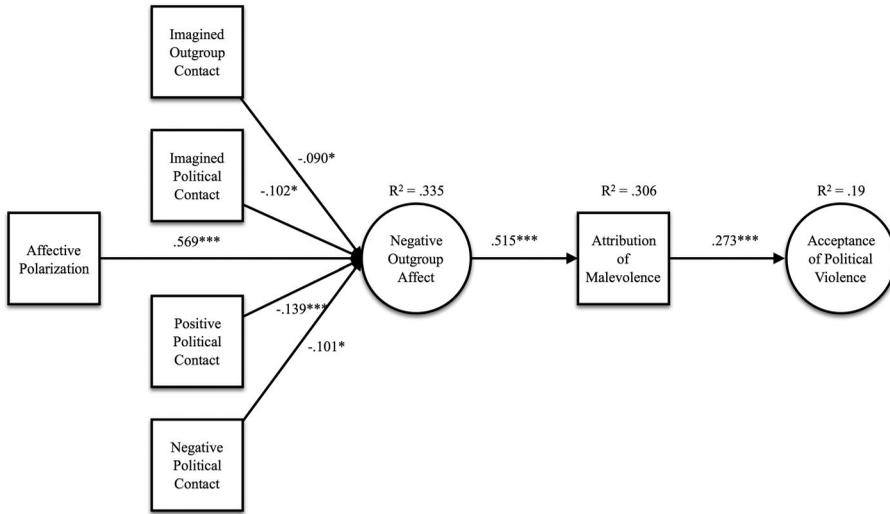


Figure 2. Final path model for effects of imagined contact.

primed to be explicitly political did reduce negative affect but was not significantly more effective than imagining a political encounter with an unspecified topic of conversation.

The third hypothesis predicted that the valence of the imagined contact would moderate the effects such that, if people were told to imagine a positive interaction, it would strengthen the effects of imagined contact, but if people were instructed to imagine

Table 1. SEM paths for imagined political intergroup contact.

Path	Negative affect 95% CI of B			Attribution of malevolence 95% CI of B			Acceptance of political violence 95% CI of B		
	β	LLCI	ULCI	β	LLCI	ULCI	β	LLCI	ULCI
Control variables									
Age	-.054	-.009	.001	-.019	-.007	.004	-.198***	-.019	-.007
Female	-.008	-.199	.165	-.045	-.277	.060	-.136***	-.502	-.107
Not White	-.042	-.361	.113	.010	-.178	.243	.039	-.138	.338
Education	-.022	-.123	.070	-.038	-.133	.041	-.075	-.176	.011
Income	-.014	-.038	.024	-.059	-.008	.056	-.019	-.041	.025
Born again	-.016	-.237	.163	.088*	.034	.414	.045	-.104	.318
Party ID	.066	-.006	.101	.006	-.051	.064	.151***	.037	.160
Pre-Polarization	.569***	-.021	.029	.042	-.002	.006	-.144*	-.009	.000
Negative affect	-	-	-	.515***	.411	.598	.032	-.092	.145
Attribution of malevolence	-	-	-	-	-	-	.273***	.153	.358
Experimental variables									
Contact (no prime)	-.090*	-.580	-.021	.039	-.131	.382	.042	-.163	.418
Political contact	-.102*	-.613	-.073	-.017	-.344	.228	.020	-.233	.365
Negative contact	-.101*	-.613	-.063	.000	-.259	.253	-.014	-.318	.240
Positive contact	-.139***	-.716	-.213	.038	-.209	.365	-.019	-.340	.234
R^2	.335			.306			.190		

Note: All estimates were produced in structural equation modeling using a robust maximum likelihood estimator (MLR) in Lavaan. Model fit for the structural model was adequate: $\chi^2(60) = 149.46, p < .001$, RMSEA = .051 (.041-.061), CFI = .955, NNFI/TLI = .921, SRMR = .024. Statistical significance was confirmed with the Chi-squared difference test; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$. Confidence intervals were generated using 5000 bootstrapped resamples with a maximum likelihood estimator. Path estimates are drawn from the completely standardized solution. Confidence intervals are unstandardized coefficients.

negative contact, it would result in more negative affect toward the outgroup. There was some inconclusive evidence that positive contact was more effective (H3a). The coefficient was notably larger than that of the other three imagined political contact conditions and both the upper boundary and lower boundary of the confidence interval were higher. However, the nested model comparison failed to demonstrate a statistically significant difference in effect between the positive-valence condition and the unspecified content condition ($\Delta\chi^2(1) = 1.30, p > .05$), the no-valence, political content condition ($\Delta\chi^2(1) = 0.58, p > .05$), or the negative valence condition ($\Delta\chi^2(1) = 0.63, p > .05$). In other words, though a positive valence prime appears to improve the effects of imagined contact, we could not distinguish this improvement from the other imagined interaction scenarios at traditional levels of statistical confidence. Contrary to H3b, negative contact reduced negative affect toward the political outgroup with a magnitude comparable to the other experimental treatments. Nested model comparisons yielded no statistically significant differences between the negative valence condition and the other three experimental treatments.

To test H4, that negative political affect would be associated with attribution of malevolence (a) and that imagined contact would indirectly influence attribution of malevolence through negative affect (b), 5000 bootstrapped resamples of the product of the direct paths were drawn (i.e. Preacher & Hayes, 2008). As is evident in Table 1, negative affect was associated with more attribution of malevolence, a result consistent with H4a. The indirect associations presented in Table 2 are consistent with H4b; those who were asked to imagine contact with a member of the political outgroup expressed less negative affect toward the political outgroup and were less likely to attribute malevolent intentions to the outgroup.

The fifth hypothesis predicted that attribution of malevolence would be associated with acceptance of political violence (H5a) and, through the effect of imagined contact on attribution of malevolence via negative affect, imagined contact would be associated with less acceptance of political violence (H5b). The indirect effects of imagined contact on acceptance of political violence through the association between negative affect and attribution of malevolence are presented in Table 2. The results were consistent with the hypotheses, there was an indirect association of imagined contact on acceptance of political violence through negative affect and attribution of malevolence.

Table 2. Indirect effects of imagined political intergroup contact.

Path	5000 Bootstraps resamples		
	B (SE)	LLCI	ULCI
Imagined contact (IC) on attribution of malevolence (AoM) through negative affect (NA)			
IC > NA > AoM	-.147 (.07)	-.295	-.010*
Political IC > NA > AoM	-.175 (.07)	-.313	-.036*
Negative IC > NA > AoM	-.173 (.07)	-.328	-.031*
Positive IC > NA > AoM	-.236 (.07)	-.372	-.106*
IC on acceptance of political violence (APV) through NA on AoM			
IC > NA > AoM > APV	-.037 (.02)	-.081	-.002*
Political IC > NA > AoM > APV	-.044 (.02)	-.091	-.008*
Negative IC > NA > AoM > APV	-.043 (.02)	-.091	-.007*
Positive IC > NA > AoM > APV	-.059 (.02)	-.107	-.024*

Note: All estimates were generated from 5000 bootstrapped resamples. Unstandardized coefficients, standard errors, and 95% confidence intervals are presented.

*Indicates that the confidence interval does not contain zero.

Discussion

This study tested imagined intergroup contact as a mechanism to reduce outgroup bias in the unique circumstances of political identity. Because political identity is selected rather than inherited, people are more likely to blame members of the outgroup for their political identity (Iyengar & Westwood, 2015) and may therefore be less susceptible to the benefits of intergroup contact. Our results suggest that imagined political intergroup contact can improve attitudes toward the political outgroup regardless of the valence of the experimental primes. Though positive contact may be more effective, even negative primes reduced negative affect. Furthermore, we observed a clear link between negative affect for members of the partisan outgroup, attribution of malevolence, and acceptance of political violence. In what follows, we discuss the contributions to research on political polarization and intergroup communication, consider limitations to our findings, and explore directions for future research.

Our study makes two key contributions to political communication scholarship. First, our findings are unique in polarization literature in that we have identified a possible intervention. Past research demonstrated that political ads (Iyengar et al., 2012), presidential debates (Cho & Ha, 2012; Warner & McKinney, 2013) and partisan media use (Garrett et al., 2014; Dvir-Gvirsman, 2014; Levendusky, 2013; Stroud, 2010) increased affective polarization. Few have identified solutions. Imagined contact is an especially promising remedy because it can act as a rehearsal for actual interactions and therefore make people more willing to engage members of the political outgroup (Miles & Crisp, 2014). Given the homophily of most people's political networks (Mutz, 2006), any strategy that increases cross-partisan interactions is desirable.

We further contribute to political communication literature by explicitly testing some of the more troubling outcomes of polarization. Highly polarized individuals are more likely to distrust the motives of members of the political outgroup (Munro et al., 2010; Warner et al., 2017), a finding confirmed in our analysis. Furthermore, this distrust undermines the incentive for governance and can even provoke violence between groups (Waytz et al., 2014). A significant minority of people in the U.S. express support for violent political behaviors (Kalmoe, 2014). Our results illustrate a clear link between affective polarization and the attribution of malevolent intentions to outgroup political actors. Furthermore, our study is novel in linking these attitudes to the acceptance of political violence.

We contribute to research on intergroup contact theory in three ways. First, we demonstrated the efficacy of imagined contact on a voluntary identity. Because partisanship is a choice, people are likely to blame members of the outgroup for their identity and are therefore more comfortable discriminating against them (Iyengar & Westwood, 2015). This means that partisan identities are a unique and especially strict test of contact as a mechanism to reduce bias. Our findings thus illustrate the robustness of the effects of imagined intergroup contact.

Second, we found that the primed valence of the interaction did not influence the effect. Though negative contact should result in the solidifying of outgroup prejudice (Barlow et al., 2012; Paolini et al., 2010), we join Harwood et al. (2017) in finding that negative contact increased intergroup evaluations. Past positive effects of negative contact have been explained as resulting from a contrast effect (Harwood et al., 2017). However, a

contrast effect is an unlikely explanation of our findings because people are unlikely to have a history of positive interactions with the political outgroup (Iyengar & Westwood, 2015; Mutz, 2006), a precondition to the contrast effect (Harwood et al., 2017; Paolini et al., 2014). However, without an explicit measure of past contact, we cannot know if it moderated the observed effects of negative contact. Nevertheless, we propose an alternative explanation for our unexpected finding. We suspect that imagining a negative interaction allowed people to work through feelings of frustration and anxiety and therefore experience the catharsis function of imagined interactions. Catharsis occurs when a positive emotional improvement results from negative thoughts by allowing people to express their frustration and anger in an imaginary setting (Bodie, Honeycutt, & Vickery, 2013). Though we cannot know that catharsis mediated the effect of negative interactions on outgroup affect without a direct measure of catharsis, this is a promising direction for future research.

It is possible that the effect of negative contact resulted from a demand effect (i.e. that participants recalibrated their evaluations of the outgroup in anticipation of our expectations). Though possible, three things argue against this explanation. First, there is no reason to believe that a demand effect would result in positive affect – participants should be just as likely to react by complying with our expectations that they become less favorable to the outgroup. Second, there is no clear reason to suspect that reactions to negative contact in our experiment would be any more susceptible to a demand effect when compared to past studies of intergroup contact. Third, an examination of open-ended responses is more suggestive of catharsis than a demand effect. For example, one participant wrote, “the conversation quickly got heated... so I just decided to walk away from this person in frustration.” Others reported that the conversation “escalated,” that they left the conversation “angry,” that the conversation partner got “aggravated,” etc. Only 16 of 93 participants in this condition provided information about the tone of the interaction, but none of the 93 responses were suggestive of a demand effect.

Finally, this study expands the domain of outcomes that are influenced by imagined interactions. Past research has demonstrated that, by reducing negative affect toward members of the political outgroup, imagined interactions can reduce prejudice (Chen et al., 2017; Harwood et al., 2017; Miles & Crisp, 2014) and increase future interaction intentions (Crisp & Husnu, 2011). However, intergroup political bias is not only problematic because it leads to mistreatment of members of the political outgroup, it is also troubling because it can undermine the legitimacy of outgroup political actors. Outgroup hostility is therefore indicative of a coarsening of democratic culture in which political opponents are viewed as malevolent actors and violent responses are invited. We demonstrate that the tools developed in intergroup communication can be adapted to political communication as interventions to improve the health of our democratic culture. Intergroup contact is thus not only valuable because it leads to improvements in how we treat each other, it also nourishes attitudes that are vital for the survival of a robust democratic culture.

As with any study, there are limitations to our findings that require consideration and provide space for future research. First, our measures of attribution of malevolence and acceptance of political violence were new and require further validation. The measure of attribution of malevolence, in particular, was adapted from a different political

communication context and utilized only a single item. Subsequent research has utilized an expanded scale and demonstrated predictive validity for the construct (Warner et al., 2017). Second, our method of classifying people into partisan groups may not sufficiently account for the various types of people who do not identify with one of the two major political parties in the U.S. Future research should consider whether those without two-party preferences should be examined independently. Third, we did not explicitly measure catharsis as a potential mediator, or past contact as a moderator, of the effects of imagined contact. Fourth, by adopting the language of “interesting and unexpected” in the first treatment, we created an asymmetry in experimental conditions. In particular, there was no negative-valence analogue to directly match this first condition. Finally, because our experiment was implemented through an online panel, we had no way to ensure compliance with the prompt. Furthermore, though we asked open-ended questions to gauge compliance, the responses to these questions were only used to screen people who explicitly admitted noncompliance. Future research should deliberately craft open-ended responses to generate theoretically meaningful content so that questions about elaboration, catharsis, and valence can be assessed. To the extent that our participants evaded compliance but did not admit doing so in the post-test, our results will underestimate the effects of imagined political intergroup contact.

Conclusion

Political polarization is increasing in the U.S. (Abramowitz, 2010; Iyengar et al., 2012) and, as such, risks delegitimizing members of the political outgroup (Waytz et al., 2014), undermining governance (Levendusky, 2013), and inviting political violence (Kalmoe, 2014; Sunstein, 2009). In this study, we demonstrated a clear link between negative affect, attribution of malevolence, and acceptance of political violence and illustrated how imagined political intergroup contact can act as a potential remedy. Our findings are unique in the polarization literature both because they treat polarization as a mediator of more problematic political attitudes and because we are one of few studies that identify an effective intervention. Our findings are unique in the intergroup contact literature because partisanship is both an adopted and invisible identity and because we identify a rare instance in which a negative valence prime reduced outgroup bias – perhaps evidence that imagined contact can work by creating emotional catharsis. These findings are illustrative of the power of intrapersonal communication and provide a promising strategy to reduce affective political polarization moving forward.

Notes

1. The two phases were initially split into separate experiments but, given the contiguous time-frame of data collection and substantial similarity in findings, the data was pooled. This decision has the benefit of generating a more cohesive and parsimonious set of findings and increasing statistical power.
2. Fitting the model without parceling the items in the negative affect variable resulted in substantially worse model fit, $\chi^2(43) = 280.36$, $p < .001$, RMSEA = .097 (.088–.107), CFI = .905, NNFI/TLI = .879, SRMR = .054. Inspection of the modification indices revealed substantial correlated residuals for respectful/contempt and friendly/hostile as well as suspicious/trusting and cold/warm. Allowing those residuals to correlate resolved misfit, $\chi^2(40) = 99.31$, p

<.001, RMSEA = .050 (.039–.062), CFI = .976, NNFI/TLI = .968, SRMR = .044. A chief advantage of parceling is the ability to reduce correlated residuals without altering latent relationships (Little et al., 2013).

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