TESTING THE EFFECTS OF CIVILITY AND RATIONALITY

DURING POLITICAL CONTACT

by

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ABSTRACT

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This research project investigated the effects of civility and rationality of contact between self-identified liberals and conservatives on several outcome measures: participants' evaluations of the political ingroup and outgroup; political attitude certainty; perceived amount of difference between political group members (liberal and conservative); and political identification strength. A 2 (civility: high, low) X 2 (rationality: high, low) experimental design was used in both studies. In Study 1, participants encountered fictitious Internet discussion board posts, with manipulated levels of civility and rationality. Findings from Study 1 did not confirm expectations that exposure to civil and rational civil discourse would lead to more positive evaluations of the outgroup or lower amounts of perceived intergroup difference. However, participants in the high rationality conditions (as compared to the low rationality conditions) reported significantly lower levels of certainty for their positions on the discussion board topics. In Study 2, participants took part in an asynchronous Internet discussion. The presence or absence of discussion rules that, respectively, requested a civil and/or rational discussion was manipulated. Participants in Study 2 reported less negative intergroup attitudes and a smaller

amount of perceived intergroup difference after taking part in a political discussion group with political outgroup members. These results are discussed in light of increased media attention on civility in political life.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

As this project began, a seemingly hostile debate was raging over the way healthcare is provided in the United States. The content of this debate, at least as portrayed by the popular press, was anything but civil and reason-based. At town hall meetings across the United States, loud protesters derailed hopes of a cordial healthcare discussion. In a particularly attention-grabbing instance of incivility during a speech to a joint session of the United States Congress, Congressman Joe Wilson of South Carolina shouted "You lie!" at President Obama. At one town hall meeting in Dartmouth, Massachusetts, a woman asked Congressman Barney Frank of Massachusetts, presumably in reference to his support for Obama's healthcare bill, "Why do you continue to support a Nazi policy?" (Keating, 2009). The impact of political discourse characterized by incivility and irrationality on democratic society has not been thoroughly investigated, but there is some evidence that incivility during political discourse may have effects that are detrimental to democracy itself. For instance, Mutz and Reeves (2005) found that encounters with televised uncivil political discourse led to less trust in politics and the American political system.

In the aftermath of the January 2011 shooting at an event held by Arizona Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords, which left six people dead and critically wounded the congresswoman, the problem of incivility in politics became a matter of national concern. Civility institutes, designed to investigate and promote civility in politics, were created to address this problem, and more attention in the news media has been focused on what has been presented as an incivility problem in American political life. According to a recent national

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survey, most Americans believe in the importance of civility for a healthy democracy, but a majority of respondents who report paying close attention to politics also perceive that levels of civility have recently declined (*Nastiness, Name-calling, Negativity*, 2010). On the other hand, political discussions that are based on reason and are characterized by respectful disagreement with opposing positions are seen as an ideal form of political discourse, but until recently, few systematic empirical research studies have investigated the effects of civility and reason-based argument during political discussion.

The major objective of the present project was to investigate the impact of rational and civil discourse between those with opposing political perspectives on outcomes that are relevant to democratic participation and relations between people who hold different political viewpoints. Student samples taking part in simulated and actual Internet forums that were created for the purposes of this study were used as the context for the proposed research. Although this context was chosen partially for reasons of convenience, Internet forums of political discussion are increasingly common and important venues for political expression and discourse, especially for people under the age of 30 (Smith, Schlozman, Verba, & Brady, 2009).

Political theorists consider contact between individuals with different political perspectives to be a critical part of democratic society (Mill, 1859/1985). Contact between people with differing political viewpoints is regarded by its proponents as a remedy for many problems that can arise in a democracy. At its best, such contact is regarded as a rewarding aspect of democratic society that makes progress through the mutual exchange of ideas possible. In this sense, it is a critical element of democratic progress. In the absence of discussion involving disagreement, democratic discourse and decision-making lack an essential quality. As Huckfeldt, Mendez, and Osborn (2004) stated, "If collective deliberation among citizens in a democracy does not involve disagreement, its value is fundamentally called into question" (p. 68).

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Through interactions with those who disagree over political issues, citizens are thought to achieve more reasoned judgments, feel less hostility toward political opposition groups, and become less narrow-minded in their political views. In contrast, political attitudes and ideas that are held in a vacuum, or shared only with like-minded others, are seen as having less value because they are untested, presumably increasing the likelihood of group polarization (Moscovici & Zavalloni, 1969; Stoner, 1968) and the likelihood that flawed arguments will not be corrected.

On the other hand, the segregation of people who hold different political perspectives is thought to breed distaste for those with opposing viewpoints, lead to polarization of attitudes, and create an untested sense of certainty for one's own position. A study conducted by Schkade, Sunstein, and Hastie (2007) provided evidence that discussion among relatively heterogeneous groups can lead to "ideological amplification." That is, in their study of separate liberal and conservative discussion groups, Schkade et al. found that deliberation of political issues among like-minded others led to the tendency for conservative participants to become more conservative and liberal participants to become more liberal, which is consistent with the group polarization literature. After deliberation, opinion diversity also declined within the discussion groups they studied. Thus, it seems that from the standpoint of democratic progress through cooperation and finding common ground on issues, separation of different perspectives is not desirable.

Despite the supposed benefits of political disagreement, not even the most ardent proponents of political discourse involving disagreement would claim that its consequences are entirely positive. Under "the wrong conditions," encounters with people who hold conflicting political ideas may lead to incivility, disillusionment, and withdrawal from political contact (Mutz, 2002a), and at its very worst contact between political group members with opposing political views can lead to physical violence. For instance, in October 2010 a member of a liberal group,

moveon.org, was attempting to present Rand Paul with a mock award when she was thrown to the ground and stomped on by supporters of Rand Paul, who was campaigning for the U.S. Senate (Green, 2010).

Although political discourse among those who disagree is viewed by many as vital part of democratic society, research investigating such everyday political discourse is surprisingly rare. Social scientists have only begun to investigate the effects of contact between individuals who disagree politically, and the conditions under which such contact can lead to outcomes that are favorable to democracy are scarcely understood. Largely because much of political science theory on the topic of political discourse – for example, deliberative democratic theory in its grand form, is not directly amenable to empirical test (see Mutz, 2008) – hard empirical evidence for the impact of political discourse involving disagreement on relevant outcome variables (e.g., political tolerance and identification) is hard to come by. Highlighting the uncertainty about the definition and effects of political deliberation in the field of political science, Mendelberg (2002) stated, "It is time we understood what it [political deliberation] is expected to do, what it is in reality, and what it could become" (p.152). The current project was intended to represent small, but important, steps toward achieving these goals.

The present research project is among the first to investigate the potential impact of Internet contact between those with different political orientations[1] on variables thought to be linked to such contact. Studies investigating the effects of computer-mediated political discussions, an arena with a seemingly unlimited potential for political discourse and disagreement, are beginning to take place (see Postmes, Spears, & Lea, 2002; Wojcieszak & Mutz, 2009). The current project focuses on civility and rationality as qualities of political discussion that have the potential to affect discussants' political position certainty or conviction (see Abelson, 1988); evaluation of the political outgroup; attributions of rationality to the

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outgroup ideology (see Popan, Kenworthy, Frame, Lyons, & Snuggs, 2010); and the perceived amount of political difference between the groups (liberals and conservatives).

The primary objective of this research project was to examine how the civility and rationality of Internet political contact that involves disagreement influence these key outcome variables. In two studies, participants encountered politically heterogeneous discussion groups (ostensible groups in Study 1 and actual groups in Study 2) in a 2 (civility: high or low) X 2 (rationality: high or low) experimental design.

The current research project is situated in the intergroup contact theory (Allport, 1954; see also Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006) and the deliberative democratic theory (see Mutz, 2008 and Thompson, 2008) literatures. Intergroup contact theory and deliberative democratic theory each specify conditions under which contact between different collective entities may lead to desirable outcomes. Intergroup contact theory deals with contact between social groups and categories in general, with prejudice reduction as a specific primary outcome measure, whereas deliberative democratic theory focuses specifically on deliberative political contact, with a greater range of outcome variables (e.g., political tolerance, participation, and political knowledge).

As noted by Mutz (2008), contact theory and deliberative democratic theory share similar trajectories. Each theory seemed to be encumbered at one point by a list of "necessary" conditions that over time was cast aside for practical reasons and due to theoretical refinement based on the results of empirical tests. Pettigrew (1998) noted that within the contact theory literature, the list of so-called necessary conditions for effective (viz., prejudice reducing) intergroup contact had grown impractically large. Mutz (2008) made a similar observation about the essential elements of deliberative political discourse. She noted that the criteria for deliberative political discourse set forth by some theorists represent more of an ideal type of political decision-making than a representation of more commonplace political discussion.

For practical reasons, and in an effort to maintain a semblance of realism in the proposed experiments, this research will not attempt to meet the strict criteria proposed by deliberative democratic theorists. Rather, it will attempt to initiate political contact within politically heterogeneous discussion groups (simulated groups in Study 1) created for the purposes of this project. These conversations are more likely to resemble what Thompson (2008) calls "political chatter," or everyday political conversation, than to meet the criteria for democratic deliberation proposed by theorists (e.g., collective decision-making through a legitimate, accepted process). This practical approach to investigating political discussion is not without precedent. Recently, researchers have used practical criteria in order to investigate the effects of contact between those who disagree over political matters (e.g., Mutz & Mondak, 2006).

Before presenting the specific hypotheses for this research project, a review of those aspects of intergroup contact theory relevant to the proposed project will be provided. For more comprehensive reviews of these topics see Kenworthy, Turner, Hewstone, and Voci (2005) and Mendelberg (2002), respectively.

Allport's (1954) intergroup contact hypothesis proposed several conditions under which intergroup contact would reduce prejudice. Prejudice is defined as "an avertive or hostile attitude toward a person who belongs to a group, simply because he belongs to that group, and is therefore presumed to have the objectionable qualities ascribed to the group" (Allport, 1954, p. 7). The situations that Allport expected to be most conducive to prejudice reduction were situations with: (1) equal status of the groups in the contact situation, (2) groups working toward common goals, (3) institutional support for cross-group contact, (4) and the perception of similarity between groups. In over fifty years since the publication of Allport's *On the Nature of Prejudice*, an enormous amount of research has investigated the relationship between intergroup contact and prejudice reduction. Pettigrew and Tropp (2006) conducted an extensive meta-analysis of this research, and overall, they found a negative but reliable relationship

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between contact and prejudice ($r = -.205$). Supporting the view that intergroup contact does indeed reduce prejudice, the strongest effects were found in studies in which the participants' choice regarding contact was limited (i.e., self-selection was not likely). Furthermore, a stronger contact-prejudice relationship was found in experiments as compared to quasi-experimental and survey design studies. This is contrary to what would be expected if the contact-prejudice relationship was attributable primarily to people with lower levels of prejudice seeking out more contact than more prejudiced people, because self-selection isn't possible in randomized study designs (assuming that attrition does not bias the results).

Racial groups have been the primary focus of intergroup contact theory-driven research. This is not surprising given the historical context of the theory's origins (i.e., the United States at the start of the Civil Rights Movement), but since approximately the 1980s, intergroup contact research has begun to venture into a more diverse range of intergroup contexts. For example, researchers have found evidence that prejudice can be reduced through contact with lesbians and gay men (Herek & Capitanio, 1996; Sakalli & Ug˘urlu, 2001), the elderly (Caspi, 1984), foreigners (Liebkind & McAlister, 1999), and people with psychological disorders (Desforges et al., 1991), among other group types.

A small amount of research from the contact theory perspective has addressed the role of contact in reducing the antipathy between antagonistic political groups. Popan et al. (2010) investigated contact between people from different political orientations (liberals and conservatives) in one British and two American samples. Their results suggest that perceived rationality is a key component to improving attitudes between liberals and conservatives. That is, contact that leads people to attribute a rational basis for the positions of the "other side" is important in improving intergroup evaluations in a political context. Attributions of a rational basis for the political opposition's positions were found to mediate the relationship between

contact quality and evaluation of the opposition. Popan et al.'s findings were, however, based primarily on correlational and cross-sectional designs, leaving much causal ambiguity.

As mentioned in the introductory paragraph of this paper, political deliberation is viewed very positively by the proponents of deliberative democratic theory. However, the evidence for its positive effects is viewed by some as being "thin and non-existent" (Mendelberg, 2002, p. 154). Perhaps the most extensive research program investigating the effects of political deliberation has been Fishkin's Deliberative Polling (Ackerman & Fishkin, 2003). In this thorough paradigm, random sampling is first used to draw a representative sample of the population under study. Participants then typically attend an all-expense-paid weekend of deliberation on political issues. Briefing materials, moderators, and experts on the topic at hand are present. The Deliberative Polling experience has been shown to lead to attitude change and increases in political knowledge among the participants (Fishkin, 2003; Fishkin & Laslett, 2003). It is billed as an excellent method to gauge public opinion under seemingly ideal (informed) conditions. Deliberative Polling also appears to be an effective method of public education, as evidenced by participants' increased knowledge about objective political matters (e.g., knowledge about the function of government bodies) after participating. Deliberative polling is decidedly not, however, representative of the kinds of political encounters that take place in more mundane settings. For instance, the presence of experts and moderators is, of course, not likely to be found in everyday political discourse. Thus, the generalization of the findings of Fishkin's Deliberative Polling beyond the ideal settings where it typically takes place is questionable. Furthermore, it is not a practical method to test the predictions made by deliberative democratic theory because its expense precludes widespread use. It should be noted, however, that the widespread use of this paradigm in the form of a national holiday called *Deliberation Day* has been called for by Ackerman and Fishkin (2003).

Johnson and Johnson (2000; see also Smith, Johnson, & Johnson, 1981) developed an approach to studying and improving discourse called Constructive Controversy. This approach is geared toward, and has been used almost exclusively in, classroom settings (i.e., grade school, high school, and college classrooms). Constructive Controversy is a decision-making process that involves forming groups that advocate different positions on an attitude issue, researching the positions, presenting and debating the alternative positions, genuinely taking the other side's position, and attempting to create a synthesis when reaching a decision. Johnson and Johnson (2000) present evidence of their approach's effectiveness in improving a range of outcome measures (e.g., quality of decision-making and perspective-taking) over another group-based decision making strategy based on reaching consensus and individual decision-making. Johnson and Johnson's contribution to elevating political discourse is an important one, but its applicability and feasibility beyond the classroom environment is questionable. When people hold their positions strongly, it may not be feasible to have them genuinely advocate the opposition's standpoint. Moreover, strong incentives would likely be needed to get non-captive audiences to participate in the process of Constructive Controversy, which can span several days (see Smith et al., 1981).

Mutz and her colleagues (e.g., Mutz, 2002; Mutz & Mondak, 2006) take a more practical approach to studying political discourse. Their approach, in contrast to Deliberative Polling and Constructive Controversy, is one that is not directly aimed at intervention. It is aimed, first and foremost, at understanding the effects and processes of political contact. Their political contact research has done much to further understanding of what they term "cross-cutting political contact," or contact between people who disagree over political issues.

The work conducted by Mutz and colleagues suggests that through contact with members of the political opposition one may gain an understanding of their rationales that, in turn, may lead to more respect for those who hold oppositional political viewpoints. Mutz (2002c) found evidence

consistent with the view that cross-cutting contact increases tolerance for diverse political perspectives. Using survey data, she also found support for two explanations of how cross-cutting contact may lead to greater levels of tolerance: affective ties and awareness of the other side's rationales. Affective ties were operationally defined as reported closeness of a relationship, and awareness of the other side's rationales was operationally defined as the number of reasons a respondent was able to report for the other side's position.

Mutz (2002b) also experimentally tested the effects of exposure to cross-cutting political views. She found that "mere exposure" to political rationales in the form of reasons printed on note cards led to higher political tolerance than did a no-exposure condition. This effect was present for participants who scored high, but not low, in perspective-taking ability (see Davis, 1983). In a study of workplace cross-cutting contact, Mutz and Mondak (2006) found additional evidence that cross-cutting contact may lead to increased knowledge about the reasons behind the opposition's views and higher levels of political tolerance. This evidence converges with the findings of Popan et al. (2010), who found that reports of positive contact with the political opposition can lead to higher levels of attributed rationality for their positions, which was associated, in turn, with more positive attitudes towards the opposition.

With the exception of Mutz' (2002b) experiment testing the effects of exposure to oppositional rationales on political tolerance, much of the research evidence for the effects of political contact has been provided through correlational and cross-sectional methodology, severely limiting the conclusions that can be drawn from such work. The present research addressed this shortfall by attempting to experimentally manipulate the civility and rationality of political discussion.

Most theorizing on political deliberation generally praises the benefits of contact that involves political disagreement and largely ignores potentially negative outcomes; yet, the existing evidence for the effects of interpersonal contact that involves political disagreement is

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not entirely positive. Such contact has been linked by previous research to what may be regarded as undesirable outcomes. Lower levels of political engagement (Mutz, 2002) and the polarization of political attitudes (Postmes et al., 2002) have each been linked to political contact that involves disagreement. Mutz (2002a) found that participants with more politically heterogeneous social networks, where heterogeneity of a social network is defined as support by network members for different presidential candidates, were less likely to vote in presidential elections in the U.S. than those with less politically heterogeneous social networks. Mutz argues that those with more politically heterogeneous social networks may become politically disengaged due to ambivalence created by exposure to conflicting views and also through the desire to maintain social harmony within their social networks. Likewise, Huckfeldt et al.'s (2004) analysis of the 2000 National Election Study found that greater political heterogeneity of social networks was associated with less political engagement and more political attitude ambivalence.

Research findings which suggest that contact with oppositional viewpoints decreases political engagement are consistent with Pettigrew's (1998) concept of "deprovincialization." Deprovincialization refers to a reappraisal of an ingroup as a result of intergroup contact that leads one to see the ingroup in a new, less superior light. Contact with people who oppose one's political positions may lead to a reappraisal of those positions, and potentially a re-evaluation of any groups that these political attitudes may define. In other words, contact involving political disagreement may lead to a re-evaluation of one's own political identity. Recent research, however, has not provided strong evidence for this re-appraisal process in ethnic and religious groups (Tausch et al., 2010). It is my view that such political contact may have the potential to temper zealotry, but it seems equally, if not more, plausible that it would fan its flames, except under the rare circumstances where the political disagreement leads one to seriously doubt positions that are fundamental to one's political orientation or party.

The Internet is a largely unexplored frontier in intergroup relations research that offers great promise of playing an important role in increasing intergroup contact, improving intergroup relations on a global scale, and offering easy access to diverse forums of political discussion. Amichai-Hamburger and colleagues (Amichai-Hamburger & Furnham, 2007; Amichai-Hamburger & McKenna, 2006) note several aspects of Internet contact that may facilitate intergroup contact and its positive effects. One important advantage that Internet contact has is that, for many people, it is an extremely efficient and practical way to be in contact with members of different groups. For people with computers and Internet access, it is generally less costly and more feasible to engage in contact over the Internet than it is in face-to-face settings.

Amaichai-Hamburger and Furman (2007) also contend that Internet contact leads to conditions that can facilitate the more positive outcomes of intergroup contact. They note that attenuation of status cues can lessen the perception of between-group status differences through the relative absence of visual information and nonverbal cues. They also suggest that the Internet can enhance the positive effects of intergroup contact by reducing the experience of intergroup anxiety (see Stephan & Stephan, 2000), particularly because those communicating over the Internet are better able to "edit" their communications and may consequently feel less anxious about saying something that would lead to offense and/or embarrassment. People in Internet contact situations may feel more comfortable and less threatened by outgroup members than those who initially encounter outgroup members in a face-to-face setting. Furthermore, Amaichai-Hamburger and Furman posit that the anonymity of many Internet settings may also increase self-disclosure, an important mediator of the contact-prejudice relationship (Turner, Hewstone, & Voci, 2007).

Unfortunately, research on intergroup aspects of the Internet has lagged far behind research examining group processes in computer-mediated settings (see Baron & Kerr, 2003,

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pp. 191-204). Given the small amount of empirical research on political contact more generally, it is not surprising that there is only a small amount of systematic empirical research on the topic of Internet political discourse and on the role of the Internet in political relations (Postmes & Baym, 2005). Several researchers have, however, begun to explore this emerging research area. In an American sample, Wojcieszak and Mutz (2009) found that approximately 10% of their respondents participated in online discussion groups that were political in nature. However, they also found that much political discussion on the Internet, especially discussion involving disagreement, takes place in settings that are not explicitly intended to be forums for political discussion (e.g., social networking sites). Their results also indicate that Internet discussion groups that are political in nature expose people to much more political agreement than disagreement. This may be troubling in light of evidence suggesting that Internet discussion among like-minded individuals can lead to a greater polarization of opinions (Lee, 2007; Postmes et al., 2002).

In the previously mentioned groundbreaking study of Internet intergroup contact, Postmes et al. (2002) formed political discussion groups composed of conservative and liberal students to test the effects of depersonalization (operationally defined as a lack of individuating information) on attitude polarization. Their results showed that depersonalization in the context of Internet political discussions leads to attitude polarization. When individuating information (e.g., photos) was absent in the discussion forum, the liberal and conservative attitudes diverged; however, when individuating information was present, their attitudes converged in the liberal direction. The results of this study imply that a lack of individuating information, which is common in many Internet contexts, can lead one to perceive the self and others as being part of an intergroup rather than an inter-individual context (see also Lee, 2007). This depersonalization may lead participants in Internet communication to partake in group-

protective strategies (e.g., intergroup differentiation), thereby rendering the contact situation less likely to improve intergroup relations.

A quick inspection of comments left below Internet video clips dealing with political matters indicates that the Internet is often anything but a forum for civil and rational discourse. In such contexts, irrational, juvenile, and hate-filled discourse frequently dominate. This outcome may be due, in part, to the depersonalizing and deindividuating aspects of such contexts, but it may also occur, to some extent, because such websites may attract people who are looking for conflict.

In summary, previous research indicates that civility and rationality (Mutz, 2002; Popan et al., 2010) are key components in effective political discourse between those who disagree over political issues. Based on the reviewed research, I argue that a civil and rational orientation to political discourse is one that will lead to the most favorable outcomes. Although this is no groundbreaking assertion, the existing scientific literature does not yet provide compelling experimental evidence for the effects of civil and rational discourse on critical outcome measures.

Two studies were conducted to investigate the effect of civility and rationality during political discussion that involves disagreement. In the first study, the content of fabricated exchanges between ostensibly liberal and conservative discussion board "participants" was used to manipulate civility and rationality of the discussion content. In the second study, discussion rules were varied in an attempt to encourage discussion that was civil and/or rational. Both studies, and their respective hypotheses, are discussed in more detail below.

The first study investigated the manipulated civility and rationality of contact in what is ostensibly a discussion group with liberal and conservative members. Participants were randomly assigned to encounter simulated Internet political discussion groups in a 2 (civility: high or low) X 2 (rationality: high or low) between-subjects experimental design. After exposure

to the discussion group, participants completed measures of political identification; evaluations (general attitude) of the political outgroup; political attitude certainty or conviction (Abelson, 1988); attributions of a rational basis for outgroup ideology (see Popan et al., 2010); and degree of perceived difference between liberals and conservatives. The hypotheses for Study 1 follow.

Hypothesis 1: Main effects of civility were expected. Exposure to civil political discourse was expected to lead to more positive outcomes than was exposure to political discourse that is not civil. Those in the high civility condition were expected to give more positive self-reported evaluations of the political opposition (H1a), higher levels of attributed rationality for the other side's positions (H1b), lower levels of political attitude certainty (H1c), and rate a smaller degree of perceived political difference between liberals and conservatives (H1d).

Hypothesis 2: Main effects of rationality were expected. Exposure to rational political discourse was expected to lead to more positive outcomes than was exposure to political discourse that is not rational. Those in the high rationality condition were expected to give more positive self-reported evaluations of the political opposition (H2a), higher levels of attributed rationality for the other side's positions (H2b), lower levels of political attitude certainty (H2c), and a smaller degree of perceived political difference between liberals and conservatives (H2d).

Hypothesis 3: A Civility X Rationality interaction was expected. The main effect of rationality was expected to be found only within the high civility condition. That is, a significant difference between the high and low rationality conditions was expected only when civility is high as opposed to low. This specific was expected for self-reported evaluations of the political opposition (H3a), levels of attributed rationality for the other side's positions (H3b), levels of political attitude certainty (H3c), and perceived political difference between liberals and conservatives (H3d).

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Although no hypotheses are offered for evaluation of the ingroup and ingroup identification, these measures were assessed and used as an exploratory dependent variables. The second proposed study was among the first to prospectively investigate the effects of Internet political discussion on key outcome measures. Specifically, the effects of civility and rationality instructions were examined. Participants were randomly assigned to groups in a 2 (civility instructions: present, absent) X 2 (rationality instructions: present, absent) experimental design, wherein discussion rules regarding the requested nature of the political conversations were manipulated. Additionally, pre- and post-discussion measures of the outcome variables were obtained. My hypotheses for Study 2 follow. These hypotheses correspond to the hypotheses for Study 1.

Hypothesis 1: Main effects of civility were expected. The presence of civility instructions was expected to lead to more positive outcomes than was the condition where civility instructions are absent. Those in the condition where civility instructions are present were expected to give more positive self-reported evaluations of the political opposition (H1a), higher levels of attributed rationality for the other side's positions (H1b), lower levels of political position certainty (H1c), and a smaller degree of perceived political difference between liberals and conservatives (H1d).

Hypothesis 2: Main effects of rationality are expected. The presence of rationality instructions was expected to lead to more positive outcomes than was the condition where rationality instructions are absent. Those conditions where rationality instructions are present were expected to lead to more positive self-reported evaluations of the political opposition (H-2a), higher levels of attributed rationality for the other side's positions (H2b), lower levels of political attitude certainty (H2c), and a smaller degree of political difference between liberals and conservatives (H2d).

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Hypothesis 3: A Civility X Rationality interaction is expected. The main effect of rationality instructions was expected to be found only within the condition where civility instructions were absent. That is, a significant difference between the rationality instructions present and absent conditions was expected only when civility instructions were also present. This greater specific effect was expected for self-reported evaluations of the political opposition (H3a), levels of attributed rationality for the other side's positions (H3b), levels of political attitude certainty (H3c), and perceived political difference between liberals and conservatives (H3d).

Although no hypotheses are offered for ingroup evaluation and identification strength, these variables were measured as exploratory dependent variables.

CHAPTER 2

STUDY 1

Study 1 Method

Participants and Design

One hundred fifty-two student participants (M_{age} = 21.07, *SD* = 4.77) were recruited from the Psychology Department participant pool at The University of Texas at Arlington. They received course credit for participating in the study. Participants who indicated on an online prescreening questionnaire that they considered their political orientation to be either liberal or conservative were eligible to participate. Those who indicated that their political orientation was neither liberal nor conservative were excluded from participation. Sixty percent of the participants self-identified as politically liberal and 40% indicated that they were politically conservative[2]. The gender breakdown of the sample was 68% female and 32% male. The sample was diverse in terms of race and ethnicity with 35% White, non-Hispanic, 30% Hispanic, 16% black, 12% Asian, and 7% other/mixed. Participants were randomly assigned to conditions in a 2 (civility: high or low) X 2 (rationality: high or low) experimental design.

Procedure and Measures

Participants signed up to participate in what was ostensibly a study of interactions on Internet political discussion boards. During the informed consent procedures, the participants were told that the study involved reading and contributing to a political discussion board that was created for the purposes of the study. They were also informed that they would be asked to respond to questions regarding their experience on the political discussion board and answer some questions about their political orientation and views.

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The simulated discussion boards contained threads on the following topics: performance of the current presidential administration, healthcare reform, and gun control (see Appendix A for details). The content of the fabricated exchanges that was visible to participants varied according to the experimental conditions. Participants in the high civility conditions encountered an online discussion board containing respectful posts, whereas participants in the low civility condition encountered relatively disrespectful posts. Participants in the high rationality condition encountered posts characterized by political opinions that were ostensibly based on thoughtful reflection and stronger arguments, whereas participants in the low rationality condition encountered political opinions that were accompanied by vacuous or weak arguments (see Appendix A).

Participants were asked to read each discussion thread and to contribute at least one comment to the discussion board. Comments from previous participants were not visible to subsequent participants. That is, each participant entered a fabricated discussion board that was constant for all participants randomly assigned to a given condition. After commenting on the discussion board, the participants were asked to complete a questionnaire containing the following measures (see Appendix B for the complete questionnaire, and see Table 1 for the scale reliabilities of the dependent measures).

Political Orientation and Attitudes was assessed by a 7-point political continuum (*extremely conservative, moderately conservative, slightly conservative, neither liberal nor conservative, slightly liberal, moderately liberal, extremely liberal*). Participants were also asked to respond to political position statements (e.g., "Same-sex (gay) marriages should be outlawed.") Responses to these items were made on 7-point scales (1 = *strongly disagree*; 7 = *strongly agree*).

Political Position Certainty was assessed following each political attitude item by asking participants to respond on a 7-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*; 7 = *strongly agree*) to

an item adapted from Abelson (1988): "I think my point of view on this issue is absolutely correct." The mean score of this item across all political attitude position statements were used as the certainty score.

Political Identification Strength was assessed using items adapted from Luhtanen and Crocker (1992) and Brown, Condor, Wade, and Williams (1986). For example, "Being a (liberal or conservative) is an important part of who I am." Responses were recorded on 7-point scales (1 = *strongly disagree*; 7 = *strongly agree*). Additionally, *evaluation of the political ingroup* was assessed with an attitude thermometer scale (see Haddock, Zanna, & Esses, 1993).

Evaluation of the Political Outgroup was assessed with an attitude thermometer scale as a measure of general outgroup attitude. The response was made on a 101-point attitude thermometer scale.

Rational Attributions for Outgroup Positions was measured with items used by Kenworthy and Miller (2002) and Popan et al. (2010). These items were preceded by the following instructions.

Please think about your perceptions of why [conservatives / liberals], in general, have the political attitudes that they hold. For each of the following items, indicate (by choosing a number) the degree to which you think it applies to the origins of the political attitudes and views of people who are [conservative / liberal].

Some example items are: "Their individual thinking about the issues," and "A logical thought process." Responses were made on 7-point scales (1 = *strongly disagree*; 7 = *strongly agree*).

Perceived Political Difference between liberals and conservatives was measured with the following items: "Conservatives and liberals share many of the same values." (reversed), "Liberals and conservatives are very similar." (reversed), Liberals and conservatives have extremely different political viewpoints." "There is a big difference between the political views of

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most liberals and conservatives." Responses were made on 7-point scales (1 = *strongly disagree*; 7 = *strongly agree*).

Manipulation Checks. Participants also completed manipulation check measures of the perceived quality of contact. These items were preceded by the stem: "I found the interaction between the discussion board participants to be…" Ratings on 7-point scales (1 = *strongly disagree*; 7 = *strongly agree*) were made to assess the degree to which participants found the interaction to be civil (e.g., pleasant, cooperative, and civil; α = .85) and rational (e.g., thoughtful, based on reason, and rational; α = .92).

After completing these measures, the participants were questioned about their thoughts on the nature of the study (i.e., probed for suspicion), debriefed about the true nature of the study, and thanked for their participation.

Data Analysis

All hypotheses for Study 1 and the influence of the manipulations on the manipulation check measures were tested using a 2 (civility: high or low) X 2 (rationality: high or low) X 2 (political orientation: liberal or conservative) ANOVA for each outcome measure, separately. Simple effects analyses with a Sidak-Bonferroni correction for type-I error were used to explore the nature of any detected interactions.

Study 1 Stimuli Pilot Test

A sample of participants was recruited to test the effectiveness of the Study 1 manipulations on the variables they were intended to manipulate (rationality and civility). Forty-four self-identified liberal and conservative participants read the stimuli and rated each of the manipulation check items (see Appendix A). These data were analyzed with 2 (civility: high, low) X 2 (rationality: high, low) X 3 (discussion question: Obama's performance, universal healthcare, and gun control) mixed ANOVAs. Civility and rationality were between-participant manipulations, and discussion question was a within-participant factor. The mean scores on the

respective manipulation check items were used as the dependent variables. A main effect of the civility manipulation on the civility manipulation check was found, $F(1, 40) = 148.15$, $p < .01$, partial $\eta^2 = .79$. As intended, participants in the high civility condition ($M = 5.85$, $SE = 0.17$) reported the discussion to be more civil than participants in the low civility condition ($M = 2.92$, $SE = 0.17$). The test of the rationality manipulation also revealed the intended main effect of rationality, $F(1, 40) = 19.91$, $p < .01$, partial $\eta^2 = .18$, with participants in the high rationality condition ($M = 4.33$, $SE = 0.19$) reporting the discussions as more rational than participants in the low rationality condition ($M = 3.55$, $SE = 0.18$).

Study 1 Results

Data Screening

Prior to the analyses, the data were screened for univariate outliers, non-normal distributions, and missing values. No implausible values for the current subject population were detected. Although several variables exhibited significant skewness (e.g., ingroup evaluation and political position certainty), the data were deemed appropriate for ANOVA. Scattered missing values were present in the data, but the missing data were present at acceptably low levels (< 5% of cases within each variable).

Sample Descriptive Statistics and Correlations among Dependent Variables

Correlations between the dependent variables, descriptive statistics, and scale reliabilities (Cronbach's α) are reported in Table 1. Inspection of the scale means revealed surprisingly high levels of political attitude certainty, significantly negative evaluations of the outgroup, and significantly positive evaluations of the ingroup (as compared to the scale midpoint). Political attitude certainty scores, ingroup evaluation, identification strength, and perceived political difference were each significantly higher than the midpoint of their respective scales (all p's < .01). Outgroup evaluation and rational attribution for outgroup ideology were each significantly lower than the midpoint of their respective scales (all p's < .01). The

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presence of reasonably high levels of political identification, high levels of attitude certainty, and a sizable amount of differentiation between liberals and conservatives indicate that the liberal and conservative intergroup dimension is acceptable to use with this sample. That is to say, these intergroup categories, which are largely social constructions, were meaningful to the participants in the sample.

Inspection of the correlation matrix revealed relationships suggesting that the larger amount of perceived difference between a political ingroup and the opposition, the less rational and more negatively the opposition is viewed, and the more positively one's own political orientation group is viewed. Strength of identification with one's political orientation was positively correlated with evaluation of the ingroup, but it was not significantly related to evaluation of the outgroup.

Table 2.1 Study 1 Correlations, Descriptives, and Scale Reliabilities

Measure	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. ID Strength	--	.36**	-.10	-0.17*	.30**	.16*
2. Ingroup Evaluation		--	-.01	-.10	.24**	.00
3. Outgroup Evaluation			--	-.23**	-.26**	-.19*
4. Rational Attribution				--	-.30**	.27**
5. Perceived Difference					--	.21
6. Certainty						--
M	4.34	73.77	42.72	3.76	5.00	5.72
SD	1.25	18.50	22.77	0.87	1.17	0.72
α	.86	--	--	.76	.74	.81

Note. Cronbach's alpha is not computed for ingroup and outrgoup evaluation because they are single-item measures. ID Strength = Identification strength; Rational Attribution = Rational attribution for the basis of outgroup positions

*p < .05, **p < .01*

Manipulation Checks

The manipulations of civility and rationality each affected their respective manipulation check variable. A main effect of civility was found on the civility manipulation check, with participants in the high civility condition reporting a higher level of civility in the discussion (M = 5.91, SE = 0.15) than participants in the low civility condition (M = 4.18, SE = 0.14), $F(1, 144)$ = 69.81, $p < .001$, partial η^2 = .33. Additionally, a main effect of rationality was found on the rationality manipulation check, with participants in the high rationality condition (M = 4.36, SE =

0.17) reporting higher levels of rationality in the discussion than participants in the low rationality condition ($M = 3.59$, $SE = 0.17$), $F(1, 144) = 10.14$, $p = .002$, partial $\eta^2 = .07$.

Political Identification Strength

A 2 (civility: high, low) X 2 (rationality: high, low) X 2 (political orientation: liberal, conservative) ANOVA was conducted with political identification strength as the dependent variable. A small, but statistically significant, difference was detected between liberals and conservatives, with conservatives ($M = 4.65$, $SE = 0.16$) reporting higher levels of identification than liberals ($M = 4.13$, $SE = 0.13$), $F(1, 144) = 6.15$, $p = .01$. The rationality manipulation did not have an effect on political identification strength, $F(1, 144) = 0.13$, $p = .72$, partial $\eta^2 = .001$. Civility did not have a significant effect on political identification strength, $F(1, 144) = 0.37$, $p = .54$, partial $\eta^2 = .003$. There was also not a significant Civility X Rationality interaction, $F(1, 144) = 0.02$, $p = .89$, partial $\eta^2 =< .001$. All other effects in the model were not statistically significant (all $F's < 1$).

Ingroup Evaluation

A 2 (civility: high, low) X 2 (rationality: high, low) X 2 (political orientation: liberal, conservative) ANOVA was conducted with evaluation of the political ingroup as the dependent variable. The rationality manipulation did not have a statistically significant effect on evaluations of one's political orientation (liberal or conservative), $F(1, 143) = 0.36$, $p = .54$, partial $\eta^2 = .003$. An unpredicted effect of the civility manipulation was detected. Participants in the high civility condition reported more positive attitudes toward their political ingroup ($M = 78.41$, $SE = 2.19$) than did participants in the low civility condition ($M = 69.91$, $SE = 2.12$), $F(1, 143) = 7.76$, $p = .006$, partial $\eta^2 = .05$. The rationality and civility manipulations did not interact to influence ingroup evaluation, $F(1, 143) = 1.62$, $p = .21$, partial $\eta^2 = .01$. No other main effects or interactions were significant in the model (all $p's > .20$ and all partial $\eta^2 < .02$).

Political Attitude Certainty

A 2 (civility: high, low) X 2 (rationality: high, low) X 2 (political orientation: liberal, conservative) ANOVA was conducted with political attitude certainty across all issues as the dependent variable. There was not a main effect of rationality, $F(1, 144) = 0.44$, $p = .51$, partial $\eta^2 = .003$. There was also not a main effect of civility, $F(1, 144) = 0.62$, $p = .29$, partial $\eta^2 = .009$. Rationality and civility did not interact to influence levels of attitude certainty, $F(1, 144) = 1.65$, $p = .20$, partial $\eta^2 = .01$. No other main effects or interactions were detected in this model (all p's > .2 and all partial $\eta^2 < .008$).

A 2 (civility: high, low) X 2 (rationality: high, low) X 2 (political orientation: liberal, conservative) ANOVA on the reported certainty of the topics which were present on the discussion board (performance of President Obama, gun control, and healthcare) indicated that participants in the high rationality condition reported slightly (but significantly) lower levels of certainty ($M = 5.72$, $SE = 0.11$) than participants in the low rationality condition ($M = 6.03$, $SE = 0.11$), $F(1, 141) = 4.18$, $p = .04$, partial $\eta^2 = .03$. Civility did not have a significant effect on the certainty of the discussed topics, $F(1, 141) = 0.84$, $p = .36$, partial $\eta^2 = .006$. There was also not a Civility X Rationality interaction, $F(1, 141) = 0.45$, $p = .51$, partial $\eta^2 = .003$. No other main effects or interactions were significant in the model (all p's > .11 and all partial $\eta^2 < .02$).

Outgroup Evaluation

The 2 (civility: high, low) X 2 (rationality: high, low) X 2 (political orientation: liberal, conservative) ANOVA with evaluation of the political outgroup as the dependent variable yielded no support for the predictions that civility ($F[1, 143] = 0.28$, $p = .60$, partial $\eta^2 = .002$) and rationality ($F[1, 143] = 0.18$, $p = .67$, partial $\eta^2 = .002$) would influence evaluations of the political outgroup . The predicted interaction between civility and rationality was also not supported, $F(1, 143) = 1.05$, $p > .30$, partial $\eta^2 = .007$. An unpredicted interaction between civility and political orientation was detected, $F(1, 143) = 5.52$, $p = .02$, partial $\eta^2 = .04$. Simple effects

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analyses indicated that in the high civility condition conservatives (M = 49.64, SE = 4.28) reported a more positive evaluation of their outgroup (liberals) than did liberals (M = 38.47, SE = 3.35; however, no significant difference between conservatives (M = 38.72, SE = 4.09) and liberals (M = 45.36, SE = 3.37) was found in the low civility condition. No other main effects or interactions were significant (all $p's$ > .22 and all partial η^2 < .01).

Perceived Political Difference

The 2 (civility: high, low) X 2 (rationality: high, low) X 2 (political orientation: liberal, conservative) ANOVA with perceived political difference as the dependent variable yielded no support for the main effect and interaction hypotheses. Specifically, civility did not have a significant effect on perceived political difference, $F(1, 143)$ = 0.82, p = .78, partial η^2 = .001. The manipulation of rationality did not have a significant effect on perceived political difference, $F(1, 143)$ = 0.17, p = .68, partial η^2 = .001. The interaction between civility and rationality was also not statistically significant, $F(1, 143)$ = 0.28, p = .60, partial η^2 = .002. All other effects in the model were not statistically significant (all $p's$ > .073 and all partial η^2 < .03).

Rational Attributions for Outgroup Ideology

A final 2 (civility: high, low) X 2 (rationality: high, low) X 2 (political orientation: liberal, conservative) ANOVA was conducted with rational attributions for outgroup ideology as the dependent variable. No support was found for the main effect or interaction hypotheses. Civility did not have a significant effect on rational attributions, $F(1, 144)$ = 0.81, p = .37, partial η^2 < .006. Rationality did not have a significant effect on rational attributions, $F(1, 144)$ = 0.24, p = .88, partial η^2 < .001. The interaction between civility and rationality was also not statistically significant, $F(1, 144)$ = 1.27, p = .26, partial η^2 < .009. All other main effects and interactions in the model were not statistically significant (all $p's$ > .17 and all partial η^2 < .01).

Study 1 Discussion

The results of Study 1 failed to support the predictions that the manipulations of civility and rationality in the internet political discussion would influence, and interact to influence, the intergroup dependent measures: evaluations of the political outgroup, perceived rationality of the political outgroup, and perceived intergroup difference. Additionally, little evidence was found for the effects of civility and rationality on identification strength, political attitude certainty, and evaluation of the political ingroup.

Several unpredicted effects were found. In the high civility condition, conservatives reported more positive attitudes towards their political outgroup than did liberals, whereas no difference between liberals and conservatives was found in the low civility condition. This finding may suggest that conservatives in the sample were more influenced by the displays of respect in the high civility condition than were liberals. That is to say, displays of respect from liberals may have had a stronger influence on conservatives' views of liberals than vice versa.

An unpredicted effect of the rationality manipulation on political attitude certainty of the topics discussed in the discussion board was also detected. Participants in the high rationality condition reported lower levels of certainty regarding the discussion board topics than did participants in the low rationality condition. This finding suggests that exposure to stronger arguments on various sides of an issue can lead to less certainty regarding the "absolute correctness" of one's position. The mitigation of certainty through exposure to more rational discourse was slight and therefore, it does not appear to lead to attitude ambivalence or disengagement as some research on heterogeneous political networks suggests (Huckfeldt et al. 2004). Given the surprisingly high level of certainty found in this student sample (see Table 1), tempering it through exposure to reason-based counterarguments would appear to be a desirable effect.

An additional unpredicted effect of the civility manipulation on the evaluations of the political ingroup was also detected. Participants in the high civility condition rated their political ingroup more favorably than did participants in the low civility condition. Although this effect was predicted for evaluation of the outgroup as the outcome, it is surprising that evaluation of one's ingroup was enhanced through more civil contact. This effect may be explained by assigning credit to the civil tone of the discussion to the ingroup. That is to say, participants may have felt more positively about their own group as a result of engaging in a civil dialogue to which their group contributed. This finding is in line with what has been called a group-serving bias or an "ultimate attribution error" (Pettigrew, 1979), which is defined, in part, by the tendency to assign credit for successful outcomes to the ingroup.

Despite the much-touted importance of civil and rational discourse for democratic society, the current study was not able to demonstrate many of the predicted effects. However, the absence of the hypothesized effects in this study may have been the result of the very limited duration of the experiment. Although the manipulations of civility and rationality were successful (according to participants' judgments of the stimuli) the impact of civility and rationality on the outcome measures may not have occurred because the contact situation lasted less than a half-hour. Such a brief encounter may not have been enough to impact even short-term measures of the study variables.

Additionally, the posttest only design used in Study 1 precluded the ability to test for changes in the dependent variables over time. Measuring the dependent variables in a pretest-posttest design would make it possible to examine whether, and to what extent, the dependent variables change from a pre-contact to a post-contact measure.

A second study was therefore designed and conducted to address these problems by investigating internet political discourse across a longer period of time. In this study, the discussion board participants were each actual participants (i.e., the posts were not fabricated

as was the case in Study 1). Study 2 involved political discussions in response to the same discussion topics as Study 1. These discussions took place on a discussion board forum created for the purposes of the study and were between self-identified liberal and conservative students over a two-week period. Simple discussion rules were used in an attempt to manipulate the civility and rationality of the discussion content. Measures of the dependent variables were taken before and after participation in 4-person discussion groups.

CHAPTER 3

STUDY 2

Study 2 Method

Participants and Design

Seventy student participants who self-identified as holding either liberal or conservative political views were recruited from the Psychology Department's participant pool. They received course credit for participating in the study. Participants who indicated on an online prescreening questionnaire that they considered their political orientation to be either liberal or conservative were eligible to participate[3]. Sixty participants (M_{age} = 22.19, SD = 5.16) were assigned to discussion groups, 57 of whom completed the Time 2 measures. Two liberals and one conservative did not complete the Time 2 measures. The gender breakdown of the sample was approximately 51% female and 49% male. The ethnic/racial makeup of the sample was approximately 45% White, non-Hispanic, 26% Hispanic, 16% Black, 7% Asian, and 7% other/mixed. The discussion groups were randomly assigned to conditions in a 2 (civility instructions: present or absent) X 2 (rationality instructions: present or absent) experimental design.

Procedure and Measures

Eligible participants signed up to take part in a study of Internet political discussion. The participants individually attended 15-minute orientation sessions. During the orientation sessions, informed consent procedures and instructions about the online discussion board were delivered. Participants were informed that they were taking part in a study of political discussion on the Internet. Registration for the discussion board website was also conducted during the

orientation session. Usernames containing three letters chosen by each participant and an indication of the participant's political orientation were created (e.g., LRJ conservative, LMB liberal). After the orientation session, participants were asked to respond to an online questionnaire (Time 1) sent via email that contained demographic items and the dependent measures (see Appendix B).

Following completion of the baseline survey, the participants were eligible for assignment to the two-week online discussion groups. Groups were formed as two liberals and two conservative became available for assignment to the discussion groups. Participants were instructed that they were required to make a minimum of 4 contributions (comments or new discussion threads) to the discussion board, and they were asked to check the discussion board for new comments several times a week over the course of the discussion period. Participants in the condition wherein rationality and civility instructions were absent were given the following instructions:

Participation in political discussion is an important part of democracy. During this study, you will be asked to exchange political ideas and comment on the ideas left by others. Feel free to comment on the discussion threads that already exist or start a new thread of your own.

Participants in the condition wherein the civility and rationality instructions are present were given the following discussion rules:

Participation in political discussion is an important part of democracy. During this study, you will be asked to exchange political ideas and comment on the ideas left by others. Feel free to comment on the discussion threads that already exist or start a new thread of your own. **There are two important rules for this discussion board: Please attempt to present a rational basis for your opinions and please be respectful of others' opinions. You may disagree, but attempt to do so in a respectful, rational, and civil manner.**

Participants in the rationality instructions only and in the civility instructions only conditions were given a version of the above instructions with, respectively, only the rationality or civility discussion rule present. Each group was presented the same set of 3 discussion question topics posted at the start of the discussion period (See Appendix A for the discussion questions). The discussion topics were the performance of the Obama administration, healthcare reform, and gun control.

Approximately half-way through the two-week discussion period, each discussion group participant was sent a reminder email. The purpose of this reminder was to increase the likelihood of discussion board participation from each participant.

Participants were emailed the Time 2 measures upon completion of the two-week discussion period. Aside from the addition of the civility and rationality manipulation check measures (see Appendix A), these measures were identical to those assessed at Time 1. On average, the participants completed the Time 2 measures approximately 22.57 days ($SD = 7.24$) after completion of the Time 1 measures.

Data Analysis

The planned analysis strategy for testing hypotheses one through four and evaluating the effects of the manipulation was to conduct multi-level modeling. This method of analysis was chosen because non-independence of observations within discussion groups was expected. Inspection of the intra-class correlation coefficients for the time two variables (see Table 4), however, indicated that none of the Time 2 dependent measures exhibited significant non-independence due to discussion group assignment[4]. Additionally, the group-level sample size requirements from the present sample did not reach acceptable levels for multi-level analysis. Therefore, mixed ANOVAs with repeated measures on the dependent variable and the manipulations as between-participant independent variables were conducted on each dependent variable. Within-participant effects (change in the dependent variables between

Time 1 and Time 2) and their interactions with the between-participants independent variables were interpreted to examine change between pre-discussion and post-discussion dependent measures. Between-participants main effects on the average (Time 1 and Time 2) dependent measure scores are not reported because the manipulations were delivered after the T1 assessment. Because of the small sample size of Study 2, political orientation was removed from the models. Between-participant ANOVAs were conducted on the manipulation check measures.

Study 2 Results

Data Screening

Prior to the analyses, the data were screened for univariate outliers, non-normal distributions, and missing values. No implausible values for the current subject population were detected. As was the case in Study 1, several variables were negatively skewed (e.g., ingroup evaluation and political position certainty); however, the data were deemed appropriate for ANOVA. Scattered missing values were present in the data at acceptably low levels (< 5% of cases within each variable).

Sample Descriptive Statistics and Correlations among Dependent Variables

Correlations between the dependent variables, descriptive statistics, and scale reliabilities (Cronbach's α) and intra-class correlation coefficients are reported in Table 2. Inspection of the Time 1 scale means revealed that the participants reported a relatively negative attitude toward their political outgroup and a positive attitude toward their ingroup. Time 1 means also indicated that the participants reported a large degree of perceived difference between liberals and conservatives and a high level of certainty about their political positions. Levels of identification with the political ingroup were also reasonably high (all *p's* < .05 when compared to respective scale midpoints).

Inspection of the correlations among the measured variables indicated that the larger the amount of perceived difference between a political ingroup and the opposition, the more negatively the opposition group was viewed. The negative relationship between perceived difference and rational attribution for outgroup ideology, which was found in Study 1, was not replicated in Study 2. Inspection of the correlations also revealed that the positive relationship between rational attribution for outgroup ideology and evaluation of the outgroup strengthened considerably from the pre-discussion to the post-discussion measure. The results of a comparison test for correlations from two different time points (see Raghunathan, Rosenthal, & Rubin, 1996) revealed that this increase was statistically significant, ZPF = 2.16, p = .03. The positive relationship between identification strength and perceived political difference also increased considerably from the pre- to the post-discussion measure, ZPF = 2.39, p = .02.

Table 3.1 Study 2 Correlations, Descriptives, and Scale Reliabilities

Measure	1	2	3	4	5	6	*M*	*SD*	α
1. ID Strength	--	.23	-.22	-.13	.24^	.07	4.32	1.18	.83
2. Ingroup Evaluation	.37**	--	-.28*	-.17	.17	.07	74.63	19.30	--
3. Outgroup Evaluation	-.15	-.15	--	.33*	-.37**	-.14	39.64	19.53	--
4. Rational Attribution	-06	-.06	.60**	--	-.06	.06	3.81	0.94	.72
5. Perceived Difference	-.48**	.22^	-.29*	-.07	--	.01	4.95	1.44	.82
6. Certainty	.12	.12	-.19	-.13	.10	--	5.80	0.81	.87
M	4.30	75.26	45.54	3.87	4.68	5.82			
SD	1.27	15.82	22.23	1.01	1.37	1.01			
α	.85	--	--	.76	.77	.92			
ICC	-.08	.04	.12	-.02	-.17	-.14			

Note. Correlations at Time 1 are presented above the diagonal, and correlations at Time 2 are presented above the diagonal. Means, standard deviations, and Cronbach's alpha for Time 1 are presented in the vertical columns, and means, standard deviations, and Cronbach's alpha for Time 2 are presented in vertical rows. Cronbach's alpha is not computed for the ingroup and outgroup evaluation because they are single-item measures. ID Strength = Identification strength; Rational Attribution = Rational attribution for the basis of outgroup positions.
^*p* < .10, **p* < .05, ***p* < .01

Manipulation Check Measures

The civility discussion rule did not have a significant effect on reported discussion group civility $F(1, 49) = 2.21$, $p = .14$, partial $\eta^2 = .04$. The conditions with civility instructions present ($M = 6.33$, $SE = 0.18$) did not yield significantly higher ratings of discussion civility than the conditions without civility instructions ($M = 5.94$, $SE = 0.20$).

The rationality discussion rule also did not have a significant effect on participant assessments of their discussion group's level of rationality, $F(1, 49) = 0.12$, $p = .73$, partial $\eta^2 = .002$. The conditions with rationality instructions present ($M = 5.41$, $SE = 0.24$) did not yield significantly higher ratings of discussion civility than the conditions without rationality instructions ($M = 5.52$, $SE = 0.22$). Means and standard deviations for all dependent variables by condition are reported in Table 2.

Political Identification Strength

A mixed ANOVA did not detect a significant change between Time 1 and Time 2 in political identification strength, $F(1, 53) = 0.05$, $p = .82$, partial $\eta^2 = .001$. The repeated measures variable did not interact with the civility discussion rule manipulation ($F[1, 53] = 1.09$, $p = .28$, partial $\eta^2 = .02$) or with the rationality discussion rule manipulation ($F[1, 53] = 1.18$, $p = .30$, partial $\eta^2 = .02$). The three-way interaction was also not statistically significant, $F(1, 53) = 0.99$, $p = .30$, partial $\eta^2 = .02$.

Evaluation of the Political Ingroup

The participants' evaluation of their political ingroup did not change significantly from Time 1 to Time 2, $F(1, 50) = 0.40$, $p = .52$, partial $\eta^2 = .001$. The repeated measures variable did not interact with the civility discussion rule manipulation ($F[1, 50] = 0.12$, $p = .74$, partial $\eta^2 = .002$) or the rationality discussion rule manipulation ($F[1, 50] = 1.19$, $p = .28$, partial $\eta^2 = .02$). The three-way interaction was also not statistically significant, $F(1, 50) = 0.08$, $p = .79$, partial $\eta^2 = .001$.

Political Position Certainty

The participants' self-rated certainty of the political issues on the political position measure did not change significantly from Time 1 to Time 2, $F(1, 53) = 0.09$, $p = .77$, partial $\eta^2 = .002$. The repeated measures variable did not interact with the civility discussion rule manipulation (F [1, 53] = 1.21, $p = .28$, partial $\eta^2 = .02$) or the rationality discussion rule manipulation (F [1, 53] = 0.14, $p = .71$, partial $\eta^2 = .003$). The three-way interaction was also not statistically significant, $F(1, 53) = 0.001$, $p = .97$, partial $\eta^2 < .001$.

Similarly, the participants' political position certainty with regard to the specific topics discussed did not change significantly from Time 1 to Time 2, $F(1, 53) = 0.39$, $p = .54$, partial $\eta^2 = .007$. The repeated measures variable did not interact with the civility discussion rule manipulation (F [1, 53] = 2.30, $p = .14$, partial $\eta^2 = .04$) or with the rationality discussion rule manipulation (F [1, 53]= 2.53, $p = .12$, partial $\eta^2 = .05$). The three-way interaction was also not statistically significant, $F(1, 53) = 0.15$, $p = .90$, partial $\eta^2 < .001$.

Evaluation of the Political Outgroup

A significant positive change in the participants' evaluations of the political outgroup was detected between Time 1 ($M = 38.55$, $SE = 2.65$) and Time 2 ($M = 45.57$, $SE = 3.10$), $F(1, 53) = 5.70$, $p = .02$, partial $\eta^2 = .10$. The change in political outgroup evaluation did not depend on the level of the civility discussion rule manipulation (F [1, 50]= 1.06, $p = .31$, partial $\eta^2 = .02$) or that of the rationality discussion rule manipulation (F [1, 50]= 0.20, $p = .66$, partial $\eta^2 = .05$). The three-way interaction was also not statistically significant, $F(1, 50) = 0.84$, $p = .37$, partial $\eta^2 = .02$.

Perceived Political Difference

A significant decrease in perceived political difference between liberals and conservatives was detected between Time 1 ($M = 4.97$, $SE = 0.20$) and Time 2 ($M = 4.63$, $SE = $

0.18), $F(1, 53) = 6.12$, $p = .02$, partial $\eta^2 = .10$. The change in perceived political difference did not vary significantly across the levels of the civility discussion rule manipulation (F [1, 53]= 0.50, $p = .48$, partial $\eta^2 = .009$) or of the rationality discussion rule manipulation (F [1, 53]= 0.18, $p = .68$, partial $\eta^2 = .003$). The three-way interaction was also not statistically significant, F (1, 53) = 0.50, $p = .48$, partial $\eta^2 = .009$.

Rational Attributions for Outgroup Ideology

There was no a significant change in rational attributions for the outgroup ideology between Time 1 and Time 2, $F(1, 53) = 0.18$, $p = .67$, partial $\eta^2 = .003$. The repeated measures variable did not interact with the civility discussion rule manipulation (F[1, 53] = 2.56, $p = .12$, partial $\eta^2 = .05$) or with the rationality discussion rule manipulation (F[1, 53] = 0.28, $p = .60$, partial $\eta^2 = .003$). The three-way interaction was also not statistically significant, $F(1, 53) = 0.24$, $p = .63$, partial $\eta^2 = .005$.

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Study 2 Discussion

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Although the simple discussion rules used in Study 2 did not affect the participants' ratings of the levels of rationality and civility in their discussion group, two important findings emerged. Comparisons of the pre-discussion and post-discussion measures of evaluation of the outgroup and of the perceived amount of political difference between liberals and conservatives suggest participants in Study 2 expressed more positive attitudes toward their political outgroup and less perceived difference between liberals and conservatives as a result of taking part in an Internet political discussion group. These findings are promising because they suggest that Internet contact experiences between groups that are ideologically opposed have the potential to improve intergroup attitudes and decrease the perception that the groups are very different. Bringing people who hold different political viewpoints together, under positive circumstances, may lessen any pre-existing notions that liberals and conservatives hold political viewpoints that are extremely divergent. Because some middle ground and agreement

is likely to be found in cordial, reason-based discussion, such contact might lessen the degree to which discussion participants hold an antagonistic conception of different political ideologies.

The marked increase between the pre- and post-discussion relationship between rational attributions for the outgroup's ideology and evaluation of the outgroup indicates that participants' evaluations of the outgroup were more strongly linked to their estimation of how rational their outgroup was after they had taken part in the discussion board. This finding is consistent with the notion that the effect of contact between oppositional ideological groups depends, in part, on the degree of perceived rationality of outgroup members (Popan et al., 2010).

The increase in the strength of the relationship between political identification and perceived political difference from pretest to posttest suggests that discussion participants who identify more strongly with their political ingroup are less apt to perceive similarity and common ground during a discussion. Conversely, participants who identify less strongly may be more ready to perceive and accept similarity between what are typically defined as opposition groups. A line of research investigating what has been termed "distinctiveness threat," or the tendency for intergroup similarity to impinge on one's social identity, has found that people who identify more strongly with a group exhibit a greater tendency to differentiate it from relevant outgroups in light of information that depicts intergroup similarity (Jetten, Spears, & Postmes, 2004). During political discourse, those who identify strongly may, therefore, be less likely to perceive instances of intergroup similarity and areas of common ground.

CHAPTER 4

GENERAL DISCUSSION

The results of this research project, generally, did not confirm expectations that higher levels of civility and rationality (Study 1) and discussion rules requesting civil and reason-based argument (Study 2) would lead to more positive outcomes. The expectation that higher levels of rationality in the discussion (H2b) would lead to less political attitude certainty was partially supported in Study 1. Participants in the high rationality condition reported lower levels of certainty for the topics that were present on the discussion board. Study 2 yielded two findings that are potentially important: a positive increase in evaluation of the outgroup between the pre- and the post-discussion measures and a decline in the level of perceived political difference between the pre- and post-discussion measure.

The difference in levels of political attitude certainty found between the high and low rationality conditions indicates that debate involving stronger arguments that take different perspectives has the potential to reduce levels of attitude certainty. If we assume that the arguments in the high rationality condition led participants to pay attention to and consider oppositional arguments to a greater extent than the low rationality condition, this finding is consistent with previous research which indicates that thinking about outgroup positions leads to lower levels of attitude certainty than does thinking about ingroup positions (Holtz & Miller, 1985). Political discourse involving disagreement may have the potential to lead to ambivalence and disengagement (Mutz, 2002a; Huckfeldt et al., 2004), but this outcome may be more likely among people with low levels of attitude certainty prior to encountering arguments advocating different positions. In situations where participants have relatively high levels of pre-existing

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attitude certainty and conviction, as was the case in this research, encountering a rational debate involving disagreement may reduce the level of certainty with which they hold their attitudes, but this reduction would not likely lead to disengagement or ambivalence (see Matthes, Morrsion, & Schemer, 2010 for a similar argument).

From the standpoint of facilitating political deliberation, extremely high levels of attitude conviction may hamper hopes of having those taking part in the deliberation seriously considering alternative viewpoints. Extremely high levels of certainty and conviction may render successful debate hopeless if high levels of certainty preclude genuine consideration of alternative, conflicting perspectives. If one's position on a given issue is seen as absolutely correct in a moral and/or a utilitarian sense, then the potential for an open-minded debate with the possibility of change is undermined. Indeed, many definitions of democratic deliberation include as a criterion the willingness for attitude or position change. Consider, for example, Chambers' (2003) definition: "we can say that deliberation is debate and discussion aimed at producing reasonable, well-informed opinions in which participants are willing to revise preferences in light of discussion, new information, and claims made by fellow participants" (p. 309). Extremely high levels of certainty and conviction may preclude the willingness for attitude change, but the results presented here suggest that reason-based discussion involving different points of view may serve to diminish high levels of certainty. Contact that involves political disagreement may have the potential to make attitude and belief change possible by first reducing the level of certainty with which one holds a given position.

The decrease in perceived difference between liberals and conservatives and the positive change in intergroup attitudes suggest that contact between ideologically opposed groups has the potential to improve intergroup relations. The perception of similarity between groups is an important aspect of Allport's (1954) intergroup contact theory. The significant increase in perceived similarity between liberals and conservatives in the current study likely

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occurred through exposure to viewpoints from outgroup members that were not altogether discrepant from what could be considered an ingroup viewpoint. For example, on the issue of the performance of President Obama, a conservative participant would be likely to encounter a liberal participant who finds the President's performance to be unsatisfactory. On the issue of gun control, a liberal participant might encounter agreement from a conservative that gun control laws should be tightened. Before taking part in the discussion group, the perception of intergroup differences may have not had a basis in recent actual contact with "liberals" and "conservatives," perhaps allowing for the influence of stereotypes that accentuate intergroup differences. However, in light of recent contact in the discussion board context, which showed that "the other side" is not as different in its political views as was initially thought, the participants may have revised their estimates of the degree of intergroup difference. Likewise, the relatively civil intergroup contact that occurred in the discussion boards may have influenced the participants to revise their attitudes toward their opposition in a positive direction. Participants may have expressed less antipathy towards their political outgroup after contact as a result of the positive contact experience in the discussion board exchanges.

Limitations

There were several limitations of the present research that should be noted. A major limitation of the second study was small sample size. To adequately test the hypotheses, a much larger sample size is desired. Although the levels of non-independence as a result of the grouping variable (the discussion group) were rather small across the dependent measures, a larger sample would provide a stronger and more accurate test of these values. Higher levels of non-independence would necessitate the use of a multi-level model. Future research with a much larger sample size is needed to more thoroughly test the effects of rationality and civility during political discussion.

Several aspects of the sample limit the potential generalizeability of any findings. A student sample was used in the present research. Although, the participants' responses indicated that they were strongly identified with their respective political orientations and quite certain about their political viewpoints, the content of the discussion and its effects on the discussants may have been dissimilar with an older, non-student sample, with potentially more crystallized political beliefs.

Additionally, the fact that participants were taking part in the discussion as part of a study likely influenced the level of civility and reason-based argument present in the discussions. The present research simply did not test the effects of extreme incivility on the outcome measures. The level of vulgarity and acrimony often present in Internet political discussions was not present in the Study 1 stimuli or in the discussions that took place in Study 2. Because the participants were taking part in a study in a university setting, the usual degree of anonymity available in Internet discussion forums was not present. Although identifying information was hidden from other participants on the discussion board, participant identity was not hidden from the researcher because participants registered to the discussion board website with the help of the researcher.

Another potential limitation of the present research was that the participants may have presumed that Study 2 was designed to improve attitudes and reduce the perception of intergroup difference. Participants encountered the dependent measures prior to and after the discussion period, and this may have tipped some of them off to the nature of the study. It should be noted that evaluations of the political outgroup expressed at Time 2 were still relatively negative, especially when compared to ingroup evaluations. Furthermore, the level of perceived difference was still sizeable at Time 2. Thus, any influence of demand characteristics was tempered by the participants' pre-existing tendency to view their political ingroup as different from, and superior to, their political outgroup.

The findings of Study 2, which suggest that political discussion led to a significant improvement of intergroup attitudes and a significant decrease in perceived difference between liberals and conservatives, should be interpreted with caution. Study 2 did not contain a no-discussion control group to which changes across time in the experimental groups could be compared. Therefore, it is not clear whether the changes in intergroup evaluations and perceived political differences were the result of the discussion.

Concluding Remarks

Since the start of this project, a great deal of media attention has been directed towards the issue of civility in American politics; however, the majority of this attention has been focused on politicians. The importance of civility between participants of political discussion who are not members of the political elite has received much less attention. Also, any call for more rational, reason-based political dialogue has been greatly overshadowed by the civility problem. From the standpoint of what is best for democratic society, it would seem preferable to have political discourse that is based on reason and is also perhaps somewhat impolite at times than to have a discourse that is unfailingly polite but vacuous. The overwhelming focus, however, has been on the issue of civility. In my view, attention should be focused on both of these qualities of political discourse.

It is not difficult to think about civility and rationality as independent constructs, but in everyday life, rationality and civility are often not perceived as such. People who are respectful in their approach to political disagreement are more likely to be viewed as rational, even when their arguments are not altogether logical. On the other hand, people who are disrespectful are not likely to be viewed as rational, even when their arguments may otherwise be valid and persuasive.

The current study uncovered some potentially positive effects of discourse between those with different ideological standpoints, but much more research is called for on the topic of

civil and rational political discourse. The effects of, and conditions that can lead to, civility and rationality during political discussion are still largely unexplored. Systematic empirical research on the topic is difficult to conduct, but the potential for contributing to democratic society by discovering ways to facilitate the positive effects of political disagreement exists. The vitriolic tone that Internet political discussions often take, and the potentially insidious effects that uncivil and irrational discourse may have on democratic participation and progress, merits future research aimed at mitigating disrespectful and irrational behavior during Internet political discussions

APPENDIX A

STUDY 1 STIMULI

Discussion Question: In your opinion, how is President Obama performing since he took office?

Rationality

High | Low

JMT (conservative): I think he is doing poorly because there has been very little real progress since he took office. I do have respect for Obama and those that support him though. Sorry, but I can't give him credit until he really brings about positive change.

JRW (liberal): i think he is doing great because the economy is turning around and it will take time for his other policies to take effect. although we may disagree, I do understand conservative views and people who don't like obama. They have valid opinions.

MWB (conservative): Obama should reconsider his policies because they represent a huge tax burden for future generations of Americans. I think he has good intentions, but their long-term effects should be considered.

SHB (liberal): I accept and appreciate conservative viewpoints, but I think Obama is doing awesome! He really helped to keep the financial meltdown from getting worse. He represents an improvement over the last president we had.

JMT (conservative): I think he is doing poorly because of his political leanings. I do have respect for Obama and those that support him though. Sorry, but I can't give him credit until he really does something positive.

JRW (liberal): i think he is doing great because I knew he would. He is amazing. although we may disagree, I do understand conservative views and people who don't like obama… they have valid opinions.

MWB (conservative): Obama should reconsider his policies because they are not very good for the country. I think he has good intentions, but they just aren't helping much.

SHB (liberal):I accept and appreciate conservative viewpoints, but I think Obama is doing awesome. He's really a great speaker. He represents an improvement over the last president we had.

JMT (conservative): I think he is doing poorly because there has been very little real progress since he took office. I don't have respect for Obama and those that support him. There's no way I can give him credit for anything because there has been very little positive change.

JRW (liberal):   i think he is doing great because the economy is turning around and it will take time for his other policies to take effect. i disagree with conservatives and with people who don't like obama… they are dumb.

MWB (conservative): Obama should reconsider his policies because they represent a huge tax burden for future generations of Americans. . I'm not sure what his intentions are, but they are NOT working.

SHB (liberal): I don't get or accept backwards conservative viewpoints. Through the economic stimulus, he helped to keep the financial meltdown from getting worse. He's way better than the last idiot president we had.

JMT (conservative): I think he is doing poorly because he's a socialist. I don't have respect for Obama and those that support him. There's no way I can give him credit for anything because he's no good.

JRW (liberal):I think he is doing great because I knew he would. he is amazing. I disagree with conservatives and with people who don't like Obama. … they are dumb

MWB (conservative):   Obama should reconsider his policies because they are not very good for the country. I'm not sure what his intentions are, but they are NOT working.

SHB (liberal): I don't get or accept backwards conservative viewpoints. I think Obama is doing awesome. He's really a great speaker. He's way better than the last idiot president we had.

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Discussion question: Do you believe universal healthcare is right for the United States?

Rationality

	High	Low

Civility — High

High Rationality:

TCD (liberal): I think universal healthcare is needed in the U.S. Too many people die because they don't have access to affordable healthcare. This is the richest nation, so I think that if liberals and conservatives work together, it can be accomplished.

ATP (conservative): I'll have to disagree with the person above. I don't think it is right for the US. I think liberals and conservatives can find more constructive issues to work together on. I don't think the government would make healthcare decisions that are in the best interest of healthcare consumers. Also, there are a lot of people out of work right now, which would make universal healthcare too expensive.

JLY (conservative): we don't need it but i see how it could solve some problems, especially more equal medical access and financial problems related to expensive medical care, but this isn't the right approach.

KMV (liberal): universal healthcare seems to work well enough for most advanced countries, so i think we can make it work here. i also think we should work together towards it

Low Rationality:

TCD (liberal): I think universal healthcare is needed in the U.S. because many people support it and it can work here. I think that if liberals and conservatives work together, it can be accomplished.

ATP (conservative): I'll have to disagree with the person above. I don't think it is right for the US. I think liberals and conservatives can find more constructive issues to work together on. I don't think the government should be in the healthcare business. Medical care is very expensive. People need jobs to get healthcare.

JLY (conservative): we don't need it but i see how it could solve some problems, there are some big problems related to healthcare access, but this isn't the right approach.

KMV (liberal): universal healthcare seems to be what a lot of people want, so we should give it a shot, i think we can make it work here. i also think we should work together towards it

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Civility — Low

High Rationality:

TCD (liberal): I think universal healthcare is needed in the U.S. Too many people die because they don't have access to affordable healthcare. This is the richest nation so, if conservatives would stop blocking progress, we could do it.

ATP (conservative): The person above is flat out wrong. I don't think it is right for the US. Conservatives should not work with liberals on this issue. I don't think the government would make healthcare decisions that are in the best interest of healthcare consumers, especially not this communist democrat government. Also, there are a lot of people out of work right now, which would make universal healthcare too expensive.

JLY (conservative): we don't need it. It won't work. Quit dreaming. Through it's inefficiency big government, that is, bureaucracy will make healthcare worse.

KMV (liberal): universal healthcare seems to work well enough for most advanced countries, so it could work here. those who disagree should step aside.

Low Rationality:

TCD (liberal): I think universal healthcare is needed in the U.S. because it can work here. This is the richest nation, so if conservatives would stop blocking progress, we could do it.

ATP (conservative): The person above is flat out wrong. I don't think it is right for the US. Conservatives should not work with liberals on this issue. I don't think the government should be in the healthcare business, especially not this communist democrat government. Medical care is very expensive.. People should stop expecting the government to provide. People should get jobs.

JLY (conservative): we don't need it. It won't work, so quit dreaming. there are some big problems related to healthcare access, but this isn't the right approach.

KMV (liberal): universal healthcare seems to be what a lot of people want, so we should give it a shot, i think we can make it work here. those who disagree should step aside.

Discussion Question: Should more restrictions be placed on gun ownership in the United States?

Rationality

	High	Low

High

LJP (liberal): There are definitely too many guns on the streets, so yes, more restrictions are needed. I recognize the right to own guns, but it doesn't seem necessary to have assault weapons. Assault weapons should be banned. Their purpose is to kill… not to defend. I believe conservative views are somewhat out of line with the spirit of the 2nd amendment.

JTZ (conservative): No, according to the second amendment, we should have the right to bear arms. This is an important right that the government should not interfere with. I understand the concerns of people who want guns off the street, but I think laws should focus on the illegal firearm trade. Most firearms used in crimes are not legally owned, so the solution is not more restrictions, but enforcing existing restrictions.

AMD (liberal): the pro-gun policies advocated by conservatives are not in the best interest of the country. They talk about guns for self-protection… think about it the more guns there are, the more dangerous the country becomes, the more guns are needed. it's not a good scenario. It's not really complicated, but people like you JTZ make valid points.

MGP (conservative): lib points of view-like those above- have value. seriously, think about how guns are a part of our culture and how legal gun owners aren't the real problem. please think about it a little and don't just follow what the media says.

LJP (liberal): There are definitely too many guns on the streets, so yes, more restrictions are needed. I recognize the right to own guns, but it doesn't seem necessary to have assault weapons. Assault weapons should be banned. They are scary. I believe conservative views are somewhat out of line with the constitution.

JTZ (conservative): No, we should have the right to bear arms. This is an important right that the government should not interfere with. I understand the concerns of people who want guns off the streets, but I think laws should focus on the crazies that go nuts and shoot up places. They're the problem because Guns don't kill people, people, people kill people.

AMD (liberal): the pro-gun policies advocated by conservatives are not in the best interest of the country for so many reasons. They want everyone to walk around with guns and be all macho… think about it the more guns there are the more crazy it will get. it's not a good scenario …It's not really complicated, but people like you JTZ make valid points.

MGP (conservative): lib points of view-like those above- have value, but seriously, think about how guns are important and not going anywhere. Think about it a little and don't just follow what the media says.

Low

LJP (liberal): There are definitely too many guns on the streets, so yes, more restrictions are needed. Guns are for killing. It isn't necessary to have assault weapons. Assault weapons should be banned. Their purpose is to kill… not to defend. Delusional right-wing conservatives should stop with the macho gun crazy stuff.

JTZ (conservative): No, according to the second amendment, we should have the right to bear arms. This is an important right that the government should not interfere with. Weak liberals are afraid of guns. I think laws should focus on the illegal firearm trade. Most firearms used in crimes are not legally owned, so the solution is not more restrictions, but enforcing existing restrictions.

AMD (liberal): conservatives have really screwed up the country. They talk about guns for self-protection… think about it the more guns there are, then the more dangerous the country becomes, the more guns are needed. it's not a good scenario. It's not even complicated, but idiots like you JTZ don't get it.

MGP (conservative): lib points of view make me sick.... seriously, think about how guns are a part of our culture and how legal gun owners aren't the real problem. use your brain for once, and don't just think what your told by the liberal media!

LJP (liberal): There are definitely too many guns on the streets, so yes, more restrictions are needed. Guns are for killing. It isn't necessary to have assault weapons. Assault weapons should be banned. They are scary. Delusional right-wing conservatives should stop with the macho gun crazy stuff. It's not in line with the constitution.

JTZ (conservative): No, we should have the right to bear arms. This is an important right that the government should not interfere with. Weak liberals are afraid of guns. I think laws should focus on the crazies that go nuts and shoot up places. They're the problem. Guns don't kill people, people kill people.

AMD (liberal): conservatives are really screwed up the country. They want everyone to walk around with guns and be all macho… think about it the more guns there are the more crazy it will get … it's not a good scenario. It's not even complicated, but idiots like you JTZ don't get it.

MGP (conservative): lib points of view make me sick.... seriously, think about how guns are important and not going anywhere. use your brain for once, and don't just think what your told by the liberal media!

Civility (left axis: High / Low)

APPENDIX B

TEXT OF SURVEY INSTRUMENT

Demographics

Age: _____

Your gender: _____ female _____ male

Your race/ethnicity: _____

Your country of citizenship: _____

Political Orientation, Attitudes, and Conviction items

What do you consider to be your political orientation regardless of your party affiliation?

       _____ very liberal
       _____ liberal
       _____ slightly liberal
       _____ neither liberal nor conservative; middle of the road
       _____ slightly conservative
       _____ conservative
       _____ very conservative

We are interested in your opinion on various social and political issues. For each statement below, please indicate your level of agreement or disagreement with each statement by writing a number from the scale below on the line that follows each statement. After rating your agreement with each statement, you are asked to rate how strongly you believe your point of view on each issue is absolutely correct.

Funding for social programs like welfare should be increased.

I think my point of view on this issue is absolutely correct.

People who don't support our country's leadership in a time of war should keep quiet.

I think my point of view on this issue is absolutely correct.

The death penalty should be outlawed.

I think my point of view on this issue is absolutely correct.

Military spending should be increased.

I think my point of view on this issue is absolutely correct.

Same-sex (gay) marriages should be legalized.

I think my point of view on this issue is absolutely correct.

Universal healthcare is not right for America.

I think my point of view on this issue is absolutely correct.

Abortion should be illegal.

I think my point of view on this issue is absolutely correct.

I support affirmative action programs.

I think my point of view on this issue is absolutely correct.

Church and state should be separate.

I think my point of view on this issue is absolutely correct.

Individuals are ultimately responsible for their financial situation.

I think my point of view on this issue is absolutely correct.

The current president is doing a great job.

I think my point of view on this issue is absolutely correct.

America almost always supports the "good guys" when we take sides in a conflict.

I think my point of view on this issue is absolutely correct.

American soldiers should use any means they can (including torture) to get information out of potential terrorists.

I think my point of view on this issue is absolutely correct.

The Creationist Perspective should not be taught in schools.

I think my point of view on this issue is absolutely correct.

The Unites States should declare English as its official language.

I think my point of view on this issue is absolutely correct.

More restrictions should be placed on gun ownership.

I think my point of view on this issue is absolutely correct.

A decline in family values is at the root of most social problems.

I think my point of view on this issue is absolutely correct.

Poverty is at the root of most social problems.

I think my point of view on this issue is absolutely correct.

Political Identification Strength Items

I see myself as a part of a group of people who share my political perspective (liberal or conservative).

Being a part of the group of people who share my political perspective (liberal or conservative) is central to my sense of who I am.

Overall, being part of the group of people who share my political perspective (liberal or conservative) has very little to do with how I feel about myself.

Being part of the group of people who share my political perspective (liberal or conservative) is an important part of who I am.

I value being a part of the group of people who share my political perspective (liberal or conservative).

I feel proud of belonging to the group of people who share my political perspective (liberal or conservative).

Belonging to the group of people who share my political perspective (liberal or conservative) is unimportant to my sense of what kind of person I am.

I feel strong ties to other people that hold my political perspective (liberals or conservatives).

Evaluation of the Political Ingroup and Outgroup

Think about the political orientation group (liberals or conservatives) that you most consider yourself to belong. How do you feel about your group in general? Please rate your group on a thermometer that runs from zero (0) to a hundred (100) degrees. The higher the number, the warmer or more favorable you feel towards your group. The lower the number, the colder or less favorable you feel. If you feel neither warm nor cold towards this group, rate them at 50°.

0	10	20	30	40	50	60	70	80	90	100

Think about the political orientation group that you disagree with the most (liberals or conservatives). How do you feel about this group in general? Please rate this group on a thermometer that runs from zero (0) to a hundred (100) degrees. The higher the number, the warmer or more favorable you feel towards this group. The lower the number, the colder or less favorable you feel. If you feel neither warm nor cold towards this group, rate them at 50°.

0	10	20	30	40	50	60	70	80	90	100

Rational Attributions for Outgroup Ideology

Please respond to the following items with regard to the political orientation group (liberals or conservatives) that you disagree with the most.

They do not have much logic to support their views.

They hold their views based on individual thinking about the issues.

They hold their views due to a logical thought process.

They do not have rational arguments to support their ideas.

They enjoy rational debate about political issues

They do not seem to put much thought or deliberation into their views.

They do not expose themselves to opposing arguments.

They hold their views because they avoid exposing themselves to other ideas.

They consider other points of view.

Perceived political difference

Conservatives and liberals share many of the same values.

Liberals and conservatives are very similar.

Liberals and conservatives have extremely different political viewpoints.

There is a big difference between the political views of most conservatives and liberals.

Manipulation Check Items

I found the interaction between the discussion board participants to be…

Pleasant

Cooperative

Civil

Thoughtful

Based on reason

Rational

ENDNOTES

[1] I use liberal and conservative as political orientation groupings. Previous research conducted in this setting suggests that students in the present setting more readily identify themselves as being liberal or conservative than as belonging to a political party.

[2] A comparison of the means for the political position statements items revealed a statistically significant difference between self-identified liberal (M = 3.39, SD = 0.66) and conservative participants (M = 4.68, SD = .80), $F(1, 150)$ = 117.17, $p < .001$, Cohen's d = 1.76. Level of agreement with liberal positions was reverse coded. Higher scores indicate higher levels of agreement with conservative positions and lower levels of agreement with liberal positions.

[3] A comparison of the means for the political position statements items revealed a significant difference between liberals and conservatives at Time 1, $F(1, 55)$ = 65.19, $p < .001$, Cohen's d = 2.14. A similar difference was found at Time 2, $F(1, 55)$ = 65.57, $p < .001$, Cohen's d = 2.15. These differences were in the expected direction, with conservatives scoring higher on the measure (Time 1: M = 4.93, SD = 0.72; Time 2: M = 4.83, SD = 0.64) than liberals (Time 1: M = 3.43, SD = 0.67; Time 2: M = 3.38 SD = 0.70).

[4] These values are based on the small sample size from Study 2. A larger sample would have provided a better test of non-independence and, therefore, a better assessment of the need for a hierarchical analysis.

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