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How group discussions create strong attitudes and strong partisans

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Abstract

Group discussions matter in politics—they affect individuals' attitudes as well as their political participation. But how do discussions influence the *strength* of attitudes? This is a question that has received scant attention, despite its relevance to both empirical and normative theories of democracy. We argue that group discussion generates strong attitudes via psychological elaboration. For many, this is a positive outcome. But we also show that discussion has a downside. Specifically, homogenous group discussions—which are the norm—strengthen partisan identities, which can increase partisan bias and motivated reasoning. Using an original experiment, we find strong support for our predictions. Our results, then, underline a tension in the political effects of group discussion: while it produces normatively desirable strong attitudes, it also creates more entrenched and potentially biased partisans.

Keywords

Political psychology, group discussion, attitude strength

Introduction

There is little doubt that group discussions shape a host of political opinions and behaviors. Discussions affect issue attitudes (Huckfeldt et al., 2004), tolerance (Mutz, 2006), partisanship (Klar, 2014b), and aspects of political engagement such as participation and donations (Mutz, 2006). What is less well known, however, is how group discussions affect attitude strength (though see Levitan and Wronski, 2014; Visser and Mirabile, 2004). Strong attitudes matter because they are exactly the sort of attitudes central to many empirical and normative theories of democracy: important, stable, and constrained attitudes that drive behavior (Zukin et al., 2006). Here, we outline an explanation for why group discussion strengthens attitudes. We explain how discussion generates elaboration—careful thought about the issues at hand—which in turn promotes attitude importance, and therefore issue-relevant behavior including a desire to obtain information and take political actions. From this perspective, group discussion generates a democratic "good." But there is a potential downside to group discussion as well. When individuals discuss politics in homogeneous groups—as they often do—they attach more weight to the partisan identification, which in turn can generate biased processing (Lavine et al., 2012).

We test our expectations using an original experiment where individuals were brought together for a politically relevant group discussion. Our results strongly support the predictions—group discussion generates more elaboration, and therefore stronger attitudes, as well as more information seeking and attitudinally relevant political behavior. But we also show that, for partisan homogeneous groups, such group discussion leads to stronger partisan identities. Our findings therefore underline a fundamental tension in the effects of group discussion on politically desirable outcomes.

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The psychological effects of group discussions

We begin with the point that group discussion shapes information processing by generating cognitive elaboration—careful thought about the issue at hand, scrutinizing the arguments around it, and so forth (O'Keefe, 2002). It is well established that when people anticipate having to justify their attitudes to others—as they often do when entering a group discussion—they elaborate on the information they receive so as to be active participants in said discussion (Kunda, 1990). So by knowing they will discuss politics in a group, individuals think more carefully and critically about the issues at hand, all else constant (Hypothesis 1 (H1)).

This increased elaboration promotes more important attitudes—elaboration strongly correlates with attitude importance (Visser et al., 2006). When individuals think deeply and carefully about an issue, that attitude becomes more important to them. This should not be surprising: deep consideration of an attitude—stemming from group discussion—will make the attitude more accessible and will strengthen it, and hence will also make it more important, all else being constant (Visser et al., 2006: 33; Hypothesis 2 (H2)).

Individuals see their important attitudes as particularly significant—attitude importance is a crucial dimension of attitude strength (Petty and Krosnick, 1995). Consequently, individuals will be motivated to acquire attitude-relevant information so as to ensure they hold the "correct" attitude (Visser et al., 2006). Similarly, individuals are more likely to take actions that are consistent with important attitudes; not only are individuals more motivated to act by important attitudes, but such attitudes are also more accessible in memory (Visser et al., 2006). For example, when people hold an important attitude on a politically relevant issue, they are more likely to write an elected official to express their viewpoint or to attend a meeting about the issue (Visser et al., 2003). Important attitudes that emerge from discussion group interactions drive information search and attitudinally relevant behavior, all else being constant (Hypothesis 3 (H3)).

Our theorizing thus far ignores the specific nature of the group. It is well-established that groups made of like-minded individuals—such as those from the same political party—typically generate more extreme issue attitudes than those made up of different parties (Mutz, 2006).[1] We expect to find a similar effect here, as heterogeneous groups are more likely to expose individuals to contrary information. This, in turn, might stimulate even more elaboration as individuals consider alternative perspectives (e.g. Ditto et al., 1998), which will lead them to question their existing beliefs, thereby generating weaker attitudes (e.g. Visser and Mirabile, 2004). This leads to the following two hypotheses. Relative to those in homogeneous discussion groups, those in heterogeneous discussion groups will exhibit greater cognitive elaboration (Hypothesis 4 (H4)) and will adopt discussion relevant attitudes that they consider to be less important, all else being constant (Hypothesis 5 (H5)).[2] We do not, however, predict that heterogeneous groups lead to differences in information search or relevant behaviors, as there is conflicting evidence in the literature on this point (c.f. Levitan and Wronski, 2014; Mutz, 2006).[3]

The partisan homogeneity or heterogeneity of the group may shape another important variable: the importance of one's partisan identity. Discussion groups not only have information effects, but they can also have social conformity effects (Visser and Mirabile, 2004: 781). Homogeneous groups reaffirm one's identity as well as one's attitudes due to conformity pressures. For example, a Democrat who interacts in a group composed of other Democrats will feel a stronger tie to her partisan group, as "beliefs commonly held by group members reinforce the common identity of the group" (Klar, 2014b: 689). Because heterogeneous groups are mixed, and lack this common identity, they do not reaffirm and strengthen identities in this way. Given this, those who discuss politics in partisan homogeneous groups will adopt a stronger partisan identity (relative to those who discuss politics in partisan heterogeneous groups), all else being constant (Hypothesis 6 (H6)). The strength/importance of one's partisan identity can have substantial downstream consequences as strengthened identities often lead individuals to engage in partisan motivated reasoning. That is, they seek out partisan-consistent information, interpret "objective" realities in partisan terms (e.g. Democrats view the economy as strong when Democrats are in power), and reject counter-veiling arguments (Klar, 2014b; Lavine et al., 2012).

Design, study, and measures

We designed an experiment that varied two factors: (1) whether or not individuals engaged in small group discussions; and (2) for those who participate in a discussion, whether those discussions take place in a partisan homogeneous or heterogeneous group.[4] We have 3 groups of interest in our experiment; these include those who do not participate in group discussion (control), homogeneous group discussion participants, and heterogeneous group discussion participants. Comparing the individuals in these three groups allows us to examine both how discussion shapes attitudes, and whether the nature of the group shapes the effects of discussion.

We implemented our study on N = 249 subjects between November 2013 and November 2014. We recruited participants from community, civic, religious, and hobby groups, as well as from University campuses, in a large city on the East Coast and a large city in the Midwest. Although the subjects in no way approximate a random sample, they are relatively diverse.[5] Participants took part in our approximately one-hour

experiment in exchange for a payment for themselves or a modest donation to their group (when relevant), as they preferred. We had subjects show up to our location at a particular place and time. In advance of each session, we randomly assigned each session to be either a discussion or a non-discussion session. At a non-discussion session, subjects completed a brief pre-test questionnaire, completed an unrelated filler activity, and then completed the post-test instrument, which contained our dependent variable measures (described below).

In a discussion session, subjects completed the pre-test and the unrelated filler activity. While they completed the filler activity, we randomly assigned each participant to either a homogeneous or heterogeneous discussion group. A homogeneous discussion group had only members of one party (i.e. all Democrats or all Republicans) and a heterogeneous group was one-half Democrats and one-half Republicans. We followed prior work by forming groups that on average contained four individuals (e.g. homogeneous groups have 4 Democrats or 4 Republicans and heterogeneous groups have 2 Democrats and 2 Republicans; see Klar, 2014b). This size coheres with empirical work that suggests political discussion groups often include 3–4 total people (Klofstad et al., 2009), and with the reality that discussion groups in general are quite common (e.g. 83% of 2008–2009 American National Election Panel Study respondents report having discussed politics in the last six months; see Robison et al., 2015).[6] The group discussion took approximately 7 minutes, and afterwards, subjects completed the post-test questionnaire, received their payment and left.[7]

For subjects in the discussion conditions, we asked them to discuss the issue of the Keystone XL pipeline and the ensuing larger debate about America's domestic energy production, especially with regard to drilling. The issue of drilling has been used in prior studies of partisan reasoning (e.g. Levendusky, 2010) and, while clearly being an issue that divides the parties, it is also one on which participants were unlikely to have particularly strong priors. This is especially true because the issue, while in the news, was never particularly salient while we were conducting our study. We did not formally inform participants about the partisan compositions of their groups. Our informal impression from observing the groups is that partisanship became clear in the discussions, perhaps due to our instruction that each person take a turn to state his/her opinion concerning an issue with at least some, albeit not a stark, partisan divide.

Study measures

To test our hypotheses about the effects of group discussion, we need measures of elaboration (H 1), attitude importance (H2), attitudinally-consistent information search and actions (H3), and partisan identity (H4). To measure elaboration, we asked respondents to rate how carefully they had thought about the issue raised during the discussion (full question wording and response options are given in the supplemental appendix; on measuring elaboration, see Tormala et al., 2006). To measure attitude importance, we ask subjects how important the issue of oil drilling more generally is to them (Visser et al., 2006). To measure attitudinally-relevant information search and behaviors, we used three measures. We measure information seeking in two ways, asking subjects how interested they would be in receiving more information on the Keystone XL pipeline and oil drilling, and asking them if they would like to provide their email address so they could be sent additional information. To measure relevant action, we ask respondents if they would be willing to sign a petition (either pro- or anti-Keystone, depending upon their view) that would be sent to their member of Congress.

Finally, to measure partisan identity, we follow Klar (2014a) and look at how important the respondent perceives his or her identity as a partisan to be. Individuals who view their partisan identity as very important are more likely to engage in biased partisan information search and evaluation (e.g. Lavine et al., 2012). We use this measure—rather than the more traditional partisan strength—because we are not interested in partisan extremity but rather the *salience* of one's partisan identity.

Results

We begin by examining how group discussion shapes elaboration (H1), attitude importance (H2), and attitudinally-relevant information search and behavior (H3). Table 1 models the dependent variables as a function of participation in group discussion; the excluded category in the regressions is those who did not engage in any group discussion. In Table 1, we present only the estimates of our treatment effects without any additional controls. In the supplemental appendix, we present results controlling for a variety of pre-treatment variables and find that our results do not substantively change.

For now, we focus on columns 1–5 of Table 1, which show strong support for H1–H3: group discussion increases elaboration, attitude importance, and attitudinally-relevant information search and behavior.[8] Elaboration increases by approximately three-quarters of a standard deviation due to discussion, and attitude importance increases nearly a full standard deviation. Those who participate in discussion think more about the issues (and more deeply), and develop issue attitude that they perceive as being relatively more important. Further, those who deliberate about the issue are about 0.8 standard deviations more interested in information about the issue, approximately 30 percent more likely to provide their email for more information, and about 25 percent more likely to sign the petition going to their member of Congress. Simply put, those who engage in discussion are more likely to be engaged with the issue. Group

Table 1. Effects of group discussion on elaboration, attitude importance, information search, and behavior.

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
	Elaboration	Attitude importance	Want information	Give email	Sign petition	Partisan identity importance
Homogeneous discussion	**0.964 (0.141)**	**1.241 (0.217)**	**1.325 (0.322)**	**1.468 (0.384)**	**1.311 (0.307)**	**1.344 (0.219)**
Heterogeneous discussion	**0.958 (0.154)**	**1.435 (0.252)**	**1.202 (0.339)**	**1.339 (0.433)**	**1.030 (0.355)**	**0.550 (0.235)**
Constant	1.919 (0.0932)	2.730 (0.180)	2.697 (0.292)	−1.642 (0.344)	−1.723 (0.240)	3.276 (0.133)
Homogeneous larger?	No	No	No	No	No	Yes
Test statistic (*p*-value)	0 (0.96)	0.81 (0.37)	0.32 (0.57)	0.17 (0.68)	0.75 (0.39)	8.95 (<0.01)
Observations	247	248	239	248	240	192
R-squared	0.095	0.112	0.083	–	–	0.106

Note: columns 1–3 and 6 are ordinary least squares regression coefficients with clustered standard errors in parentheses; columns 4–5 present logistic regression coefficients. In all cases, coefficients that can be distinguished from 0 at conventional levels of statistical significance ($p < 0.05$, two-tailed) are given in bold. The section labeled "Homogeneous larger?" indicates whether we can statistically distinguish the effects of homogeneous and heterogeneous discussion. The test-statistic in the row below is the relevant *F*-statistic (or Chi-squared statistic) and associated *p*-value.

discussion not only shapes attitudes, but also shapes these other attitudinal dimensions that drive behavior.

Interestingly, however, in none of these cases can we differentiate the effects of homogeneous and heterogeneous discussion—it is discussion itself, and not the composition of the group, that drives these effects. As we show in Table 1, we cannot reject the null hypothesis that homogenous and heterogeneous discussion has equivalent effects, which is inconsistent with hypotheses 4 and 5. While such findings are not consistent with our expectations, they are consistent with arguments that when people know they will engage in discussion, it is their elaboration *ahead* of the discussion—not the discussion itself—that is key (Eveland, 2004). The elaboration generated by any group discussion (regardless of group composition) is what leads subjects to strengthen their attitudes, motivates individuals to seek out more information and take action on an issue. Discussion leads to engagement (Kim et al., 2016).[9] Moreover, our results cohere with Robison et al. (2015) who find that the nature of the group's composition (i.e. homogeneous or heterogeneous) does not affect attitude importance.

One concern, however, is that interactions with like-minded others will strengthen in-group identity, which in turn can generate biased reasoning (H6). We explore this possibility in the final column (column 6) of Table 1.[10] The data again show strong support for our hypothesis, but with an interesting twist. Consistent with our expectation, homogeneous groups dramatically increase partisan identity and they do so to a substantially greater extent than heterogeneous groups. The effects are nearly 2.5 times as large in the homogeneous discussion case (and the difference between them is statistically significant, $p < 0.01$). Interestingly, though, relative to the no discussion baseline, heterogeneous groups also heighten partisan identity, presumably by stimulating a defensive partisan orientation (e.g. counter-arguments) when faced with heterogeneous discussion partners (Wojcieszak, 2011). That group composition matters here highlights the necessity of differentiating the importance of particular attitudes (where we found no differential effects) from the salience of one's (partisan) identity. These results also accentuate a potential downside of political discussions—they can exacerbate differences in partisan identity, which can lead to biased partisan reasoning and ultimately increased polarization. We recognize this result is suggestive, as we do not have direct measures of biased partisan reasoning. Even so, the findings spotlight the importance of attending to varying discussion effects—both those that are normatively desirable and those that may be more troubling.[11]

Discussion

Does group discussion generate strong attitudes? While its effects on attitude extremity are well known, its effects on attitude strength are not. We argue that discussion, by generating elaboration, increases attitude importance and attitudinally-relevant behavior—discussion generates strong attitudes. Using an original experiment, we find strong support for these predictions.

Yet our work also highlights a tension in the effects of group discussion on behavior. Both homogeneous and heterogeneous groups (relative to a no discussion baseline) increase the importance of partisanship, though this is especially pronounced in homogeneous groups. In all likelihood, given prior evidence (e.g. Klar, 2014b), this then leads these individuals to engage in more partisan motivated reasoning. It also underlines a tension in the effects of group discussion more broadly. While strong attitudes are a normative good, especially in terms of generating information seeking and engagement, partisan motivated reasoning can lead to worse democratic outcomes, as individuals seek out and interpret

information in light of their priors, rather than the world as it actually is (Lavine et al., 2012). The results thus highlight a normative trade-off when it comes to group discussion. Specifically, group discussion strengthens attitudes, and leads to desirable behaviors, but also starts participants down a road to partisan polarization, as they attach more weight to their partisan identity. Especially when combined with the tendency of groups to generate more extreme attitudes, this suggests a troubling drawback to many political discussions.

We are certainly not the first to demonstrate the double-edged nature of inter-personal interactions (e.g. Mutz, 2006); however, we have highlighted a previously under-appreciated tension between attitude strength and identity. Moreover, our experimental approach, while limited in some ways, accentuates the potential knowledge gains from implementing studies where psychological measures, not often included in surveys (e.g. elaboration and attitude importance), add to an understanding of group effects. Future work can continue to explore how discussion both enhances and detracts from political decision-making.

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Notes

1. Our focus is on *partisan* agreement/disagreement in groups (Huckfeldt et al., 2004) rather than more general disagreement (Mutz, 2006).
2. We recognize that these two dynamics are at odds with our prior point that any elaboration leads to stronger attitudes. In this case, the driver is the content of the information being elaborated upon (which was held constant in our prior hypothesis).
3. Levitan and Wronski (2014: 796) suggest that contrary information in heterogeneous groups generates anxiety and ambivalence and, in response, people seek out more information. This is possible and they provide evidence along these lines; however, this assumes people care enough to want to resolve their anxiety and ambivalence.
4. Our design was more complicated, and is described in detail in Druckman et al. (2015). In brief, some subjects watched partisan media content; here, we focus on the subjects who did not watch partisan media.
5. The sample is 49% Democrat and 29% Republican (including leaners), 43% female, 34% minority, 30% student-aged, and 41% have a household income of less than $100,000 per year.
6. Due to variation in the number of respondents per session (and the need to form heterogeneous/homogeneous groups), group size actually varies between 3 and 6 (homogeneous groups can have 3–6 respondents, heterogeneous groups have only 4 or 6 participants). Controlling for the number of discussants per group does not change our substantive results below; we randomly assigned pure independents to discussion groups.
7. While we randomly assigned subjects to conditions, at some sessions there may have been partisan imbalance in who showed up to take part in the experiment. We present results in the appendix, which control for a wide variety of pre-treatment covariates, and find that our substantive conclusions do not change when we control for sources of potential imbalance.
8. Throughout the paper, because the treatment is effectively delivered at the level of the discussion group, we present clustered standard errors (where the cluster is the discussion group).
9. Our results contrast with Levitan and Wronski (2014), as they find that people in attitudinal heterogeneous discussion groups are more likely to seek out and attend to political information. To be clear, we find Levian and Wronski's study to be innovative and important. We believe our findings differ due to distinctions in design and outcome measures. We manipulated group discussion composition and had participants discuss an issue with one another. Levitan and Wronski conducted three impressive studies but in none did they both manipulate composition and have participants engage in discussions. This contrasts with our design where the discussions were relatively elaborate. Their measures also differed from ours. In brief, our measures are akin to more active information search, which differ from their focus on information consumption.
10. We included pure Independents in columns 1–5 of Table 1 (though omitting them does not change our substantive results). We exclude them from column 6 since we are asking about the importance of their partisanship (though including them there would again not change our substantive conclusions).
11. We explored several possible sources of heterogeneous treatment effects. We found the strongest moderator was education, which exacerbates discussion group effects on some of our outcome variables, most notably attitude importance. This is consistent with previous work, which finds that education facilitates understanding of political discussion (e.g., Nelson et al., 1997) and correlates with attitude importance (Visser et al., 2006: 7).

Supplementary material

The online appendix is available at: http://rap.sagepub.com/content/3/2

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