

Understanding The Other Side: Empathy Across The Political Divide

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Understanding The Other Side:
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PhD Dissertation

Politica

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ISBN: 978-87-7335-334-9

Cover: Svend Siune

Print: Fællestrykkeriet, Aarhus University

Layout: Annette Bruun Andersen

Submitted August 30, 2024

The public defense takes place January 17, 2025

Published January 2025

Forlaget Politica

c/o Department of Political Science

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Acknowledgements

Why do people write a dissertation? There are many reasons: a deep curiosity about a topic, the desire to understand the unknown, the joy of exploring theory and data, a passion for uncovering a truth, and countless others. While these factors may spark our interest and guide us along the way, they are not necessarily always the ones that keep us going. For this reason, I believe that there is a more important question than why people write a dissertation, namely, *why don't people give up on writing one?* For me, the answer is simple: because of the people who surrounded me. It is the colleagues, friends, and loved ones who lifted me up when I was low, who were there to celebrate the highs, and even offered support during the moments that were neither exceptionally good nor bad but just ordinary. It is because of *you* that I was able to write this dissertation, and ultimately, it is *your* support that has helped me to be where I am today. There are so many people I would like to thank for their unwavering support and encouragement throughout this journey. I have made every effort to acknowledge everyone (in individual or more general terms), but please bear with me if I have unintentionally overlooked you.

Writing a dissertation on empathy and disagreements is so much easier having supervisors who modeled a balance between these two factors every step of the way. *Michael Bang Petersen and Lasse Lindekilde*, you guided me with empathy but never shied away from disagreeing with me. This not only strengthened me as a researcher but also gave me the confidence to navigate through challenging moments as a person. In Germany, we call a PhD supervisor *Doktorvater* — “PhD father” — which feels fitting for you both. As my *Doktorväter*, you offered me support, patience, and sound judgment, guiding me closely along the way, while also allowing me to make mistakes and learn from them. *Michael*: Despite your busy schedule, you are always available to discuss anything I want or need to share. You have a remarkable gift for seeing the big picture while not forgetting about important small things (whether academically or in life), and you deliver all your thoughts with a calmness that reassured me during uncertain times. Thank you for your unconditional support and honesty, especially when my ideas took a more “cre-

ative” turn, when things didn’t go as I had hoped for, when there were difficult decisions to be made, or when I found myself overthinking again and again. *Lasse*: Officially, you are my “second” Supervisor, but it never felt that way. Your insights, whether academic or personal, are always sharp and well-considered. You have an exceptional ability to know how to encourage and when to challenge people, which helped me grow in ways I hadn’t anticipated. Thank you for putting things into perspective and for reminding me not to worry too much. I am deeply grateful to both of you. Thank you for believing in me, enduring my complaints, and supporting me every step of the way. I couldn’t have asked for better supervisors.

A heartfelt thank you also to the PhD coordinators who made life as a PhD student so much easier. I feel lucky to have had three wonderful coordinators over the years: *Helene*, thanks for your insightful conversations, your attentive listening, and your constant care and support; *Christoffer*, for a smooth start and a warm introduction to the PhD group; and *Lasse* (again), for a successful conclusion of this journey.

I am also incredibly grateful to all the wonderful people this PhD has brought into my life. First to *Ane*. Where do I even begin? I feel incredibly fortunate to have shared an office with you from the start to nearly the end of the PhD. Thank you for being there through every aspect of PhD life, for listening to it all, and for offering the perfect words of support at just the right moments. You always know when to speak and when to hold back, and that balance has been invaluable. Sometimes, I think it is good we didn’t share an office all the time — otherwise, we might have spent more hours talking than working. Thank you for being there through the highs and lows, for your care, and for simply being such a warm, incredible person. I truly wouldn’t want to have gone through this without you. *Tim*, from being “just” a colleague to the coziest flat-mate I could have asked for: Thank you for your unwavering support that expressed itself in staying up until 2 a.m. to philosophize about the differences between *Verstehen*, *Verständnis*, and *Einverständnis*, patiently watching *Tatort* with me every Sunday, laughing at my judgmental comments in our kitchen (and for making them yourself), and the pancakes and waffles with Nutella on Sunday mornings. Most of all, thank you for always making me feel at home the moment I walk through the door. *Nanna*, thank you for being the kindest and most positive person I know. From the very beginning, you welcomed me not just as a colleague, but as a friend. Thank you for the many nights filled with dancing until dawn, for our cozy dinners, for winter bathing, and for roller-skating around Brabrandssø. Most of all, thank you for becoming a friend that I

wouldn't want to miss. *Morgan and Laura*, thank you for all your support and much-needed distractions, both in and outside of work. Whether we were chatting in the office, relaxing at home, grabbing a drink downtown, or going winter bathing, these moments and conversations were key in getting me through the final stretch of the PhD. You both manage to strike the perfect balance between fun and seriousness, always being able to talk about more than just work, while offering honest advice and support when it matters most. You are much more than colleagues to me, and I am grateful that our paths crossed. *Steffen*, thank you for the perfect blend of humor, deep conversations, and the possibility to let go of one's funny and quirky side. With you, it is possible to laugh, do something silly, and still engage in meaningful conversations — all in one go. I truly appreciate that both your office and home doors were open whenever I needed them. Your support has meant a lot, and I am grateful to both you and *Inger* for providing something like a second home in Aarhus. *Tobias and Valentin*, thank you for being such an incredible, fun duo to be around. You made the tough times in this PhD easier and the good times even more enjoyable. I will always remember our fun dinners (special thanks to Valentin for cooking), late-night parties, ice cream and PlayStation Sundays, New Year's celebrations, and all the laughter in between. It means a lot to me that we have stayed in touch even after taking on new adventures outside Aarhus. *Matias*, thank you for our conversations about life as a PhD, your trust in me, and for reminding me of the importance of taking things slow. *Mario*, thank you for being someone with whom I could talk about anything and everything and for the fun and cozy evenings together. *Laurits*, your dry humor and German memes always brightened my day (special thanks also to you and Steffen for introducing me to the game "Hillerød Jagten" and for "secretly" cheating so I would always lose). *Ashraf*, thanks for bringing fun to the mundane PhD life with your dad jokes. *Kristian*, I am grateful for your constant academic and personal support in every question (and to both Ashraf and Kristian for the unforgettable time in Berkeley, not least the chicken wings nights). *Nic*, thank you for your support during the final phase of the PhD, for checking in on me, insightful research discussions, providing excellent feedback, and for being a trusted companion. *Love*, thank you for your honesty, for sharing moments of frustration and joy, for offering invaluable feedback, and most importantly, for enduring CrossFit together (and *Francesco* too). *Tobias*, for your help with Text-as-Data questions, our trusting conversations, your wise advice, our shared frustrations, and evenings filled with good wine. *Julian and Clara*, thank you for enduring Danish language classes together and for bringing the

spirit of Hessen to Aarhus. *Ida and Jannik*, it has been a pleasure starting this PhD journey together, watching each other grow, and sharing the experience along the way. Thanks also for always stopping by my office for coffee. *Fabio*, thank you for looking out for me in the beginning and making social life in Aarhus so much more enjoyable during and after a pandemic. *Mathias*, thank you for the great, albeit brief, final moments we shared in the office.

A heartfelt thank you also to the entire *PhD group* for making this journey so memorable — for the great parties, the laughter, and the mix of extraordinary and everyday moments we shared along the way. A special thanks to *Anna, Ida, Lasse, Liv, Louise, and William*.

I was also fortunate to be part of several sections and teams during my PhD at this department, each of which has contributed to my PhD journey in unique ways. A heartfelt thank you to the *ROPH team* for welcoming me as a quasi-member: *Esther* for hanging in there together, *Jesper* for reminding me to keep things simple and not stress, *Alexander* for believing in my abilities and patiently supporting me with every statistical question I brought your way, *Antoine* for your outgoing nature, *Mathias* for readily offering your help whenever I needed it, and *Stig* for your support on any data-related question. Also thanks to *Simon* and *Tanja* from the sister project *STANDBY* for your support and feedback. I am also deeply grateful to my colleagues in the *Political Behavior and Institutions Section*, who I owe a lot to. *Rasmus Skytte*, I am deeply grateful that you have encouraged me to pursue this PhD — without you, I wouldn't be where I am today. *Rune Slothuus*, for exemplifying and teaching me the value of a calmer, more considered approach to doing research. *Martin Bisgaard*, for reminding me not to be afraid to ask the big questions or to take unconventional paths. *Martin Vinæs Larsen*, for your curiosity, for always checking in, offering an open ear, and having a solution to almost every problem. *Rune Stubager*, for the enjoyable time we shared as office neighbors and for always being up for a chat, *Lene Aarøe* for being such an academic role-model. Beyond that I would like to thank you, *Daniel Bischof*, *Anne Binderkrantz*, *Troels Bøggild*, *Lasse Laustsen*, *Kim Mannemar Sønderskov*, and *Mathias Tromborg*, for your support and feedback along the way. I am also grateful to all the members of the *department's Christmas Band* for letting me share my passion for music. A special thanks to *Andreas*, *David*, *Lars*, *Mathias* (especially for the Karaoke in LA!), *Mathies*, *Mads Pieter*, *Morten*, *Simon*, *Tonny*, and everyone else involved.

Besides my academic colleagues at Aarhus, this PhD wouldn't exist without the best administrative colleagues one could wish for. *Annette*, thank you for your support in language-revision and for making it possi-

ble to actually hold this PhD in my hands. *Kate*, I am grateful for your careful and thorough language revisions. *Ruth*, thank you for always answering any of my questions and rescuing me every time I locked myself out of the office. *Ida, Susanne, Helle*, thank you for your invaluable support with everything related to teaching. *Olivia*, your organizational skills kept everything running smoothly. *Pernille*, thanks for repeatedly nudging me when I missed a deadline. *Malene*, I am grateful for your help with conference budgets. *Njall*, thank you for saving me the last lunch bun, teasing me for my spotless cutlery obsession, and keeping me informed about the "sparkling water"-gate. *Anna Sofie and Ida*, I have really enjoyed our chats in the kitchen.

I am also grateful for the international experiences that this PhD has allowed me to pursue. I am grateful for the conferences I have attended that were full of inspiring talks and enriching conversations about research. At these events, I was able to meet the brightest researchers from all over the world, many of whom have provided invaluable feedback on this dissertation. I am especially thankful for the opportunity to spend a semester at the *University of California, Berkeley*, where I could take part in such an inspiring and dynamic academic environment. My sincere thanks to *David Broockman and Gabe Lenz* for welcoming me and providing me with the opportunity to learn and grow. I am also grateful to the Political Science PhD students at Berkeley, who welcomed me so warmly: *Matty, Anna, Spring, John, Max, Pia, Rebekah, Sara, Zach, Andrew*. My time in Berkeley was an incredible experience, and it wasn't just the academic part that made it so special. Without you, *Giuseppe, Florian, Manoela, Valerie, Marcos, and Stefan*, this experience wouldn't have been the same. You made those 4.5 months unforgettable and truly transformative. Thank you for all the memories, for making this time one of the most enriching of my life, and for broadening my perspective in ways that have left a lasting impact and will stay with me forever. An even more special thank you goes to *Giuseppe*. Thank you for staying long after we left Berkeley, for taking many long trips to Aarhus, and for always knowing how to brighten my day and put a smile on my face. Thank you for being so patient, for navigating through the uncertainties of academic life together, and for challenging me in ways that make me think and encourage me to do as I preach. And for making me learn Italian (and some Neapolitan) so I can finally take credit for my surname! Meeting you at Berkeley changed everything, and I am excited to see where this journey will go.

While life over the past three years has been shaped by the incredible people I met in Aarhus and abroad, there are also others outside this aca-

democratic bubble whom I want to thank. I am truly thankful for my friends back home who have been a steady source of support and patience. Maintaining connections across distances is never easy, especially as our lives take different directions, but no matter the miles between us, it is always reassuring to know that when I return, it feels like no time has passed. Even if we don't speak every day — or every month — you are always in the back of my head, reminding me of what truly matters. *Ronja*, thank you for being there for over 18 years and for supporting me through every situation, including this PhD. I am lucky to have shared so much of life with you. *Paul*, thank you for our long calls, great conversations, debates, and discussions — your perspective has always challenged me to think deeper (including about this PhD). I am grateful for the friendship we share. *Eva* and *Benny*, I am so glad we have managed to keep checking in on each other over the past years. You have been an important source of support back home. *Tim*, thank you for bringing me to Aarhus and for always taking the time to ask how I am doing.

I owe the biggest thanks to my family. First, to *Oma Gertrud und Opa Kurt*, from whom I learned so much about politics and the privilege of living in a democracy. Your stories and experiences have shaped my understanding of the political world and showed me the importance of studying it. *Marcel*, thank you for reminding me of what true passion looks like through your music and for helping me reconnect with important things in life that I sometimes forget about. I am always glad to come home because I know I will get to see you. No matter what, I trust that my brother will be there — and for that, I am deeply grateful. Finally, *Mama und Papa*: If anyone truly deserves this PhD, it is you. I have lost count of how many times I have called you for advice or just to share my struggles, frustrations, doubts, anger, sadness, happiness, or enthusiasm. You have been on this rollercoaster with me, always believing in me, especially when I didn't. You have continuously reminded me to push through, especially when things were tough, and assured me that I would make it. Thank you for listening to me, supporting me on every step of the way, and bearing with me when I went on about my research — even when I explained what a p-value is on Christmas Eve (twice in a row). I will never be able to thank you enough for everything you have done for me.

Lea Pradella,
Aarhus, December 2024

If we knew what we were doing,
it wouldn't be called research, would it?

Albert Einstein

Preface

This report offers an overview and summary of my PhD dissertation, *Understanding the Other Side: Empathy Across the Political Divide*, written between September 2021 and August 2024 at the Department of Political Science, Aarhus University. The report outlines the dissertation’s theoretical framework, core contributions, and methodological choices, and provides a summary of the empirical results along with their discussion. Beyond this, the dissertation includes the following three solo-authored articles, which form the basis of this report.

Article A: Pradella, Lea. 2024. “Approaching Political Disagreements With Understanding: Comparing Empathy To Other Modes of Information Processing.” *Under review*.

Article B: Pradella, Lea. 2024. “When Out-Partisans Understand: The Impact of Out-Party Empathy on Third-Person Observers.” *Working paper*.

Article C: Pradella, Lea. 2024. “Testing the Social Pressure Hypothesis: Does In-Party Social Pressure Reduce Out-Party Empathy?” *PNAS Nexus* 3 (10): e358.

Chapter 1

Introduction

When I started working on this dissertation three years ago, I was motivated by a personal experience. My friend, whom I will call Steve, and I frequently found ourselves in heated debates about politics. Steve and I have fundamentally different political views, and people who heard us talking about politics would not have said we were having a conversation, but rather a battle characterized by hostility and accusation. These debates often ended in arguments, frustration, and eventually silence. I left each of these encounters with Steve feeling frustrated, and kept asking myself: How could we have had a better conversation? How could we have disagreed more constructively?

This is not only a personal struggle; it reflects a broader trend in today's Western democracies, whose political cultures are increasingly defined by hostility toward political opponents (Boxell et al., 2024; Gidron et al., 2019). On social media, people humiliate, harass, and intimidate those with different political orientations (Andresen et al., 2022; a Vogels, 2021; Bor and Petersen, 2022), and spread fake news to degrade the other side (Osmundsen et al., 2021). In "real" life, individuals hold negative stereotypes about those with different political affiliations and worldviews and perceive them as having particularly malicious intentions toward their own side (Lees and Cikara, 2020; Mernyk et al., 2022; Moore-Berg et al., 2020). This aversion extends to every part of life, leading to the avoidance of friendships, partnerships, and even business dealings with those of opposing views (see Iyengar et al., 2019 for an overview). It seems that politics has become like a religion, with individuals viewing their own side as morally superior and the opposition as fundamentally wrong and alien (Finkel et al., 2020).

Like me after each debate with Steve, the public is increasingly frustrated by these deepening political divisions, believing that the excessive animosity between different political camps distracts from addressing critical national issues (Doherty et al., 2023a). There is also growing concern that such hostility undermines democratic processes (Finkel et

al., 2020; Graham and Svobik, 2020; Iyengar et al., 2019). Hence, reducing such hostility has become one of the West's most urgent political challenges (Doherty et al., 2023b), sparking efforts to intervene in the deep political divide and restore harmony between political camps.

While the desire for harmony is natural, and I would have preferred it if Steve and I could have simply agreed and avoided these deeply hostile disagreements, it is crucial to recognize that complete harmony in politics is neither practical nor desirable. Politics and democracy are inherently rooted in conflict and disagreement, and “it is [...] an illusion to believe in the advent of a society from which antagonism would have been eradicated” (Mouffe, 2005, p. 6). Democracy thrives on a diversity of opinions and the ability to express, discuss, and challenge opposing views. Some have also indicated that the concern about political hostility threatening democracy is overstated (Broockman et al., 2023; Voelkel et al., 2023). Research suggests that affective polarization may even positively influence democratic processes, as it is found to be associated with increased individual mobilization and higher voter turnout (Harteveld and Wagner, 2023; Wagner, 2021).

Thus, there appears to be a tension between the necessity of conflict and the risks associated with conflict in democracy. This tension was already recognized decades ago by Almond and Verba (1963, p. 491) in their seminal work *The Civic Culture*:

Without some meaningfully structured cleavage in society, it is hard to see how democratic politics can operate. ... If there were no cleavage, if people did not combine into meaningfully opposed political groupings, this would suggest “... a community in which politics was of no real importance to the community,” (*Berelson et al. op.cit., p. 319*) ... Yet if cleavage went too far, “... a democratic society ... would probably be in danger of its existence. The issue of politics would cut so deeply, be so keenly felt, and, especially, be so fully reinforced by other social identifications of the electorate...” as to threaten democracy. (*Ibid.*)

In other words, while excessive division can indeed threaten democracy, a certain degree of division is crucial for its functioning. Thus, eliminating political conflict might be as problematic for democracy as allowing it to escalate. Rather, the ideal seems to be a balance where disagreement does not descend into hostility or even violence, making us able to disagree in a non-hostile way. As Mutz (2006, pp. 125–6) suggests in her book *Hearing the Other Side*, “We want tight-knit, close

networks of mutual trust, but we want them to be among people who frequently disagree. And we want frequent conversations involving political disagreement that have no repercussions for people's personal relationships." However, as Mutz (2006, p. 126) then adds, "At the very least this is a difficult bill to fill."

The question therefore is,

How do we conceptualize a framework within which a diverse array of ordinary people can live their lives as both active citizens in a competitive political system and as compassionate fellow human beings? In particular, how do we accomplish this when one of these tasks appears to require strong partisanship and confident judgments about which political choices are right and which are wrong, while the other requires a tolerant, openminded, nonjudgmental nature, and an acceptance of people's worth on their own terms, however disagreeable we may find their political views? (Mutz, 2006, p. 126)

Using Empathy To Facilitate Non-Hostile Disagreements

According to Morrell (2010, p. 157), the way to ensure that interactions are characterized by less hostility while still maintaining disagreement, and thus reach the normative ideal of civil disagreement, is to place empathy at its heart:

The way we can combine both respectful contestation and the possibility for cooperation and legitimate decision-making is by placing the process of empathy at the heart of democratic politics. Political contestation among citizens who engage in the process of empathy can be adversarial and respectful [...]. [...] While allowing for disagreement and contestation, it retains the possibility for cooperation and agreement.

Empathy toward others — here defined as the attempt to understand the thoughts, feelings, and experiences of others from their unique perspective — has long been valued as essential for positive social interactions (Eisenberg and Miller, 1987) and is commonly linked to lower levels of hostility and aggression (Miller and Eisenberg, 1988). In addition,

it is frequently pointed out that understanding another's thoughts, feelings, and subjective experiences does not automatically imply that one agrees with them (Livingstone et al., 2020a; Morrell, 2010; Mutz, 2002; Reis et al., 2017). Therefore, empathy seems to be an important tool to strike a balance between reducing hostility and allowing disagreement.

In essence, this suggests that for Steve and me, as well as for anyone who disagrees politically, having better disagreements "simply" requires us to be more empathic toward one another. But does it really work this way? To explore this, this dissertation seeks to answer the following overarching research questions:

How does empathy toward political opponents shape attitudes and feelings in interactions between political opponents? And does it facilitate non-hostile disagreement across political divides?

I am not the first to study how or whether empathy can improve interactions between people. Specifically, there has been a great deal of research on how empathy helps reduce hostility among different types of groups, such as those based on ethnicity, religion, social status, or other social and demographic categories (see reviews by Batson and Ahmad, 2009; Dovidio et al., 2010; Galinsky et al., 2005; Stephan and Finlay, 1999; Todd and Galinsky, 2014; Vanman, 2016). However, the role of empathy between *political* groups has not yet been thoroughly explored. As outlined above, the political sphere is particularly complex because it requires the maintenance of different viewpoints and disagreements, but also cooperation and compromise. This makes the existing gap in research on the role of empathy in the political context, and especially its role in potentially balancing disagreement and respect, particularly important. My dissertation aims to address this gap by contributing to our understanding of empathy in the context of political interactions and its ability to facilitate non-hostile disagreement between political opponents. It does this in two ways.

First, as empathy research has not traditionally focused on political interactions, it is crucial to examine the extent to which empathy shapes attitudes and feelings toward political opponents compared to other common approaches to engaging with political opponents, such as self-advocacy, where individuals advocate for and defend their own views against their political opponents, and seeking factual accuracy, which focuses on ensuring that discussions are grounded in facts. Understanding these dynamics will provide a clearer picture of how empathy compares

with these alternative ways of engaging in political discussions. This leads to the first research question of my dissertation:

RQ1: How does empathizing with political opponents shape non-hostile political disagreements compared to other ways of engaging with political opponents?

Second, empathy research has predominantly concentrated on dyadic, i.e., one-on-one, interactions. However, political interactions typically involve multiple participants and occur within more complex social environments (Carlson and Settle, 2022), such as on social media, on television, or at other social gatherings. Thus, political interactions are more likely to involve a range of actors, both actively engaged and passively involved, making the dynamics of political discourse more complex than those traditionally studied in the dyad. Therefore, it is crucial to understand how empathy toward political opponents both influences and is influenced by these more complex social settings. Understanding the broader social dynamics at play can shed light on how empathy influences attitudes and feelings toward political opponents within the complex social landscape of politics, as well as the feasibility of empathy as a way to reduce hostility across political divides. Thus, I ask the following two further research questions:

RQ2: How does observing political opponents showing empathy influence perceptions, feelings, and attitudes across political divides?

RQ3: How do social dynamics shape intentions to empathize with political opponents?

I chose to investigate how empathy toward political opponents influences attitudes and feelings in political interactions and thereby assess the possibility of non-hostile political disagreements in the highly polarized context of the United States of America, where affective polarization has been increasing most dramatically in recent decades (Boxell et al., 2024). In a highly polarized environment such as the United States, where political and moral differences are deeply entrenched (Finkel et al., 2020), it is crucial to explore strategies that reduce hostility while allowing for disagreement to be voiced and debated.

The Main Findings of This Dissertation

The dissertation finds that empathy is indeed a useful tool to reduce hostility between political opponents. Whether individuals actively engage in empathy toward their opponents or simply observe their opponents demonstrating empathy, they tend to become less hostile toward those opponents. Additionally, when people see their political opponents showing empathy, they feel more comfortable engaging in discussions with them and reciprocate the empathy they receive. Thus, empathy has beneficial effects for both those who are directly involved in political interactions and those who only passively observe them. This shows that empathizing with political opponents can initiate a positive feedback loop wherein one person's empathy leads others to be empathic as well, which helps reduce hostility and improve interactions overall. Moreover, individuals are willing to be empathic towards political opponents and reduce their hostility toward them even if they consider potential negative reactions from their own political group for empathizing, suggesting that a positive feedback loop of empathy can start despite potential push-back.

While empathy reduces hostility and improves interactions between political opponents, it also tends to increase agreement with political opponents. Rather than facilitating the expression of (non-hostile) disagreement, empathy seems inherently connected to increased agreement: Empathizing with political opponents results in a greater likelihood to agree with the political opponent; when an individual sees an opponent empathizing, they are perceived as being more in agreement with the individual's own views; and as soon as empathy is combined with explicit disagreement and thus no longer conveys agreement, it ceases to reduce hostility. This means that empathy tends to facilitate agreement more readily than it does disagreement. However, empathy does not completely close the door to disagreement, at least not from a psychological perspective, where increased empathy and reduced hostility can coexist with disagreement. Yet, this changes when it comes to the communication of disagreement. In these situations, maintaining non-hostile disagreement through empathy is challenging, even when such disagreements are expressed with empathy.

Hence, the usefulness of empathy toward political opponents should be assessed based on its effectiveness in achieving context-dependent goals, rather than on whether it inherently promotes or hinders a particular outcome (such as agreement or disagreement). If the objective is to reduce hostility and foster agreement, or if agreement is an acceptable

consequence, empathy can be a powerful tool for building emotional and ideological unity between political opponents. However, if the goal is to reduce hostility while still allowing for the explicit expression of disagreement — particularly in contexts where agreement may be undesirable or even counterproductive — empathy alone may not be sufficient.

Outline of the Dissertation

This dissertation is structured as follows. Chapter 2 is devoted to defining empathy. It begins with a general overview of the phenomenon of empathy and then provides the specific definition of empathy used in this dissertation, which puts at its core the role of *understanding* and defines a specific target that is important to incorporate, namely the political out-group.

Chapter 3 offers a broad summary of existing research on empathy in intergroup relations to outline our current understanding of the topic. It mainly distinguishes between research on non-political and political intergroup relations, points to the positive, limited, and negative effects of empathizing with out-group members, and details not only the effects of empathizing but also of being empathized with.

Building on this foundation, Chapter 4 identifies two significant gaps in the existing literature, namely the importance of having a politically realistic counterfactual when studying the use of empathy in political interactions, and the importance of incorporating social dynamics into the study. It thus provides more detail and justification for the need to explore Research Questions 1, 2, and 3, and highlights the main contributions of my research.

In Chapter 5, I describe the research method used in the dissertation, focusing on survey experiments. I also discuss the decisions I took when designing my studies, including, *inter alia*, why I focus on the United States, as well as the limitations of my research.

Chapters 6, 7, and 8 address Research Questions 1, 2, and 3, respectively, presenting the empirical findings of this dissertation. Each chapter offers a summary of the relevant theoretical background, details the methods employed, and reports the empirical results.

In Chapter 9, I discuss the results of my research in relation to the main research question and evaluate whether empathy can facilitate non-hostile disagreements across political divides, review the limitations of my research, and propose directions for future studies.

Chapter 2

What is Empathy?

Different Types of Empathy

Empathy is a complex and multi-layered phenomenon that is studied under the guise of various definitions. Scientists generally distinguish between cognitive and affective empathy. However, beyond these basic distinctions, scholars often view empathy and its components as an intertwined and dynamic process in which different elements of the phenomenon influence each other at different points in time (Davis, 1996; Zaki, 2014). Despite its complexity and multifaceted nature, it is crucial to break empathy into its components in order to be able to measure and study it effectively, and thereby enable us to draw meaningful conclusions.

Drawing on the work of Batson (2009) and Batson and Ahmad (2009), I distinguish between five types of empathy¹ — gaining knowledge of another’s internal states, feeling as another, imagine-self perspective taking, imagine-other perspective taking, and feeling for another — that can be categorized based on their affective and cognitive nature, as well as whether they are self-focused or other-focused. In the following, I will illustrate the different types of empathy through an example situated in the United States, which is the case that I focus on in my research.

Imagine you are at a birthday party in Pennsylvania and meet Lisa, your friend’s colleague. As the evening progresses, you get into a conversation with Lisa. After a while, she begins to redirect the topic of the conversation to America’s southern border with Mexico. She argues passionately in favor of building a wall to limit immigration. Lisa believes immigrants are taking away jobs, and makes them responsible for her

¹Batson (2009) originally distinguished between eight types. For simplicity, I exclude his second type, “adopting the posture or matching the neural responses of an observed other,” also known as facial empathy, motor mimicry, or imitation. I also simplify and collapse the distinctions between different forms of perspective-taking and omit empathic distress.

own struggle to find one that pays her bills. She also recounts a recent experience: Last week, after she went home from a party at a friend's place, a man followed and shouted at her. Lisa is convinced the man was an illegal immigrant. She is visibly upset and shares her anger, fear, and frustration. She insists that a wall must be built to prevent people from entering the country and expresses her hope that Donald Trump will win the upcoming election. She believes that Donald Trump is the only one who can prevent such situations from happening again.

What would it mean to be empathic toward Lisa? In the following, I provide an overview of at least five ways to show empathy to Lisa.

1 Gaining Knowledge About The Internal States Of Another Person

One possibility is to gain knowledge about what is going on in Lisa's mind. This empathic process — which can also be termed empathic accuracy (Ickes, 1997) or mind perception (Zaki, 2014) — falls under the category of other-focused cognitive empathy. It involves gaining knowledge about another person's internal states and understanding what they think and feel. For instance, in Lisa's case, you would gain insight into her internal states based on her verbal expressions, facial expressions, and actions. You would understand that Lisa fears that immigrants are taking her job, feels threatened by them, supports building a wall, believes Trump would be the best president, aligns with the Republican party, and is experiencing anger, frustration, and upset about the situation. Although you might not perfectly capture every detail of her internal experience, you can gain general knowledge of her mindset by listening attentively to her thoughts, feelings, and experiences. This process is a crucial precursor to the other empathic processes that I discuss below (Zaki, 2014).

2 Feeling As Another Person Feels

Another way to empathize is to share the same emotions as the person with whom one empathizes. This form of empathy, often referred to as emotional contagion, emotional mirroring, or experience sharing, is an affective and self-oriented process. It is self-oriented in that it involves the “tendency to *adopt* the sensory, motor, visceral, and affective states that they encounter in others” (Zaki, 2014, pp. 1608–1609, emphasis added). For example, in Lisa's case, you would empathize by directly experiencing her feelings yourself. For example, you could say, “I feel you,”

and indicate that you, just like Lisa, feel resentment toward immigrants or fear of the person who followed her home.

3 Imagining How One Would Think And Feel In The Other's Place

People can also try to put themselves in the other person's shoes. This is an important aspect of cognitive empathy, also known as imagine-self perspective-taking, role-taking, or simulation. It is self-focused because it involves "imagining your own mental states as if you were the other person or experiencing their situation" (Wang et al., 2014, p. 375). It thus requires placing *yourself* in another person's shoes and reflecting on what *your* reactions and emotions would be if you were in that situation. In Lisa's case, for example, you would consider how you would think and feel if you were a Republican facing similar challenges and how you would react if you were followed by another person at night. Essentially, you are projecting yourself into another person's situation and acting as *if it were happening to you*.

4 Imagining How Another Is Thinking And Feeling

Instead of viewing someone else's perspective through your own lens, you can also focus on understanding how they perceive and experience the world from their own point of view. This form of other-focused cognitive empathy, known as imagine-other perspective taking (Wang et al., 2014), mentalizing (Zaki, 2014), or perspective-getting (Kalla and Broockman, 2023), involves stepping outside your own perspective to understand another person's thoughts and feelings from *their* own viewpoint. It is other-focused because you let *the other* guide your understanding of *their* perspective, rather than projecting your own perspective onto another's perspective (as in imagine-self perspective-taking). As Nagel (1974) argues, each being has a unique subjective experience that we can never fully know. However, we can improve our understanding of their perspective through their own accounts. For instance, with Lisa, you would seek to understand how and why her personal experiences — such as the encounter that night and her job market challenges — affect *her* in the ways they do.

5 Feeling For Another Person Who Is Suffering

Last but not least, empathy can mean feeling for another person. This type of affective and other-focused empathy is commonly referred to as empathic concern or compassion. Compassion is defined as “the feeling that arises in witnessing another’s suffering and that motivates a subsequent desire to help” (Goetz et al., 2010, p. 351). It is also focused on the goal of easing another person’s distress (Batson, 2009). In contrast to the other type of affective empathy discussed in (2), this emotional reaction is not about mirroring the feelings of the other person. Instead, it is a reaction *to* the other person’s feelings — a feeling *for* the other person and *not as* the other person. For example, if you are compassionate towards Lisa, you would say something like “I’m sorry for what happened to you,” and feel concerned and sad for her because she is struggling to find a job or has experienced an unpleasant situation. You would also like to help her and relieve her stress, but that does not mean you share her anger or frustration with immigrants. Compassion has similarities to pity, but pity introduces a hierarchical dimension in which you feel for someone who is considered inferior (Goetz et al., 2010). For example, pitying Lisa would mean seeing her as a helpless individual who, without your intervention or guidance, would not be able to navigate the situation or feel better.

In this dissertation, I focus on cognitive and other-focused empathy, aligning with the empathic processes described under (1) gaining knowledge of another person’s internal states and (4) imagining how another person thinks and feels. The concrete definition of empathy in this dissertation, along with the rationale for employing this particular type of empathy, is provided at the end of this chapter. First, before we can arrive at a final definition to guide this dissertation, it is important to address two other critical aspects of empathy: how empathy occurs (whether automatically or deliberately), and to whom it is directed.

Empathic Ability or Motivation

Research often assumes that empathy occurs automatically and is dispositional, i.e., varies from person to person: One automatically understands what is going on in another person’s mind, automatically feels the same way, automatically thinks about how one oneself would think and feel in the other’s situation, automatically lets the other speak for themselves to get at their perspective, and automatically feels concerned and wants to

help — and one does all of this either more or less automatically than other people do.

To illustrate this within the political context examined in this dissertation, scholars studying dispositional empathy explore how different political groups vary in their capacity for empathy. For example, research has shown that liberals generally report higher levels of empathy compared to conservatives (see Waytz et al., 2016 for an overview). Some studies find that social dominance orientation — a preference for social hierarchies often associated with political conservatism (Sidanius and Pratto, 2001) — is negatively correlated with dispositional empathy (Pratto et al., 1994; Sidanius et al., 2013). Additionally, Hasson et al. (2018) found that in the United States, as well as in Germany and Israel, liberals tend to feel more empathy towards others than conservatives, and are more willing to empathize with conservatives than vice versa. However, more recent research by Casey et al. (2023) presents a different view: in the United States, liberals and conservatives do not significantly differ in their overall tendency to show empathy, but conservatives are found to demonstrate more empathy towards liberals than liberals do towards conservatives. How can we make sense of this? Who is more and who is less empathic in the political realm?

Perhaps the question we should be asking is not who is generally more or less empathic, but rather, “Who is more or less empathic *towards whom?*” In addition to viewing empathy as a static ability that varies from person to person and is activated more or less automatically, one should also understand it as a dynamic motivational process. In other words, “There are many situations in which a person has the ability to empathize but does not have the desire to empathize” (Weisz and Zaki, 2017, p. 213). In 2014, Jamil Zaki introduced a motivational framework for understanding empathic processes, emphasizing that empathy does not arise from people’s (in)ability to empathize, but from their (lack of) motivation to do so, be it conscious or unconscious (Zaki, 2014).

One key finding in the literature is that empathy often depends on the level of similarity between individuals. That is, the motivation to empathize with someone is influenced not only by one’s general ability to empathize, but also by how similar one is to the person with whom one is empathizing. Thus, people are more likely to empathize with those who belong to their in-group than with those who belong to their out-group. This is also known as intergroup empathy bias (Cikara et al., 2011) or selective empathy (Stevens et al., 2021); Hochschild (2016) calls it “empathy walls.” Returning to the example at the beginning of this chapter: You would likely have found it easier to empathize with Lisa if

you are a Republican or share skepticism about immigration. Conversely, if you are a Democrat or support immigration, empathizing with Lisa might have been more challenging. This highlights that empathy toward another person is shaped by their characteristics and group affiliations in relation to your own.

This discussion highlights why some studies focusing on dispositional empathy show that empathy is associated with increased hostility towards political opponents (Simas et al., 2020) and that individuals with the highest levels of empathy tend to experience the strongest polarization (Brophy and Mullinix, 2023). If the studies had explicitly considered the characteristics of both the empathizer and the target, the results might have been significantly different. It is therefore essential to distinguish between dispositional and deliberate empathy and to clearly identify the characteristics of both the sender and the target of empathy to understand its diverse effects.

The Definition of Empathy Used in This Dissertation

Building on these insights, this dissertation investigates (1) cognitive and other-focused empathy through a (2) motivational lens, specifically focusing on (3) individuals belonging to a political out-group.

First, I focus on a cognitive, other-focused form of empathy that aligns with the empathic processes outlined at the beginning of this chapter, specifically (1) gaining knowledge of another person's internal states and (4) imagining how another person thinks and feels. This type of empathy is particularly suited to situations involving disagreement as it allows for understanding others without having to necessarily agree with them (Livingstone et al., 2020a; Morrell, 2010; Mutz, 2002; Reis et al., 2017). Unlike affective empathy, which involves sharing the same emotions as another person, or self-focused perspective-taking, which can make it challenging to maintain a distinct viewpoint, this type of cognitive empathy supports the coexistence of differing opinions.

Additionally, the definition of empathy used here is deeply influenced by the psychotherapeutic tradition, particularly the work of Rogers (1975), Rogers and Farson (1957), and Rogers (1951) and Barrett-Lennard (1962), who place understanding at the core of empathy. This psychotherapeutic perspective emphasizes that empathy is not only a fundamental aspect of effective interpersonal communication but also a skill that can be cultivated and developed, making it suitable for broader ap-

plications, including in the political realm. To clarify what it means to center understanding in empathy, I present the definition of empathic understanding as proposed by Barrett-Lennard (1962, pp. 3–4)

Empathic understanding [...] is an active process of desiring to know the full, present and changing awareness of another person, of reaching out to receive his communication and meaning, and of translating his words and signs into experienced meaning that matches at least those aspects of his awareness that are most important to him at the moment. It is an experiencing of the conscious 'behind' another's outward communication, but with continuous awareness that this consciousness is originating and proceeding in the other. Thus, empathic understanding is concerned with experiencing the process and content of another's awareness in all its aspects. In particular it includes sensing the immediate affective quality and intensity of the other's experience, as well as recognizing its particular context (for example, who or what his feeling is directed toward, or his awareness of the conditions that produce it). [...] Maximum empathic understanding of B, by A, requires that A be able to discriminate and permit his awareness all that B gives direct or indirect signs of consciously experiencing when he is with A. [...] To the extent that A identifies with B's feelings, or unconsciously projects feelings of his own into his perception of B's experience, or in any other way confuses B's experiences with experiences that originate in himself, his empathic understanding of B will be reduced.

In other words, Barrett-Lennard understands empathy as the sincere desire to fully understand and grasp the unique nuances of another person's inner world through that person's frame of reference rather than one's own frame of reference. This aligns with Morrell (2010, p. 166), who describes the ideal form of empathy for democratic engagement as follows: "Citizens must strive to understand how others see their positions from their perspectives; only by doing so will democratic citizens reduce biases they tend to have and give others the equal consideration necessary for legitimate collective decision-making." This understanding of empathy is also adopted in this dissertation.

Second, I approach this type of empathy from a motivational perspective, concentrating on targeted and deliberate rather than dispositional and automatic empathy. My focus is on empathy directed toward individuals from political out-groups — i.e., those with opposing political attitudes (e.g., empathy from someone with anti-immigration views toward someone with pro-immigration views, and vice versa) or different party

affiliations (e.g., empathy from Republicans toward Democrats, and vice versa).

Based on this, when I speak of empathy toward political opponents in this dissertation, I am referring to **the attempt to understand the thoughts, feelings, and experiences of those belonging to a political out-group from their unique perspective**. Throughout the dissertation, I will use different terms to describe this empathy. Specifically, I use the term *out-party empathy* to refer to empathy between individuals with different party affiliations, such as between Republicans and Democrats. More generally, I use the terms *empathy toward political out-groups*, *empathy toward political opponents*, and *empathy across political divides* to describe empathy directed at individuals both with different political views or different party affiliations.

Chapter 3

The Role Of Empathy In Intergroup Relations

I am not the first to consider the implications of empathy for improving relations between groups in conflict. Given the existence of intergroup empathy bias — the likelihood of empathizing more with those who belong to one’s in-group than with those who belong to an out-group (Cikara et al., 2011; Stevens et al., 2021) — efforts are being made to direct empathy toward the people it normally overlooks. The aim of these efforts is to reduce prejudice and hostility and promote cooperation across all kinds of divides, be they social, ethnic, religious, political, or any other. Politicians frequently advocate for more empathy towards dissimilar others to overcome animosities (Biden Jr., 2021; Higgins, 2016; Leake, 2016), and public initiatives aim to make people more empathic toward their opponents to bridge divides.¹ These calls are based on the idea that empathy plays a crucial role in navigating the social world, building social relationships, and promoting solidarity. As Stephan and Finlay (1999) puts it: “[E]mpathy makes the incomprehensible comprehensible.” By understanding the thoughts and feelings of others, individuals can better predict and manage behavior, which is essential for collaboration (Preston and de Waal, 2002; see also Anderson and Keltner, 2002).

What does research say about the effects of targeting empathy toward dissimilar others? In this chapter, I introduce the research on the effects of empathy towards different out-groups. This is solely an overview of the literature and is not intended to be exhaustive. I begin with studies of empathy in intergroup relationships, in which groups are defined by social categories such as ethnicity, religion, social class, sexual orientation, or other demographics such as age or gender. I then focus on research that deals specifically with *political* intergroup relations, which is of particular relevance to this dissertation as it examines the role of empathy

¹For example, the Listening First Project (<https://www.listenfirstproject.org/>)

in facilitating non-hostile disagreement across political divides. For the sake of clarity, the term “out-group empathy” is used to refer generally to empathy towards those belonging to an out-group, regardless of the features by which that group is defined. However, when speaking specifically about political contexts, where groups are defined by differences in political opinions or affiliations, I use terms such as “out-party empathy,” “empathy towards political out-groups,” “empathy towards political opponents,” or “empathy across political divides” to specify that I am referring to the political context. Furthermore, I highlight the positive, limited, and negative effects of empathy for intergroup relationships found in the literature. While empathy is often hailed as a universal remedy, some critics point out its dark sides (Breithaupt, 2018, 2019) and even speak out against empathy (Bloom, 2017). Accordingly, I summarize the evidence on the impact of empathy, including its positive impact on the overall quality of relationships between groups; its limited impact, i.e., when it does not bring about the expected change; and its potential to backfire and worsen intergroup relationships or individual outcomes. I also distinguish between the impact on the person empathizing as well as the person being empathized with, as empathy is not a one-way street. Given that empathy can be defined and applied in different ways, I also specify the type of empathy that was examined in each study.

The Positive Effects of Targeting Empathy Towards Out-Groups

In Intergroup Relations

A substantial body of research investigates the potential of interventions to enhance various types of empathy towards out-group members in order to improve intergroup relationships (see reviews by Batson and Ahmad, 2009; Dovidio et al., 2010; Galinsky et al., 2005; Stephan and Finlay, 1999; Todd and Galinsky, 2014; Vanman, 2016). This research primarily focuses on how increasing empathy towards out-group members can improve intergroup relationships, particularly among groups distinguished by characteristics such as ethnicity, religion, or sexual orientation. There is also a notable emphasis on investigating the impact of empathy towards minority, disadvantaged, or stereotyped groups that have historically been targets of discrimination and prejudice. These reviews consistently point towards the positive effects of increasing empathy toward out-groups, indicating that it reduces prejudice and avoidance be-

haviors and increases the likelihood of approaching, engaging with, and helping out-group members.

Recent studies also increasingly demonstrate the significant lasting effects of increasing empathy towards out-groups. For example, playing a perspective-taking game is found to significantly reduce prejudice against the Roma minority in Hungary for at least a month, decrease bias against other stigmatized groups such as refugees, and reduce support for racist far-right political parties (Simonovits et al., 2018). Similarly, encouraging the hearing and understanding of others' dissenting perspectives through non-judgmental narrative exchanges — whether via video, phone, or in person — durably reduces exclusionary attitudes towards unauthorized immigrants and transgender people for up to four and a half months and increases support for nondiscrimination laws (Broockman and Kalla, 2016; Kalla and Broockman, 2020); in this case, perspective-getting was most successful (Kalla and Broockman, 2023). Furthermore, media interventions like watching a soap opera that includes narratives about people's lives in post-genocide Rwanda have resulted in demonstrated increases in empathy (measured by asking about the extent to which people could imagine the thoughts or feelings of out-group members) towards other Rwandans, fostering greater trust, cooperation, and trauma healing (Paluck, 2009).

Across Political Divides

Only recently has research on out-group empathy traveled to more political domains and investigated how increasing empathy toward political opponents might improve relationships between them. Thus far only a few studies have looked into this. Santos et al. (2022) investigate whether prompting people to believe that feeling empathy and taking the perspective of another (compound affective and cognitive empathy definition) is useful as a political resource (rather than being a weakness) makes people more willing to engage in bipartisan cooperation and feel less out-party animosity, less moral disengagement, and less social distance with out-partisans. Treatment effects here are similar across Democrats and Republicans. Muradova and Arceneaux (2021) show that encouraging people to think about the thoughts and feelings of people with opposing political views increases their willingness to consider and reflect on these perspectives. Another study finds that when shown by an AI assistant (GPT-3) how to rephrase their written contribution to a political discussion on US gun regulations in a more empathic way (defined here through understanding and acknowledging another's

perspective), this increases participants' willingness to respect the views of their opponents in the broader political system and the importance of understanding the people who disagree with them on the political issue under discussion (Argyle et al., 2023).

The Limited or Negative Effects of Empathizing with Out-Group Members

However, redirecting empathy to out-group members in order to improve intergroup relations, whether political or non-political, is not a one-size-fits-all solution. The majority of studies does indeed find positive effects of empathy on intergroup relationships, but there are some that show only minimal or limited effects. Furthermore, voices cautioning about the dark side of empathy (Breithaupt, 2018, 2019) and even speaking out against it (Bloom, 2017) are growing louder, and research also points to negative consequences of out-group empathy for intergroup relationships and individuals. This complicates our understanding of the effect of directing empathy towards out-group members.

Limited Effects

Empathy interventions do not always yield significant effects. For instance, Bor and Simonovits (2021) find that while successfully encouraging people to take the perspective of a poor person increases feelings of upset, compassion, and anxiety, it had only small and insignificant effects on warm feelings toward the poor and does not affect support for redistributive policies. Similarly, taking the perspective of a refugee (versus merely being informed about them) increases the likelihood of writing a supportive letter to the president of the United States, but this effect does not persist beyond a week, and perspective-taking does not alter respondents' attitudes toward refugees (Adida et al., 2018). When looking at relationships between political opponents, Argyle et al. (2023) find that while writing more empathically increases participants' willingness to respect opposing views and recognize the importance of understanding those who disagree with them (as outlined previously), it does not improve their perception of conversation quality. Similarly, Muradova and Arceneaux (2021) find that while empathy increases individuals' willingness to consider and reflect on opposing perspectives (also outlined previously), it does not result in greater openness to changing their attitudes compared to simply being exposed to the opposing viewpoint.

Negative Effects

Redirecting empathy to out-groups can have negative effects on intergroup relationships in two significant ways: (1) it can exacerbate prejudices against the target or (2) place the empathizer at a disadvantage.

In an extension of her research in Rwanda, Paluck (2010) find that encouraging perspective-taking alongside exposure to a soap opera increases intolerance. Additionally, in competitive intergroup environments, individuals engaging in perspective-taking have been observed to paradoxically display more self-interested behaviors, potentially due to anticipating that their counterparts will be biased and self-interested (Epley et al., 2006). Furthermore, efforts to increase empathy for political dissenters appear to be effective for some individuals and counterproductive for others. This is especially the case when power dynamics define the intergroup relationship. For example, when members of a dominant group show empathy towards members of a minority group instead of taking their perspective, this leads to the minorities perceiving their group as less powerful and lacking status (Vorauer and Quesnel, 2016). However, this effect does not seem limited to hierarchical relationships. Other research finds that after receiving perspective-taking prompts, people who are pro-immigration are more willing to consider the perspective of the person opposite them than are those who are anti-immigration. In contrast, people who are against immigration developed more negative feelings and felt more competitive when asked to take the perspective of their pro-immigration counterpart (Klimecki et al., 2020).

Allocating more empathy to an out-group can also place the empathizer at a disadvantage. Critics like Bloom (2017) contend that empathy, no matter who it targets, is inherently biased and can lead to unfairness or favoritism towards specific individuals at the expense of others (see also Breithaupt, 2019 on the dark side of empathy). Batson et al. (1995) find that those who imagine how their counterparts feel and how a certain situation affected their lives allocated more resources to the counterpart, which led to a reduction in the overall collective good. Similarly, in a study on negotiations, Galinsky et al. (2008) find that those who try to understand their counterpart's feelings in a negotiation achieved the poorest individual outcomes, mostly benefiting their counterparts. In contrast, those who focus on understanding their counterpart's thoughts improve both their own outcomes and those of their counterparts. This not only shows that different types of empathy might have different effects but also reflects the potential of empathy to "engender an asymmetry that empowers an (imaginary) other; the empa-

thetic person is at the same time emptied out and weakened” (Breithaupt, 2019, p. 60), which can place the individual at a disadvantage.

Being Empathized With

Yet empathy does not stop at the individual who exercises it. When one person empathizes with another, it not only affects the attitudes and emotions of the empathizer but also shapes the thoughts and feelings of the person receiving empathy. Hence, the impact of empathy extends beyond the individual who demonstrates it. These ripple effects of out-group empathy are crucial to consider when seeking to understand its impact on intergroup relationships. This line of research, however, is very recent. Earlier studies primarily focused on interpersonal dynamics, such as romantic relationships (Goldstein et al., 2014) and/or interactions between strangers (Gordon and Chen, 2016), and find predominantly positive effects of being empathized with. Only recently have the studies moved into the political arena, and now also include intergroup dynamics.

For example, Santos et al. (2022) find that believing that out-party empathy is useful (rather than a weakness) altered people’s way of communicating: They used more perspective-taking language when writing a message to persuade an out-partisan of their views on gun laws. People who then read these messages written by those who believed that empathy is useful perceived the messages as more empathic and more persuasive, liked the author better, and decreased their partisan animosity not only toward the specific person, but the whole group. Similarly, in the discussion study by Argyle et al. (2023) in which people are offered rephrased versions of their messages that showed more understanding, acknowledgment, positive emotions, and agreement, those who received these rephrased messages report significantly higher conversation quality and are also more likely to report that it is important to understand the people who disagree with them on the political issue under discussion. These effects are found even among those with the strongest initial disagreement. At the same time, people do not change their attitudes towards the topic under discussion. Similar effects are also found by Minson et al. (2023), who show that vaccine skeptics engaged in a discussion with someone who is pro-vaccine but is receptive to their views (i.e., uses language to communicate one’s willingness to engage and understand opposing perspectives) makes vaccine skeptics think of their pro-vaccine counterparts as more reasonable, trustworthy, intelligent, and knowledgeable, and made them more willing to get that person’s advice

and engage in a conversation with them — but it does not change their willingness to get vaccinated, or their level of concern with the safety and efficacy of the vaccine. Yeomans et al. (2020) also find that writing more receptive posts on Wikipedia reduces the likelihood of receiving personal attacks from disagreeing editors, and that those who write in a receptive way are considered more desirable partners for future collaboration and their messages perceived as more persuasive. Other studies find that beyond improving intergroup relations, feeling understood by one's counterparts had strong associations with a lower separatist vote (actual voting behavior in the Brexit referendum, and voting intentions in a Scottish independence referendum) as well as more trust in the out-group institution (like the UK's or EU's functioning) (Livingstone et al., 2020b). In addition, when people experience being listened to — i.e., when others make a genuine effort to understand them — they feel less lonely (Itzchakov et al., 2023). Feeling understood also increases social wellbeing and connectedness, encourages people to think less defensively about their own attitudes, and reduces attitude certainty and moral rigidity (Itzchakov et al., 2024). This is the case even when listening to more extreme and prejudiced others. When those who are prejudiced against black people, homeless people, immigrants, or LGBTQ+ people are listened to in order to be understood, they gain more self-awareness, become more open to changing their minds and develop more positive feelings towards those against whom they were previously prejudiced (Itzchakov et al., 2020).

While studies show that receiving empathy from out-groups generally has positive effects on the quality of inter-group relationships, there are also cases where it can have negative consequences. For example, Livingstone et al. (2020b) find that being a younger adult who is empathized with by older adults (being told that older adults understand their perspective) has negative effects on the relationship between them. The authors suggest that this may be because this form of empathy conveys a sense of lower status or dependence, potentially reinforcing feelings of incompetence. Furthermore, Nadler and Liviatan (2006) highlights that being empathized with by an adversary (e.g., a Palestinian saying that Israelis also experience suffering) can be problematic when trust toward this out-group is low, as such efforts at empathy may not be perceived as sincere or could be misinterpreted, which would worsen intergroup relationships.

Summarizing Research on Empathy in Intergroup Relationships

This overview, while not exhaustive, highlights the extensive interest in the role of empathy in improving intergroup relationships. Most studies focus on intergroup relationships defined by categories such as ethnicity, religion, social status, age, or sexual orientation. There is growing scholarly interest in empathy in the context of political differences, but currently only a few studies have examined it.

The most prevalent finding is that people are more motivated to empathize with their in-group members than with out-group members. This phenomenon, known as intergroup empathy bias, contributes to intergroup hostility. To address this issue and improve intergroup relationships, efforts are made to redirect empathy toward those who are not typically targeted by it, particularly out-group members. This affects the quality of intergroup relationships by impacting both the person who is empathizing and the one who is empathized with, highlighting the importance of considering both sender and recipient in order to fully understand the effects of empathy.

Research suggests that redirecting empathy to out-group members generally improves the quality of intergroup relationships, benefiting both the sender and the recipient of empathy. However, some studies also show limitations and potential negative effects on intergroup relationships and individual outcomes. Results on attitude change are also mixed: Some studies show that empathy can change the political attitudes of the sender and recipient of empathy, while other studies find no significant changes. Furthermore, there are differences between affective and cognitive empathy, both of which produce a range of outcomes, from positive to limited or negative effects. These findings highlight the importance of recognizing the complexities of empathy-building strategies in improving the quality of intergroup relations and changing attitudes, rather than viewing them as either entirely virtuous or wholly problematic.

Chapter 4

Gaps In The Literature And My Contributions

What have we learned thus far about the role of empathy in intergroup relations? Below, I summarize key insights from Chapters 2 and 3 in bullet points. These insights serve as the foundation from which I will build my dissertation and highlight its contributions.

- There is ample research on the role of empathy in intergroup relationships.
- Most research in the context of intergroup relationships is defined by categories such as ethnicity, religion, age, social status, sexual orientation, or other social and demographic characteristics. There is not much research on intergroup relationships defined by political differences.
- An important factor contributing to hostile intergroup relations is intergroup empathy bias: comparatively higher empathy for members of one's in-group and lower empathy for members of the out-group. Therefore, it is also often found that dispositional empathy increases hostility in intergroup relations.
- To improve intergroup relationships, efforts are made to redirect empathy toward those who are not typically targeted by it, particularly out-group members.
- It is important to distinguish between different types of out-group empathy, as they may have different effects on intergroup relationships.
- Empathy is not a one-way street. It is crucial to consider the effects of increasing out-group empathy on both the sender and the recipient.
- Results generally show positive effects on intergroup relationships for increasing all types of out-group empathy, benefiting both the sender and the recipient. However, some studies show that increasing out-group empathy — regardless of the type or whether it focuses on the sender or recipient — has limited or even negative effects.

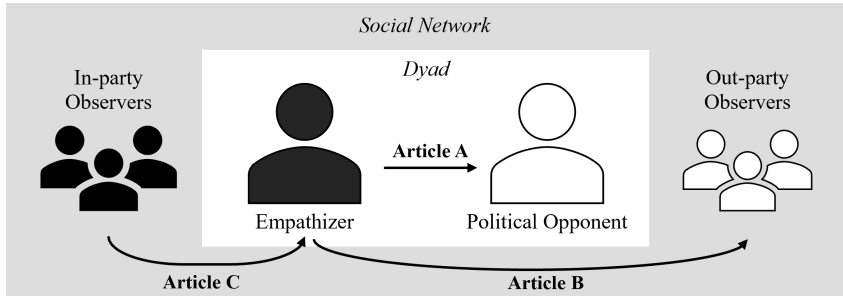
However, there remains much that we do not yet understand. To understand how empathy toward political opponents shapes attitudes

and feelings in interactions with political opponents, and on this basis to assess whether directing empathy toward political opponents can facilitate non-hostile disagreement, we need a deeper understanding of empathy's role in *political* interactions. Currently, there is a lack of research on the effects of empathy directed toward groups whose members are distinguished by their political beliefs and affiliations. My dissertation addresses this gap by examining empathy specifically between political opponents.

While my dissertation consistently emphasizes the importance of studying empathy in the political sphere, it also identifies two further significant gaps in the literature. First, since the study of empathy has not traditionally been situated in the political realm, in order to understand its utility in *political* interactions, it is important to *examine its effects in comparison to other common ways of interacting with political opponents* that have thus far not been considered by the literature. Secondly, empathy research primarily focuses on dyadic settings, i.e. one-on-one interactions. However, the political realm often involves complex social dynamics beyond individual interactions (Carlson and Settle, 2022). Political interactions often take place on social media platforms, on TV, in the workplace, or during social gatherings with friends and family, where many people are involved, both actively and passively. Hence, it is important to consider the broader social context and examine how empathy toward political opponents affects and is affected by social dynamics, rather than focusing solely on the impact of empathy in dyadic contexts on just the sender or recipient.

To study these gaps and address the overarching question of how empathy toward political opponents influences attitudes and feelings toward them and assess the extent to which it facilitates non-hostile disagreement, I formulate three research questions. While addressing the two identified gaps, these research questions also point toward the importance of taking into account how empathy affects different players in political interactions: the sender, the recipient, and the social network that observes the communication of empathy. Below, I outline the three questions and describe how the articles in my dissertation contribute to answering them. For a visual overview, please refer to Figure 4.1, which illustrates how the three articles in this dissertation address the research questions and simultaneously provides an overview of the different players involved in empathy interactions.

Figure 4.1: Studying Empathy Toward Political Opponents in Socially Complex Political Settings



Comparing Empathy to Other Legitimate Ways of Engaging With Political Opponents

Empathy research initially developed in non-political fields, where it primarily centered on comparing different levels or types of empathy or empathy with objectivity (e.g., Cameron et al., 2019; Galinsky et al., 2008). As a result, studies in the political domain have adopted these same frameworks for examining empathy. In the political sphere, however, these comparisons fall short and do not capture how people often approach political opponents. Thus, in order to really understand the effects of being empathic in interactions with political opponents, it is important to compare being empathic with other common (and often normatively desirable) ways of interacting and processing information in such encounters. This approach allows for a more realistic assessment of the effects of empathy in the political domain. Accordingly, this leads to my first research question:

RQ1: How does empathizing with political opponents shape non-hostile political disagreements compared to other ways of engaging with political opponents?

This question is further investigated in Chapter 6 of this dissertation. Here, I mainly draw on Article A, "*Approaching Political Discussions With Understanding: Comparing Empathy To Other Modes of Information Processing*," which compares the effects of empathizing with a political opponent with other common modes of processing information in interactions

with political opponents: (1) advocating for and defending one's opinion and (2) seeking factual accuracy about the political topic under discussion. These two modes have long been identified as fundamental ways of processing political information (Kunda, 1990). By comparing empathy to other established forms of political information processing, I aim to provide a more nuanced understanding of its role in interactions across political differences.

The Social Dynamics of Empathy Toward Political Opponents

Empathy is mainly studied in dyadic contexts, i.e., in one-on-one interactions. This approach usually examines the effects of empathy on either the sender or the recipient. However, politics often takes place in a broader social landscape and often involves more than just two people interacting in private. Many studies neglect the broader social context in which empathy can operate. To fully understand the effects of empathy toward political opponents, it is necessary to go beyond the dyadic setting and consider social complexity. To do so, it is important to additionally consider at least two relevant actors: in-party observers and out-party observers of empathy. In the following two subsections, I outline how my research accounts for these social dynamics by examining how observing out-partisans empathizing with one's side is perceived and influences feelings and attitudes across the political divide, and how in-party members influence the expression of empathy toward political opponents.

The Consequences Of Observing Political Opponents Showing Empathy

Recent research has begun to explore the social dynamics of empathy by examining how people react when observing like-minded others show empathy toward political opponents, i.e. the extent to which people like or dislike and morally approve or disapprove of showing empathy toward political opponents. However, as mentioned in Chapter 3, it is important to consider not only the effects of sending empathy, but also consider the side who is receiving it. So far, research has only focused on the effects of receiving empathy in a dyadic context. Here, however, I go beyond this dyadic context by examining how people react when *observing* empathy from political opponents to like-minded others. This approach allows me to test the broader impact of being empathic to political opponents and

whether it can influence not only the direct recipient (as has been investigated in previous research) but also the recipient's like-minded social network when its members observe the interaction. Ultimately, this aims to illuminate whether showing empathy towards political opponents can foster the potential for less hostile and more constructive disagreements in broader social settings. I therefore pose the following research question:

RQ2: How does observing political opponents showing empathy influence perceptions, feelings, and attitudes across political divides?

This question is investigated in Chapter 7 of this dissertation. Drawing on Article B, "*When Out-Partisans Understand: The Impact of Out-Party Empathy on Third-Person Observers.*" In this article, I examine how individuals perceive and are influenced by out-party members who show empathy toward other in-party members. Specifically, I explore not only how the act of expressing empathy or withholding it is perceived, but also how the act of showing empathy while simultaneously expressing explicit disagreement is viewed compared to situations where empathy is expressed without any disagreement. This can give immediate insight into the extent to which expressions of empathy can enable non-hostile disagreement between political opponents and whether empathy also affects those who merely witness these expressions but are not directly targeted by them.

How Social Dynamics Shape Empathy Toward Political Opponents

While it is important to examine the consequences of empathy toward political opponents in a more realistic political context — i.e., in comparison to other ways of dealing with political opponents (RQ1) and for those who observe political opponents showing empathy (RQ2) — it is at least equally important to understand how empathy can be *manifested* in more socially complex settings. This is crucial if we are to understand whether there is any chance at all of developing a culture of empathy toward political opponents, if so desired. But what factors influence whether empathy is shown toward political opponents? While there may be many reasons (Cikara et al., 2011), I again account for the more complex social context inherent to politics and look at how social dynamics, especially social pressure from one's in-party, might facilitate or inhibit intentions to be empathic toward political opponents.

RQ3: How do social dynamics shape intentions to empathize with political opponents?

This question is further investigated in Chapter 8 of this dissertation, drawing on Article C, “*Testing the Social Pressure Hypothesis: Does In-Party Social Pressure Reduce Out-Party Empathy?*” In this chapter, I examine how intentions to empathize with political opponents are influenced by perceived approval or disapproval from fellow in-party members. This article theorizes about and tests how perceptions of potential negative consequences from one’s in-party for empathizing with out-partisans shape people’s intentions to empathize with out-partisans.

Chapter 5

Using Survey Experiments To Study Empathy Between Political Opponents

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I —
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.

Robert Frost, The Road Not Taken, see also Angrist and Pischke (2014)

Just as the traveler claims that taking the road less traveled made a difference for him, I claim in this dissertation that taking the road of empathy makes a difference for interactions with political opponents. But how can I assess the extent to which empathy toward political opponents shapes attitudes and feelings in interactions with them, and assess whether empathy can lead to non-hostile disagreement and thus can make a difference? Or, to put it more technically, how do I determine the causal effect of empathy?

To investigate this, I use quantitative methods and survey experiments. More specifically, I conducted three survey experiments and one survey (see Table 5.1 for an overview). This section is dedicated to explaining why I use survey experiments to study the causal effects of empathy on interactions with political opponents, discussing the choices I made when designing my studies and reflecting on their benefits and limitations in the context of researching the role of empathy in facilitating non-hostile disagreement.

Table 5.1: Overview of Studies

Article	Study Design	Treatment Groups / Independent Variables	Treatment Type	Pre-registered Outcomes	N	Sample Characteristics	Survey Company	Dates	Link to Pre-reg.
A	1 Online Survey Experiment	Approaching Political Opponent in (1) Self-advocacy, (2) Factual Accuracy, (3) Empathy, (4) Control (no specific motivation)	Video-based Instructions + writing task	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hostile Feelings • Hostile Intentions • Belief Superiority • Dogmatism • (Dis)agreement with Political Opponent • Pro-social Intentions 	3051	U.S. sample, quota-based on age, gender, education, race, location	YouGov	15 Dec, 2022 - 16 Jan, 2023	osf.io/ygxbe
B	1 Online Survey Experiment	Out-partisans show (1) Pure Empathy, (2) Empathy and Disagreement, (3) Pure Disagreement, (4) Pure No-empathy, (5) No-Empathy and Disagreement, (6) Control	Picture-based vignettes of interactions on Social Media	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Empathy toward Out-Partisan • Hostility toward Out-Partisan • Comfort in Conversations with Out-Partisan • Belief Superiority 	3234	U.S. sample, quota-based on age, gender, ethnicity	Cint	29 Apr - 09 May, 2024	osf.io/bmx5p
C	1 Online Survey	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Perceptions of In-party Reluctance to Out-Party Empathy • Perceptions of In-party Disapproval of Out-Party Empathy 	-	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Out-Party Empathy 	1046	U.S. sample, quota-based on age, gender, ethnicity; analysis restricted to Republicans / Democrats	Prolific	28 - 30 July 2023	osf.io/4akjv
C	2 Online Survey Experiment	Information and reflection about potential (1) Social Costs of, (2) Social Benefits for empathizing with out-partisans, (3) Baseline	Information + Writing Task	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Out-Party Empathy • Perceived In-Party Disapproval of Out-Party Empathy 	1489	U.S. sample, balanced on gender and partisanship	Prolific	01 - 03 Dec 2023	osf.io/fxcu9

The Challenge of Causally Studying The Effect of Empathy on Non-Hostile Disagreement

How can we study whether empathy leads to non-hostile disagreement? The most straightforward way of studying this would be to compare two encounters between political opponents — Encounter A in which a person is empathic with Encounter B in which a person is not empathic. If Encounter A turns out to be less hostile than Encounter B while maintaining similar levels of disagreement, we would probably conclude that empathy decreases hostility while maintaining disagreement. But this conclusion would be biased. It might be that factors other than empathy explain the lower degree of hostility. Encounter A and Encounter B might vary on factors other than empathy that could have made people less hostile, also called omitted variable bias. Or it might not have been empathy that made the encounter less hostile, but the fact that one encounter was less hostile from the beginning, which may have led this encounter to be more empathic; this is called reversed causality. Just because empathy and non-hostile disagreement are present in one encounter and lower empathy and more hostile disagreement are present in another encounter does not mean that empathy caused the less hostile disagreement. Therefore, these comparisons make it impossible to accurately determine whether empathy causes non-hostile disagreements.

To truly understand empathy's *causal* effect, we would need two encounters that are exactly the same except that they differ *only* on whether empathy is present or absent. We would need an encounter in which a person engages in empathy, and a parallel universe with the exact same encounter in which the exact same person does not engage in empathy. However, until quantum physics finds out how to split the universe to make this possible, we are plagued with what is called *the fundamental problem of causal inference* — we cannot observe the outcomes of one encounter in which empathy is present and one in which empathy is not present (Angrist and Pischke, 2014).

However, this does not mean we must give up on finding out whether empathy facilitates non-hostile disagreement. Rather, we can study causality by relying on experiments, which circumvent the fundamental problem of causal inference by using the powerful tool of randomization and leveraging the Law of Large Numbers: By sampling a sufficiently large number of individuals and randomly assigning them to two groups — i.e., flipping a fair coin for each participant, with heads assigning them to Group 1 and tails to Group 2 — we will end up with two groups that

are *on average* similar to each other on any variable, becoming even more similar as the sample size increases. If we now provide Group 1 with a treatment that makes this group on average more empathic than Group 2, subsequently expose individuals in both groups to the same political opponent, measure their degree of hostility and disagreement with this opponent, and then find that Group 1 has *on average* lower hostility toward but the same level of disagreement with the political opponent, we can conclude that empathy makes people on average less hostile toward political opponents without affecting their level of disagreement. This is because the only factor that differed between Group 1 and Group 2 was their average level of empathy.

And this is exactly what I did. I study the causal effect of empathy using the golden standard for determining causality: experiments.

Seven Considerations When Designing Experiments on The Role of Empathy in Non-Hostile Disagreements

Although this process may seem simple — gathering participants, randomly assigning them to different groups, making individuals in one group more empathic than individuals in the other group and then measuring their degree of hostility and disagreement to compare the averages between groups — designing and conducting experiments in the social sciences is very complex. When designing experiments, numerous considerations and decisions have to be made that influence the outcome of the study. Each decision can bring certain advantages, but also carries limitations that have to be weighed in advance — if they can be predicted. Therefore, the design of experiments requires skill and precision, as researchers must be mindful about their choices and consider the trade-offs involved (Druckman, 2022).

In the following sections, I will therefore discuss seven critical aspects that I considered when designing and conducting my experiments on the role of empathy for non-hostile disagreements: (1) case selection, (2) the choice of *survey* experiments, (3) data collection, (4) exposure to political opponents, (5) treatment design, (6) measurement of key outcome variables, and (7) ethical considerations and open science practices. I will provide an overview of each of these aspects, highlighting why I made these choices and their benefits and limitations. Specifics about the various methods used can be found in the individual articles and also in the

relevant summary chapters (6-8). This section aims at an overarching discussion of the choices I made.

The Case: A Politically Divided United States of America

I decided to situate the study of how empathy shapes non-hostile political disagreements within the context of the United States due to its pronounced political polarization. Over the past four decades, the United States has seen the most significant rise in affective polarization among democracies (Boxell et al., 2024). Americans report being frustrated and exhausted by the political divide between Republicans and Democrats (Doherty et al., 2019) and think of it as the most important issue to tackle (Doherty et al., 2023b). Hence, exploring ways to foster non-hostile disagreement in this environment seems especially important. Furthermore, the binary structure of US politics provides a clear framework for studying interactions between political opponents in a group-based framework. It separates Republicans and Democrats into two distinct groups, making it straightforward to identify who is considered an opponent. This is in contrast to multi-party systems, where such distinctions are often less clear-cut.

Yet I focus not only on hostility between political opponents, but also on the role of empathy in reducing it. The United States is a particularly relevant context for studying the role of empathy in shaping non-hostile disagreement because empathy is repeatedly promoted as the key solution to this divide, including from the highest political office. For example, Barack Obama is renowned for his extensive emphasis on empathy in his political speeches (Leake, 2016). In fact, his quotes on empathy are considered by some to be so significant that they have been compiled on a dedicated website.¹ Joe Biden also emphasized the importance of empathy in overcoming divisions in his inaugural address (Biden Jr., 2021). Republican presidents such as George W. Bush have also spoken about empathy as a tool against political hostility (Higgins, 2016). Given the prominent role that the concept of empathy plays in public political discourse, it is important to examine whether empathy can actually help foster non-hostile political disagreements in such a polarized environment.

While the study of the United States offers valuable insights, focusing exclusively on this context also has its limitations. While most research on the topic has been conducted in the United States, we must not forget that it is a unique case with specific characteristics, including not only its

¹<http://cultureofempathy.com/Obama/Quotes.html>

high degree of polarization and binary party system, but also its particular democratic institutions, media landscape, culture, social conditions, and much more. These factors are not the same across democracies, many of which may be less polarized and have a multi-party system or other political structures. Caution should therefore be exercised when generalizing results from the United States to other countries with fundamentally different political, social, and cultural conditions.

Why Use Survey Experiments To Study The Effect Of Empathy On Non-Hostile Political Disagreements?

In my research, I employ the experimental method in a specific way: through online surveys. I conducted a total of three online survey experiments.² All of my experiments employ a between-subject design, where each participant is exposed to one treatment, as opposed to a within-subject design, where each participant is exposed to more than one treatment (Charness et al., 2012). An overview of all studies conducted in the dissertation, their design, treatments, key outcome variables, and sample characteristics can be found in Table 5.1.

Why did I choose online survey experiments over other experimental methods to study the role of empathy in non-hostile disagreements? Survey experiments offer several distinct advantages. First, they enable the collection of larger datasets and allow for data gathering from a more diverse and representative sample of the population than is typically feasible in traditional lab-based studies, which often depend on student participants. This broader reach is essential if I want to be better able to generalize my findings to the broader US population (Mutz, 2011). At the same time, survey experiments maintain a level of control comparable to that of lab experiments, which is crucial for preserving internal validity and determining causal relationships (Mutz, 2011). This balance between control and representativeness is particularly important given my interest in understanding the *causal* effect of empathy on non-hostile disagreements *in the United States*.

²Study 1 in Article C was a non-experimental cross-sectional survey. Although simple surveys are not ideal for establishing causality, they are valuable for identifying associations between variables. They also serve important descriptive purposes. In this case, I used a survey in Article C to better understand the extent to which people perceive their co-partisans as reluctant to and disapproving of empathizing with those from the opposing side. If the survey results had shown no such perceptions, further investigation in this direction would not have been warranted. Additionally, I could use the findings of the survey for the design of the treatments in the subsequent experimental study, which aimed to establish a causal relationship.

Data Collection in the United States

I conducted my survey experiments (and one survey) on a total of 8820 participants from the United States who were surveyed via data collection platforms such as YouGov (Article A), Lucid (Article B), and Prolific (Article C, Studies 1 and 2). All but one of the samples (Article C, Study 2) were quota sampled based on different demographics to approximate representativeness of the US population and improve the generalizability of my results. In Study 2 of Article C, due to resource constraints, I opted for a convenience sample balanced on gender and party affiliation. While a fully representative sample would have been more ideal for the generalizability of the results, it would also have been more expensive, meaning that I would have had to draw a smaller sample, which would have reduced the statistical power of my study. I chose to increase the sample size to improve statistical power, i.e., to ensure that I could detect an effect if there in fact was one (Cohen, 1992). Importantly, however, this decision does not necessarily affect the generalizability of my findings to the US population, as research shows that convenience samples provide results similar to those from nationally representative samples (Mullinix, 2018).

Another important aspect of data collection was ensuring the quality of the sample. To do this, I included attention checks in all the studies I conducted to identify inattentive participants. I then analyzed the data both with and without these inattentive participants to determine possible effects on the results. Crucially, these attention checks were conducted pre-treatment to avoid post-treatment bias when inattentive participants were excluded from the analysis. There was one exception to this attention check approach: Article B, which was conducted on Lucid, a platform known to have the highest rate of inattentive participants (Aronow et al., 2020; Stagnaro et al., 2024). In this case, I not only integrated attention tests into the survey, but also directly screened participants based on their performance on these attention checks and only allowed attentive individuals to participate in the study. Including only fully attentive participants in my study enhances the quality of the sample. It also reduces the risk that inattentive participants could compromise the internal validity of the study (Kane, 2024). Furthermore, having only attentive participants helps maintain a larger sample size and increases statistical power, as there is no need to exclude data from inattentive participants after data collection (Maniaci and Rogge, 2014).

Exposure to Political Opponents

One significant challenge in conducting research on the impact of empathy in non-hostile disagreements through survey experiments is effectively simulating interactions with political opponents. While the ideal approach would involve participants engaging in real, live interactions with political opponents (Carlson and Settle, 2022; Levendusky and Stecula, 2021), I chose a different method. In my studies, participants did not interact directly with live political opponents but were instead exposed to picture-based vignettes representing political opponents on social media. Although using vignettes is a common approach, it can limit the generalizability of the findings to real-life interactions between political opponents. This limitation is particularly relevant for Article A, where it remains unclear whether instructing participants to be more empathic would have had the same effect in real-life interactions as it does when they are merely exposed to a vignette of a political opponent. Yet Hainmueller et al. (2015) demonstrates that survey experiments utilizing vignettes closely approximate real-world behavior, indicating that participants “behave” similarly in survey experiments as in the real world.

Furthermore, this approach has the advantage of better reflecting the contexts in which people typically encounter political opposition today. Research shows that face-to-face political discussions with opponents are relatively infrequent and often avoided (Carlson and Settle, 2022). Instead, people are very likely to encounter opposing viewpoints through the media, particularly on social media platforms (Bail, 2021; Bor and Petersen, 2022; Settle, 2018). This was especially relevant for Article B, where the lack of direct interaction was a crucial aspect of the study, as it aimed to understand how third parties who are not directly involved in the interaction respond to out-party empathy. In Article C, direct exposure to the political opponent was less central, though I discuss the limitations related to the generalization of the findings of this article to real-life political interactions below.

The specific kind of political opponent is also important. In Article A this was an opponent on the issue of immigration. This means that I can only generalize to this specific issue. However, in Article B, I tried to boost generalizability by exposing participants to three different out-partisans in an interaction with three different in-partisans about three different political issues (abortion, welfare, and immigration) — three contentious but also different types of political issues, thus making results more generalizable to multiple issues.

Therefore, while my findings may not fully capture the complexities of real-life interactions with political opponents, they offer valuable insights into the role of empathy for non-hostile disagreements between political opponents on different issues and in the contexts where exposure to political opponents is increasingly likely to occur.

Designing Treatments On Empathy

Another challenge was designing treatments related to empathy. It was crucial to create a treatment that effectively increased participants' empathy toward a political opponent (Article A), led them to witness an out-partisan being empathic to an in-partisan (Article B), or manipulated individuals' perceptions of in-partisans' disapproval of out-party empathy (Article C). To achieve this, I employed a combination of established methods for manipulating empathy, integrating them with other common approaches used in social science experiments.

In what follows, I provide an overview of the decisions I made in designing these treatments and discuss their benefits and limitations. I start out by discussing the realism of my treatments, which is important for both internal and external validity and can be assessed through two key concepts: mundane realism — “whether the experimental situation resembles situations encountered in the real world,” — and experimental realism — “whether what happens in the experiment appears real to the subject” (Mutz, 2011, p. 141). Then I discuss the use of manipulation checks to ensure that treatments do in fact treat what I want them to treat (Kane, 2024; Kane and Barabas, 2019) and discuss challenges of informational equivalence (Dafoe et al., 2018) as well as benefits and limitations of combined treatments. For additional details on the exact wording of the treatments, please refer to the individual articles or their dedicated chapters (6-8).

Starting out with realism, Article A uses video-based instructions followed by a writing task to encourage participants to be empathic to their political opponent, i.e., to understand their thoughts and feelings (as well as other ways of approaching the political opponent). When the goal is to enhance people's empathy, particularly empathy defined by understanding others' thoughts and feelings from their perspective, instructions and writing tasks that guide individuals on how to achieve this are frequently employed (Ickes, 1997). The reason why I used videos to instruct people is that their use is increasingly common, and also reflects intervention approaches that can be seen on social media or in TV ads in order to for,

example, reduce misinformation (e.g., Roozenbeek et al., 2022). Given the widespread use of video instructions and the growing prominence of video content on social media, incorporating videos enhances mundane realism. I also use videos to make the treatments more engaging and easier to deliver compared to lengthy written instructions, which could diminish attention.

In Article B, I used vignettes that simulated social media interactions between individuals from opposing political camps. The study employed a factorial design to manipulate how an out-partisan communicated with an in-partisan, varying both the level of empathy (high empathy vs. low empathy vs. control) and the degree of explicit disagreement (disagreement vs. no disagreement) expressed by the out-partisan. One challenge with this approach is the rarity of political opponents displaying empathy on social media, which could undermine the study's mundane realism and, by extension, its experimental realism. This concern is further supported by findings in this dissertation that suggest people generally believe out-partisans are not empathic. As a result, participants might view such empathic behavior as unrealistic or fictional, making the scenario feel less genuine to them. However, my primary goal in this study was to explore what might happen if out-partisans became more empathic despite it being potentially rare in reality, which makes mundane realism less of a concern. Still, experimental realism remains a concern.

In Article C, Study 2, I used information-based treatments to get participants to consider the social costs and benefits of empathy toward political opponents. To increase the experimental realism of the treatment, I asked participants to write down the potential positive or negative consequences of engaging in out-partisan empathy, thereby making the potential costs and benefits of engaging in this behavior more realistic for participants. One important limitation of this treatment, however, is that participants were not confronted with immediate social consequences if they empathized with the political opponent, given that there was no in-partisan present who could have implemented these consequences. However, research indicates that varying the level of hypothetical detail in situational scenarios does not significantly alter the results (Brutger et al., 2023) and that individuals tend to “behave” in survey experiments with hypothetical scenarios similarly to how they would in real-world situations (Hainmueller and Hopkins, 2015). It remains a significant limitation of this study, however, that it tested the hypothesis without a key condition for implementing social costs: the presence of a disapproving in-partisan. Since the study focused on intentions rather than actual behavior, the absence of this condition

might be less critical. Nonetheless, it is important to keep this limitation in mind.

While I have thus far covered a lot of ground on the potential realism of the treatments, one important question still remains: *Did the treatments effectively manipulate what they were intended to manipulate?* This is critical to the internal validity of the study (Kane, 2024) and can also alleviate some of the concerns related to experimental realism. To address this, I took two important steps. First, I ensured that participants were attentive to the treatments, as inattention would undermine the effectiveness of the treatments. Second, I tested whether the treatments actually produced the desired responses. To do this, I used factual and subjective manipulation checks (Kane and Barabas, 2019). The *factual manipulation checks* tested whether participants accurately recalled key information from the treatment, indicating their attention to it. For example, in Article A, I tested whether participants correctly recalled the instructions from the particular treatment video they were watching. *Subjective manipulation checks* assessed whether the treatments influenced participants as intended. For example, in Article A, I measured whether participants in the empathy condition were more inclined to understand the thoughts and feelings of the political opponent than participants in the other conditions. In Article B, I examined whether participants perceived empathic opponents as more empathic than non-empathic opponents. In Article C, I assessed whether participants believed that in-partisans disapproved more of out-party empathy when informed about and reflecting upon its social costs vs. benefits. In all cases, manipulation checks confirmed that the treatments I administered did actually manipulate participants as intended (for detailed results, see the main articles or the summaries in Chapters 6-8).

Although the manipulation checks indicate that my treatments were effective, it is possible that manipulating empathy also inadvertently influenced other factors. For instance, in Article B, the empathy manipulation might have led participants to view the out-partisan as not only more empathic but also more likely to agree with them or less representative of a typical out-partisan, which is also consistent with what I find. Consequently, it is uncertain whether the observed effects were primarily due to empathy or were influenced by perceived agreement or atypical behavior. Unlike the natural sciences, where variables can often be isolated more precisely, the social sciences frequently face challenges in achieving perfect isolation of variables. While this underscores the challenge of disentangling complex concepts, it also emphasizes the

importance of understanding what the treatments and concepts actually signal. This provides valuable theoretical insights, despite methodological limitations.

Another challenge is that Articles A and C (Study 2) employed *multi-component treatments*, making it difficult to pinpoint which specific element contributed to the observed outcomes. For instance, in Article A, the results might have varied if the focus had been solely on understanding thoughts or feelings, or if participants had only viewed the video without the additional writing task. Similarly, in Paper C, the combined effect of providing information about in-partisan (dis)approval along with a reflection task might differ from presenting each component separately. Kalla and Broockman (2023) highlight the importance of disentangling these factors in empathy research to understand what part of the treatment is actually effective. However, I chose these multi-component treatments to enhance participant engagement and strengthen the treatment effect. Simpler treatments might have risked inadequate participant engagement, but the trade-off is that combining elements makes it harder to determine which specific component was responsible for the outcomes. Hence, this approach complicates the identification of the exact factors driving the results, which should be kept in mind when interpreting them.

Measuring Key Outcome Variables

To investigate the extent to which non-hostile disagreement can be facilitated through empathy, I measure different aspects of hostility (hostile feelings, hostile intentions), as well as of (dis)agreement (agreement with political opponents, felt agreement by political opponents, belief superiority). I also measure empathy toward political opponents as an outcome variable, in addition to its role as an independent variable, given that I was especially interested in how to facilitate it in Articles B and C. For an overview of key outcome variables, please refer to Table 5.1 or for more details to the individual Articles.

In measuring these outcomes, I adopted a multifaceted approach that combines both *standard measures* and *customized measures*. This approach allows for a more nuanced investigation by differentiating between measures that target the *specific* political opponents or issues under discussion in the context of the experiment and measures that assess broader attitudes and perceptions about political opponents or political attitudes *in general*. The rationale for this approach is to cover a broad spectrum of measurements, which helps to address the potential limita-

tions of relying on any single method. The following sections will provide a detailed explanation of these measurements, the reasoning behind their selection, and the benefits and limitations associated with them.

First, I have developed my own measures of empathy toward political opponents (Articles B and C). The reason for this is that I am interested in a particular type of empathy, namely empathy defined as understanding the thoughts and feelings of political opponents from their perspective (see Chapter 2). Typical measures of empathy used in the literature capture other dimensions of empathy. For example, the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI) (Davis, 1983), which is widely validated and also used in the political science literature (e.g., Simas et al., 2020), measures empathy on four dimensions: Perspective Taking (mostly reflecting self-focused perspective taking), Fantasy, Empathic Concern, and Empathic Distress. However, these dimensions do not capture well the type of empathy I am interested in. Furthermore, this measure also captures empathy disposition rather than targeted empathy. Although Sirin et al. (2021) validated the Perspective Taking and Empathic Concern dimensions of the IRI specifically for the target of racial or ethnic groups, these measures would not be directly applicable to political opponents. Additionally, because these dimensions originate from the IRI, they do not fully capture the specific type of empathy I am interested in. Instead, I took these measures as inspiration and developed my own scale. The scale consists of a total of eight items and was mainly used in Article C in two variants (one with six and one with eight items). I validated the scale using a principal component analysis and correlating it with other concepts, like perspective taking, receptiveness to opposing views, need for closure, and the Big Five Personality Traits. Details about the validation can be found in the Appendix. In Article B, due to space constraints, I used two of these items and adapted them to better fit that specific experimental context. An overview of the different ways I measured empathy across articles and studies is available in Table 5.2. I am aware that my custom measure limits comparability with other studies. However, this is largely due to the unique definition of empathy I am exploring — understanding political opponents' thoughts and feelings from their point of view — rather than because it is a new measure of empathy.

Secondly, I use feelings thermometers in all my articles to measure hostility, a well-established method in the literature (Iyengar et al., 2019). This involves people indicating their feelings towards certain groups or individuals on a thermometer scale from 0 to 100 degrees, with 0 being the coldest feelings and 100 being the warmest feelings. When using this method (and other measurements relating to specific groups in

Table 5.2: Measures of Out-Party Empathy

Article	Study	Variables	Items
A	1	Stated Empathy Motive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •While reading through [Name's] Facebook Post, I tried to accurately identify the thoughts and feelings of [Name]
B	1	Interaction-specific Out-party Empathy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •I'm interested in learning about the thoughts and feelings behind [commenter's] views on [political issue] •I don't bother to understand the perspective behind [commenter's] views on [political issue]*
B	1	Generalized Out-party Empathy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •I'm interested in learning about the thoughts and feelings behind [out-party] political views •I don't bother to understand the perspective behind [out-party's] political views*
C	1	Out-Party Empathy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •I put effort into accurately understanding what [out-party] think and feel •I listen carefully to [out-party] in order to understand where they are coming from •I try to learn about how [out-party] see the world to better understand their point of view •I want to understand the reasons for why [out-party] hold their opinions •I try to make sure that I understand [out-party] point of view accurately •I am not interested in learning about [out-party] perspective* •I don't waste much time trying to understand [out-party] point of view* •I don't bother to understand the reasoning behind [out-party] opinions or beliefs*
C	2	Out-Party Empathy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •I put effort into accurately understanding what [out-party] think and feel •I listen carefully to [out-party] in order to understand where they are coming from •I try to learn about how [out-party] see the world to better understand their point of view •I want to understand the reasons for why [out-party] hold their opinions •I try to make sure that I understand the point of view of [out-party] accurately •I am not interested in learning about the perspective of [out-party]* •I don't waste much time trying to understand the point of view of [out-party]* •I don't bother to understand the reasoning behind the opinions or beliefs of [out-party]*

Note: * = reversed items; all items measured on a scale from 1 = strongly disagree 7 = strongly agree

general), it is important to determine the exact target group for the measurement. For example, when asking participants about their feelings towards “Republicans” or “Democrats,” the problem is that participants may think of different types of partisans, which violates the information equivalence assumption (Dafoe et al., 2018). Druckman and Levendusky (2019) find that when asked these questions, participants mostly think of political elites rather than normal voters. However, since I am interested in the latter, I needed to be more specific about the target. In my studies, I therefore asked participants explicitly about the political opponent they were exposed to (Articles A and B). In Article B, however, I took a dual approach. Here, I distinguished between interaction-specific measures, which refer to the individual political opponent with whom participants interact (e.g., feelings toward John, a Democrat), and generalized measures, which assess perceptions of broader political groups (e.g., feelings toward Democrats in general). This also allows me to distinguish between effects on specific political opponents and on political

opponents in general. However, in both studies of Article C, I only asked about the general political opponent, i.e. Republicans and Democrats, which echoes the problem described above. However, in order to have more control over who the participants were thinking about, I had previously asked them about everyday Republicans and Democrats, which has been also done by previous research to tackle this issue (e.g., Braley et al., 2023).

In addition to the feelings thermometers, I also used a different measure of hostility in Article A. Here, I was interested not only in hostile feelings, but also hostile intentions toward political opponents. To measure this, and to account for the specific context of the experiment, namely social media, I used a procedure in which I showed participants different types of hostile comments and then asked them about their perceptions of these comments, including how legitimate they found them and the extent to which they would approve of or make such comments toward the political opponent themselves. This measurement boosts mundane realism because it more closely mirrors real-world scenarios that participants encounter on social media. Capturing participants' perceptions of and reactions to concrete examples of hostility, rather than relying solely on abstract question batteries, provides a more comprehensive and contextually relevant measure of hostility.

Third, to assess the political attitudes dimension, I focused on measures of (dis)agreement with political opponents and belief superiority — the conviction that one's own beliefs are more correct than those of others (Toner et al., 2013). Normally, political attitudes are measured using items on specific topics, i.e., people are asked how they feel about a certain topic. However, as I was primarily interested in understanding whether people can engage in interactions where they disagree with their political opponents without becoming hostile, I did not focus on such general measures of political attitudes, but instead focused specifically on whether participants (dis)agreed with their opponents. This approach therefore has its limitations in terms of assessing more general changes in political attitudes. By focusing on the immediate context of the interactions, I may fail to capture broader changes in core political beliefs after engaging with political opponents. Nevertheless, this narrower focus was intentional, as the main aim of my research was to examine immediate reactions and dynamics within the interactions, rather than to track general changes in attitudes. This decision allowed me to more accurately assess whether participants were able to maintain non-hostile disagreement during direct engagement with a political opponent.

Another limitation is that in order to measure any of these outcome variables, I primarily rely on self-reports. In self-reports, participants provide information about their attitudes, intentions and behaviors. This method is widely used in social science research. Although self-reports provide valuable insights, they also have their drawbacks. Participants may not always give truthful answers, either consciously or unconsciously. One reason might be social desirability bias — the tendency of individuals to provide responses that are considered socially acceptable rather than reflecting their true preferences or behaviors. For example, in Article C, while the goal was to manipulate in-party social desirability, a broader social desirability bias may have overridden this. To explore this possibility, I measured participants' general prestige-seeking tendencies, which reflect a desire for social recognition based on skills, success, or knowledge (Cheng et al., 2013). However, I found no significant evidence that prestige-seeking influenced responses, suggesting that social desirability may not have played a substantial role in shaping the results. Furthermore, in Article B, social desirability might have led participants to be more empathic, less hostile, and more willing to engage with empathic others, following social norms that encourage reciprocating empathy. To examine this, I used a more common measure of social desirability than prestige-seeking, namely self-monitoring, which assesses how much individuals adjust their behaviors and attitudes to meet others' expectations (Berinsky and Lavine, 2012). Participants who were higher (vs. lower) in self-monitoring showed less hostility toward the out-party in general after observing three specific empathic out-partisans, and were less hostile toward non-empathic out-partisans. However, no other significant effects were found, indicating that while social desirability played some role in reducing generalized hostility, it was not a major factor in influencing the study's overall findings.

Furthermore, a limitation of all my studies and outcome measures is their temporal scope; they capture only a single point in time, leaving uncertainty about the durability of the observed effects. While some research indicates that perspective-taking treatments can influence beliefs and attitudes for several months (Broockman and Kalla, 2016; Kalla and Broockman, 2020), other studies suggest that such effects may not be long-lasting (Adida et al., 2018). Since my research does not address the persistence of these effects, any findings should be interpreted with this limitation in mind.

Research Ethics and Open Science

When conducting research with human participants, it is important to carefully consider the ethical implications. I have carefully documented and considered the ethical implications of my studies, and all of my studies have been approved by the institutional review board at Aarhus University. Among other things, this involved ensuring that participants gave their informed consent to take part in the study. In addition, I assessed and considered any potential harm that could be caused to people by participating in the study. For example, in Article A, I assumed that participants might suffer minimal distress from exposure to hostile comments, but pointed out that such content reflected real-life scenarios they might encounter. However, to nevertheless reduce potential distress, I included a warning in the consent form so that participants knowingly agreed to this exposure, and debriefed them after the study. Overall, by obtaining ethical approval for all my studies, I strived to deal responsibly with ethical concerns and ensure the well-being of my participants.

Additionally, all my studies were pre-registered on the Open Science Framework (OSF) Repository (<https://osf.io/p9ard/>). Pre-registration involves documenting hypotheses and analytic methods before conducting the study or analyzing data, which helps prevent practices like “HARKing” (hypothesizing after the results are known), selective hypothesis testing, and selective reporting. This process enhances the transparency and integrity of the research. However, research does not always go as planned, and unforeseen circumstances can arise, especially as a young scholar with limited experience. Hence, when I deviated from the pre-registration, I explicitly noted this in the relevant paper. Similarly, any analyses not included in the pre-registration were clearly labeled as exploratory analyses. This transparency ensures that the research remains rigorous and trustworthy, even when adapting to unforeseen developments or correcting mistakes in the pre-registration process.

Chapter 6

How Does Empathy Compare To Other Ways Of Engaging With Political Opponents?

In this chapter I provide evidence for RQ1, which asks, *How does empathizing with political opponents shape non-hostile political disagreements compared to other ways of engaging with political opponents?* I investigate this question in Article A, “Approaching Political Discussions With Understanding: Comparing Empathy To Other Modes of Information Processing.” Article A has three main goals: First, it sheds light on how empathizing with political opponents affects the empathizer. Second, given that studies on empathy in the political context are rare and those available mostly study effects on the empathizer across different levels and types of empathy or compare empathizing with staying objective (Argyle et al., 2023; Klimecki et al., 2020; Muradova and Arceneaux, 2021; Santos et al., 2022), this article takes a more politically realistic lens. It compares empathizing to other common ways of engaging with political opponents, focusing on two information processing modes commonly found and studied in the political domain. Using these different counterfactuals is important to understand how empathy functions in *political* interactions. Third, the article directly speaks to the overall research question and provides insights regarding whether empathizing, compared to other approaches to engaging with political opponents, reduces hostility while maintaining similar levels of disagreement.

Empathy and Other Ways of Approaching Political Opponents

To examine the effect of empathizing with political opponents on the empathizer, it is important to compare empathizing with other common

modes of processing information in encounters with political opponents. Drawing on motivated reasoning theory, I identify two such modes. According to motivated reasoning theory, people are “forming impressions, determining [their] beliefs and attitudes, evaluating evidence, and making decisions” through *directional goals*, in which they aim to reach a particular preferred conclusion, or *accuracy goals*, in which they aim to reach an accurate and objective conclusion (Kunda, 1990, p. 480).

Directional goals align with behavioral approaches to political opponents, where individuals seek to confirm their own political beliefs and convictions while actively countering opposing views to promote and enforce their political stance (Groenendyk and Krupnikov, 2021; Taber and Lodge, 2006). This approach, which involves standing up for, defending, and representing one’s political convictions, is fundamental to pluralistic democracy and democratic engagement. It serves as a valid and important strategy in political discussions, allowing individuals to advance their political agenda and advocate for their interests.

Accuracy goals reflect an approach in which individuals aim to reach factually correct conclusions when engaging in political discussions (e.g., Osmundsen et al., 2021). This approach involves participating in discussions grounded in objective, verifiable information and evidence. The focus is on ensuring that opinions are backed by facts, which helps foster more informed and rational debates. Since the Enlightenment, this fact-based approach has been considered the ideal way to engage in politics, emphasizing knowledge, reason, and logical discourse. In today’s climate, where misinformation is widespread and trust in factual information is declining, pursuing accuracy in political discussions is considered to be more important than ever (Allcott et al., 2019; Lewandowsky et al., 2017; Pennycook et al., 2021).

Understanding how empathy compares to these two other ways of processing information when engaging with political opponents — through either self-advocacy or factual accuracy — offers valuable insights into its unique role in political discourse. Below, I present an overview of the theory addressing the effects of all three approaches on hostility and disagreement. I then evaluate how empathy compares to the other approaches to political opponents in influencing hostility and disagreement. More specifically, I argue that empathizing with political opponents vis-a-vis engaging in self-advocacy or seeking factual accuracy reduces hostility toward political opponents.

Potential Effects on Hostility

While **self-advocacy** is a legitimate and essential strategy for representing and achieving political goals, it is often accompanied by hostility. People frequently use hostility as a tool to advocate for and defend their beliefs (Rasmussen, 2023; Van Bavel et al., 2024). Hostility can be especially effective in achieving political objectives because it allows individuals to exert power over others (Cheng et al., 2013) and assert superiority over their opponents (Bor and Petersen, 2022; Brady et al., 2020; Grubbs et al., 2019). Additionally, hostility serves as a powerful means of mobilizing supporters (Rathje et al., 2021). As a result, approaching political opponents with self-advocacy is likely to increase hostility.

Factual Accuracy is just as essential in the political arena — even more so in an era marked by the rise of fake news and misinformation (Allcott et al., 2019; Lewandowsky et al., 2017). Political debates are increasingly perceived as less fact-based (Doherty et al., 2023a), which violates norms of civilized communication (Bormann et al., 2021), and risks deepening political divides, inciting violence, and weakening democracy (Benkler et al., 2018). A majority of Americans believe that opinions based on facts and statistics are worthy of more respect (Kubin et al., 2021). This underlies growing efforts to nudge and train people to tell true from false (Pennycook and Rand, 2022), aligning with more traditional research emphasizing the importance of accurate information processing (Bolsen et al., 2014; Leeper and Slothuus, 2014; Taber and Lodge, 2006). As Fishkin et al. (2021, p. 14) notes, “we need more institutions that encourage evidence-based, thoughtful public discussion across our deep divisions” (see also Barabas, 2004; Fishkin and Luskin, 2005). The pursuit of factual accuracy could therefore lead to less hostility in encounters with political opponents compared to when the focus is on self-advocacy.

However, striving for factual accuracy can also justify the use of hostility. Ensuring factual accuracy about a topic under discussion is often cited as a justification for hostility (Rasmussen, 2023), and factual arguments are frequently accompanied by hostile rhetoric (Coe et al., 2014). For example, the majority of Danish tweets that reject misinformation mock those who believe it (Johansen et al., 2022). People even feel stronger negative emotions towards those who hold false beliefs than towards those with different opinions (Molnar and Loewenstein, 2020). One reason for this may be that the pursuit of factual accuracy is considered a moral virtue, and inaccuracy is considered malicious

and despicable (Ståhl et al., 2016). This potential pitfall suggests that striving for factual accuracy may not be the most effective approach for reducing hostility in interactions with political opponents.

Empathy, however, might offer a better solution. It allows individuals to understand the “deep story” of those on the other side and “stand back and explore the subjective prism through which the party on the other side sees the world” (Hochschild, 2016, p. 135). Empathy shifts people’s focus away from merely pushing their own political agenda (like in self-advocacy) or insisting on the factual accuracy of arguments (like in factual accuracy) to an understanding of the subjective experiences, thoughts, and feelings of their political opponents from *their opponent’s* perspective. This shift encourages a more balanced relationship, reducing the sense of superiority that might justify a person’s use of hostility to make their own views or the objective and factual truth prevail. Research shows that personal experiences generate more respect than facts (Kubin et al., 2021) and that group-based factors are more effective in reducing hostility towards political opponents than policy-based factors (Huddy and Yair, 2021). Therefore, empathizing with a political opponent, as compared to seeking factual accuracy in the interaction or advocating and promoting one’s own political agenda, should lead to less hostility.

Does Empathizing With Political Opponents Maintain Disagreement?

However, empathizing with political opponents may have its own drawbacks compared to self-advocacy and the pursuit of factual accuracy. By shifting the focus from defending one’s own views or ensuring factual accuracy, empathy might lead individuals to lose sight of their own perspectives or accurate information. Since personal experiences and emotions often appear more convincing than abstract facts (Kubin et al., 2021), empathy might reduce critical evaluation and encourage uncritical acceptance of others’ viewpoints and false information (Van Bavel et al., 2021). This shift could weaken individuals’ commitment to their own beliefs, potentially putting them at a disadvantage in political discussions and inadvertently benefiting their opponents (Batson et al., 1995; Galinsky et al., 2008). While increased agreement with political opponents might often be seen as a positive development — given the focus on changing attitudes to find common ground and promote compromise

— it especially raises concerns when it involves harmful, extreme, or undemocratic beliefs or factually incorrect information.

The literature presents mixed findings on this issue. Some studies suggest that empathy can lead to long-lasting changes in political attitudes (Broockman and Kalla, 2016; Kalla and Broockman, 2020), while others do not find significant effects (Adida et al., 2018; Argyle et al., 2023; Bor and Simonovits, 2021; Muradova and Arceneaux, 2021). Yet others argue that empathy is distinct from agreement and should not have an effect on it. Understanding someone’s thoughts and feelings does not mean that one agrees with their perspective (Livingstone et al., 2020a; Morrell, 2010; Mutz, 2002; Reis et al., 2017).




Given these mixed findings, it is unclear whether empathy facilitates agreement or keeps people in disagreement with their opponents. However, if empathy is to facilitate non-hostile disagreement — as this dissertation explores — it should enable individuals to reduce hostility towards political opponents while maintaining a level of disagreement comparable to that observed under self-advocacy or a focus on factual accuracy.

Research Design

To investigate the degree to which empathizing, as compared to the other two ways of processing information in encounters with political opponents, facilitates non-hostile disagreement, Article A is based on a pre-registered and IRB-approved survey experiment using a between-subjects design on a representative sample of 3051 US Americans (quota sampled based on age, gender, education, race, and geographic location).

In the experiment, participants are randomly assigned to one of three treatment conditions or a control group. Each treatment condition involved watching a whiteboard animation video that instructs participants to approach a subsequent Facebook post in a specific manner: (1) defending and advocating for their own political views (self-advocacy condition), (2) verifying the factual accuracy of the information in the post (factual accuracy condition), or (3) understanding the thoughts and feelings of the author of the post (empathy condition). After having watched the videos, participants see a Facebook post in which someone expressed an opinion contrary to their own views on immigration. This Facebook post was created specifically for the study and was not an actual post. I selected the topic of immigration due to its highly emotional and polarized nature, as well as its association with significant hostility (Oliphant and Cerda, 2022; Papacharissi, 2004). To reinforce

Table 6.1: Article A Treatment Overview

<p>Self-Advocacy Condition</p>  <p>Link to video</p> <p>“[...] Pay attention to those statements in the post that you disagree with. Try to find arguments that refute these statements. Why is this person wrong, and why are you right? We want you to advocate for what you believe is best and most just and defend your beliefs in the face of opposition. [...] ask yourself: how can I best advocate for my ideas and refute opposing ones? [...]”</p>	<p>Factual Accuracy Condition</p>  <p>Link to video</p> <p>“[...] Pay attention to the factual statements that the user makes in the post. Try to find out whether what the person writes matches the objective facts. Are the statements factually correct or factually incorrect? We want you to identify to the best of your knowledge and as accurately as possible the extent to which what the person writes is true or untrue. [...] ask yourself: Do these statements correspond to the factual and objective truth?”</p>	<p>Empathy Condition</p>  <p>Link to video</p> <p>“[...] Pay attention to the thoughts and feelings of the Facebook user that wrote the post. Try to find out what was going on in that person’s mind when writing the post. What was this person thinking? What was this person feeling? We want you to identify the thoughts and feelings of the Facebook user as accurately as possible. [...] ask yourself: Does what I think this person is thinking and feeling correspond to what he or she is actually thinking and feeling?”</p>
<p>Writing Task (during exposure to Facebook post)</p> <p>Please read through the post and write down the points on which you disagree with [name]. Justify your answer by explaining why you disagree. Remember that based on your notes, we can evaluate if people who have the same opinion as you would agree with your reasoning.</p>	<p>Please read through the post and write down whether the statements [name] makes are factually correct or incorrect. Justify your answer by explaining why you think these statements are factually correct or incorrect. Remember that based on your notes, we can evaluate how good you are at correctly identifying whether [name’s] statements are factually correct or incorrect.</p>	<p>Please read through the post and write down what you think [name] was thinking and feeling when [he/she] wrote the post. Justify your answer by explaining why [name] had those exact feelings and thoughts. Remember that based on your notes, we can evaluate how good you are at correctly identifying [name’s] thoughts and feelings.</p>

the treatment and ensure participants engage with the Facebook post as instructed in the videos, they are required to convey their assigned treatment (self-advocacy, factual accuracy, or empathy) in writing. In the control condition, participants do not watch a video or complete a writing task, but only read through the Facebook post. Manipulation checks confirm that the manipulation of the different ways of engaging with political opponents was successful. An excerpt of the video instructions can be found in Table 6.1. For more details on the treatment materials, please refer to Article A.

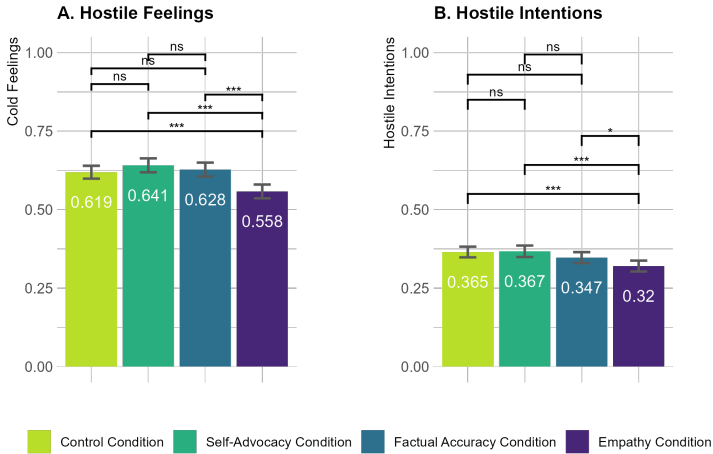
After participants read through the Facebook post, outcome variables are measured. These include measures of hostility toward and (dis)agreement with the political opponent. Hostility is measured in two ways: First, participants rate their cold or warm feelings toward the author of the Facebook post using a feelings thermometer. Second, participants are shown four hostile comments, displayed one at a time, beneath the post. For each comment, they assess its legitimacy, their likelihood of liking it, and their likelihood of posting a similar comment. These responses are combined into an index reflecting participant's hostile intentions. (Dis)agreement is measured by asking participants how much they agreed or disagreed with the author of the Facebook post. For the specific question wording, please refer to Article A.

Results

Effects of Empathy on Hostility Toward Political Opponents

Figure 6.1 shows average levels of hostile feelings (Panel A) and hostile intentions (Panel B) toward the author of the Facebook post across different treatment conditions and the control condition. Both hostile feelings and hostile intentions toward the author of the Facebook post are significantly lower in the empathy condition compared to all other conditions. The results support the hypothesis that empathizing with a political opponent reduces hostility compared to advocating for and defending one's own political views, assessing the factual accuracy of the information at hand, or being in the control condition. There are no statistically significant differences in hostile feelings and intentions comparing the self-advocacy, factual accuracy, and control conditions with each other. These findings reject the pre-registered hypotheses that predicted that self-advocacy would increase hostility compared to the con-

Figure 6.1: Empathizing With Political Opponents Reduces Hostility



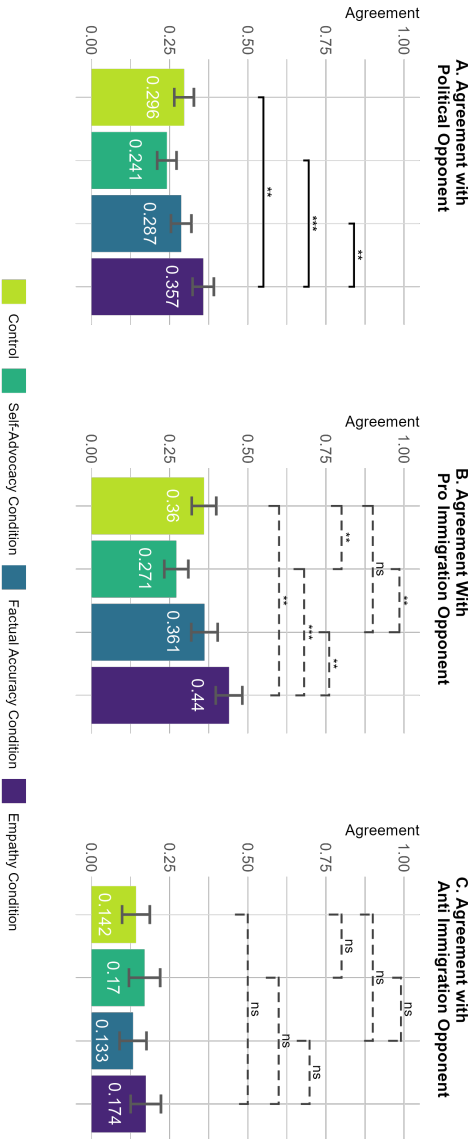
Note: Panel A shows average hostile feelings, while Panel B shows average hostile intentions toward political opponents, across experimental conditions. Error bars represent 95% CI. Thick brackets display pre-registered comparisons. ns: $p > 0.05$, *: $p \leq 0.05$, **: $p \leq 0.01$, ***: $p \leq 0.001$.

control condition, and that seeking factual accuracy would reduce hostility compared to both self-advocacy and the control conditions.

Effects of Empathy on (Dis)agreement With Political Opponents

Does empathy enable individuals to sustain their level of disagreement while engaging with political opponents as effectively as the other information processing modes? Figure 6.2 shows in Panel A that empathy makes people more likely to agree with political opponents compared to self-advocacy, factual accuracy, or the control condition. However, exploratory subgroup analyses suggest that this increase in agreement is more pronounced when empathizing with pro-immigration individuals than with anti-immigration individuals. Figure 6.2 shows exploratory subgroup analyses differentiating between exposure to opponents with

Figure 6.2: Empathizing With Political Opponents Increases Agreement



Note: Panel A shows the proportion of participants agreeing with their political opponents across different experimental conditions. Panels B and C break this down according to attitudes about immigration. Panel B depicts the proportion of anti-immigration participants who agree with pro-immigration individuals, while Panel C shows the proportion of pro-immigration individuals agreeing with anti-immigration individuals, across experimental conditions. Error bars represent 95% CI. Thick brackets display pre-registered comparisons. Dashed brackets display exploratory comparisons. ns: $p > 0.05$, *: $p \leq 0.05$, **: $p \leq 0.01$, ***: $p \leq 0.001$.

different political stances on immigration. Panel B shows that immigration opponents who empathize with supporters of immigration tend to agree more with them than those who engage in self-advocacy, focus on factual accuracy, or are in the control group. In contrast, Panel C shows that immigration supporters do not show significantly different levels of agreement with immigration opponents, regardless of whether they engage with them through empathy, self-advocacy, factual accuracy, or the control condition.

Furthermore, a closer examination of the absolute levels of agreement with political opponents reveals that most people in the empathy condition still disagree with their political opponents (and significantly more so with those who are anti-immigration than with those who are pro-immigration). Further exploratory analyses also suggest that even those who remain disagreeable after empathizing with their political opponents are less hostile toward them compared to those who remain disagreeable after advocating for their own beliefs, seeking factual accuracy, or being exposed to the control condition.

Chapter 7

What Happens When Political Opponents Show Empathy?

It's such a relief, such a blessed relaxation of defenses, to find oneself understood.
Carl Rogers, On Becoming A Person (1995, p. 323)

While Chapter 6 focused on the effects of empathizing with political opponents on the empathizer, it is important to recognize that empathy is not a one-way street. As discussed in Chapter 3, empathy not only influences the one who empathizes, but also the one who is empathized with. Hence, most research in the realm of empathy is located in dyadic interactions, exploring the effects of empathy on both the empathizer and the recipient. However, in the complex social landscape of politics, interactions are rarely isolated. Political discussions are more likely to occur in public or semi-public settings — i.e., through social media, television, or within social circles — rather than in one-on-one situations (Carlson and Settle, 2022). This raises an important question that has so far received little attention: What impact does empathizing with political opponents have on those who observe it? Given the inherently social nature of political engagement, if empathy is to foster non-hostile disagreement in such an environment, its influence should extend beyond the immediate recipient.

Only recently has research begun to go beyond the dyad and examine how empathy affects the social network surrounding an empathic interaction. In the political domain, studies have primarily focused on how individuals evaluate like-minded peers who show empathy toward political opponents (e.g., Heltzel and Laurin, 2021; Hussein and Wheeler, 2024; Wang and Todd, 2021; Wang et al., 2023). However, there is a lack of understanding regarding how people react when observing political opponents showing empathy. Therefore, this chapter is dedicated to RQ 2 of this dissertation: *How does observing political opponents showing empathy influence perceptions, feelings, and attitudes across political divides?* To investigate this, I draw on Article B, “When Out-Partisans Un-

derstand: The Impact of Out-Party Empathy on Third-Person Observers,” where I investigate how people react when observing an out-partisan showing empathy toward an in-partisan.

Article B offers several key contributions. First, it enhances our understanding of the broader impact of showing empathy towards political opponents beyond the immediate interaction. Second, it identifies a crucial condition under which this empathy influences third-person observers: the absence of disagreement. Third, it addresses and alleviates a common concern that showing empathy might reinforce the beliefs of political opponents. Fourth, it explores what it is that empathy from out-partisans signals. Finally, it shows how the actions of a few empathic individuals can change perceptions of the out-party as a whole.

What Happens When People Observe Empathy Displayed by Political Opponents?

Observing Out-Party Empathy Has the Potential to Improve Relationships Across Political Divides

As reviewed in Chapter 3, the feeling of being understood has an overall positive impact on the quality of both non-political and political relationships: It makes people less hostile and more open towards the empathizer and may even change their attitudes. This is attributed to empathy providing validation, acceptance, and recognition (Dailey, 2023) and strengthening essential human needs for autonomy, relatedness, and self-esteem (Itzchakov and Weinstein, 2021; Itzchakov et al., 2023). By creating an environment in which individuals feel accepted and understood, empathy reduces the need for self-defensive behaviors and encourages openness to other perspectives (Rogers, 1975). Showing understanding to political opponents could be particularly effective in the political arena, where many people feel that the other side does not understand them (Dunn et al., 2020).

But the effect of empathy toward political opponents might not only be beneficial for those it directly targets — its benefits may also extend to those who observe this empathy. Drawing on insights from dyadic empathy research, I argue that even observing empathy as a third-person has positive effects: First, I predict that it can increase the observer’s empathy toward the out-partisan, reciprocating the out-partisan’s behavior. Second, I suggest that it decreases hostility toward the out-party. Third, the observer may find it more comfortable to engage in discussions with

the out-partisan, as the observed empathy can make these interactions appear less confrontational and safer to engage in. Finally, it may lessen the observer's tendency to view their own perspective as superior to that of the out-partisan.

Observing Out-Party Empathy May Endorse Beliefs

However, the confirmation provided by empathy might also have unintended consequences. Since people are naturally inclined to confirm their existing beliefs (Kunda, 1990; Taber and Lodge, 2006), there is concern that showing empathy toward the other side could reinforce these beliefs (Heltzel and Laurin, 2021; Minson and Chen, 2022; Wang and Todd, 2021) and put the empathizer at a comparative disadvantage while bolstering the recipient side (Batson et al., 1995; Breithaupt, 2019). Observers might interpret empathy from out-partisans as agreement, which could further strengthen their beliefs, thereby keeping them within their own ideological bubbles rather than encouraging consideration of other perspectives.

Experimental Design

To investigate how people are affected by observing empathy from political opponents, I conducted a pre-registered and IRB-approved survey experiment with 3234 US participants, quota sampled by age, gender, and region. In the experiment, participants are exposed to a total of three vignettes reflecting social media interactions between an out-partisan and an in-partisan, where the extent of empathy and disagreement shown by the out-partisan is varied. This creates a 2 (empathy vs. no empathy) x 3 (disagreement, no disagreement, control) factorial design and leads to a total of six conditions: two conditions in which people observe an out-partisan showing empathy (either pure empathy or empathy and disagreement) and four conditions where out-partisans do not show empathy (either pure disagreement, pure no-empathy, no empathy and disagreement, or a control).

Participants are exposed to a total of three interactions on different political issues (abortion, immigration, and welfare), presented to them in random order. Despite the variation in issues, the out-partisan's reaction to the in-partisan remains consistent. For instance, those in the empathy and disagreement condition observe different interactions on welfare, immigration, and abortion, where out-partisans con-

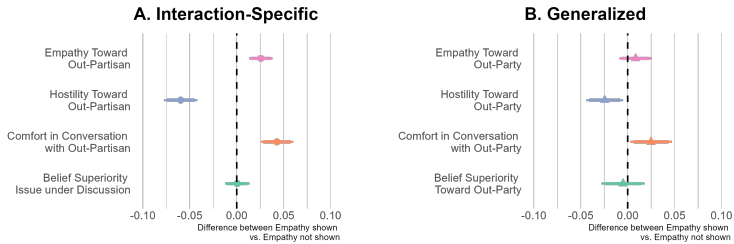
Table 7.1: Article B Treatment Overview

		Explicit Disagreement		Issue
		No	Yes	
Empathy	High	•I vote [out-party]! But I hear your concern [...]	•I vote [out-party]! But I hear your concern [...]. Still, [issue disagreement]	<i>abortion</i>
		•[Out-party] vote ahead! But I can see your [...]	•[Out-party] vote ahead! But I can see your [...]. Nevertheless, [issue disagreement].	<i>welfare</i>
		•Firmly voting [out-party]! But I can understand [...]	•Firmly voting [out-party]! But I can understand [...]. However, [issue disagreement].	<i>immigration</i>
	Low	•I vote [out-party]! I don't get your concern [...]	•I vote [out-party]! I don't get your concern [...]. [issue disagreement].	<i>abortion</i>
		•[Out-party] vote ahead! I don't see why [...]	•[Out-party] vote ahead! I don't see why [...]. [issue disagreement].	<i>welfare</i>
		•Firmly voting [out-party]! I don't understand [...]	•Firmly voting [out-party]! I don't understand [...]. [issue disagreement].	<i>immigration</i>
Control	•I vote [out-party]! •[Out-party] vote ahead! •Firmly voting [out-party]!	•I vote [out-party]! [issue disagreement]. •[Out-party] vote ahead! [issue disagreement]. •Firmly voting [out-party]! [issue disagreement].	<i>abortion</i> <i>welfare</i> <i>immigration</i>	

sistently demonstrated empathy while expressing disagreement with the in-partisan. An overview of these manipulations is provided in Table 7.1.

After observing each single interaction, participants answer a series of questions tailored to the specific interaction (= interaction-specific measures). These questions measure their empathy toward the specific out-partisan, their warm or cold feelings toward the specific out-partisan, the degree to which they would feel comfortable discussing the given issue with the specific out-partisan, and their perception of the correctness of their own beliefs on the specific issue. After participants had seen all three interactions and completed all rounds of interaction-specific questions, their overall perceptions of the three out-partisans they observed are measured. This includes the extent to which participants view the out-partisans as empathic toward and in agreement with the in-partisan, as well as how typical of an out-partisan they perceive them to be (for exploratory reasons). Additionally, I measured participants' levels of empathy, hostility, comfort in conversations, and belief superiority towards the out-party as a whole (= generalized measures) for exploratory reasons.

Figure 7.1: Effects of Observing Out-Partisans Empathizing on Interaction-specific and Generalized Attitudes Toward Out-Partisans



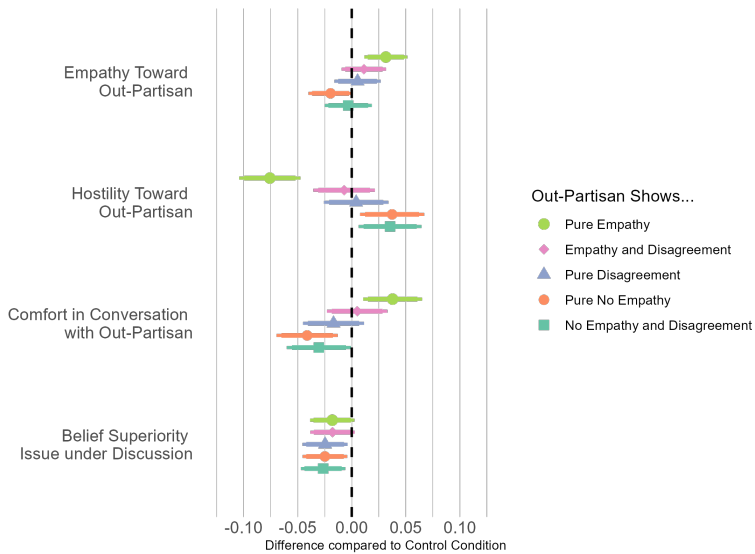
Note: Panel A shows effects of observing an empathic (vs. a non-empathic) out-partisan on interaction-specific outcomes. Effects are unstandardized OLS coefficients with issue fixed effects including 90% (thick lines) and 95% (thin lines) confidence intervals, calculated based on clustered standard errors at the individual level. Panel B shows the effects of observing three empathic (vs. non-empathic) out-partisans on generalized outcomes. Effects are unstandardized OLS coefficients including 90% (thick lines) and 95% (thin lines) confidence intervals, calculated based on robust standard errors.

Results

Observing Empathic Out-Partisans Improves Perceptions of Out-Partisans Without Strengthening Personal Beliefs

For the main analysis, I compare interactions between political opponents in which empathy is observed (averaging over pure empathy and empathy and disagreement conditions) to those where empathy is not observed (averaging over pure disagreement, pure no-empathy, no-empathy and disagreement, and control conditions). Figure 7.1, Panel A shows that observing an out-partisan showing empathy, compared to observing out-partisans not showing empathy, leads to greater willingness to empathize with them, reduces hostility toward them, and increases comfort in having a conversation with them about the given issue. However, there is no effect on belief superiority, i.e., observing an empathic (vs. non-empathic) out-partisan does not impact the degree to which participants view their own opinions on the issue under discussion as more correct. This alleviates concerns that showing empathy toward political opponents might reinforce their beliefs.

Figure 7.2: Effects of Observing Out-Partisans Empathizing X Disagreeing



Note: Effects of observing an out-partisan showing (a) pure empathy, (b) empathy and disagreement, (c) pure disagreement, (d) pure no empathy, or (e) no empathy and disagreement compared to the control condition. Effects are unstandardized OLS coefficients with issue fixed effects including 90% (thick lines) and 95% (thin lines) confidence intervals, calculated based on clustered standard errors at the individual level.

Turning to Figure 7.1, Panel B, an exploratory analysis indicates that the previous findings extend beyond the specific partisan who shows empathy. Participants who saw three empathic out-partisans, as opposed to non-empathic ones, show less hostility toward and feel more comfortable having conversations about politics with out-partisans in general. While there are no significant effects observed for generalized empathy toward or belief superiority over the out-party as a whole, taken together this evidence suggests that encountering even a small number of empathic out-partisans can significantly change perceptions of the entire out-party.

The Conditional Benefits of Empathy: Positive Effects on Observers Require Absence of Simultaneous Disagreement

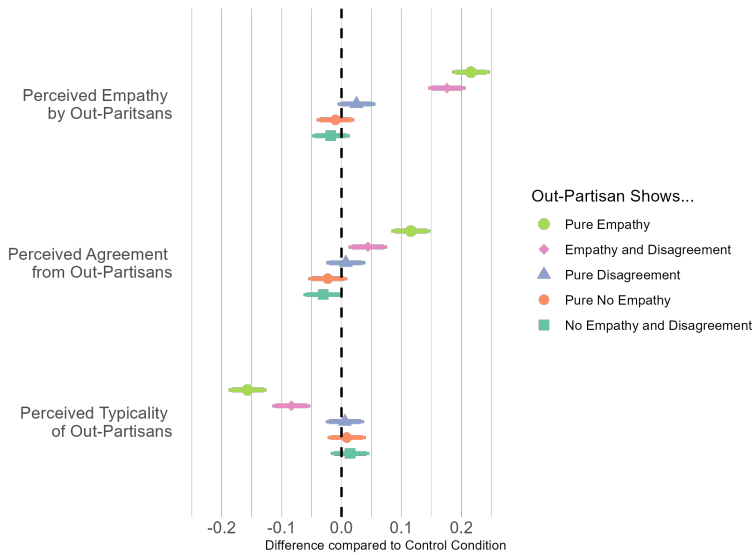
However, for empathy to have these positive effects on observers, a certain condition must be met: no simultaneous disagreement. Figure 7.2 shows that only when the out-partisan displays pure empathy (compared to the control) do participants become more empathic, less hostile, and more comfortable discussing politics with the political opponent. However, this effect disappears when the out-partisan shows empathy while also disagreeing. Empathy from out-partisans seems to only have a beneficial influence on its observers when expressed purely, not when combined with disagreement.

Additionally, when the out-partisan exhibits no empathy or is non-empathic and disagrees (compared to the control), observers become less empathic toward (though this is not statistically significant when both no empathy and disagreement are present), more hostile toward, and less comfortable engaging in conversation about the political issue with the non-empathic out-partisan. This suggests that the absence of understanding contributes to hostile partisan divides.

What Empathy Signals

In addition, as can be seen in Figure 7.3, further exploratory analyses reveal that those who show pure empathy or empathy combined with disagreement are perceived to be more empathic, more in agreement with one's own side, and less typical of out-partisans. Interestingly, those who show pure empathy and those who show empathy with disagreement are perceived as similarly empathic. However, empathic out-partisans who also disagree are perceived as being less in agreement with one's side and more typical of their political group than those who show pure empathy. Combined with the finding that only pure empathy, but not empathy and disagreement, positively influences perceptions of out-partisans, this could suggest that it may not be the empathy that empathic responses convey that improves interactions between political opponents, but rather the agreement and atypicality of the opponent that it signals. These results also suggest that showing pure empathy, even though it may be perceived as a sign of agreement, does not lead people to feel more certain about the correctness of their own beliefs, but does make them more open to engaging with the other side.

Figure 7.3: What Out-Partisans Signal When Engaging in Empathy X Disagreement



Note: Effects of observing three out-partisans showing (a) pure empathy, (b) empathy and disagreement, (c) pure disagreement, (d) pure no empathy, or (e) no empathy and disagreement compared to the control condition. Effects are unstandardized OLS coefficients with 90% (thick lines) and 95% (thin lines) confidence intervals, calculated based on robust standard errors.

Chapter 8

How Do Social Dynamics Shape Empathy Toward Political Opponents?

Having shown that empathizing with political opponents can improve relationships between political opponents for both the empathizer (Article A) and the (indirect) recipient (Article B), the next natural question is whether empathy can actually thrive in political contexts. As previously mentioned, it is not necessarily the ability to empathize that people lack, but rather the motivation to do so (Zaki, 2014). Efforts to make people more empathic to improve relationships between political opponents may be useless if something keeps people from engaging in it.

But why might empathy fail in the first place? One possibility as to why empathy fails is social norms (Zaki and Cikara, 2015). Social norms involve perceptions of how others commonly behave and see the world, how appropriate one finds these behaviors and worldviews, and the consequences of conforming to or deviating from them (Bicchieri, 2016; Cialdini et al., 1990). While social norms play a crucial role in shaping people's political attitudes, intentions, and actual behaviors (Cialdini et al., 1990; Dinas et al., 2024; Groenendyk et al., 2023; Valentim, 2024), their impact has not been extensively studied with regard to empathy, as most empathy research focuses on dyadic interactions, overlooking broader social dynamics. But what if social dynamics determine whether empathy toward political opponents is expressed or withheld?

This chapter is dedicated to clarifying this and addresses RQ 3, which asks *how do social dynamics shape intentions to empathize with political opponents?* To investigate this, I draw on Article C, "*Testing the Social Pressure Hypothesis: Does In-Party Social Pressure Reduce Out-Party Empathy?*" This article tests whether perceived disapproval by fellow in-partisans reduces individuals' intentions to empathize with out-partisans.

The In-Party Social Pressure Hypothesis

People generally believe that it is morally right to show equal amounts of empathy to both in-groups and out-groups, and that it is morally wrong to show empathy exclusively to one group, with the strongest disapproval directed at those who show more empathy to out-groups than in-groups (Fowler et al., 2021). Consistent with this, partisans who empathize with their political opponents are often seen as morally questionable (Hussein and Wheeler, 2024), with disapproval increasing when empathy is directed toward more extreme opponents (Heltzel and Laurin, 2021; Wang and Todd, 2021; Wang et al., 2023). Regardless of the specific reasons behind this disapproval (see Hussein and Wheeler, 2024 for a discussion), this can create social dynamics where “those who empathize across social divides might be repudiated by their own peers for doing so” (Wang and Todd, 2021, p. 1023). The fear of being labeled a traitor, experiencing negative reactions, receiving backlash, or losing status within the group can generate significant social pressure against empathizing with the other side. This pressure might not even have to be real; even “[i]f people mistakenly believe that others discourage political perspective-seeking, they may abstain from it out of fear of social punishment” (Heltzel and Laurin, 2021, p. 1798). When people thus *believe* that fellow partisans are unlikely to empathize with out-partisans and disapprove of it, they might also decrease their intentions to empathize with them.

Overview of Studies

To investigate this, Article C draws on two studies. Study 1 is a pre-registered and IRB-approved survey among 1199 US Americans quota sampled based on age, gender, and ethnicity, aimed at establishing descriptive and correlational evidence regarding empathy and its different potential predictors. I measure people’s degree of out-party empathy, the extent to which they think others (in- and out-partisans) engage in out-party empathy, the extent to which they disapprove of in-partisans engaging in out-party empathy, and the extent to which they think in-partisans disapprove of other in-partisans engaging in out-party empathy. I use these measures to first provide a descriptive overview of their distributions and to test two hypotheses: that individuals exhibit less empathy toward out-partisans when they perceive in-group members to be reluctant to engage in out-party empathy (H1), and when they perceive in-group

Table 8.1: Article C Treatment Overview

Social Cost Condition	Social Benefit Condition	Baseline Condition
<p>We recently conducted a survey to understand the beliefs and values of ordinary citizens who identify as [in-partisans]. Here's what we discovered: A large share of [in-partisans] we surveyed say that most [in-partisans] disapprove of fellow [in-partisans] who try to understand the perspective of [out-partisans]. These findings align with another recent study showing that people dislike politically like-minded individuals who listen to or engage with those from the other side.</p> <p>Imagine what fellow [in-partisans] might think of you if you showed understanding for the perspective of [out-partisans]. What negative reactions do you anticipate from fellow [in-partisans]? Please provide a detailed description in the space below.</p>	<p>We recently conducted a survey to understand the beliefs and values of ordinary citizens who identify as [in-partisans]. Here's what we discovered: The majority of [in-partisans] we surveyed approves of fellow [in-partisans] who try to understand the perspective of [out-partisans]. These findings align with another recent study showing that people like politically like-minded individuals who listen to or engage with those from the other side.</p> <p>Imagine what fellow [in-partisans] might think of you if you showed understanding for the perspective of [out-partisans]. What positive reactions do you anticipate from fellow [in-partisans]? Please provide a detailed description in the space below.</p>	<p>No information</p> <p>Imagine what fellow [in-partisans] might think of you if you showed understanding for the perspective of [out-partisans]. What reactions do you anticipate from fellow [in-partisans]? Please provide a detailed description in the space below.</p>

members as disapproving of those who do engage in out-party empathy (H2). Here, I restrict the analyses to Republicans and Democrats only (N = 1046), given that I am mainly interested in partisan dynamics.

While Study 1 provides correlational evidence, I conducted Study 2, a pre-registered and IRB-approved survey experiment, in order to provide causal evidence for the influence of perceived in-party disapproval of out-party empathy on people's intentions to empathize with out-partisans. I collected a sample of 1489 US Americans, balanced on partisanship and gender. In the experiment, I randomly assign participants to one of three experimental conditions that informs them about potential in-party approval or disapproval of out-party empathy based on findings from Study 1 as well as other studies (Heltzel and Laurin, 2021; Hussein and Wheeler, 2024): (1) social cost condition (N = 498), in which participants are informed about the *perceived* disapproval of in-partisans for empathizing with out-partisans, (2) social benefit condition (N = 484), in which participants are informed about the *actual* approval of in-partisans for empathizing with out-partisans, or (3) a baseline condition (N = 507), where no information is provided. In addition, participants are asked to write about the potential negative (social cost condition),

positive (social benefit condition), or simply the general (baseline condition) consequences they would expect from in-partisans for empathizing with out-partisans. This happened directly after providing the information to the treatment groups, and for the baseline condition at the end of the survey after all outcome variables were measured. The exact wording of the treatments can be found in Table 8.1.

Results

Study 1: Partisans perceive in-partisans as reluctant and disapproving with regard to out-party empathy

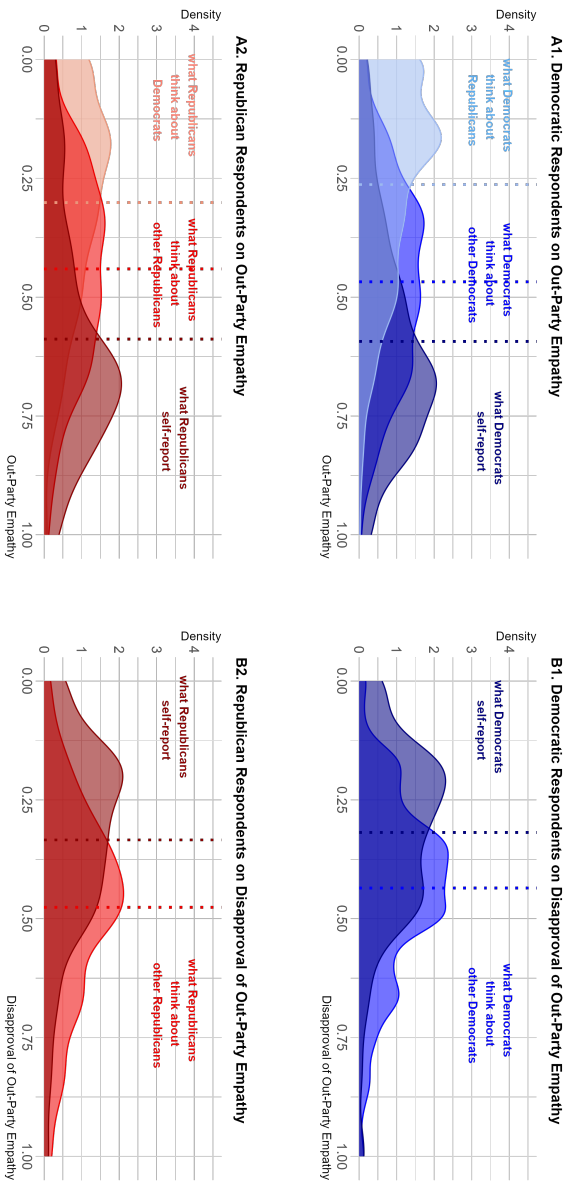
I begin by summarizing the findings of Study 1. Figure 8.1 shows distributions of Republicans' and Democrats' self-reported willingness to empathize with out-partisans, their (dis)approval of doing so, and their perceptions of the extent to which in- and out-partisans empathize. Republicans and Democrats perceive both fellow in-partisans and out-partisans as less likely to engage in out-party empathy than they themselves are, and out-partisans less so than in-partisans. Democrats and Republicans also see fellow in-partisans as more disapproving of engaging in out-party empathy than they are themselves. In other words, partisans do perceive their fellow in-partisans as less willing to engage in out-party empathy and more disapproving of those who do so. Correlations between these variables show that those who are more likely to think that fellow in-partisans are reluctant to engage in empathy and those who are more likely to think that fellow in-partisans disapprove of engaging in out-party empathy have lower levels of out-party empathy themselves. However, the association with in-party disapproval disappears when controlling for variables that indicate out-party hostility.

Study 2: Perceived In-Party Disapproval Does Not Reduce, But Increases Willingness To Engage in Out-Party Empathy

While these results are indicative, they are only correlational in nature. To understand to what extent in-party disapproval of out-party empathy, and thus social pressure not to engage in empathy, has a causal effect, I turn to the results of the second study.

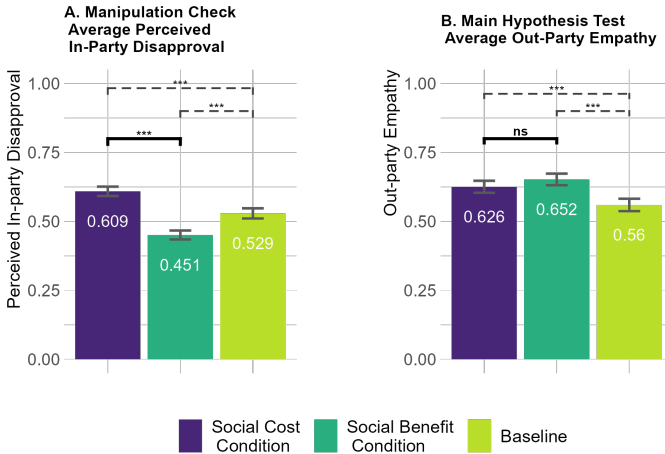
Figure 8.2, Panel A shows that the manipulation was successful. Those in the social cost condition who receive information about oth-

Figure 8.1: Meta-perceptions of Out-Party Empathy



Note: Panels A1 and A2 show smoothed kernel density estimates of self-reported out-party empathy as well as perceptions of in-partisans and out-partisans. Measures range from 0-1 with higher values reflecting more out-party empathy. Panels B1 and B2 show distributions for the extent to which Democrats and Republicans report themselves and perceive other in-partisans to disapprove of out-party empathy. Measures range from 0-1 with higher values reflecting stronger disapproval of in-partisans engaging in out-party empathy. Dotted lines represent mean values.

Figure 8.2: Effects on Perceived In-Party Disapproval and Out-Party Empathy Across Experimental Conditions



Note: Panel A shows mean perceived in-party disapproval of out-party empathy across experimental conditions, used as a manipulation check. Values range from 0-1, higher values indicate stronger perceived in-party disapproval. Panel B displays mean self-reported out-party empathy across experimental conditions used to test H1. Values range from 0-1, higher values indicate stronger out-party empathy. For all panels, error bars represent 95% confidence intervals. Thick brackets display pre-registered comparisons. Dashed brackets display exploratory comparisons. *** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$, ns = $p > 0.05$.

ers' perceived disapproval of in-partisans with regard to engaging in out-party empathy and who write about the negative consequences of engaging in out-party empathy are more likely to think that their fellow partisans are more disapproving of their engaging in out-party empathy than those in the social benefit condition, who receive the information that in-partisans approve of out-party empathy and write about the positive consequences of engaging in it. The baseline condition lies in between, indicating that being in the social cost condition increases perceived disapproval, and being in the social benefit condition decreases perceived disapproval.

Turning to Figure 8.2B, however, shows that being informed about and reflecting upon the social cost of out-party empathy does not significantly reduce partisans' intentions to empathize with out-partisans compared to reflecting upon its social benefits. While there is a small difference in the expected direction, it is very small and not significant on conventional levels. To test the robustness of this null effect, I analyzed alternative measures related to out-party empathy, including a more behavioral outcome of out-party empathy where people had to choose whether they wanted to learn about the perspective of an out-partisan or an in-partisan by reading an op-ed, and measures of willingness to be in contact with out-partisans as well as feelings toward out-partisans. None of these measures shows a significant difference compared to the social benefit condition. The finding thus does not seem to be outcome-specific. Hence, against expectations, perceived in-party disapproval of out-party empathy does not decrease intentions to empathize with out-partisans.

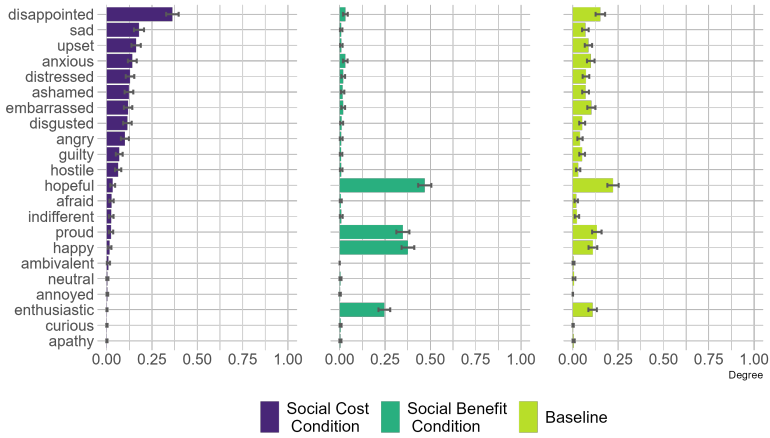
Surprisingly, an exploratory comparison with the baseline condition shows that both the social cost condition and the social benefit condition increase partisans' intentions to empathize with out-partisans. This increase is also observed in measures of willingness to engage with out-partisans and in warm feelings toward them, although it does not extend to choosing to read about the perspectives of out-partisans.

In-Party Disapproval of Out-Party Empathy Sparks Feelings of Disappointment

What could explain why partisans increase their intentions to engage in out-party empathy when they perceive in-party disapproval of it? One potential explanation comes from the feelings that this disapproval evokes in people. In an exploratory analysis represented in Figure 8.3, I asked people to rate their feelings toward the reactions that they anticipate from in-partisans for engaging in out-party empathy, I find that people in the social cost condition who expected negative reactions from their in-partisans are more likely to be disappointed compared to the other conditions. Partisans also slightly reduce their overall warm feelings toward their in-party, measured on a feelings thermometer, compared to the social benefit condition, but not compared to baseline.

How can we make sense of these findings? One interpretation is that when partisans perceive disapproval from their peers for empathizing with the opposition when they themselves endorse such empathy, a conflict arises between their own values and those of their party (Hornsey et al., 2003; Packer, 2008). Empathy is widely viewed as a moral virtue

Figure 8.3: Discrete Feelings Toward In-Partisans Across Experimental Conditions



Note: Figure shows means of different discrete feelings towards anticipated reactions of in-partisans across experimental groups. Values range from 0-1, with higher values indicating stronger feelings. For all Panels, error bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

(Fowler et al., 2021), and Study 1 indicates that party members generally support showing empathy towards the other side. Furthermore, many people are frustrated with current levels of political divisiveness and think that increasing cooperation across the political divide is a crucial issue to address (Doherty et al., 2023a, 2023b). Consequently, when their own party disapproves of those who empathize, members feel disappointed with their fellow partisans. In response to their party’s lack of empathy and unwillingness to bridge political divides, these members might increase their own empathy in an attempt to compensate and improve the party’s image, but also to finally stop the conflict. This is also in line with findings by Druckman et al. (2019) showing that when in-partisans behave in an uncivil way, it depolarizes partisans.

Chapter 9

Discussion and Conclusion

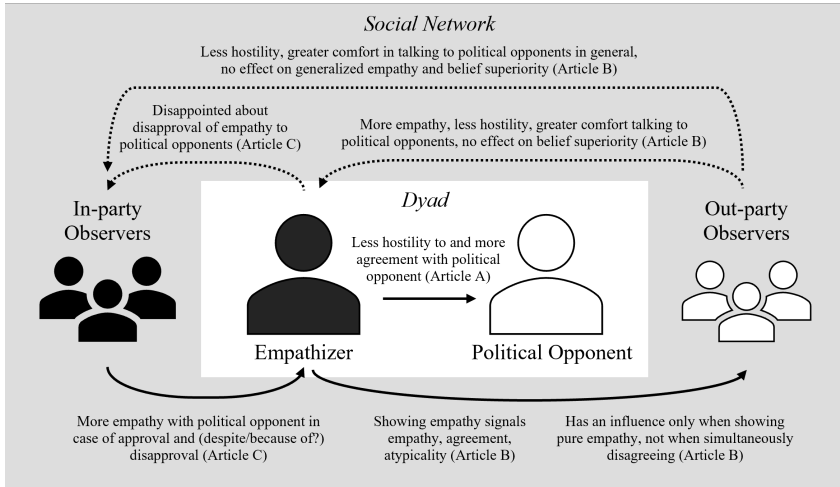
In this final chapter, I will address the overarching research questions of this dissertation: *How does empathy toward political opponents shape attitudes and feelings in interactions between political opponents? And does it facilitate non-hostile disagreement across political divides?* I will start by summarizing the empirical findings on how empathy toward political opponents shapes individuals' attitudes and feelings from Articles A, B, and C, which were summarized in Chapters 6, 7, and 8, respectively. I will then discuss the implications of these findings for understanding to what extent empathy promotes the normative ideal of non-hostile disagreement. I then explore how empathy can be cultivated and consider the contexts that may be more or less favorable for promoting empathy. Following this, I will again highlight the limitations of this dissertation. Finally, I will discuss how my findings can deepen our understanding of the role of empathy across political divides, point toward the contributions of this dissertation, and suggest directions for future research and end with some final thoughts.

Summary of Findings

How does empathy toward political opponents — the attempt to understand the thoughts, feelings, and experiences of those belonging to a political out-group from their unique perspective — shape attitudes and feelings in interactions between political opponents? To summarize the most important results of my dissertation, I return to Figure 4.1 from Chapter 4, which I now present in a revised form in Figure 9.1, incorporating the findings of my dissertation. What have I discovered?

Let us begin by examining the effects within the dyadic context, looking at the effect of empathizing with a political opponent as compared to other ways of approaching political opponents. Article A reveals that individuals who empathize with their political opponent, rather than engaging in self-advocacy or focusing on factual accuracy, tend to be less

Figure 9.1: Studying Empathy Toward Political Opponents in Socially Complex Political Settings 2.0



hostile toward the opponent. Against pre-registered expectations, individuals who empathize with their political opponents are also more likely to agree with them. At the same time, however, empathy does not eliminate the possibility of disagreeing. There is suggestive evidence that people agree less when empathizing with anti-immigration individuals. Moreover, the majority of people who empathize with their political opponents still disagreed, especially when empathizing with anti-immigration individuals. Additionally, correlational evidence suggests that those who disagree after empathizing are less hostile than those who disagree after advocating their own views or focusing on facts.

Empathy with political opponents not only influences the empathizer in dyadic interactions, but also has effects beyond the dyad on those who observe but are not an active part of the interaction. Article B shows that when people see a political opponent empathize with one's own side, they perceive this opponent as more empathic and more in agreement with one's own side (and also less representative of a typical political opponent), a perception that is consistent with what actually happens in the empathizer, as indicated by the results in Article A. Furthermore, those who observe empathy from a political opponent become themselves more empathic, less hostile, and feel more comfortable having a conversation

about politics with the empathic opponent. But not only that: Seeing several (in this case three) political opponents showing empathy makes people perceive the entire opposing party as more empathic, and they become less hostile toward and feel more comfortable talking politics with the entire out-party in general. However, observing an empathic political opponent has these positive effects only when the empathy is pure and free from explicit disagreement. If the opponent expresses disagreement, even if done in an empathic manner, the positive effects of empathy disappear, and attitudes toward political opponents return to their baseline state. Despite not encountering active disagreement when pure empathy is displayed and perceiving those who show pure empathy as more in agreement with their side, however, observers are not more likely to view their own opinions as more correct, alleviating concerns that empathizing, even when perceived as increased agreement with one's side, may reinforce existing beliefs.

The results from Articles A and B illustrate a feedback loop initiated by empathizing with political opponents. When you are empathic, you become less hostile and more likely to agree with your opponent. Observers who then witness this empathy also perceive you as more understanding, more in agreement with their views, and less representative of a typical opponent. Your empathy then makes these observers themselves more empathic, less hostile, and more comfortable engaging in conversations about politics with you, and even potentially others who have similar views or political affiliations as you. And even though they see you as more in agreement with their side, this does not lead them to believe that their own views are more correct. However, this loop is only set in motion when you purely empathize, not when you also voice disagreement. Thus, only pure empathy sets off a cycle: Engaging in pure empathy causes you to be less hostile and more in agreement, which likely encourages others who observe this empathy to reciprocate. This is in line with other evidence showing that being empathic can create such a feedback loop (Argyle et al., 2023; Santos et al., 2022).

Based on this, it might seem as if all it takes is for someone to show pure empathy, and the positive cycle would reinforce itself. So why are people not doing it? Article C theorizes that one obstacle to initiating this process is the potential backlash of the in-party. The theoretical argument here is that people may hesitate to empathize with political opponents because they fear negative consequences from within their own ranks. While the descriptive evidence in this article shows that individuals indeed perceive fellow in-partisans as more reluctant and disapproving regarding empathy toward political opponents, experimental data shows

that this perception is not a direct cause of people's reduced empathy. In fact, anticipating social costs from the in-party does not significantly decrease people's willingness to empathize with political opponents, compared to expecting social benefits. Surprisingly, both the anticipation of social costs and the expectation of social benefits actually increase the intention to empathize compared to baseline. At the same time, anticipating costs for engaging in empathy with political opponents from in-partisans leaves people disappointed in their own side, potentially contributing to the increase in their empathy as a way to make up for their in-party's shortcomings. Hence, empathy toward political opponents is possible despite (or maybe even because of?) in-party disapproval of it.

All in all, the overall question of *how empathy toward political opponents shapes attitudes and feelings in interactions between political opponents* can be answered as follows: Those who empathize with their political opponents become less hostile and agree with them more. Those who observe how political opponents empathize also become less hostile, and they show more empathy and feel more comfortable in discussions with political opponents, but only if the political opponent does not explicitly disagree. At the same time, people do not adjust the extent to which they think of their views as more correct. Thus, empathy has positive effects both for those who are directly involved in political interactions and for those who only passively observe them. Furthermore, many people are willing to show empathy toward political opponents, even if it means risking backlash from their own party.

Does Empathy Toward Political Opponents Facilitate Non-Hostile Disagreement?

How do these findings address the central question and motivation of this dissertation: *Does empathy toward political opponents facilitate the ideal of non-hostile disagreement?* The results indicate that while empathy toward political opponents does reduce hostility, it often leads to (perceptions of) increased agreement rather than facilitating disagreement.

For example, Article A shows that empathizing with a political opponent leads the empathizer to agree more with that opponent. Similarly, exploratory analyses in Article B show that when a political opponent shows empathy, observers perceive that opponent as more likely to agree with their side. Moreover, observing an empathizing opponent reduces hostility only when the empathizing opponent does not explicitly disagree. This suggests that (1) those who are empathic are more likely to

agree with the other side, (2) empathy signals agreement, and (3) empathy is ineffective in promoting less hostile interactions when explicit disagreement is present.

While scholars argue that understanding another's perspective does not necessarily equate to agreeing with it (Livingstone et al., 2020a; Morrell, 2010; Mutz, 2002; Reis et al., 2017) — which is also why I chose to focus on a specific type of cognitive empathy that theoretically could support disagreement (as outlined in Chapter 2) — my findings suggest that in practice the line between understanding and agreement is blurred, and that agreement appears to be an important part of why empathy might reduce hostility. Hence, rather than facilitating disagreement, empathy facilitates agreement. This is in line with recent research showing that people tend to view those who listen carefully to them and try to understand their perspectives as more likely to agree with them. On the other hand, if someone disagrees with them, it is often seen as a sign that the person was not understanding well (Ren and Schaumberg, 2024).

However, while empathy is more likely to lead to agreement, this does not mean that it makes disagreement impossible. Exploratory correlational analyses in Article A show that individuals who continued to disagree with their political opponents after empathizing were less hostile than those who remained in disagreement after engaging in self-advocacy or focusing on factual accuracy. At the same time, empathy might facilitate agreement only with specific types of political opponents, and the majority of people kept disagreeing with their political opponents after engaging in empathy. This suggests that non-hostile disagreement can indeed coexist with empathy, even though this is not what is primarily fostered by empathy. In other words, empathy does not close the door on disagreement with political opponents; it just opens the door to agreement with them much more readily. This tendency seems particularly pronounced when empathy is communicated, as shown in Article B, such that expressions of empathy are interpreted as signs of agreement. When people hear someone say “I understand,” they may struggle to differentiate between understanding and agreement and see this as a sign of agreement. As a result, even if the person saying “I understand” does not actually agree but in fact disagrees, their statement may still be perceived as a form of agreement. Empathy and agreement, even though theoretically distinguishable concepts and psychological states, are in practice closely intertwined and difficult to separate.

How should we understand the finding that empathy tends to facilitate agreement more than disagreement, in light of the ideal of non-hostile disagreement described in the introduction? It might be tempting

to conclude that because empathy promotes agreement rather than maintaining disagreement, it does not align with this ideal and should potentially even be discouraged. However, this would be an overly simplistic and incorrect conclusion. The normative goal of non-hostile disagreement is to ensure that disagreements are handled respectfully, not to keep them unresolved indefinitely. If empathy fosters an environment where people who previously disagreed can more easily find common ground and agree, it does not necessarily contradict the ideal of non-hostile disagreement, provided it does not undermine the ability to maintain or express disagreement when desired or necessary. Rather, it would violate this ideal if empathy undermined the ability to discuss, sustain, or articulate disagreement when desired or necessary. Hence, the answer to this question is much more nuanced and largely depends on two interrelated factors: first, one's normative views on (dis)agreement — whether agreeing or disagreeing is considered beneficial or harmful — and second, the specific context in which empathy is applied. Researchers have spent decades studying how to encourage agreement among political actors, reduce ideological polarization, build consensus, and facilitate compromise across the political divide — all of which are essential for the effective functioning of a democracy. From this perspective, empathy's tendency to encourage agreement should be seen as a positive asset, reducing conflict while promoting cooperation and compromise, which is beneficial for and necessary in democratic processes. However, there are valid concerns about the potential downsides of empathy leading to increased agreement. If empathy compromises individuals' ability to express dissenting opinions across the political divide, diminishes the representation of their views, or enables exploitation and manipulation by the other side, it could undermine healthy democratic discourse. Additionally, the fact that empathy leads to agreement might inadvertently support extreme, hostile, or anti-democratic positions or even false information, which could stifle necessary dissent. Thus, while empathy's tendency to encourage and signal agreement can be beneficial for fostering compromise and reducing conflict, its impact on agreement needs to be carefully considered to ensure it does not inadvertently undermine necessary disagreements, reinforce harmful positions, or lead to misunderstandings and false polarization because people mistake empathy for agreement and disagreement for no empathy (see also Ren and Schaumburg, 2024).

While this dissertation cannot alleviate concerns about empathy regarding extreme and radical contexts, it addresses concerns about empathy leading to increased agreement in contentious situations. First,

Article A indicates that empathy might promote agreement more for pro-immigration positions than for anti-immigration stances, suggesting that the effect of empathy on agreement may vary depending on the issue position. Second, Article B finds that while showing empathy increases perceived agreement, it does not lead to outright endorsement of the other side. People do not view their own opinions as more correct after seeing empathy being expressed towards their side. This means that even on contentious and controversial issues like immigration and abortion, which are deeply rooted in strong moral beliefs, pure empathy with their side, even though it is interpreted as agreement, does not make people more convinced of their own views. Instead, it makes them more open to understanding the other side. However, this dissertation of course does not address all potential concerns related to empathizing with opponents that leads to more agreement, as it does not explore empathy in interactions with extremists or radicalized individuals who hold specifically undemocratic views, endorse violence, believe in false information, or hold conspiracy theories. There is some evidence suggesting that empathy could be beneficial even for more extreme individuals by fostering a psychologically safe environment for dialogue (Itzchakov and Demarree, 2022; Itzchakov et al., 2020). However, research in this area is still limited and in its infancy, indicating a need for further exploration to fully understand the impact of empathy in such situations.

While it is beyond the scope of this dissertation to resolve the complex (normative) issues surrounding empathy and (dis)agreement, it emphasizes that the outcomes of empathy cannot be considered inherently virtuous or vicious. The value of empathy signaling and increasing agreement depends largely on the context in which it is applied. Therefore, empathy's role in political discourse should be evaluated based on how well it achieves specific context-dependent goals rather than on whether it inherently encourages or discourages a particular outcome. If the goal is to reduce hostility and facilitate agreement, or if agreement is an acceptable byproduct, then empathy seems to be a good way to build more affective and ideological unity between political opponents. However, if the aim is to reduce hostility while still allowing for the expression of disagreement, particularly in situations where agreement might be undesirable or counterproductive, empathy might not be the ideal approach, and other (additional) strategies may be necessary to ensure that disagreement can be expressed and discussed in a non-hostile manner.

Cultivating Empathy Toward Political Opponents

In contexts where we aim to create an environment of empathy to reduce hostility and the facilitation of agreement is either acceptable, desired, or necessary, how can we effectively cultivate empathy? It seems that in societies where empathy toward political opponents is most needed in order to reduce hostility and enable people to agree with each other and compromise over important decisions, it is also most difficult to cultivate because of people's own resistance to it. Exploratory analyses in Articles B and C suggest that the willingness to empathize with political opponents largely depends on how those opponents are perceived, which is also indicated by other research (Wang and Todd, 2021; Wang et al., 2023) and brings us back to empathy bias (Cikara et al., 2011). People are less inclined to empathize with political opponents not due to concerns about negative consequences from their own party (as argued but rejected in Article C), but due to their own hostility as well as perceived hostility from the other side. Study 1 in Article C indicates that the lack of empathy to political opponents is more closely related to out-party hate than to in-party love. Additionally, this study shows that people perceive the out-party as least willing to empathize with their own side, which correlates with their own reduced willingness to empathize with the out-party. Article B also supports this causally, showing that when an out-partisan displays a lack of empathy toward an in-partisan, it increases hostility and discomfort in having conversations with the non-empathic out-partisan. These findings align with a study from the Pew Research Center showing that people have the feeling that “those on the Other Side ‘don’t get’ them” (Dunn et al., 2020), and the recent research on meta-perceptions that show that hostility is increased when people believe that the other side is more hostile toward them (Lees and Cikara, 2020; Mernyk et al., 2022; Moore-Berg et al., 2020). In summary, reluctance to empathize seems to stem mostly from both personal hostility toward the other side and (perceptions of) the other side's hostility.

Paradoxically, effectively integrating empathy into political interactions and using it to reduce hostility and foster agreement may then first require the overcoming of some of the existing hostility between opposing sides. If people are unwilling to empathize with their political opponents because they are hostile toward them or believe that the other side is inherently unempathic and hostile, then the cycle of empathy cannot begin. Without one side taking the initiative to empathize, it becomes

impossible to break this deadlock. This challenge is particularly severe in highly polarized and hostile environments. Additionally, as Article B highlights, empathy needs to be free of explicit disagreement to effectively reduce hostility. This requirement may make it even harder to promote empathy. The need to avoid disagreement might further diminish people's willingness to engage in empathy toward political opponents. In essence, the polarized environment creates a catch-22: The conditions that make empathy necessary are the same conditions that make it difficult to implement.

This also means that empathy alone may not be a panacea for political conflict. Instead, it should be viewed as part of a broader strategy. Empathy is likely more effective as a preventive measure to avoid escalating conflicts early on, rather than as a remedy for deeply seated animosities. This is also indicated by Article B, where strong partisans reduced their hostility toward empathic out-partisans less. In less polarized environments, disagreement might not feel as threatening, potentially making it possible to convey disagreement through empathy for constructive political interactions. Therefore, it seems more practical to employ empathy at the very beginning of a conflict, when tensions and stakes are lower, to prevent escalation, rather than when disputes have already escalated and stakes are very high. Yet one potential way to implement it even in highly polarized contexts may be to leverage moments when people have become weary of the deep division and are actively seeking to overcome it. Right now in the United States, people seem to be tired of partisan divisions and see overcoming them as one of the most fundamental problems to address (Doherty et al., 2023a, 2023b). Article C also provides suggestive evidence that disappointment with one's own party disapproving of empathy — a strategy to reduce hostile divisiveness — might make people more inclined to take action and begin empathizing with the other side. This shift toward being tired of partisan divisions could provide a valuable starting point for facilitating empathy between political opponents.

But how can we effectively initiate and facilitate empathy in the first place? It seems that starting the cycle of empathy requires some form of instruction, nudge, or motivation. In Article A, for instance, I demonstrate that using short instructional videos to encourage people to empathize with the other side can be quite effective across different socio-demographics, personality traits, and political orientations. Implementing similar videos on social media platforms could serve as a scalable intervention, leveraging the power of simple nudges to foster empathy, just as has been done with interventions against misinformation (Roozenbeek

et al., 2022). Furthermore, in line with Santos et al. (2022), interventions could motivate people to engage in empathy because they see this as beneficial for their own purposes.

However, a key question is who should deliver these interventions. If the source has a political bias, it may not resonate well with the opposing side. Research on source cues shows that it may be more effective if these messages come from credible figures and figures within one's own political group rather than from the political out-group (Druckman, 2001; Hartman and Weber, 2009). In line with this, research by Munger (2017) shows that interventions by high-profile in-group individuals can reduce the use of racial slurs. Similarly, Article C suggests that when empathy is framed as a social norm and valued by one's political in-group, it can more effectively encourage empathic intentions toward political opponents. Although the detailed exploration and practical implementation of such interventions are beyond the scope of this dissertation, future research needs to examine the effectiveness of these approaches more thoroughly. Specifically, it should investigate under what circumstances these interventions are most successful and explore the best methods and contexts for delivering them on a larger scale.

Limitations

As already discussed in Chapter 5, this dissertation has several significant limitations. The primary limitation lies in its reliance on survey experiments to explore interactions between political opponents. Although these experiments provide valuable control and enhance internal validity, they often fall short of capturing the intricate and dynamic nature of real-world political discourse. While showing that empathy can reduce hostility and increase agreement in a controlled environment is an important contribution, it remains unclear whether these effects can be generalized to the more unpredictable and complex settings of actual political interactions (see also Iyengar et al., 2019). Real-world political conversations typically occur organically and spontaneously (Carlson and Settle, 2022), differing markedly from the structured and often artificial environments of survey experiments. Consequently, future research should focus more on exploring how empathy functions in real-world political and social contexts, including the conditions under which it manifests, how it is perceived, and what its consequences are for the empathizer, the one being empathized with, and the social network around the interaction.

Another key limitation is the geographic focus of this research, which predominantly centers on the US political context. While the findings are relevant, they may not fully apply to other countries with different political landscapes and levels of polarization. To gain a more comprehensive understanding of empathy's role across diverse political environments, it is essential to extend this research to various international contexts. Additionally, exploring more extreme political contexts — such as those involving undemocratic views, fake news, and radical or even violent individuals — could provide deeper insights into the potential benefits and limitations of empathy in mitigating hostility and fostering agreement. Additionally, my studies primarily address short-term effects, while there is a need to understand the more long-term impact of empathy in reducing hostility and signaling and increasing agreement.

By addressing these limitations, future researchers will provide a more nuanced understanding of empathy's influence on political dynamics and its role in shaping hostility and (dis)agreement, as well as its broader consequences, whether deemed positive or negative.

Conclusion and Outlook

This dissertation investigates how empathy toward political opponents shapes feelings and attitudes toward political opponents, and the extent to which it can facilitate the ideal of non-hostile disagreement. The findings show that empathy effectively reduces hostility toward political opponents, benefiting both those who practice empathy and those who observe it. People are motivated to empathize with and reduce their hostility toward political opponents even when considering potential backlash from their own political group for empathizing with political opponents. Another critical aspect that emerges from my research is that empathy is not just a tool for reducing hostility; it is also closely tied to agreement. Not only is empathy interpreted as showing agreement; in some cases, empathy seems to lead to actual agreement. As soon as empathy is combined with explicit disagreement, it does not reduce hostility.

The findings of my dissertation have significant implications for understanding empathy's role in political interactions. While empathy effectively reduces hostility, it is closely linked to increased agreement rather than disagreement. However, it does not entirely exclude the possibility of disagreement, at least not on a psychological level, as increased empathy, reduced hostility, and disagreement can coexist in one individual. Yet, this dynamic changes when empathy is outwardly expressed. In

such cases, the potential for non-hostile disagreement diminishes, even when disagreement is communicated in an empathic way. The strong connection between empathy and agreement highlights the need for further exploration of their relationship. Future research should investigate whether empathy and agreement lead to similar outcomes and whether they are observationally equivalent. It is also important to determine whether agreement is essential for reducing hostility. Furthermore, it will be important to look at the conditions under which empathy sustains disagreement, especially given that some studies find that it does not alter beliefs (Bor and Simonovits, 2021; Muradova and Arceneaux, 2021).

This dissertation does make several significant contributions. First, it expands the study of empathy beyond simple dyadic interactions to more complex social contexts, showing that empathy is influenced by and has an impact beyond individual interactions, as it affects and is affected by wider social contexts (Articles B and C). Previous research has frequently concentrated on one-on-one interactions, often neglecting broader social dynamics that are crucial to consider. Second, it compares empathy to alternative approaches for engaging with political opponents (Article A) and examines its interaction with disagreement (Article B). This comparison offers a more nuanced assessment of empathy's impact, particularly in the political sphere. Third, it disentangles concrete and abstract effects of empathy by providing evidence on both the direct effects of empathy on immediate individual interactions with political opponents and on how this translates into attitudes toward political opponents in general (Article B). Fourth, it sheds light on factors that facilitate and inhibit empathy toward political opponents (Articles B and C). Fifth, it has built scalable interventions to increase empathy across a diverse set of people (Article A). Sixth, it emphasizes the multifaceted nature and complex dynamics of empathy in political interactions, exploring both its potential benefits and drawbacks, specifically with regard to empathy facilitating agreement. By doing so, it addresses some existing concerns and criticisms of empathy, while also uncovering new challenges associated with its use in political contexts.

Final Thoughts

Looking back on my conversations with Steve, I cannot help but think about how differently I would approach them now. If I were to sit down with Steve today, with the insights from my PhD research in hand, my

approach would be entirely different. Instead of trying to out-argue him or fact-check every one of his statements, I would focus on understanding the thoughts, feelings, and perspectives that shape his views. This shift would not just cause us to fight each other less aggressively; it might even lead me to find common ground with Steve, perhaps agreeing with him on points I had previously dismissed.

But the change would not stop with me. I would hope that by opening up and showing a genuine interest in Steve's perspective, he might also become more willing to understand mine. And this understanding could likely ripple outwards, influencing his friends who always sat alongside us during our discussions — those who share his political views. Likely they, too, would start to understand my side, change their hostile feelings, and see me as someone they could discuss politics with more comfortably. It could even lead to Steve's friends feeling warmer towards my friends and more comfortable talking about politics with them.

However, there are some challenges: If I want Steve's side to be more open toward me, I will need to avoid explicitly disagreeing with him. This is difficult because I do not want my efforts to understand Steve's perspective to be mistaken for agreement, leading others to believe I endorse views I do not share. But as my research has shown, these concerns may not be as pressing as they seem. Even if Steve's friends perceive me as aligned with him, it would not necessarily validate their views, which eases my worries somewhat. Still, I am uncertain how some of Steve's more radical friends might react. Another challenge could arise if my friends do not appreciate and disapprove of my efforts to understand Steve better. While their lack of support would disappoint me, it would not deter me. In fact, it might even motivate me to increase my efforts to make up for their lack of understanding.

In reflecting on this, I see how the lessons from my research could have fundamentally transformed my interactions with Steve and beyond. Instead of hostile battles, these interactions could have become opportunities for deeper connection, mutual understanding, more comfort in engaging with each other, and even a bit of (unexpected) agreement.

Appendix

Validation of Out-Party Empathy Measure

On May 18, 2023, I conducted a small-N study using a convenience sample of 200 participants from the United States, recruited through Prolific. The sample is balanced in terms of age (18-75 years, median age = 40) and gender (50% female). The primary objective of this study is to validate the out-party empathy measure, which is used in various forms throughout this dissertation.

Initially, the measure consisted of 10 items (see Figure A.1 for item distributions and wording). To assess the structure and coherence of these items, I performed a Principal Component Analysis (PCA). This analysis aimed to determine how well the items cluster together. Additionally, I examined the correlations between the out-party empathy measure and other relevant constructs to ensure that the measure behaves as expected.

Principal Component Analysis Out-Party Empathy

Figure A.2 is a scree plot, which displays the Eigenvalues of the factors extracted during Principal Component Analysis (PCA). The plot helps in determining the number of factors to retain by showing the Eigenvalues on the y-axis and the factor numbers on the x-axis. The plot suggests that the items might load onto one or two factors. To determine the most appropriate factor structure, I conducted Principal Component Analysis (PCA) with both one-factor and two-factor solutions, using oblique (nonorthogonal) rotation to allow the factors to be correlated with each other.

Figure A.3 (left panel) shows the results of the two-factor solution. The items are organized into distinct “high-empathy” and “low-empathy” (the reversed items) factors, with high loadings on their respective factors. This indicates a meaningful separation between items that reflect high and low levels of out-party empathy. In the one-factor solution, presented in the right panel of Figure A.3, all items have high loadings on

Figure A.1: Distribution of Initial Out-Party Empathy Items

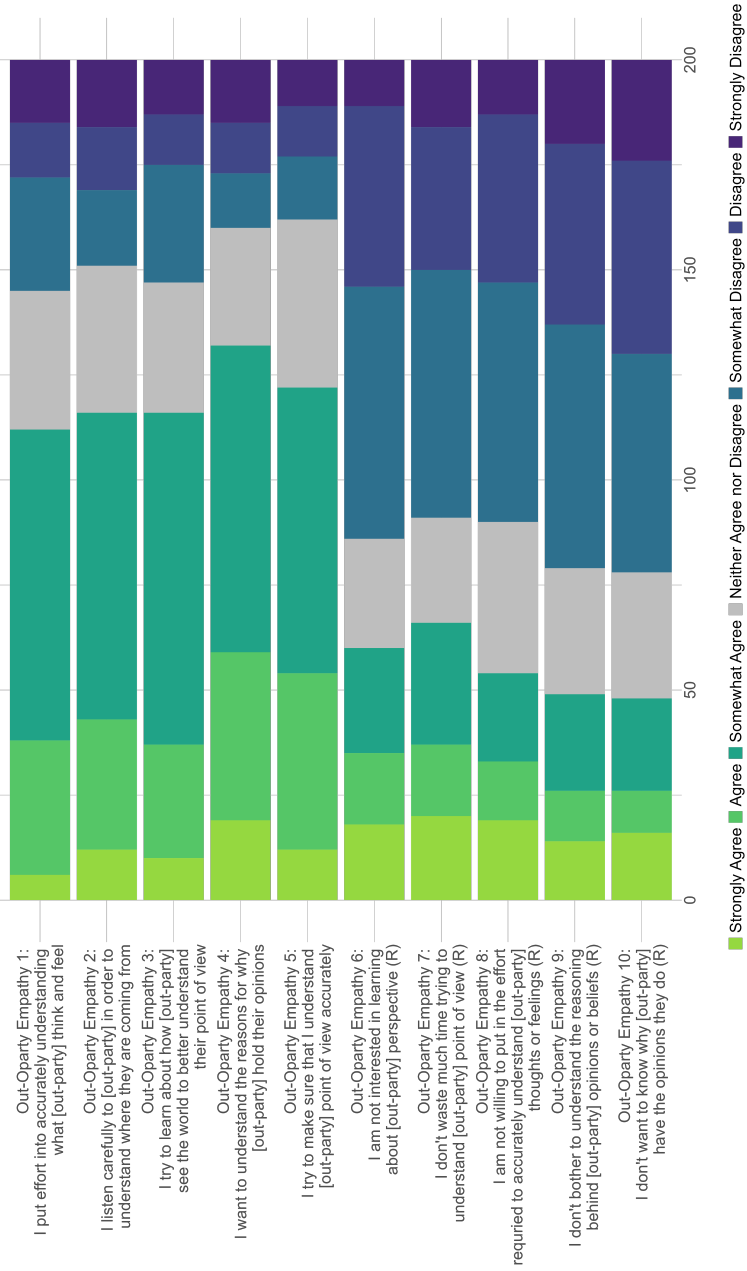
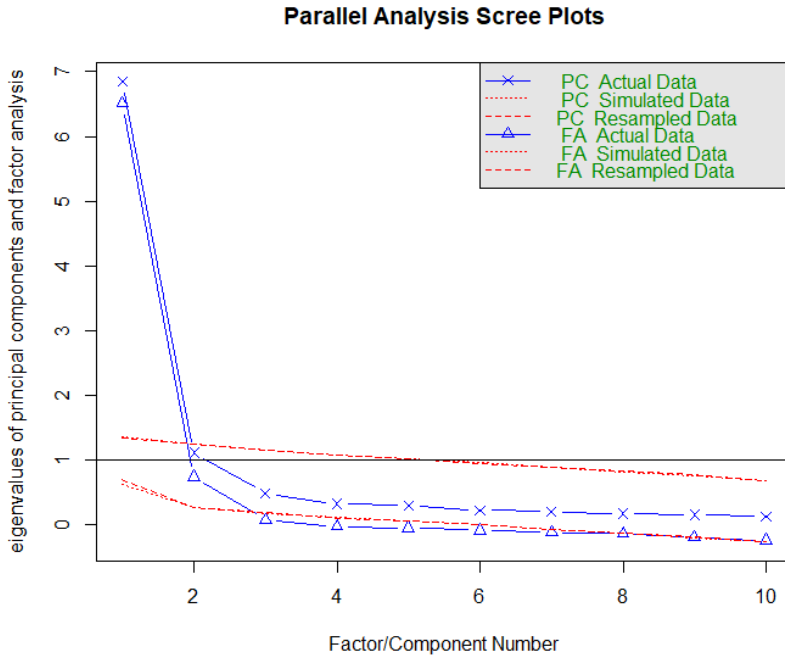
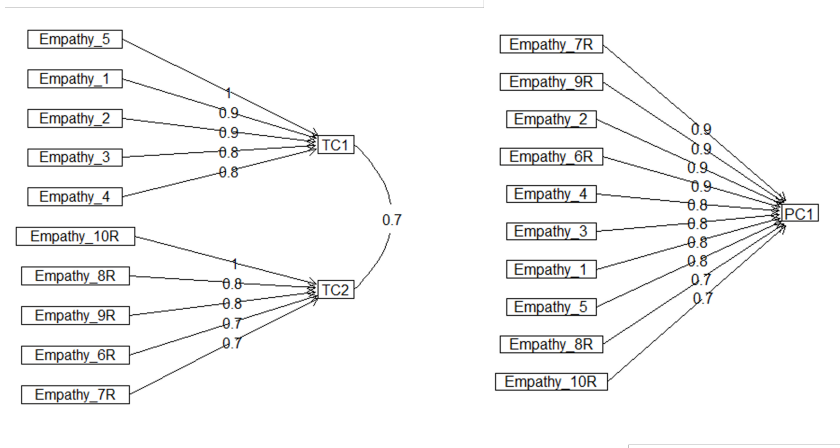


Figure A.2: Scree Plot



a single factor. This suggests that a unidimensional model also captures the structure of the data effectively. Despite the clear factor loading in the one-factor solution, items 8 and 10 displayed notably lower loadings compared to the others. Given that my focus is on measuring out-party empathy as a single concept, I opted for the one-factor solution. This choice is more parsimonious and aligns with the theoretical expectation of a unidimensional construct. Additionally, the high factor loadings for all items on this single factor confirm that they are consistently related to the core construct. This approach ensures that the measure remains both simple and robust, effectively capturing the essence of the concept without unnecessary complexity. Given the lower factor loadings for items 8 and 10, I dropped them from the measure.

Figure A.3: Components Analyses



Note: The figure on the left displays the results and factor loadings for the two-factor solution, while the figure on the right presents the results and factor loadings for the one-factor solution.

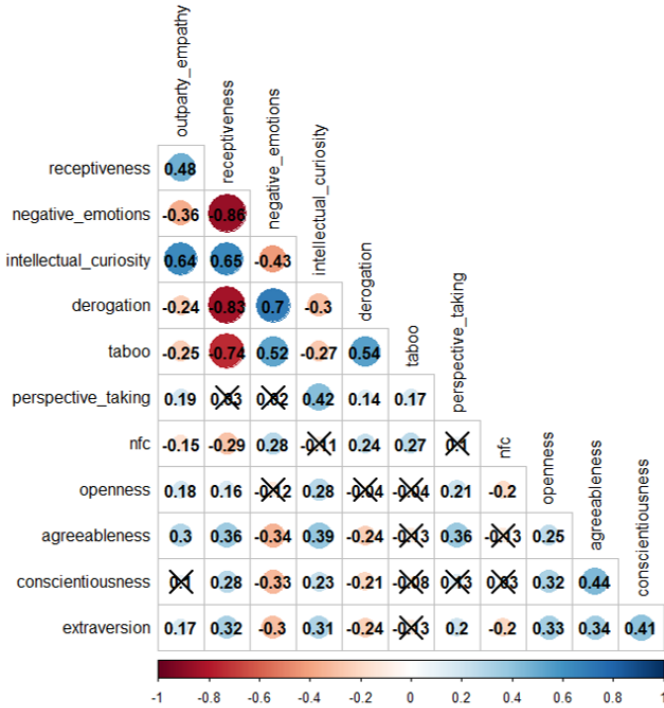
Correlations With Other Theoretically Related Concepts

Figure A.4 presents a correlation matrix showing relationships between the Out-Party Empathy scale and various related constructs, including perspective-taking (subscale from the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI), Davis, 1983), receptiveness to opposing views (Minson et al., 2020, p. 3069), need for closure (Roets and Van Hiel, 2011), and the Big Five Personality Traits.¹

The Out-Party Empathy scale shows a strong positive correlation with the intellectual curiosity dimension of receptiveness to opposing views. This dimension focuses on the cognitive aspect of engaging with and understanding differing perspectives, which aligns closely with the scale's emphasis on cognitive empathy. In contrast, other subscales of receptiveness to opposing views, such as derogation of opponents or taboo issues, are less relevant and measure different aspects of receptiveness that do not align as closely with the Out-Party Empathy scale's focus. This alignment with intellectual curiosity underscores the scale's focus on understanding and appreciating diverse viewpoints.

¹Due to a mistake in the questionnaire setup, neuroticism was not measured.

Figure A.4: Correlations With Related Concepts



Note: The matrix displays Pearson's correlations. Shows Pearson's correlations. Correlations marked with strikethroughs are not statistically significant ($p > 0.05$).

The Out-Party Empathy scale is positively correlated with perspective-taking, though the correlation is weaker. This reflects that while both measures are about the perspective of another person, they focus on different aspects. The Out-Party Empathy scale emphasizes understanding and engaging with opposing viewpoints from an external perspective, aligning more closely with other-focused empathy. In contrast, perspective-taking often includes self-focused aspects, such as imagining oneself in another's situation. The lower correlation indicates that while related, the Out-Party Empathy scale captures something distinct.

The Out-Party Empathy scale shows a negative correlation with the need for closure. This is expected because individuals with a high need

for closure prefer certainty and are uncomfortable with ambiguity. Since empathy, particularly the cognitive aspect that the Out-Party Empathy scale aims to measure involves openness to and engagement with diverse and complex viewpoints, it should be less likely to be associated with a measure that represents the desire for clear and definite answers.

The Out-Party Empathy scale shows strong positive correlations with Agreeableness, as expected. It also correlates positively with Openness to Experience, though to a lesser extent. The correlation with Extraversion is positive but weaker, while there is no significant correlation with Conscientiousness. This pattern emphasizes that the out-party empathy scale is most closely aligned with traits that have also been found to be related to empathy.

Overall, the correlations reveal that the Out-Party Empathy scale is both similar to and distinct from related concepts like general perspective-taking and broader receptiveness to opposing views. Its strong link with intellectual curiosity, positive associations with perspective-taking, and negative correlation with need for closure indicate that the scale is likely to capture a distinct aspect of cognitive empathy, which supports its validity and utility.

Summary

In an era marked by increasing hostility between political opponents, engaging in meaningful and respectful debates about political differences has become both increasingly important and deeply challenging. The ability to discuss political differences constructively is essential for healthy democratic societies. However, escalating hostility between political opponents threatens to undermine this crucial aspect of democratic discourse. The core challenge is to be able to disagree without descending into personal animosity.

But how can we engage across political differences and express our disagreements without becoming hostile towards each other? One way to overcome this challenge could be the use of empathy in interactions with political opponents. Empathy is often suggested as a panacea to reduce hostility between political opponents. Understanding political opponents' thoughts, feelings, and perspectives could reduce animosity and foster more respectful discussions. Yet can empathy toward political opponents also effectively balance the reduction of hostility with the allowance of substantive disagreement?

This dissertation explores whether empathy can achieve a balance between reducing hostility and allowing disagreement to be voiced and maintained. It examines how empathy toward political opponents influences individuals' feelings and attitudes toward those opponents, and whether it supports non-hostile disagreement. To address these questions, I present three articles based on survey experiments conducted among the highly polarized US public. These articles focus on (1) how empathy compares to other common approaches to engaging with political opponents, (2) the effects of observing political opponents showing empathy toward one's own side, and (3) the challenges of cultivating empathy, examining the role of social dynamics in shaping empathy toward political opponents.

Article A (*“Approaching Political Discussions With Understanding: Comparing Empathy To Other Modes of Information Processing”*) examines the impact of empathizing with political opponents on feelings of hostility and levels of agreement, compared to other common ways of engag-

ing with political opponents. It specifically contrasts empathy with (a) self-advocacy, where individuals focus on reinforcing their own political beliefs while opposing others, and (b) factual accuracy, where individuals aim to reach objective truth and check the facts in political discussions. Using a large-scale survey experiment, I find that individuals who empathize with someone who disagrees with them about immigration exhibit lower levels of hostility toward their political opponents compared to those who engage in self-advocacy or focus on factual accuracy. Additionally, those who practice empathy are more likely to agree with their political opponents compared to those who engage in self-advocacy or focus on factual accuracy. However, empathizers tend to agree less with individuals who hold anti-immigration views.

Article B (“*When Out-Partisans Understand: The Impact of Out-Party Empathy on Third-Person Observers*”) investigates the effects of observing political opponents empathizing with one’s own side. The findings show that when people observe political opponents expressing empathy, they perceive them as more understanding, more in agreement with their own views, and less representative of a typical political opponent. Observers of empathic opponents also reduce hostility toward, increase empathy toward, and increase comfort in having conversations with the empathic political opponent, as well as reduce their hostility toward and feel more comfortable about having conversations with out-partisans in general. However, this positive effect is contingent on the political opponent showing pure empathy free from explicit disagreement. When empathy is accompanied by disagreement, the beneficial effects disappear. This suggests that the perception of agreement—signaled by empathy—is key to reducing hostility, increasing empathy, and enhancing comfort in conversations with political opponents. However, even though empathic opponents are seen as more in agreement with one’s own side, observers do not become more convinced of their own beliefs. This alleviates concerns that showing empathy toward political opponents might endorse their views.

Article C (“*Testing the Social Pressure Hypothesis: Does In-Party Social Pressure Reduce Out-Party Empathy?*”) addresses the potential challenges for cultivating empathy by investigating perceived backlash from one’s own political group as a potential barrier to empathizing with political opponents. While descriptive evidence shows that people perceive fellow in-partisans as less willing to empathize with out-partisans and more disapproving of doing so, experimental evidence shows that anticipating social costs from like-minded peers for empathizing with out-partisans does not significantly decrease their willingness to empathize with po-

litical opponents. In fact, both anticipating social costs and anticipating social benefits from within one's own ranks increase the intention to empathize with political opponents as well as decrease hostility toward them. This suggests that individuals are motivated to empathize with political opponents despite potential resistance from their own side. This motivation could be driven by a sense of disappointment with their own political group, as indicated by exploratory analyses.

Overall, this dissertation provides consistent evidence that empathizing with political opponents reduces hostility, both for those who practice empathy toward political opponents and those who observe political opponents engaging in it. It also demonstrates that individuals may engage in empathic behavior and reduce hostility toward political opponents even when they anticipate backlash for it from their own political group.

However, while empathy toward political opponents reduces hostility, it does not facilitate the maintenance or communication of substantive political disagreement. Rather, this dissertation consistently shows that empathizing with political opponents facilitates agreement. Those who empathize with opponents are more likely to agree with them, and observing empathy from political opponents can lead people to perceive these opponents as more in agreement with their own side. Moreover, when empathy is combined with explicit political disagreement, its positive effects on reducing hostility disappear.

This highlights a strong connection between empathy and agreement, suggesting that empathy potentially reduces hostility by increasing agreement. Hence, while empathy is valuable for reducing hostility and promoting agreement between political opponents, it may fall short in contexts where maintaining non-hostile disagreement is necessary. Empathy with political opponents thus appears most effective in situations where reducing hostility and achieving consensus are desired outcomes, but less so in contexts requiring the expression and maintenance of disagreement.

Dansk Resumé

I en tid præget af stigende fjendtlighed mellem politiske modstandere er det blevet mere og mere vigtigt — og samtidig dybt udfordrende — at deltage i meningsfulde og respektfulde debatter om politiske forskelle. At kunne diskutere politiske forskelle på en konstruktiv måde er afgørende for et sundt demokratisk samfund. Men den eskalerende fjendtlighed mellem politiske modstandere truer med at undergrave dette afgørende aspekt af den demokratiske diskurs. Den centrale udfordring er at være i stand til at være uenige uden at forfalde til personlig fjendtlighed.

Men hvordan kan vi indgå i dialog på tværs af politiske forskelle og udtrykke vores uenighed uden at blive fjendtlige over for hinanden? En måde at håndtere denne udfordring på kunne være at bruge empati i interaktionen med politiske modstandere. Empati foreslås ofte som et universalløsning til at reducere fjendtlighed mellem politiske modstandere. At forstå politiske modstanderes tanker, følelser og perspektiver kan reducere fjendtlighed og fremme mere respektfulde diskussioner. Men kan empati over for politiske modstandere også effektivt afbalancere reduktionen af fjendtlighed med tilladelsen af substantiel uenighed?

Denne afhandling undersøger, om empati kan opnå en balance mellem at reducere fjendtlighed og tillade uenighed at blive udtrykt og fastholdt. Den undersøger, hvordan empati over for politiske modstandere påvirker individers følelser og holdninger over for politiske modstandere, og om det understøtter ikke-fjendtlig uenighed. For at besvare disse spørgsmål præsenterer jeg tre artikler baseret på undersøgelseseksperimenter gennemført med deltagere fra den stærkt polariserede amerikanske befolkning. Disse artikler fokuserer på (1) effekten af empati sammenlignes med andre almindelige måder at forholde sig til politiske modstandere på, (2) effekten af at se politiske modstandere udvise empati over for ens egen side og (3) udfordringerne ved at opdyrke empati gennem en undersøgelse af sociale dynamikkens påvirkning af empati over for politiske modstandere.

Artikel A (*“Approaching Political Discussions With Understanding: Comparing Empathy To Other Modes of Information Processing”*) undersøger effekten af empati med politiske modstandere på følelsen af

fjendtlighed og graden af enighed sammenlignet med andre almindelige måder at indgå i dialog med politiske modstandere på. Den modstiller specifikt empati med (a) selvforsvar, hvor individer fokuserer på at styrke deres egne politiske overbevisninger, mens de modsætter sig andre, og (b) faktisk nøjagtighed, hvor individer stræber efter at nå den objektive sandhed og tjekke fakta i politiske diskussioner. Resultaterne viser, at individer, der har empati med nogen, der er uenige med dem om emnet indvandring, udviser mindre fjendtlighed over for deres politiske modstandere sammenlignet med dem, der engagerer sig i selvforsvar eller fokuserer på faktisk præcision. Derudover er de, der har empati, mere tilbøjelige til at være enige med deres politiske modstandere sammenlignet med dem, der engagerer sig i selvforsvar eller fokuserer på faktisk præcision. Men empatiske personer har en tendens til at være mindre enige med personer, der er imod indvandring.

Artikel B ("*When Out-Partisans Understand: The Impact of Out-Party Empathy on Third-Person Observers*") undersøger effekten af at se politiske modstandere udtrykke empati med ens egen side. Resultaterne viser, at når folk oplever, at deres modstandere udtrykker empati, opfatter de modstanderne som mere forstående og enige og mindre repræsentative for en typisk politisk modstander. Personer, der observerer empatiske modstandere, reducerer også deres fjendtlighed over for, øger deres empati og føler sig bedre tilpas i samtaler med den empatiske politiske modstander, ligesom de reducerer deres fjendtlighed over for og føler sig bedre tilpas i samtaler med politiske modstandere generelt. Denne positive effekt er dog betinget af, at den politiske modstander udviser ren empati uden eksplicit uenighed. Når empatien kombineres med uenighed, forsvinder de positive effekter. Det tyder på, at opfattelsen af enighed - signaleret af empati - er nøglen til at reducere fjendtlighed, øge empatien og forbedre komforten i samtaler med politiske modstandere. Men selv om empatiske modstandere ses som mere enige med ens egen side, bliver man som observatør ikke mere overbevist om sine egne holdninger. Det mindsker bekymringen for, at det at vise empati over for politiske modstandere legitimerer deres synspunkter.

Artikel C ("*Testing the Social Pressure Hypothesis: Does In-Party Social Pressure Reduce Out-Party Empathy?*") tager fat på de potentielle udfordringer ved at dyrke empati gennem en undersøgelse af opfattelsen af modreaktioner fra ens egen politiske gruppe som en potentiel barriere for at føle empati med politiske modstandere. Mens deskriptive resultater viser, at folk faktisk opfatter deres egne partikammerater som mindre villige til og mere afvisende over for at føle empati med politiske modstandere, viser eksperimentelle resultater, at forventningen om so-

cialle omkostninger fra ligesindede ikke i væsentlig grad mindsker viljen til at føle empati med politiske modstandere. Faktisk øger både forventning om sociale omkostninger og forventning om sociale fordele fra ens egne rækker intentionen om at føle empati med politiske modstandere, ligesom det mindsker fjendtligheden over for dem. Det tyder på, at folk er motiverede til at have empati med politiske modstandere på trods af potentiel modstand fra deres egen side. Den motivation kan være drevet af en følelse af skuffelse over deres egen politiske gruppe, som det fremgår af de indledende analyser.

Samlet set giver denne afhandling konsistent støtte til, at empati med politiske modstandere reducerer fjendtlighed, både for dem, der praktiserer empati over for politiske modstandere, og dem, der observerer politiske modstandere, der engagerer sig i det. Den viser også, at personer kan være empatiske og reducere fjendtligheden over for politiske modstandere, selv når de forventer modreaktioner fra deres egen politiske gruppe.

Men selvom empati over for politiske modstandere reducerer fjendtligheden, gør empati det ikke lettere at opretholde eller kommunikere substantiel politisk uenighed. I stedet viser denne afhandling konsekvent, at empati med politiske modstandere fremmer enighed. De personer, der er mere empatiske med modstandere, bliver mere tilbøjelige til at være enige med dem, og hvis man observerer empati fra politiske modstandere, kan det få folk til at opfatte disse modstandere som mere enige med deres egen side. Når empati kombineres med eksplicit politisk uenighed, forsvinder dens positive effekt på at reducere fjendtlighed.

Det fremhæver en stærk forbindelse mellem empati og enighed, hvilket tyder på, at empati potentielt reducerer fjendtlighed ved at øge enighed med politiske modstandere. Selvom empati er værdifuldt til at reducere fjendtlighed og fremme enighed mellem politiske modstandere, mangler den måske i sammenhænge, hvor det er nødvendigt at opretholde uenighed. Empati med politiske modstandere virker således mest effektivt i situationer, hvor man ønsker at reducere fjendtlighed og opnå enighed, men mindre effektivt i sammenhænge, hvor det er nødvendigt at udtrykke og fastholde uenighed.

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