Why can't you all just get along? Effects of political conflict among outgroups

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ABSTRACT: Politics often involves complex combinations of groups aligning on various sides. How do these relationships affect citizens' opinions? Particularly, what happens when one observes groups of which they are *not members* engaging in conflict or coalition? We address these questions by drawing on balance theory. We hypothesize that individuals react to conflict between two liked outgroups by adopting more negative attitudes towards the less-liked group. We test our predictions with two survey experiments – one conducted on a convenience sample and one with a nationally representative sample. Study 1 indicates that when a liked group and a disliked group clash, individuals do not change their evaluations of these outgroups – their prior opinions persist. By contrast, when political conflict involves two liked outgroups, individuals adopt more negative affect for and express lower solidarity with the lesser-liked group. We confirm these findings with Study 2, where we observe similar behavior. We also discuss the limits of these effects, which do not extend to evaluations of specific candidates or policies. Our results suggest that intergroup conflict can do more than just shift attitudes among those involved; it also impacts third-party observers and potential allies.

Keywords: intergroup conflict, balance theory, experiments, political psychology, coalitions

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Introduction

> The outcome of every conflict is determined by the extent to which the audience becomes
> involved in it. That is, the outcome of all conflict is determined by the scope of its contagion
> E.E. Schattschneider (1960, p. 2)

A great deal of research in political science considers political attitudes and behaviors as a product of feelings towards various social and political groups (Achen & Bartels, 2016; Kinder & Kam, 2009). This group-focused perspective emphasizes that attitudes towards groups shape power dynamics and politics and largely explores the political importance of an individual's relationship with a single social group (whether that be a group to which the individual belongs or an outgroup).

However, politics involve numerous groups who have different relationships. Moreover, these relationships are not static: the boundaries and dynamics of even long-standing coalitions shift over time in response to the emergence of newly salient issues (Ray, 1999) and the development of new issue information (Visser, 1994). Understanding these changes can provide crucial insight into the scope of political conflict (Schattschneider, 1960) and the attitudes of the public at large. Despite this, little extant scholarship documents how changing relationships among social groups (and therefore among potential coalition members) affect the attitudes of third-party observers.

Drawing on balance theory from psychology, our research uses two experiments to explore how complex networks of groups shape political attitudes and how existing coalitions may be affected by internal conflicts. Our first study focuses on how shifting relationships between outgroups create changes in attitudes about those groups and support for policies that focus on those groups. We find that political conflict between two previously liked outgroups leads to a devaluation of less liked of these groups, along with lower political support for that

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outgroup. However, and in keeping with balance theory, we find no such effects as a result of political conflict between a liked outgroup and a disliked outgroup. Our second experiment, conducted with a more diverse sample, replicates Study 1 and considers a wider range of political outcomes. Through these studies, we provide insight into how group-based coalitions form and fall apart in the fluid world of politics.

Social groups and intergroup conflict

Individuals use the groups to which they belong —their "ingroups"—and the personal meanings they attach to these group memberships to understand and navigate everyday life (Tajfel, 1981). In addition to providing a sense of shared traits and community with others, social identities offer heuristics to promote self-image and self-interest (Monroe et al., 2000). As part of this heuristic process, individuals rely on their ingroup memberships to make judgments about politics. For instance, black racial identity can often lead African-Americans to support co-racial candidates (Dawson, 1995), and religious group memberships can impact attitudes about immigration policies (Margolis, 2018).

Importantly, the relationships between social groups also structure political attitudes and behaviors. In particular, conflict between one's ingroup and an outgroup—a group to which an individual does not belong—affects attitudes toward the outgroup and about policies related to it. Key's (1949) foundational study demonstrated that Southern whites voted for segregationist candidates at higher rates in areas with greater interracial contact. Similarly, perceived conflict over resources between native and immigrant groups can drive attitudes toward immigration (Esses et al., 1998) and structure African-Americans' attitudes toward Latinos (Gay, 2006). Even partisan polarization may be best understood as conflict between party-based identity groups (Mason, 2018).

However, research on political intergroup conflict focuses almost exclusively on how this conflict affects the attitudes and voting behaviors of members of one of two groups in a dyadic conflict. In other words, scholars know relatively little about the ways in which a political dispute between two social groups can impact individuals who belong to neither group. And these types of outgroup conflicts are ever-present as most individuals affiliate with a relatively small subset of groups. For example, consider a 2017 dispute between individuals identifying as Jewish and those associated with the LGBTQ movement. Jewish participants in a Chicago gay pride parade were asked to leave the event because organizers said their rainbow Star of David flags made other marchers feel unsafe (Politi, 2017). While extant research speaks to the impacts of this event on the political attitudes of Jews and LGBTQ individuals, what about those who observed or learned of the dispute but identify with neither of these groups (e.g., non-Jewish, non LGBTQ individuals)? This question could be asked about many other political conflicts such as those between French and English-speaking Canadians, Palestinians and Israelis, and the historically fraught relationship between unions and African-Americans (see Frymer, 2008).

Balance theory and outgroup conflicts

There is good reason to believe that citizens attend to political groups to which they do not belong. Individuals offer discernibly different evaluations of outgroups (Bartels, 2005) and can categorize these outgroups under broader labels such as party coalitions (Robison & Moskowitz, 2019). However, existing studies do not offer predictions about how such events affect individuals who belong to neither group involved in the dispute.

Balance theory offers insights into the effects of intergroup conflict on third party observers. At a basic level, people maintain networks of ideas and beliefs in their minds, connected through various types of associations (Festinger, 1957). Because human beings have a

psychological need for balanced states, individuals are motivated to resolve tensions and dissonance within networks of relationships (Heider, 1958) and are particularly averse to uncertainty about the connections between social groups (Hogg, 2000). Therefore, individuals are motivated to have a coherent understanding of the sociopolitical world that accounts for both a) the relationships between themselves and outgroups, and b) the relationships between multiple outgroups. In keeping with this perspective, Figure 1 and Figure 2 both represent balanced states, with a positively charged system of connections—either positive attitudes towards and between the groups in question, or some other arrangement that maintains an overall positive charge. Under these conditions, individuals do not experience heightened uncertainty or dissonance and are not motivated to shift their underlying evaluations of the groups in the network. Liked outgroups like each other (see Figure 1) and disliked groups are disliked by preferred groups (see Figure 2). This creates a stable group environment, where groups potential coalition partners (and enemies) can be relied upon to behave predictably.

[Figs 1 and 2 here]

The dynamics change, however, when something like Figure 3 occurs. In this circumstance, people feel dissonance and tension as two groups they like dislike one another. This state, and the uncertainty that accompanies it, motivates individuals to begin to change their views to push the overall network towards figures 1 and 2. This shift is not necessarily immediate - that is, people do not instantly devalue a group they previously considered an ally - but over time and with repeated messages, such dramatic change can occur.

[Fig. 3 here]

Political scientists have used balance theory to account for shifting attitudes toward countries (Crandall et al., 2018; Moore, 1978) and candidates (Shaffer, 1981); however, this

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theory has not yet been applied to political relationships between social groups and coalition partners. Broadly, we expect that shifting political dynamics between two groups will affect the attitudes that third-party citizens have toward these groups. Changing relationships disrupt the balance of the connections between oneself and other groups, and individuals should react to this change in a way that works to restore balance to the overall network.

In general, this should occur by changing the positivity and negativity people feel towards relevant groups. Specifically, individuals should resolve these psychological tensions in the way that requires the smallest adjustment (Brehm, 1956; Festinger, 1957). In the case of political conflict between outgroups, this adjustment should take the form of becoming more negative toward the group about which they feel less positively initially. These changes should also have political consequences: because positive and negative feelings predict perceived closeness (Berry et al., 2000) and closeness to a group predicts levels of policy support for that group (Craemer, 2008), changes in these connections should also shift relevant policy attitudes.

To test these balance theories, we explore how attitudes shift when two outgroups are presented as in conflict with one another. In particular, we emphasize the kind of conflict represented in Figure 3 - when two liked outgroups (and potential coalition partners) engage in conflict. We consider this liked-group scenario because it represents the type of political conflict where balance theory is most applicable – in other words, where political disagreement between two groups would upset established understandings of group relations. In other words, we seek to understand how potentially successful political coalitions may be undermined by internal conflicts in ways that extend beyond the effects on individuals who are directly involved. In such situations, balance theory suggests individuals should respond to the imbalance by adopting more negative attitudes in their feelings towards the less-liked of the two liked outgroups, with

the positive charge on that connection Figure 3 becoming weaker and eventually negative. Summarized, we expect that:

H1: When one liked outgroup creates a conflict with a different liked outgroup, affect and policy support for the least liked of the two outgroups should decrease.

Balance theory suggests an explicit focus on conflict that upsets the balance of individuals' views of various groups and themselves. However, these are not the only kinds of conflict that occur in the political world—liked groups come into conflict with disliked groups as well as liked groups. This would be represented with the structure shown in Figure 2 - one group is liked, the other disliked, and conflict between the groups is consistent with the individuals' feelings towards each group. In this case, the balance in the network is maintained, rather than disrupted, when conflict between the groups occurs.

To more thoroughly evaluate the propositions of balance theory, then, we consider this scenario, where conflict between outgroups should not introduce an imbalance. This allows us to establish if the changes observed from H1 arise from balancing or to some other mechanism— such as an increase in general negativity or a desire to avoid conflict. H2 indicates the balance theory prediction in reaction to the conflict presented in Figure 2.

H2: If the effects in H1 are due to a process of balancing, similar effects should not occur when a liked and disliked group come into conflict.

To evaluate these hypotheses, we designed and carried out two experiments. We discuss Study 1, implemented on a convenience sample, and Study 2, conducted with a diverse sample of American adults, in the sections that follow.

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Study 1

Design and procedure

The first test of our hypotheses relies on a survey experiment in which we manipulate whether individuals are exposed to conflict between two outgroups, and if so, whether this conflict occurs between two liked groups or between a liked group and a disliked group. We fielded this survey experiment on a sample of 287 undergraduate students at a private Midwestern university. Participants completed our study in 2018 as a requirement for credit in a political science course. Figure 4 provides a graphical summary of the flow of this experiment. Each respondent began by answering a detailed set of demographic and attitude questions to determine various group memberships of each respondent (see Appendix for details). Table 1 describes the composition of our sample for Study 1.

[Fig. 4 and Table 1 here]

Following the demographic and attitudinal items, respondents completed a "drag-and-drop" group sorting task, in which they placed up to 20 social groups into five categories based on how they felt about the groups: *very negative*, *somewhat negative*, *neutral*, *somewhat positive*, and *very positive*.[1] For this sorting task, we removed any groups to which participants belonged based on their responses to the previous demographic and attitude items (see the bottom-right corner of Figure 4). Intentionally, this design means that participants rated only outgroups in this task. We elected to use a categorical sorting task, rather than feeling thermometers, because judging feeling thermometer scores as "liked" or "disliked" can rely on arbitrary judgments (for example, is a score of 60 a liked or disliked group? 55? 70?). Our task, on the other hand, asks subjects to directly indicate toward which groups they do and do not feel positively. Separate pilot tests indicated that this sorting task could be easily understood and completed.

After the sorting task, we then randomly assigned each respondent to one of the three experimental conditions: Liked/Liked Conflict (LLC), Liked/Disliked Conflict (LDC), or the control group. For each respondent, we randomly selected outgroups to pipe into the subsequent treatments and outcome items from the categories of groups that corresponded to their treatment assignment.[2] In the LLC condition, we randomly selected one group labeled as very positive and one group they labeled as somewhat positive. For respondents assigned to the LDC condition, we randomly selected one very positive group and one somewhat negative group. For respondents in the control group, we selected one very positive group, one somewhat positive group, and one somewhat negative group. Importantly, this treatment design required respondents to sort at least one outgroup into the necessary categories for their treatment assignment; failing to do so prevents us from directly applying balance theory and the hypotheses discussed earlier. As a result, respondents who did not sort at least one outgroup into each of the necessary categories for their assigned treatment were not shown any treatment stimuli and did not complete the rest of the survey.[3] For example, a respondent who did not rate any outgroups as very positive and then was assigned to the LLC treatment group would have no highly-liked group to include in their treatment. They would then be removed from the study after the treatment assignment step.

Participants in the LLC treatment group were then told that they would read an article about some political organizations related to the groups they rated in the previous task. We then presented a vignette about a conflict between interest groups representing a highly-liked group and a somewhat-liked group. In this article, the somewhat-liked group expresses opposition to programs combatting discrimination against the highly-liked group. Participants in the LDC treatment group received a similar prompt and vignette, but with a conflict between groups representing a highly-liked and a somewhat-disliked outgroup. The full texts of these treatments

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are located in the appendix. Table 2 shows key elements of the vignette for both the LLC and

LDC conditions. Lastly, those in the control group did not receive a vignette.

[Table 2 about here]

Table 3 summarizes the three experimental conditions in Study 1. Comparing the LLC

and Control conditions allows us to evaluate H1. Two liked groups come into conflict, creating

an imbalance in the mental state. However, one of the groups is liked less than the other,

allowing us to evaluate the process by which people restore balance to their mental networks

(i.e., by developing more negative attitudes towards the lesser-liked group of the two). This

group-combination, then, allows us to evaluate the predictions of balance theory distilled into

H1. Comparing LDC to the Control group is our test of H2, as it involves conflict between a

liked and disliked group. This scenario permits us to affirm that there is something distinct about

conflict between liked groups that generates imbalance and the resulting change in people's

attitudes.

[Table 3 about here]

Outcomes

Following the treatments, respondents completed a set of dependent variables.

Respondents assigned to the LLC and LDC conditions completed each of these items with

respect to the two outgroups discussed in their assigned vignette. Those in the control group

answered questions about three randomly selected groups: one highly-liked, one somewhat-liked,

and one somewhat-disliked.

We began with two manipulation check items to assess whether the treatments induced

the intended perceptions of conflict among outgroups. We asked respondents to characterize the

relationship between the two groups in their vignette on a 1-5 scale, from very negative to very

positive. Respondents also completed modified feeling thermometers, where they reported a score from 0 to 100 of how each outgroup feels about the other outgroup.

Following these manipulation checks, we measured respondents' affect toward each outgroup with standard feeling thermometer items. We then measured solidarity toward each outgroup by asking respondents to disagree or agree (on a 5-point scale) with five statements about solidarity and common cause with the groups.[4] We later combine these five items into a single solidarity scale for each group (α = .81 for the somewhat liked outgroup, α = .83 for the somewhat disliked outgroup).

Lastly, we included three zero-sum dependent variables about the outgroups. First, we asked participants to imagine the government had to choose between programs that helped each of the outgroups from a respondent's assigned treatment. They then rated whether the government should help one group or the other, or somewhere in between (1-7 scale). Next, we asked about a hypothetical situation in which organizations representing both groups wanted to hold a demonstration in the same location, but without enough space for both. Respondents were asked if they would fully support one group, fully support the other group, or somewhere in between (on a 1-7 scale). Finally, we asked respondents to allocate $1,000 of hypothetical money between organizations representing each of the two outgroups. The full text of these outcome measures can be found in the Appendix.

Results

When it comes to perceived relationships between the two groups in a conflict, our treatments worked as intended. Respondents in the LLC condition perceived the relationships between the two outgroups to be significantly more negative than those in the control group (2.33 compared to 3.29; p < .001), as did those in the LDC condition (1.65 compared to 2.12 in

the control; p < .01). Moreover, respondents placed the conflict-creating outgroup lower than the control on the modified feeling thermometers in both the LLC (41.6 compared to 59.3; p < .001) and LDC (23.8 compared to 34.4; p < .01) conditions. This suggests that subjects perceive the relationships between the groups as intended, a critical condition for our predictions.

We next test our hypotheses on the outcome variables using nonparametric combination, or NPC. NPC allows researchers to test the effects of a treatment on multiple, related outcomes while taking account of the dependency between these tests. For our purposes, this method acknowledges that we are testing the impact of outgroup conflict on multiple dependent variables derived from the same theory. NPC offers two main components: First, it adjusts the p-values of individual statistical tests to account for multiple testing. Second, it offers a "global" p-value that corresponds to the likelihood of observing the sum of results across outcome variables under the assumption of a sharp null hypothesis of no effect (see Caughey et al., 2017; Pesarin & Salmaso, 2010) As robustness checks we also test our hypotheses with traditional two-tailed difference-in-means tests, which offer nearly identical conclusions. Table 4 and Table 5 display the p-values from each type of hypothesis test.

[Table 4 about here]

In Table 4, we present results from comparing attitudes about the somewhat-liked group among the LLC condition and the control group. Respondents in the LLC condition exhibit significantly more negative affect toward the somewhat-liked group than those in the control (p < .05), as well as significantly lower solidarity (p < .05). When it comes to our zero-sum items (distribution of funds, help from the government, and demonstration support), we observe effects that are in the expected direction but do not meet standard significance levels. The global p-value suggests that it would be very unlikely to observe this full set of results if the treatment has no

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actual effect. Lastly, we observe no significant effects of the treatment on evaluations of the highly-liked outgroup—these are not presented in Table 4 as they all show statistically insignificant differences. This result suggests that respondents reduce dissonance by focusing on the least-liked of the two groups, rather than simply responding with general negativity toward both groups in the vignette.

[Table 5 about here]

By contrast, Table 5 suggests that a political conflict between a highly-liked outgroup and a somewhat-disliked outgroup does not significantly impact attitudes. We observe no significant changes in attitudes toward the somewhat-disliked group (or toward the highly-liked group) in the LDC condition as a result of the vignette. These null findings suggest that because the respondents already had negative attitudes toward the somewhat-disliked group, the conflict vignette did not create dissonance. Therefore, there was no need to adjust attitudes about or political support for either of the groups.

In sum, Study 1 suggests that political conflict between two groups that an individual sees positively creates dissonance, offering support for H1. This dissonance is resolved by adopting more negative attitudes toward the lesser-liked of the two groups. By contrast, political conflict between a positively-perceived group and a negatively-perceived group does not produce any such effects. This supports H2, suggesting that the effects of conflict between a liked outgroup and another outgroup depend on an observer's affect toward that second group. The bottom line is that this is some of the first evidence that relationships between outgroups can have consequential effects on those who are not part of either groups – group conflict spills over into general opinions beyond those of group members.

Study 2

To confirm the results of the experiment presented above, we conducted a follow-up experiment with a more diverse sample of American adults. In addition, questions remain about how the effects of Study 1 apply to other political outcomes. It is unlikely that these processes affect every kind of political evaluation and choice; however, Study 1 included only a limited range of political variables and leaves questions about the boundaries of these effects.[5]

Design and expectations

To address these points, we fielded Study 2 in the summer of 2019 on a nationally diverse sample through Bovitz, Inc's.[6] We draw from the same theory underlying Study 1 in our design and expectations for Study 2. Given the null results with regard to the liked/disliked treatment in Study 1, we focus on the liked/liked conflict and did not include the liked/disliked condition. A flowchart for the design of Study 2 appears in Figure 5. This experiment began in the same manner as Study 1, with respondents completing nearly similar demographic and attitudinal items and sorting tasks from the previous experiment.[7] At this stage, subjects who did not sort groups required for the treatments—i.e., at least one group into both the highly-liked and somewhat-liked categories—were taken to the end of the survey and were not included in the treatment assignment. Table 6, below, describes the demographics of our sample for Study 2.[8]

[Fig. 5 and Table 6 here]

Respondents who did sort the required groups (approximately 60 percent of the sample, or 392 respondents) were randomly assigned to one of two conditions, a control condition and condition with conflict between two liked groups. With these conditions, we repeat the portion of Study 1 dealing with the effects of a conflict between a highly-liked outgroup and a somewhat-liked outgroup. This reduces the possible number of comparisons between treatments and

maximizes the power within the conditions key to our expectations and theory.[9]

In the control group, subjects did not see a vignette and simply moved on to the subsequent dependent variables. In the treatment condition, subjects were presented with a scenario where a somewhat-liked group came into conflict with a highly-liked group. The vignette was nearly identical to the one used in the LLC group in Study 1, with only minor changes to the story to make it sensible to a national sample – the full text of this vignette can be found in the Appendix. With these treatments, we again test H1 from Study 1

Outcomes

Following the treatments, subjects completed a series of outcome measures, comparable to those used in Study 1. Specifically, we use the same two manipulation check items from Study 1. Following these manipulation checks, we again measured respondents' outgroup affect with standard feeling thermometers and solidarity toward each outgroup with the same five statements. As with Study 1, we combined these items into a single solidarity scale. Because they showed no statistically significant treatment effects in Study 1, we omit most of the zero-sum items in Study 2. We retain, however, the item regarding government-funded programs due to its policy implications, suggestive level of statistical significance in Study 1, and as a way to evaluate our choice to remove most of the zero-sum questions.

We also introduced a series of new items. The first asks about voting for candidates endorsed by the group in the conflict. We asked, "If a group representing [GROUP] endorsed a candidate for mayor in your hometown, would you be less likely or more likely to vote for the candidate?" The purpose of this item is to more directly relate these processes to more concrete political choices, rather than abstract attitudes.

In addition, we included two items about potential coalitions. The first asks subjects if

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they agree or disagree with the following statement: "People like me are better off when they work together with [GROUP] in politics." The second asks subjects who they would work with to solve a problem in their community. Specifically, "Imagine you wanted to organize people to advocate for a cause you care about. Which of the following types of organizations would you turn to for help?" Subjects then viewed a list of groups, identical to their list from the ranking task, and chose up to three. Both of these items are intended to capture willingness to explicitly work politically with the groups involved in the conflict.

Finally, we asked a short series of questions about perceived distance from a respondent's party. Given the strong associations individuals have between social group coalitions and political parties (Robison & Moskowitz, 2019), tensions within those coalitions may impact one's own feelings toward their party. Outgroup conflicts among liked groups may weaken third-party observers' own perceived closeness to their party. On the other hand, individuals may be motivated to defend groups toward which they feel very positively by emphasizing loyalty to their party coalitions. Using slider bars, subjects placed themselves, their highly-liked group, and their somewhat-liked group on a continuum from "very close to the [Democratic/Republican] Party" to "very far from the [Democratic/Republican] Party." Pure independents did not see these items as the format and substance of the question do not correspond clearly to that partisan group. The Appendix contains the text of these outcome measures.

Results

As in Study 1, we compare the treatment group to the control using NPC. 392 respondents were randomly assigned to the treatments and are used in the analyses that follow. As in Study 1, we first assess the two manipulation checks about perceptions of the relationship between the groups involved in the conflict and the modified feeling thermometers about groups

feelings towards one another. We again observe that subjects who observed a conflict between two liked groups perceived the relationship between those groups as more negative (2.50) than those in the control group (3.53; p<0.001) and placed the conflict-creating outgroup lower on the modified feeling thermometers (44.5 compared to 65.6; p<0.001).

We next test our hypotheses on the outcome variables using NPC. Table 7 presents these results for the full sample for most of the outcome measures. Table 8, in contrast, shows the same estimates for those who saw the party placement item; as this table excludes pure independents, the sample used in this table is smaller than in Table 7.

As indicated by this table, we see a consistent set of reactions to conflict between the two liked groups (global p-value of 0.001). Feeling thermometer ratings, feelings of solidarity, and willingness to include the somewhat liked group in a coalition all decrease significantly as a result of the conflict between the groups. However, we observe no significant change in support for a mayoral candidate endorsed by the somewhat liked group, government policies helping the somewhat liked group, or the placement of the somewhat liked group relative to respondents' own political party.

To evaluate the predictions of balance theory more thoroughly, we also consider how the treatments do or do not influence attitudes towards the liked group. We find a similar pattern with these data as in Study 1 – observing the conflict has no impact on feelings of solidarity, government help, including the group in a coalition, or placing the liked group with respect to one's political party. We do see a substantively small and marginally significant decrease in feeling thermometer ratings and a decrease of support for the mayoral candidate endorsed by the liked group. Given the way that the mayoral item operated for the somewhat-liked group, we expect that this new item added to Study 2 is tapping into more complex dynamics than we

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anticipated and merits further exploration elsewhere. In general, we see the same attitudes towards the liked group in the control and treatment conditions, as in Study 1.

[Tables 7 and 8 about here]

Overall, we find additional support for our hypotheses: when individuals observe conflict between two liked outgroups, they respond to that conflict with more negative evaluations of the less-liked group of the two. These effects extend beyond a single variable but have limits – this conflict shifts feeling thermometer ratings, solidarity with the less-liked group, and the willingness to include that group in an actual coalition to solve local problems. Observing this kind of conflict therefore seems to have the potential to change general feelings towards and actual collaborations with outgroups involved in that conflict. When it comes to attitudes involving larger and more complex political factors (e.g., partisanship, vote choice, and specific policy preferences), we fail to observe the same effects. In other words, while attitudes toward an outgroup may become more negative, and an individual may see that group less as a strong ally, individuals do *not* appear to punish that outgroup via reduced government benefits or withholding electoral support. Stronger or repeated treatments may be necessary to influence these kinds of stronger, more crystalized attitudes about the outgroup. The consequences of observing this type of political conflict, then, have more interpersonal, community, and grassroots implications than national consequences.

General discussion

Citizens have coherent attitudes about the social groups to which they do not belong and understandings of how these groups relate to one another. Moreover, our work shows that as the relationships between these outgroups change, third-party individuals respond by altering their political attitudes. In Study 1, we demonstrate that when a political dispute arises between two

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groups toward which a third-party observer feels positively, that individual is likely to develop more negative attitudes toward the less-liked of the two groups. In keeping with balance theory, however, such political conflicts do not produce a change in attitudes when a third-party individual feels negatively toward one of the outgroups. We confirm these findings in Study 2 with a separate sample and a larger set of political outcome measures, finding that this type of conflict can reduce feelings of solidarity with the lesser-liked group and depress respondents' willingness to include that group in coalitions.

More work needs to be done to explore how relationships between groups influence politics. For example, why we fail to observe treatment effects on some of our more concrete outcomes in Study 2 remains a mystery. Additional studies applying stronger messages about group conflict may be able to produce more universal changes. Vignettes that describe conflict between a political outparty (such as the Democratic Party for Republican respondents) and a social outgroup may also tap into more powerful dynamics and have other interesting effects, given the importance of partisan identities in the contemporary United States.

For both pragmatic and theoretical reasons, our experiments emphasized a specific kind of outgroup conflict. In both Study 1 and Study 2, the somewhat-liked group was the one creating the conflict with the liked group. Under different circumstances, one may perceive a more positively-valenced group to initiate this conflict; future studies should consider how the present findings apply to a wider range of political situations. And while we have not explored conflict between two disliked groups, that too might disrupt the balance of one's mental network albeit in more complex ways than we have outlined here. We therefore see our findings as a first illustration of the value of balance theory in understanding group conflict and collaboration.

The mechanisms underlying balance theory should also be more thoroughly documented.

We observe, in two separate studies, reactions consistent with the balance theory and unsupportive of other explanations. However, we are not able to directly measure the dissonance that should prompt the negative evaluations we observe.

These studies have important consequences for the study of political behavior, as well as political coalition formation and maintenance. Even when shifts in political relationships do not involve groups to which a citizen belongs, these changes do not go unnoticed. Balancing processes lead citizens to devalue previously-liked groups that conflict with other positively-viewed groups, which affects solidarity and preferences for political partnerships. These reactions mean that social and political groups that become involved in conflicts risk political alienation to a greater degree than previous research would suggest.

One troubling consequence of these processes is the potential impact on disadvantaged groups. Marginalized social groups like the poor, the disabled, and racial and ethnic minority groups often garner positive feelings by many in American society. However, if these groups come into political conflict with groups that are *better* liked as a result of various privileges (e.g., the middle class, the wealthy, whites), those marginalized groups may suffer a penalty that more advantaged groups do not. Merely observing political conflict, therefore, may serve to reinforce disparities between already unequal groups.

Elites may also play off of these dynamics in the way they choose to portray conflicts. Elite actors, including politicians and media outlets, often discuss conflict and tensions between different segments of American society. The results of these experiments suggest that discussing this conflict has rippling effects across the public and that observing conflict is not without political consequences. Further research may benefit from examining the ways in which conflict is used as a political tool by strategic elites for influencing the attitudes and behaviors of third-

party observers. Overall, though, it is clear that studies of social groups need to attend not only to

the effects of groups' behaviors on their members but also to the impact of this behavior on

citizens who stand outside of such groups.

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Endnotes

[1] These groups included Muslims, gays and lesbians, transgender individuals, Jews, African-Americans, Immigrants, union members, gun owners, Hispanics, senior citizens, scientists, feminists, welfare recipients, atheists, environmentalists, pro-lifers, conservatives, liberals, alt-right supporters, and evangelical Christians.

[2] We analyze all respondents together, regardless of the groups selected for their treatments. This is similar to the "least-liked group" measure of political tolerance (e.g., Sullivan et al., 1981).

[3] See the Appendix for comparisons of those who completed the sorting task and the entire sample. 173 respondents made it to the treatments by these criteria.

[4] See the Appendix for exact wording.

[5] The Study 1 procedure removed individuals who did not provide key group sorting responses *after* the randomization to treatments. This may weaken the causal inferences we can make from Study 1. The only significant predictor of dropout is that those receiving the treatments are less likely to be white than the overall sample.

[6] See https://www.beforthright.com/for-researchers for more information.

[7] In addition to the items in Study 1, respondents in Study 2 reported whether they identify as alt-right, have been employed as a scientist, have been employed as a law enforcement officer, or have been enlisted in the military.

[8] The Appendix compares those who completed the sorting task and the entire sample.

[9] We also included two exploratory treatments connected to the mechanisms of balance theory. We do not include these conditions as we have concerns about their effectiveness and they do not influence the causal inferences from the conditions discussed here.

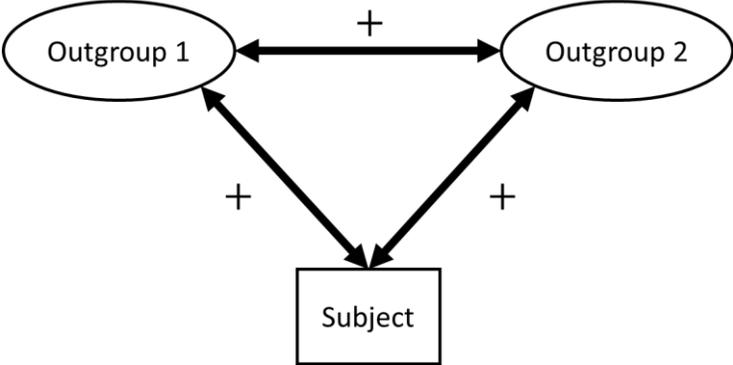**Fig. 1** Balanced system with positivity between and towards outgroups

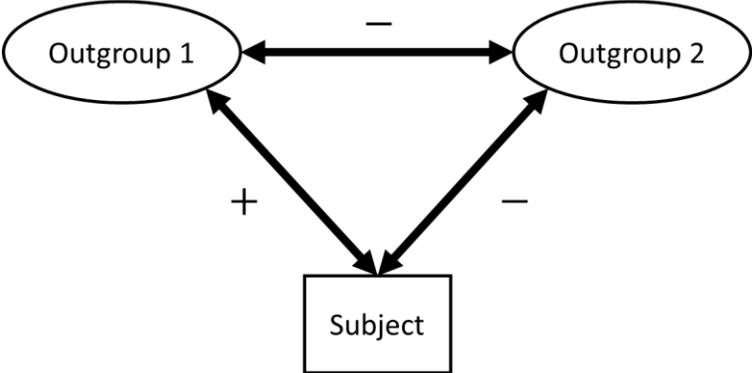**Fig. 2** Balanced system with positivity towards one outgroup and negativity between outgroups

Fig. 3 Unbalanced system with positivity toward two outgroups

Fig. 4 Study 1 design

Study 1

Subjects complete demographic and attitude questions → Subjects categorize outgroups (very liked, somewhat liked, etc.) → Treatment assignment

Liked, liked conflict (LLC)

Liked, disliked conflict (LDC)

Control

Subjects see vignette about conflict between assigned outgroups

Subjects complete measures of outgroup affect and attitudes

Subjects who did not rate necessary outgroups for their treatment dropped

Fig. 5 Study 2 design

Table 1 Study 1 demographics

Category	Percent in Sample
Female	51
White	61
Liberal	83
Moderate	12
Conservative	5
Average age in years	19

Table 2 Vignette examples

	LLC vignette	*LDC vignette*
Action by very liked group	"...lobbying the Illinois state government for increased legal protections. Due to several recent instances of discrimination and intimidation of [Liked group] by political opponents, these organizations have called for state-funded programs to raise awareness about these issues and provide police protection and legal counsel."	
Response by other group **Bolded statements show differences between the conditions**	**"Although they are often considered to be political allies of** [Liked group], [Somewhat liked group] have largely opposed funding such programs, stating that they would be a waste of money. "**People sometimes think we're natural allies, but folks don't realize their politics are largely incompatible with ours**," explained the leader of a prominent [Somewhat liked group]. "[Liked group] always want a leg up; our job is to ensure that they don't get an unfair advantage over [Somewhat liked group] and others." ... [Somewhat liked group] interest groups from across the state have begun to facilitate public ad campaigns and neighborhood canvassing drives to oppose [Liked group]'s proposals."	**"Often at odds with** [Liked group], [Disliked group] have largely opposed funding such programs, stating that they would be a waste of money. " **We're not really natural allies, and their politics are largely incompatible with ours**," explained the leader of a prominent [Disliked group]. "[Liked group] always want a leg up; our job is to ensure that they don't get an unfair advantage over [Disliked group] and others."... [Disliked group] interest groups from across the state have begun to facilitate public ad campaigns and neighborhood canvassing drives to oppose [Liked group]'s proposals."

Table 3 Study 1 conditions

Condition	Conflict Outgroup 1	Conflict Outgroup 2
1. Control	N/A	N/A
2. Liked/Liked Conflict (LLC)	Highly-liked outgroup	Somewhat-liked outgroup
3. Liked/Disliked Conflict (LDC)	Highly-liked outgroup	Somewhat-disliked outgroup

Table 4 LLC hypothesis tests (attitudes about somewhat-liked group)

Dependent Variable	LLC Mean	Control Mean	NPC P-Value (adjusted)	Non-NPC P-Value
Feeling Thermometer	66.0	74.3	.03	.01
Solidarity	4.06	4.6	.04	.02
Funds	344.0	409.0	.15	.15
Government Help	3.35	3.8	.09	.07
Demonstration	3.09	3.5	.21	.17
Global P-Value	-	-	.009	N/A

Note: P-values come from two-tailed difference in means tests comparing the LLC condition and the control.

Table 5 LDC hypothesis tests (attitudes about somewhat-disliked group)

Dependent Variable	LDC Mean	Control Mean	NPC P-Value (adjusted)	Non-NPC P-Value
Feeling Thermometer	31.0	33.9	.70	.33
Solidarity	2.22	2.2	.76	.92
Funds	90.2	81.8	.69	.77
Government Help	2.3	2.1	.52	.42
Demonstration	2.0	1.9	.76	.65
Global P-Value	-	-	.52	N/A

Note: P-values come from two-tailed difference in means tests comparing the LLC condition and the control.

Table 6 Study 2 demographics

Category	Percent in Sample
Female	45
White	67
Liberal	39
Moderate	33
Conservative	28
Average age in years	46

Table 7 Study 2 attitudes about somewhat-liked group

Dependent Variable	LLC Mean	Control Mean	NPC P-Value (adjusted)	Non-NPC P-Value
Feeling Thermometer	67.5	76.0	.004	.001
Solidarity	3.92	4.32	.01	.002
Government Help	3.39	3.6	.27	.27
Support for Mayor	4.72	4.87	.23	.21
Include group in coalition	0.20	0.35	.008	.005
Global P-Value	-	-	.001	N/A

Note: P-values come from two-tailed difference in means tests comparing the LLC condition and the control.

Table 8 Study 2 attitudes about somewhat-liked group (excluding independents)

Dependent Variable	LLC Mean	Control Mean	NPC P-Value (adjusted)	Non-NPC P-Value
Feeling Thermometer	67.5	76.0	.03	.001
Solidarity	3.92	4.32	.03	.001
Government Help	3.39	3.6	.82	.53
Support for Mayor	4.72	4.87	.53	.19
Include group in coalition	0.20	0.35	.07	.006
Placement to party	55.3	55.8	89	0.89
Global P-Value	-	-	.001	N/A

Note: P-values come from two-tailed difference in means tests comparing the LLC condition and the control.