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## Why Would I Want To Talk To Them? An Exploration of Perceptions of Talking Across Political Divides

Melinda Burrell

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Why Would I Want to Talk to Them?  
An Exploration of Perceptions of Talking Across Political Divides

by

Melinda Burrell

A Dissertation Presented to the  
College of Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences of Nova Southeastern University  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

Nova Southeastern University  
2020

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March 2020

**Nova Southeastern University**  
**College of Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences**

This dissertation was submitted by Melinda Burrell under the direction of the chair of the dissertation committee listed below. It was submitted to the College of Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences and approved in partial fulfillment for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Conflict Analysis and Resolution at Nova Southeastern University.

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## Dedication

I dedicate this work to my husband, Thomas Daughton, for his support throughout this doctoral journey. It began with a concerned “Why don’t you take a nap?” the first Friday afternoon after a string of transatlantic time zone two a.m. classes, continued with a smirking ask if my transcripts were “perfect,” and finished with talented editing and formatting. I owe so much of this – and everything else – to him.

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On the note of family, I wish to thank my in-laws, particularly JP Daughton for providing perspective on the PhD process, Karyn Panitch for her outreach on my behalf, and Don and Sally Daughton for asking me often and eagerly these past five years when they could help me celebrate my graduation.

Very fundamentally, I wish to thank my parents, Steve and Kathie Burrell.

Initially, they modeled how a Republican and a Democrat heatedly could discuss issues, but happily live together and raise a family. What's more, they made sure the daughter they raised was curious and up for a challenge – even a five-year challenge such as this.

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## Abstract

Americans are increasingly reluctant to talk across the political divide, a problematic situation for a system predicated on a citizenry exploring a marketplace of ideas and arriving at policy consensus. This study seeks to illuminate this problem through a qualitative, exploratory study around the research question of how conservatives and liberals experience communicating across the political divide. Results are examined through a research framework that first posits the benefit of deliberative democracy (Habermas, 1996), then identifies two major challenges to such – the tendency to avoid uncomfortable political discussions (Eliasoph, 1998) and the emotional, identity-driven process of polarization (Iyengar and Westwood, 2015) – and finally turns to dialogic engagement (Nagda, 2006) for possible solutions. Interviews with 15 conservatives and 15 liberals are analyzed thematically and narratively. Findings are that actual cross-divide conversations occurred only rarely, as participants avoided them out of fear of jeopardizing relationships or reputation. When participants did interact across the divide, the interactions tended to be highly emotional assertions of identity and values rather than rational policy-oriented discussions. In an already divided context, these interactions contributed to escalating conflict dynamics. Participants nonetheless indicated a desire to talk across the divide and described factors that would assist them to do so, as well as examples of micro-cultures where such respectful conversations were a norm. A conclusion is that a quest for safety and comfort (cognitive, social, emotional, and physical) both drives the polarization and can help shape interventions to overcome it.

## Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

This study looked at political talk in the United States in this moment of perceived polarization. Specifically, it looked at how ordinary people think about talking to others who hold different political opinions. It explored motivations for engaging in such conversations as well as factors that could make those conversations constructive and easier to have.

### **Introduction**

Recent decades – and particularly the 2016 presidential election and its aftermath – seem to be polarizing ones for the United States, causing many to worry about the health of its democracy (Prior, 2013). This is occurring partly as a result of geographic self-sorting, where people tend to live and work with like-minded people, as well as due to media self-sorting, when people tend toward outlets that reinforce their existing thinking. This polarization seems to be affecting how much people talk and to whom. In July 2017, the Pew Research Center reported that 59% of Americans surveyed say it is "stressful and frustrating" to talk about politics with someone with a different attitude towards President Trump than their own. In 2018, Chen and Rohla found that politically-mixed families spent less time together at Thanksgiving than politically-aligned families – a change from previous years. Significantly, some studies show that such polarization has meant that antipathy towards the other side is becoming ingrained and reflexive (Iyengar & Westwood, 2015) and therefore ever harder to eradicate.

However, some groups and individuals are stepping up to encourage dialogue and political cross-talk between people from different parties. Better Angels and Living Room Conversations, two of the leading such organizations, report sharp jumps in their



numbers ([www.better-angels.org](http://www.better-angels.org); [www.livingroomconversations.org](http://www.livingroomconversations.org)), indicating popular desire for such dialogue. Unite America is a political action committee formed in 2014 to encourage politicians to work across the aisle ([www.unitedamerica.org](http://www.unitedamerica.org)). Even established organizations such as the Aspen Institute are creating dialogue initiatives designed to foster talk across the political divide.

This begs the question of why, in a polarized situation, some people are indeed reaching out to talk to others across the political divide. Relatedly, it brings up questions as to whether or not more people can be encouraged to join them and what would make these conversations constructive. Providing insight to these questions could improve our national capacity for discourse. These insights could aid individuals, communities, and organizations to develop more constructive communication patterns across the political divide.

This chapter outlines the context of the study by starting with a summary of concepts from the field of social psychology and political science – particularly the subfield of political talk. It then summarizes relevant concepts from the fields of communication and of conflict resolution. From this review of the literature, including main gaps, this chapter then details the proposed research questions as well as methodology and conceptual framework. As part of this, it outlines the boundaries, assumptions, and limitations of the methodology. It concludes with discussions of the significance of this research.

## **Context**

This study fills a gap in research around political discourse, which can be helpful in this moment of perceived heightened polarization in the United States. Current social

psychology and political science research, with an emphasis on political talk, outlines reasons why people tend not to talk across political divides. It also delineates the characteristics of those relatively few people who do. For its part, communication literature defines typical human motivations for talking. Conflict resolution literature, including social cognitive neuroscience, contributes ideas as to why groups polarize, what helps promote constructive conversation, as well as what can undermine such. This study seeks to contextualize this information in this moment of polarization, looking specifically at what can be done to motivate people to talk across our current political divide, and to do so constructively.

Relevant political talk literature on this topic revolves around several issues. A fundamental issue is the role of citizen dialogue and deliberation in our democracy – in other words, why such political talk is necessary. Here, theory ranges from John Stuart Mill’s arguments for debate (1869) to Jurgen Habermas’ description of the ideal of deliberation (1996).

Communication literature is useful at this point. It elaborates reasons why people talk at all. This includes motivations such as to request assistance, offer advice, foster joint activities, influence the other person’s point of view, alter the relationship between the two people, and induce the other to satisfy an obligation (Kellerman, 1992).

Most of these motivations for general interpersonal engagement would be part of political talk and could be explored as such. Political talk literature contains relatively little research into motivation. A few recent studies found that people are motivated to engage in political cross-talk less for the goal of gathering information about political topics than to express themselves (Lyons et al., 2014; Jacobs et al., 2009). Other potential

motivations, such as building social bonds, are explored only minimally in the political talk literature.

Much more attention is given in the literature to the opposite question, namely, what prevents people from engaging others with differing political opinions. Work on this question includes personality-based theories (Gerber et al., 2012); conflict orientation theories (Ulbig & Funk, 1999); and theories on the effects of differing levels of biological sensitivity to threat, anxiety, and disgust (Jost & Amodio, 2011). Still others describe the divergent value systems of conservatives and liberals, claiming these create a fundamental inability to understand each other and have productive conversations (Graham, Haidt, & Nosek, 2009). Others posit that we have no norms to control uncivil discourse around politics (Iyengar & Westwood 2015) so our conversation becomes increasingly anger- and hate-filled. All of these dynamics serve to suppress both formal and informal conversation across political divides.

Conflict resolution literature echoes some of these themes. The theory of group polarization first articulated as such (Moscovici et al., 1972) sought to explain how groups become both more entrenched in their own views and farther from the other group. Later theorists sought to identify the mechanisms that enable polarization. These included theories about undertaking actions out of a desire to compare favorably with others (social comparison theory) as well as the power of hearing new arguments in favor of a position one already holds (informational influence). Others have looked at social identity as the main driver of polarization – how one’s perception of oneself as belonging to a certain social category is a strong motivator of behavior.

Polarized context aside, there is conflicting research around the effect of political talk. Some find that it increases political engagement while others find that encountering different opinions dampens further political participation (Mutz, 2006). Others find that people engage in self-censoring, which leads to a “spiral of silence” causing like-minded others to think they are in the minority and therefore similarly not state their opinion (Noelle-Neumann, 1974).

Recent practical experience bears out the fact that political talk can harm rather than help. In the aftermath of the August 2017 lethal demonstrations, a dialogue group went to work in Charlottesville, Virginia. Their simplified dialogue models only created more tension amidst the complex set of relationships and issues (Dukes, May 2017). Talk is not always an unmitigated good. It can bring grievances to the fore but do little to alleviate them (Paluck, 2010), as well as entrench the perspective of the dominant group without supporting the oppressed group (Bruneau & Saxe, 2012). Dialogue about existential issues, such as dignity and safety, can be completely off the table (Baldwin, 1955).

Not all talk is harmful, however. There is a growing body of literature around what elements make these conversations more successful. These include engaging individuals’ abstract reasoning (Yang et al., 2012) as well as encouraging note-taking and reflection (Pitts et al., 2017). Others argue that a multi-pronged approach is necessary. Viewing a film or listening to a radio program on a divisive political topic offers a safer way for discussion of sensitive issues (Pitts et al., 2017). Listening carefully and open-mindedly is key in a political context (Dobson, 2012) as much as in more common conversational contexts.

Thus, the literature examines why deliberation and exposure to disagreement are necessary to democracy. It also looks at why and how we tend not to have conversations with people with different opinions. It further looks at how, on the rare occasions when we do have those conversations, they can be successful. Despite all this information, there is little research into what can be done to help ordinary people seek out and conduct conversations with people with whom they disagree.

### **Problem Statement**

The problem to be researched was polarization in the United States and its effects, particularly a lessening of discourse between political parties. Evidence of the significance and timeliness of the problem can be seen in the plethora of articles in mainstream media as well as scholarly journals about polarization and its effects in the U.S. The subject of increasing polarization has been the topic of Pew Research Center reports and Gallup polls since mid-2017. As noted above, several new dialogue-oriented organizations and initiatives have been created since the 2016 presidential election, including Better Angels, AllSides, Make America Dinner Again, and the Better Arguments Project. All of this popular discussion and action speaks to the existence of the problem of polarization and diminished conversation across political divides.

This study built on the literature that finds that, while many people avoid conversations across a political divide, some do indeed initiate it – particularly extroverts and liberals. This study also built on the small amount of literature that addresses why people would choose to talk across a political divide. Here again I note that the political talk literature explores only a limited set of reasons for such behavior, while communication literature details a far greater number of motivations for interpersonal

communication. This study also built on the conflict resolution literature that addresses what helps people have constructive dialogue in small groups despite a polarized setting. In doing so, this study helps fill the gap in understanding if and how, in the current politicized state in the U.S., people can be encouraged to have constructive conversations across a political divide.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to explore the challenges of and possibilities for improved informal political talk between people with political opinions different from their own. Specifically, the purpose was to conduct an exploratory, qualitative study using narrative interviewing to identify the preferences, beliefs, and behaviors of people with respect to talking across political divides.

The research paradigm was that of pragmatism, a worldview that conceptualizes reality as a fluid state, with actors and circumstances so dynamic that they require constant re-examination and debate. In Dewey's conception, our experience of the world is situational, emotional, and social. We reflect on our beliefs. This reflection leads to actions, which we further reflect on, which leads to further beliefs (Morgan, 2014). We use our feelings to help us understand this cycle, and we draw on our physical as well as social and cultural context in doing so. Additionally, pragmatism seeks to solve problems. This means it has a social justice bent (Morgan, 2014). The problem of polarization in the U.S. therefore is ripe for examination through a pragmatic worldview, because it deals with this dance between action and belief, addresses social issues, and also is a problem in need of a solution.

Bringing together four strands of literature – political science/ political talk, social psychology, communication, and conflict resolution – creates a conceptual framework for this research. The overarching theory is that of democratic discourse: for a democracy to function effectively, its citizens need to be speaking with each other, learning new information, sharing opinions, and identifying potential solutions to common issues. However, in the United States we are experiencing problems that complicate our ability to conduct deliberative democracy. First, as explained through conflict avoidance theory, people often shy away from conversations with people with whom they disagree. This tendency creates a complicating dynamic for deliberative democracy. Second, as explained by the theory of affective polarization, increasingly over the past decades, partisan emotions have been binding us ever more tightly to our political ingroup and distancing us from our outgroup (Iyengar & Westwood, 2015). The final applicable theory is that of dialogic engagement (Nagda, 2006; Nagda & Zuniga, 2003), which posits that the more people attach importance to dialogic engagement (defined as speaking, listening, and asking questions), the better their outcomes on: considering their own identity and the effect it has on their worldview and perceptions; developing skills in perspective-taking and communicating across a divide; and generating greater desire to create bridges across differences.

All of these theories relate to pragmatism, as all deal with the experiential nature of our personal worldviews. They also reflect a belief that we develop identities and values in relation to others. Finally, they also all are context-specific, noting that people behave differently in different situations and are not static and unchanging. Polarization

involves a complex and multilayered set of society-wide, group-level, and dyad-level dynamics. Pragmatism, and these key theories, are able to encompass this dynamism.

The framework relates to the research questions because it looks at the overall value of democratic discourse, even and especially between people who disagree with each other, and the effect that the erosion of such discourse can have. The framework provides clues as to why people may be becoming polarized – because of the big questions of identity and emotion – as well as why people may not be talking to each other as much as before – because of desire to avoid conflict and increasing perceived distance from the other. These overarching topics of discourse, emotion, identity, and conflict provided fertile ground for development of interview questions as well as analysis of data.

### **Research Question**

The main research question for this study was: How do liberals and conservatives experience communicating across the political divide? Three sub questions were: what motivations do people have for these discussions and what do they hope to achieve; what challenges do they face in having these conversations; and what could make these conversations easier and more constructive.

### **Methodology**

With regard to the methodology, the research used an exploratory qualitative approach. Thirty in-depth narrative interviews were conducted with equal numbers of conservatives and liberals from around the country and comprising different demographics. Initially I sought to recruit through libraries and organizations in two politically-mixed areas – the rural area of Warrenton, Virginia, and the urban area of



Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. However, those recruitment efforts brought almost no participants. I then switched to asking family and friends to help identify potential participants from their own networks. This had the advantage of letting me ensure diversity of demographics: from all over the country, different age groups, and various races and ethnicities.

Interviews centered around participants' perceptions of the need for and ways to have conversations across a political divide. The interview protocol was developed from the literature, and used a narrative inquiry approach to elicit the values and beliefs that underpin individuals' motivations to avoid or to undertake conversations across a political divide (also called political cross-talk). It also probed what could make such conversations easier for them to engage in. (See interview protocol in the appendix.) Data was analyzed for trends and themes as well as inconsistencies and omissions. Data analysis will be described further in chapters three and four.

### **Definitions**

In conducting this research, I will use the definition of political talk provided by Wyatt, Katz, & Kim (2000) that focuses on the informal, interpersonal discussion of political issues that comes about in daily life rather than the formal, structured deliberation held in a setting designed to guide such conversation. Liberal and conservative participants self-identified, but analysis of their responses found them in line with the definition of liberal and conservative outlined by Jost & Amodio (2011). Jost & Amodio's definition aligns with decades of other political science theorizing and delineates the difference between the two views as coming from two basic orientations.

One orientation is the degree to which one supports tradition versus social change, and the other is the degree to which one accedes to or refuses social inequality.

The term “political talk” also should be defined. I used the definition adopted by many researchers, which includes conversations about “governments, elections, and politics” (Eveland, 2004, p. 183; Huckfeldt, 2001, p. 427, 2007, p. 981; Huckfeldt, Johnson, & Sprague, 2002, p. 4; Huckfeldt, Sprague, & Levine, 2000, p. 642; Mutz, 2002). Other researchers have added definitions about the level of politics specified, whether local or national or specific topics such as the economy or unemployment (Moy & Gastil, 2006). All participants’ answers fell within these parameters.

### **Assumptions**

The fundamental underlying assumption of this research is that, to have a functioning democracy, people must talk with others across the political divide. This assumption is held up by thinkers ranging from John Stuart Mill to recent political theorists. Without this assumption, it would be meaningless to study how to create more frequent, and more successful, cross-party conversations.

Another assumption is that informal, everyday talk across the political divide is indeed relevant to democracy. The political cross-talk to be encouraged does not have to be in a formal, structured context. This assumption is supported by the communication and the conflict resolution literature. Ordinary interpersonal communication performs many functions that are applicable to democracy, in addition to the information-seeking and persuasion functions cited in political talk literature. Interpersonal communication is also used to form and deepen social bonds, to establish norms, and other behaviors that are linked to living in democratic society.

## **Scope and Delimitations**

The study addressed aspects of facilitating political talk across a divide. It looked at who people would want to engage in such a conversation, for what reason, what they perceived the challenges to be, and what conditions would make it easier for them to engage. These aspects were chosen because these are the elements that constitute conversation across borders.

This study looked at the political divide between liberals and conservatives. It did not intentionally look at other cleavages in U.S. society, although racial and ethnic issues ended up being mentioned by almost half of the participants. Participants' thoughts on these other divides therefore figure into the findings of this study on the Red-Blue political divide.

## **Significance**

It is hoped that this study will advance knowledge for dialogue and conflict resolution scholars and practitioners alike. As scholars mostly have been studying why people avoid cross-cutting political talk, this study looked at what can be done – in a polarized environment – to support people to undertake such conversations and to do so in a constructive manner. Since political polarization is occurring not only in the United States, but also in many places around the world, these findings provide insights that are potentially relevant to further research elsewhere.

Practitioners, particularly organizations dedicated to catalyzing such cross-divide dialogues, should be able to use the information in two ways. First, it will help them design better outreach, as they will have a more specific understanding of what makes people want to come to the table. They will be able to tailor the means and messengers

with which they recruit participants. Second, it will help them design better dialogue programs as they will have more information about what participants expect from such conversations as well as what factors participants think will make it easier for them to engage in such conversations.

### **Summary**

Increasing politicization in the U.S. has made it more difficult for people to talk to others with whom they disagree politically. Research into the issue of political talk details why people tend to avoid such conversations, but contains only a little insight into why they do enter into them. Research on political talk also contains little about how to make these conversations more constructive.

However, communications and conflict resolution literature do offer ideas about why people have conversations and how to boost the success of dialogues when they occur. This dissertation therefore builds on all this literature for an exploratory qualitative study, using narrative inquiry, to understand how people experience communicating across the political divide. To do so, it looks at why people are motivated to have such conversations, what the challenges are, and what factors would make them more able to engage in them. The next chapter therefore will look at the social psychology, political science, communication, and conflict resolution literature that informed the data gathering and analysis of this study.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

The purpose of this research was to conduct a qualitative study to identify Americans' perceptions about the challenges of and possibilities for increased conversation across the political divide. To examine the literature related to this topic, this chapter first defines the overall conceptual framework for the research. Next it explains the search strategy used to find relevant literature. Finally, it outlines the relevant literature from four fields: political science /political talk, social psychology, communication, and conflict resolution. In doing so, the chapter examines gaps as well as trends in how the strands of literature come together.

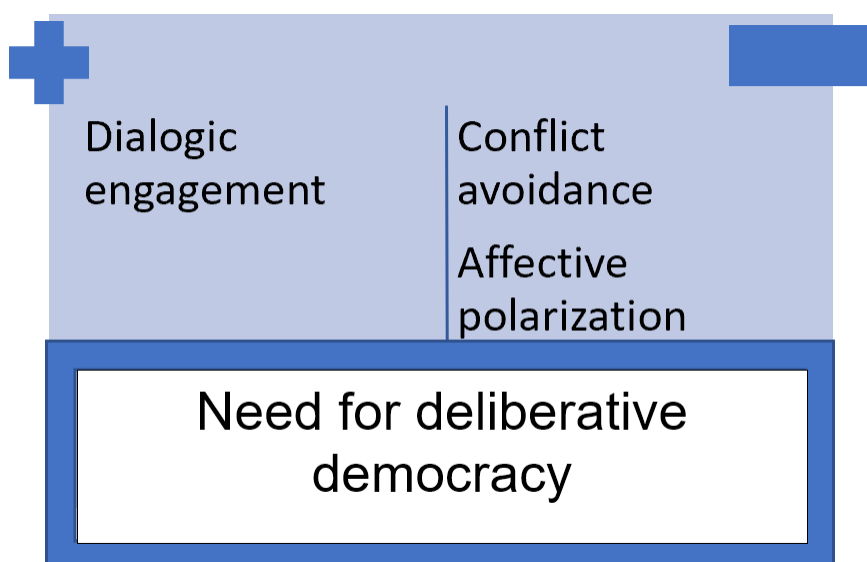
### **Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework for this dissertation borrows from four main strands of literature: political science (particularly around political talk), social psychology, communication, and conflict resolution. Political science contributes the overarching framework of deliberative democracy (Habermas, 1996; Fishkin, 1991). Deliberative democracy, or deliberative discourse, posits that discourse is crucial to democracy because it is the complexity and richness of conversation – both formal and informal – that is the wellspring of legitimacy for governance.

However, while such democratic discourse is the ideal, as a society we experience challenges and barriers to achieving this ideal. Conflict avoidance theory helps us understand one barrier. We tend to avoid situations in which we would disagree with others. Affective polarization theory unearths another challenge. The emotions of pride and anger bind us increasingly to our own political party, which is our ingroup, and distances us from the opposite party, which is our outgroup (Iyengar & Westwood, 2015).

From conflict resolution, the theory of dialogic engagement (Nagda & Zuniga, 2003) offers a solution. The more we prize engagement, the better skills and attitudes we have to overcome these challenges to democratic discourse.

The diagram below presents the conceptual framework for this study. At base is the need for deliberative democracy. Two forces are at work to undermine deliberative democracy, signified by the minus sign: conflict avoidance and affective polarization. A potential solution signified by the plus sign is dialogic engagement. This, consisting of listening, asking questions, and reflecting, could assist us to have the deliberative democracy we need.



*Figure 1.* Diagram of Conceptual Framework.

### **Deliberative Democracy**

The broad concept is of deliberative democracy is that conversation and deliberation are key to democratic decision-making. Political conversation is more important than voting, which is merely the aggregation of public preferences. Political conversation is the multi-tiered process that gives the legitimacy to lawmaking. As

Habermas (1996) articulates, political conversation draws out and further defines both the common and the contrasting values of different segments of the polity. This helps to create more nuanced social understanding of perceived problems and potential solutions and therefore more legitimate governance.

There are many reasons for this, cited by scholars for more than a century. On the policy-making front, Mill (1869) argued that discourse enables us to learn more, to have the opportunity to change our minds, and to further our understanding of our own positions. Others have noted that discourse helps us understand the rationale for a different opinion so that, if it becomes adopted into policy, at least one understands its basis in reasoning (Mutz & Martin, 2001; Mutz & Mondak, 2006). In this vein, talking is “informal decisions by accretion” (Parkinson & Mansbridge, 2012, p.9). Talking allows us to make sense, particularly of a changing context, before undertaking problem solving and policy making (Jacobs et al., 2009). It also is the first step that leads to more public discussion and then action (Jacobs et al., 2009; Conover et al., 2002). What is more, those exposed to political disagreement not only have stronger political views but also are more politically engaged (Klofstad et al., 2013) and therefore contribute more to the democracy.

Democratic discourse does have complications. Mutz (2006) identified a “democratic dilemma” in that those exposed to political disagreement are more tolerant of, or open to, other opinions. However, as a result they gain more ambiguity in their political views. This tends to make people less engaged. Political conversation thus plays many positive roles but also has snares of which we should be aware.

### **Conflict Avoidance**

Many theorists have applied the theory of conflict avoidance to discussion of political cross-talk (Eliasoph, 1998; Ulbig & Funk, 1999; Wells et al. 2017; Frimer et al., 2017). They suggested that individuals' orientation to conflict affects their engagement in political talk, in that a general tendency towards conflict avoidance in life translates into avoidance of political disagreement. Furthermore, Frimer et al. (2017) and Mutz & Mondak (2006) also found that, in the midst of conflict avoidance, people seem to be more able to agree to disagree with those with whom they have weak ties than those with whom they have close ties. Testa et al. (2014) found that, in order for people to be able to handle disagreement within a relationship, they must have some positive inclination to accept conflict. Finally, Frimer et al. (2017) found that both conservatives and liberals are equally averse to disagreement.

### **Affective Polarization**

Sunstein (2000) argued that polarization and extremism can come about if people only talk to like-minded others, and thereby reify each other's views while not receiving any belief-challenging input. Iyengar & Westwood (2015) took this further, with the theory of affective polarization. They argued that identity and emotion play a deep role in American party affiliation. Increasingly over the past decades, partisan emotions have been binding us ever more tightly to our political ingroup and distancing us from our outgroup. Through a series of four controlled experiments, they found that party affiliation for Americans has increased to the point where it is more polarizing than race, as exemplified by the fact that it now has social effects – such as whom we choose to spend time with – rather than only political effects – such as whom we vote for. They



further found that this polarization is driven more by negative than by positive emotions, in that people are more opposed to people from the other party than drawn to people of their own. They described a mechanism for the furtherance of affective polarization, according to which party affiliation is used by partisans to express hatred of others, and observed that we lack norms to control political hate speech in the way that we have (or perhaps used to have) norms to control ethnic or racial hate speech.

### **Dialogic Engagement**

As a counter to politicization, others have been exploring the possibility of talking across divides. Jacobs et al. (2009) argued that talking with other citizens is satisfying because it allows us to learn, to connect with others, as well as potentially to identify common interests or concerns. Others have taken this argument further and have noted that talking can foster even more talking as well as the growth of relationships, particularly in an intergroup prejudice reduction situation. Nagda & Zuniga (2003) posited that the more people value “dialogic engagement” – talking, listening, and asking questions – the more they tend to think about their own identity, build their ability to take the perspective of others, and develop both the skills and desire to bridge differences with people from another identity.

This can be a counter to polarization, as many have pointed out. Fishkin et al. (2012) argued that ordinary people are less intractable than elites. Their conversation across a political divide can do more to identify common interests than it might with partisan leaders.

Careful, skilled dialogic engagement, as advocated by Nagda & Zuniga, can also be the counter to some of the warnings others have issued about the pitfalls of talking.

Paluck (2010) argued that sometimes talking only increases prejudice, especially if self-disclosure is met with more stereotyping (Yeakley, 1998), or if one is exposed to individuals with extreme views (Kim 2015). Others have posited that talking merely intensifies disagreement rather than creating greater understanding (Paluck 2010; Sunstein 2002; Mutz 2006).

Skilled conversation is necessary to overcome these pitfalls. Nagda (2006) further argued that dialogic processes achieve the most complete, long-lasting results when done in a sustained and structured way, rather than just through informal and infrequent conversation. He argued in favor not only of sharing stories and asking good questions, but also of thinking deeply about oneself and building alliances. Skilled listening, questioning, and reflection can also bring one to the concept of the “ironic story” (Cobb, 2013), which is a more complex story of conflict, including the admission that we ourselves have also had a role in creating the conflict.

### **Literature Search Strategy**

As with all literature reviews, this was an iterative process as my understanding of the topic, and therefore issues to search, evolved. My initial searches around “group polarization” in ProQuest brought me to conflict resolution and social psychology research, most of which was not based in the United States. I then searched “civic discourse” and “deliberative democracy” in ProQuest, which not only gave me many more articles about the development of the deliberative democracy field in the US, but also introduced “political talk” and “political conversation” as a search terms. These terms I used not only in ProQuest but also ERIC, PAIS, and Psych Info. The former term is much more frequently used and therefore brings up significantly more material.

I then began to want to find literature specifically focused on what motivates people to talk, as I was not finding much around that topic in the literature. I used Google scholar for a quick search around “motivation and political talk”, which was not fruitful. However, “political beliefs” and “communication motivator” worked well in the databases for conflict resolution and peace studies. “Political beliefs” and “political communication” worked for the communications database. I then decided to look specifically at what motivates human communication in general, outside of a political lens. “Motivation to talk” and “motivation to communicate” revealed little in any database, so I turned to handbooks of interpersonal communication in order to flesh out my study.

### **Literature Review**

In reviewing the literature, I looked at several main questions. The first question, “Why talk across the political divide?”, is addressed in the description of the overarching concept for the conceptual framework of this dissertation – that of deliberative democracy. Another question, “Who tends to talk across the divide?”, ties into a major wing of current political talk literature. The next questions, “What motivates people to talk across the divide?”, “What are the barriers to doing so?”, and “What seems to work in these conversations?”, are key concepts explored in this study.

### **General Trends and Themes**

Several trends and themes emerge from broader consideration of the four strands of literature. In particular, questions of emotion, identity, power, and context increasingly appear in literature addressing polarization and talk across the political divide. For example, the notion of belongingness and how one’s individual identity affects and is

affected by group identity has long been a part of conflict resolution literature (Cosner, 1956; Kriesberg, 1998; Pruitt & Kim, 2004). However, the theme of belongingness also is gaining importance in political talk literature, as noted above (Iyengar & Westwood, 2015). Moreover, political talk literature increasingly is looking at affective motivations for conversation in addition to cognitive motivations (Valenzuela & Bachmann, 2015). Questions of power differentials and political systems are being considered more and more in conflict resolution literature, as outlined by Ramsbotham's history of the field (2011). In a similar vein, political talk literature increasingly is focusing on questions of equity and inclusion. Here, some have argued that enclave dialogue is necessary (Walsh, 2006) to allow minority communities to build their sense of power as well as assemble their arguments.

Another new trend is the advent of neuroscientific evidence supporting psychological theories for both reconciliation as well as deliberation (Bruneau & Saxe, 2012; Falk et al., 2012; Jost & Amodio, 2011; Zaki & Ochsner, 2012). Conflict avoidance theory plays through all literature, as do cognitive theories such as confirmation bias. All of the relevant strands of the literature increasingly are looking at the dynamics of the communication/ polarization process. There is growing recognition that the process is not static but constantly changing: spirals of silence in political talk literature (Noelle-Neumann, 1974); cycle of violence/revenge in conflict resolution (Pruitt & Kim, 2004); reciprocity and compensatory behavior in communication literature such as interaction adaptation theory (White, 2015). Finally, mentalizing, or the theory of mind, is increasingly entering the literature. This is particularly true for conflict

resolution literature, as theorists work on issues of perspective-taking (Bruneau & Saxe, 2012) or putting ourselves in others' shoes (Falk et al., 2012).

### **Literature Review of Key Concepts**

**Why talk across political divides?** A fair amount of work has been done examining why people undertake political talk. Of the reasons cited, which include civic, social, epistemological, and contextual reasons, the most frequently noted is civic motivation. This includes exchanging information, discussing community problems, and learning how to get involved in political activity (Gastil 1993). Gil de Zuniga et al. (2016) found that women are more likely to engage in political talk for civic reasons than social reasons.

Many of these civic motivations are driven by emotional factors. Lyons et al. (2014) looked specifically at the role emotions, particularly fear and enthusiasm, play in prompting political cross-talk. They found little support for their initial hypothesis that fear would drive information-seeking behavior in the form of political cross-talk. Instead, they found greater correlation between enthusiasm for one's chosen candidate and expressive, socially-motivated cross-talk. Marcus et al. (2013) similarly looked at affective intelligence theory and how emotions drive behavior. They focused on the role that anxiety over political issues plays in generating a desire to learn more information about political issues and candidates, and therefore a desire to engage in political cross-talk.

Others have also found that social reasons in general do prompt political talk (Gil de Zuniga et al., 2016). Eveland et al. (2011) posited more specific social motivators for all types of political conversation: the desire to be seen as intelligent, to pass time, to

build bonds, to enjoy the act of argumentation, and to build a shared social identity by highlighting common values or interests (Eveland et al. 2011, p. 1090). Cialdini et al. (2015) argued that people engage in political talk for social approval and to maintain positive self-regard. Jost et al. (2003) argued that people choose an ideology because they are responding to senses of uncertainty, threat, and a need to conform, and therefore engage in such talk because they are searching for security, knowledge, and relationships.

Still others have posited epistemological reasons for political cross-talk. Weick et al. (2005) noted a need for “collective sensemaking...[which] is triggered when people experience ambiguity and uncertainty and seek to create rational accounts that help them gain clarity or understanding about an event” (Weick et al., 2005, p. 4). There seems to be an increase in the frequency of political talk after events such as party conventions and political debates, and as elections loom. These timing issues lend support to the idea of a need to engage in political cross-talk to make sense of the moment.

Communication theory buttresses the sensemaking argument. Southwell & Yzer (2009) suggested that we talk to others to verify that we understand the world accurately (opinion accuracy desire). They also suggested we do so because we are interested in a subject and wish to discuss it, or want to argue in favor of a certain position. This latter becomes particularly salient around elections.

Other theorists have offered more generalized thoughts about motivations for cross talk. Gil de Zuniga et al. reminded us that we can have many motivations for a conversation, rather than just a single one. They also noted that these motivations can change over the course of the conversation.

**Who talks across political divides?** Personality has been determined to be a big factor in whether or not one is likely to want to talk across the political divide. Most of the work in this area has been done using the “Five Factor Model” typology of personalities. Gerber et al. (2012) found that high scores for extraversion and emotional stability were correlated with frequent political discussion, whereas agreeableness (the tendency to want to be in harmony with others) was negatively correlated. This holds more for family members than nonfamily members, although there is some evidence that high scores for openness to new experiences correlates with a tendency to have political discussion with nonfamily members. Lyons et al. (2016) found similar results but also that those people who are high in conscientiousness – in contexts in which political cross-talk could be seen as performing one’s duty – also correlate with pursuit of conversation across divides.

Individuals’ level of social trust also affects their willingness to engage in conversations across the divide. People with high social trust (Matthes, 2012) will engage in discussion because they do not fear negative consequences of self-expression. However, they will not do so if they are also dispositionally high in conflict avoidance. Conversely, those lower in conflict avoidance will engage in political disagreement (Ulbig & Funk, 1999). Hayes et al. (2005) found that those lower in self-censorship are more likely to engage in political cross-talk as they are less concerned with conforming their behavior to others. Not surprisingly, those higher in attitude certainty (Matthes et al., 2010) are more likely to engage in political cross talk.

Researchers developing the new field of political neuroscience are seeing how some individuals’ heightened biological sensitivity to threat, anxiety, and disgust prompts

different political activity than those whose neurology makes them less risk-averse and more open to exploration (Jost & Amodio, 2011). Others describe the divergent value systems of conservatives and liberals, which create a fundamental inability to understand each other and have productive conversations (Graham, Haidt, & Nosek, 2009).

Another issue to consider with regard to political cross-talk – one unrelated to personality or disposition – is timing. Paluck (2010) posits that, particularly in deep conflicts, the middle of a conflict could be too soon for talking across a divide. Falk et al. (2012) looked at partisans' ability to mentalize, or think about the thinking of, the leader of the opposite party. They found that, the closer election day was, the more emotions interfered with an individual's ability to consider the other person's thought processes.

**What are the barriers to political cross-talk?** One of the most frequently cited sets of reasons for why people do not talk frequently across the political divide is relationships. Many theorists note a wish to preserve relationships. Others note a fear that disagreement will cause loss of relationships, and a need for courage to have these risky conversations.

More specifically, McPherson et al. (2001) cited homophily, or the fact that “like talks to like,” as a reason why people do not frequently have such conversations. Mutz (2002) pointed to social accountability theory, or fear that disagreement will threaten relationships. Ting-Tomey (2005) noted the link to face-saving and preservation of relationships. Given this pressure to maintain relationships, others have noted the courage required to voice one's opinions when they are different from others (Mansbridge, 1980).

Another area of discussion of the difficulty of conversations across a political divide is that of information processing. Many theorists have noted the role of cognitive



dissonance in helping us deal with the discomfort of facing or holding different views. Because it is uncomfortable or mentally taxing to address different views, we avoid or discount views that do not cohere with our own (Huckfeldt, 2004; Frimer et al., 2017). Others have pointed to the related concept of selective media exposure (Kim 2015; Sunstein & Bobadilla, 2017), in which we chose to consume news from media outlets that offer information and opinion that supports our own, thereby avoiding cognitive dissonance. Also relatedly, Falk et al. (2012) found that perspective taking, or seeking to put oneself in another's shoes, is something we deliberately have to choose to do. It is not a natural response for human relating. Kahneman and others, with theories of the dual-processing nature of our brains, posited that our emotions take over in certain situations, such as of conflict, and that we lose rational thought capacity. All of these are cognitive barriers to talking across the divide.

Other researchers find culture to be part of the problem. Different culturally-defined understandings of conflict itself can create problems in communication (Lebaron, 2003). Culture provides “whispered messages” about who and what we should value, and therefore might fight over (Lebaron, 2003, p.14): “The ways we name, frame, blame, and attempt to tame conflicts are profoundly shaped by culture” (Lebaron, 2003, p.16). The issue of sacred values is related to this look at culture as a barrier to conversation. Some things are so important, so sacred to us in our respective cultures, that we cannot dialogue over them easily (Berns et al., 2012).

Still other theorists focused on a lack of skills, particularly listening skills, as being a barrier to conversations across a divide. This listening would lead us into cognitive dissonance and the mentally taxing action of resolving how to hold different

identity groups' narratives in our minds alongside each other (Corry, 2012). Schmitt-Beck and Lup (2013) spoke of the need to be able to understand the many levels of communication, including individual body language as well as normative meta-communication. Successfully conversing across the divide requires many honed skills.

Another area of discussion in the literature concerns externalities and, in particular, norms of grouping with your own and avoiding disagreement, but not norms of condemning political hate speech (Iyengar & Westwood, 2015). Polarization as a powerful dynamic, fits into this line of thinking: in an untrusting environment, we stick to our own and that very isolation leads to unchallenged, negative perceptions of the other that reify the differences. In such situations, we have low social trust and individual trust, which means we fear relational repercussions (Matthes, 2012) if we engage with others who are politically different from ourselves. In these situations, our existing biases cause us to trust and empathize less with our outgroups (Bruneau, Dufour, & Saxe, 2012; Cikara, Bruneau, & Saxe, 2017), or more seriously, to dehumanize the other (Bruneau and Kteily, 2017). Also in such polarized situations, we concentrate on our own moral bases for our beliefs, which are entirely different from those of the "other" group; this means we do not even understand each other (Graham, Haidt, & Nosek 2009) enough to have a conversation. What is more, such polarization increases through escalation dynamics (Pruitt & Kim, 2004). This means that an increasing number of issues are brought into the conflict. We use increasingly more aggressive tactics. We also experience a change in in conflict motivation from simply wanting to achieve our initial goal to wanting to win out over the other, finally to wanting actually to hurt the other.

The literature reveals that all of these polarization drivers and dynamics create challenges for political cross-talk.

**What seems to make these conversations successful?** For those times when people with different opinions do come together, there is a growing body of literature around what elements make these conversations more successful. Most of these recommendations speak of self-awareness, as well as rational and deliberate thought. This includes cultural fluency, which requires in part understanding our own culture and “meaning-making structures” (Lebaron, 2003, p. 71), such as what we pay attention to/focus on/notice as well as what we value. Yang et al. (2012), in experimental discussions about the Ground Zero mosque, found that injecting a task that utilized individuals’ abstract reasoning led them to be more moderate in their opinions. From a brain science perspective, Pitts et al (2017) similarly found that prompting critical thought by way of encouraging note-taking and reflection during focus groups helped people to add nuance to their thinking. Others argue that a multi-pronged approach is necessary. Just engaging in talk alone may actually increase prejudice (Paluck, 2010), but interventions that include, for example, viewing a film or listening to a radio program on the topic, offer a safer way for discussion of sensitive issues (Pitts et al, 2017). Epley et al (2006) suggested a need to have an overarching goal for difficult political conversations, such as identifying commonalities. Paluck (2010) suggested something similar with the goal of preventing the conversation from simply entrenching stereotypes, or building relationships that build trust (Lebaron, 2003).

Most of this research examines structured group processes, not informal dyadic conversations. However, these findings can be useful to consider if and how they can be

applied to dyadic conversations. Much of this research also validates the findings of neuroscientists about our cognitive processes and questions of trust and conflict. Still very much in development, the “dual processing” theory describes how we process information along two tracks, one emotional and one rational (Satpute & Lieberman 2006). The “X-system,” or reflexive system, is instantaneous, involves the limbic apparatus of the brain such as the amygdala, and forms the impressions and intuitions that guide our unconscious reactions. The “C-system,” or reflective system, is slower, situated in the pre-frontal cortex, and deals with rational appraisal of our situation. Each system takes primacy while operating. Rarely do we consciously understand or recognize the impressions gained from the emotional system (Kahneman, 2013). One of the most important understandings of this theory is that humans are largely emotional and instinctive creatures, not the rational beings that we think we are. This insight about the limits of human rationality is an important one as we explore how to create the conditions for constructive conversation across the emotionally-charged political divide.

A final neuroscience theory relevant to conflict resolution posits that we respond to certain socially-originated rewards and threats as acutely as physically-originated rewards and threats (Rock, 2008). Rock articulates this in terms of “SCARF,” asserting that we are hard-wired to crave status, certainty, autonomy, relatedness, and fairness. When we are accorded all of these in social interactions, we feel secure. We are relaxed and happy, and our brains are able to think creatively and rationally. The opposite conditions for SCARF, however, create the opposite effect in humans. When we feel threatened in this context – denigrated, isolated, treated unfairly – our threat circuits are

triggered and the rational part of our brains shuts down. We cannot think logically or creatively, and we rely on default behaviors that tend not to be constructive.

Clearly, to make difficult conversations across a political divide work, these insights about how social situations trigger threat or reward responses are helpful. Indeed, Lack & Bogacz (2012) outlined ten “neurobiological commandments” that draw on the principles of SCARF. One in particular describes the mechanisms of many of the interventions noted above. Because of our dual-processing brain, we have emotional responses before being unconsciously aware of them, and certainly before being consciously aware of them. At that point, because of an amygdala-prefrontal cortex connection, we can dampen our emotional responses if we wish (Lack & Bogacz, 2012, p. 41). While aimed at mediators, these “neurobiological commandments” could be useful tools for more constructive political cross-talk.

### **Gaps in the literature**

Delli Carpini et al. (2004) pointed out that not much work had been done on how political talk starts, how it ends, and what it sounds like. This remains true today, with the exception of a handful of ethnographic such as that by Walsh et al. (2017) on political conversation in the conflictual time of a recall vote in Wisconsin. Similarly, little has been done in the field of political talk around the skills needed for such. The exception is a call by some for more listening (Dobson, 2012; Thill, 2009), and it is noted that Habermas himself did not address listening at all. Conflict resolution literature has more information about skills.

There is research on general human motivations to talk across a political divide. There also is research about the types of people who are more likely to undertake such

conversations. There is a great deal of research on why people do not talk across political divides. However, there has not yet been much inquiry, particularly in this time of heightened polarization, into what makes different people seek out such conversations and the concomitant questions of how more people can be encouraged to do so and equipped to do so successfully. Nor has there been much mapping of how these conversations unfold and what their consequences are for polarization. This research fills that gap.

### **Summary and Conclusions**

In conclusion, bringing social psychology and political science literature (particularly that of political talk) together with communication and conflict resolution literature does several things. It illuminates themes of identity, emotion, and belonging as drivers of our political behavior. It also identifies several challenges to political cross-talk: the desire to maintain positive relationships; the built-in information-processing mechanisms that cause biases we may not even be aware of; and a general lack of skills to carry out such difficult conversations. Finally, it offers glimpses of how positive conversations could come about, particularly with an increase in conversational skills and social trust.

Little of the literature addresses the question of what would help people who naturally avoid difficult conversations to choose instead to seek them out. It particularly does not address this in the hyper-polarized time since the 2016 presidential election. It also fails to outline what would be necessary to make those conversations productive rather than destructive.

This study helped to fill these gaps by focusing on this polarized moment. It sought to understand why and with whom people would consider having such conversations. It also sought to uncover ways in which people might feel more able to have these conversations and have them well.

### Chapter 3: Research Method

This chapter presents the methodology for this study. First, it outlines the worldview for the research design and rationale for choosing the research approach. It defines my role as a researcher, including assumptions and biases I brought to the process as well as how I addressed ethical issues. This chapter includes methodological details such as the rationale for selection of participants, development and piloting strategy for the interview protocol, and procedures for collecting data. It also provides a summary of how data was analyzed, including descriptions for how trustworthiness was handled.

#### **Research Worldview**

The purpose of this research was to explore the challenges of and possibilities for easier and more constructive informal political talk between people with divergent political views. The research tradition chosen was a pragmatic worldview, using an exploratory qualitative design of narrative inquiry with structural and thematic analysis. Pragmatism has several hallmarks that are applicable to the study of polarization and its effects on society. First, pragmatism is about the reciprocal relationship between belief and action (Morgan, 2014). This action/belief/action dynamic occurs during polarization as people's beliefs about both their ingroups and outgroups cause them to act in certain ways – in this case, communicating less and less frequently with each other. This lack of communication in turn feeds into individuals' misperceptions about the outgroup, which then strengthens their belief about the chasm separating their ingroup from the outgroup.

Second, pragmatism is about embodied, contextual experience (Morgan, 2014). This dynamic is also part of the phenomenon of polarization, because both individual and group behavior is shaped by external forces. Finally, pragmatism is about coming to



understand the underpinnings of a phenomenon in order to create social change (Morgan, 2014). This study sought to identify the challenges to, and possibilities for, better communication across the current political divide. The final part of the study, therefore, generated recommendations concerning conditions for positive social change.

### **Research Questions**

The research purpose, tradition, and central concepts all led to my research questions. My main research question was: how do liberals and conservatives experience communicating across the political divide? The sub-questions were:

- What are their motivations for communicating across the political divide?
- What are the barriers to doing so?
- What can be done to assist people to have more frequent and constructive conversations?

### **Research Rationale and Design**

Given the research worldview, purpose, and research questions, I chose an exploratory qualitative methodology, using narrative interviewing, as the design of the study. This approach was chosen as a result of the complexity of the problem to be researched. Polarization is about relationships between individuals and groups in a society. Many factors affect these interpersonal relationships, particularly in a polarizing context. Citing just a few, these include individuals' personality traits and belief systems, but also externalities such as the dynamics of social media and the trend of sorting into like-minded communities. They also include exogenous factors such as income and education. The interplay of these factors means that the relationships and context for

political conversations are constantly changing and therefore best understood through a qualitative approach that probes individuals' beliefs and actions deeply.

This qualitative approach also was chosen because it helps fill a gap in the literature. As noted in the literature review, much quantitative work has been done around which types of people are likely to talk across the divide, who their talk networks are, and what effects those conversations might have on their behavior. Only a little research has been done around how people perceive the importance of such conversations and their ideas as to what might make it easier to have more frequent and constructive conversations. Therefore, the complexity of the problem of polarization, as well as gaps in the literature, led to the decision to adopt a qualitative research methodology.

More specifically, the approach chosen for the qualitative research was that of narrative analysis. At its core, narrative analysis is based on an understanding that humans construct their self-identities, group identities, value systems, and norms through stories. In other words, narratives are “strategic, functional and purposeful...[they] do political work” (Riessman, 2008, pg. 8). Stories are fundamental to how we understand and define ourselves, as well as how we understand and define others. The act of defining self and others – or “us” and “them” – is at the heart of polarization, and therefore the examination of how people tell partisan stories is crucial.

Riessman articulates six complex intentions behind individuals' construction of narrative (Riessman, 2008, pg. 8-9). All of these relate to the question of polarization. First, she argues that narrative is used to recall past events and people. This then helps us to define both ourselves and others – the partisan ingroup with which we identify and the outgroup against which we are polarizing. She argues that narrative is also used to contest

others' stories in an attempt to exert power – again, a dynamic of polarization and the quest for political control of the country. Then Riessman posits that narrative is used to influence as well as to deceive others. In a partisan context, these equate to bids for power and control. Finally, she argues that narrative is used to mobilize constituencies in order to create change. In this case, partisans use their shared narrative to create their partisan vision of change.

Narrative analysis therefore relates directly to the research purpose and questions. Analyzing the narratives people use to describe their history and values allows us to understand how they have built their worldview and what it means for the (partisan) norms they follow and values they hold. These partisan narratives arise from both internal and external sources. I therefore looked at both “lived” and “told” narratives (Cobb, 2013). “Lived narratives” are the narratives we develop ourselves, and “told narratives” are those given to us by our culture. In other words, I looked at participants’ personal narratives about their experience communicating across the political divide, but also probed their understanding of the meta-narratives they are told around American polarization. These latter included, for example, widely shared stories of how much polarization has increased in recent years and how the other side has become angrier and less willing to listen. As Cobb notes, comparing these two sets of narratives enables us to see how people contest the meaning of events and actions, as well as how conflict hardens and narratives simplify over time. For this research, it lets us see both how individuals use their own stories about the other side in their polarized context, as well as how they are shaped by external stories about the other side.

This approach was chosen not only for the possibility of exploring an under-researched aspect of this problem. It was chosen because narrative analysis also may carry the seeds of a solution to the current state of polarization. Through increased, constructive political talk, people on opposite sides of the political divide may begin to identify seeds of a new and shared narrative.

### **Role of the Researcher**

I came to this research as a longtime political activist and a committed “small d” democrat. By this I mean that I believe that no single person or party has a monopoly on truth, and that we need to have vibrant conversations with all members of our society in order to truly understand the issues that face us as well as to identify potential solutions. I come to this stance having grown up with a father who was a Republican and a mother who was a Democrat. Dinner conversations frequently involved politics and emotions – but also a great deal of learning. My belief in the need for dialogue springs from this upbringing.

That said, I tend to fall on the liberal side of the spectrum and I am currently actively involved in a number of liberal causes. Like many of my compatriots I have naturally self-selected into a like-minded social and cultural environment. I have to be deliberate in seeking out conservative viewpoints. In other words, I am part of the polarization in this country.

I sought to keep these biases in mind as I undertook my research. In particular I tried to bracket my identity during participant recruitment, data collection, and data analysis. This included deliberately involving conservatives in reviewing my interview protocol to achieve neutral language. I also had an additional review of preliminary

findings by two conservative colleagues, as well as member checks to ensure I was articulating both sides fairly. Additionally, I perceived a slight liberal bias in much of the literature and therefore tried to find even-handed scholarly definitions of liberals and conservatives.

### **Participant Selection Logic**

Thirty people were interviewed: 15 self-identified conservatives and 15 self-identified liberals. Since this study was looking at polarization, the most important selection factor was ensuring I had equal numbers of liberals and conservatives. For this reason, I used “independent” as an exclusionary criterion. Within each partisan category, however, participants were chosen to represent a diversity of frequently-attended demographic characteristics such as gender, age, and geographic location (urban and rural). This was to allow me to explore a range of perceptions both across the political divide as well as within each side.

### **Participant Recruitment**

Initially I sought to recruit participants through libraries and organizations in two politically-mixed areas within driving distance of my home in Washington, D.C.: the rural area of Warrenton, Virginia, and the urban area of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. However, after several months of unsuccessfully trying different ways to reach members of those communities, I shifted to describing my study to family and friends, and seeking their help in recruitment. I also used snowballing, with some participants recommending others whom they thought would be willing to participate.

This recruitment technique had some advantages. I was able to garner interviews from all across the country, from Vermont to South Carolina, Virginia to California. I

also was able to talk to people who stated up front that they do not like talking about politics, but were participating because their friend or family member had asked them to. Since that conflict avoidant attitude is representative of most Americans, per Pew and other reports, that was an important group of people to be interviewing. Research around participant recruitment highlights the frequent problem that people who are open to participating in a study are not always representative of the rest of the population. To some degree, my recruitment methodology through family and friend connections helped me overcome that bias.

Because these interviews were around the country, most were conducted by telephone. Most were about 30 minutes long and most were recorded. (I did have some technical difficulties with three, but had very thorough notes from which to reconstruct the interviews.) I sent the consent form in advance, explaining in the body of the email what it was and why. At the end of the interview, I thanked the person for their time, and asked if I could send them preliminary findings for their confirmation of accuracy.

### **Interview Protocol**

I produced an interview protocol for the interviews, following a narrative analysis style. To uncover narratives, Jacob and Furgerson (2012) recommend open-ended questions that progress from easier to more difficult questions and are drawn from factors identified in the literature as important to the topic. My questions therefore sought to elicit narratives that related to the research questions. This included exploration of times when participants had, or thought about having, conversations across the divide. The interviews inquired into participants' motivations for undertaking such conversations, the challenges they perceived, and factors they thought might ease future such conversations.

I used the recommended open-ended question phrasing, “tell me about xxxx” (Jacob and Furgerson, 2012).

The protocol was tested on one liberal and one conservative and adjusted based on their feedback. I sought to ensure not only that the questions were comprehensible to the participant. I also hoped to verify that the items in the interview protocol explored the concepts I wished them to explore. The substance of the interviews to test the protocol were not included in the findings.

**Definition of key terms.** Key terms in the study are those of informal political talk as well as the identifiers of “liberal” and “conservative.” To guide discussion of informal political talk, I used the definition of Wyatt, Katz, & Kim (2000). This focuses on the informal, interpersonal discussion of political issues that comes about in daily life, rather than the formal, structured deliberation held in a setting designed to guide such conversation. Similarly, this research focused on face-to-face or telephone conversations that ordinary people have with each other, rather than conversations they might have through social media.

Eveland et al. (2011) notes further ambiguity in the literature, particularly around what constitutes “politics” and what constitutes a “conversation”. For this reason, I defined political talk as conversations about “governments, elections, and politics” (Eveland, 2004, p. 183; Huckfeldt, 2001, p. 427, 2007, p. 981; Huckfeldt, Johnson, & Sprague, 2002, p. 4; Huckfeldt, Sprague, & Levine, 2000, p. 642; Mutz, 2002a, 2002b). Other researchers have added definitions about the level of politics specified, whether local or national or specific topics such as the economy or unemployment (Moy & Gastil, 2006). I used the more general terms rather than those that specified level or topic.

## Data Analysis

Interviews were recorded and I then transcribed them manually. NVivo software was used to assist data storage and retrieval for the coding process.

Slightly adapting the process outlined by Kalpokaite and Radivojevic (2019), I conducted a round of preliminary coding to familiarize myself with the data and create initial descriptive and *in vivo* codes, the better to maintain participants' voices into my analysis. In this round of coding, I also started becoming aware of repetition within individual interviews, across the body of interviews, and within the groups of "liberal" and "conservative". This beginning to be alert to patterns would help me in further coding.

After familiarizing myself with the data through preliminary coding, I then did a round of narrative analysis. I did this in part following Rogan and DeKock (2005), who advocate first examining the whole text for themes, then going back and looking at the grammar and syntax choices embedded in the wording. Then they advocate returning to the wider frame of the entire text, looking for its literary aspects. This was where I turned to Mishler (1986), who advocates for coding the text in terms of Orientation, Abstract, Complicating Action, and Resolution, and then analyzing the whole text through that framework.

I wrote summary narrative analysis memos for each interview that contained stories of cross-divide conversations. Most "stories" were extremely short and contained little plotting or characterization. Information derived from the narrative analysis mostly revolved around the question of what the story seemed to mean to them, which ultimately was captured in findings around meaning-making, skills required, and examples of mini-



cultures of respect (detailed in chapters four and five). In those few cases where there were fully developed stories of cross-divide conversation, I paid attention to the way plot was constructed, characters were described, and meaning seemingly given to the incident (Cobb, 2013). In this way, the structural analysis deepened the understanding brought about by the thematic analysis.

Because I unearthed relatively few stories of actual cross-divide conversation, I chose to postpone further narrative analysis in order to pursue thematic analysis of the majority of the data: participants' answers to the general questions of "Do you think these conversations are important, and if so, why?"; "What do you think are barriers to these conversations?"; and "What could help you have more frequent and constructive conversations?" I therefore went back and did a round of axial coding, where I began to identify codes that were linked, could be condensed, and could be joined into categories and subcategories. I did a third round of coding, looking at text excerpts within each code to ensure the codes were both standard as well as distinct.

Having analyzed interviews individually, I then looked at emerging themes across categories, including those raised in narrative analysis, which would form my findings. I looked at these both within groups (liberal or conservative) as well as between groups. For example, did conservatives and liberals explain political cross-talk in the same way or differently? Were similar emotions described? Did motivations differ between groups? I also tracked these between genders, exploring questions such as whether women and men have these conversations with different types of people. As will be seen in the findings section, I found no significant differences between men and women, and only a

few between the experiences of conservatives and liberals (although I did find great differences in the worldviews expressed by liberals and conservatives).

Table 1

### Codes and Categories

| Interview question  | Code                                | Sub-category                  | Category                 |
|---|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------|--------------------------|
| Tell me a story about when you have had (or seen) a conversation across the political divide? | Vilification                        | Socially                      | Experience               |
|   | Rejection                           |                               |                          |
|   | Intolerance                         |                               |                          |
|   | Frequency                           | Frequency                     |                          |
|   | Sorrow                              | Emotions                      |                          |
|   | Safety and comfort                  |                               |                          |
|   | Fear                                |                               |                          |
|   | Enjoyment                           |                               |                          |
|   | Anger                               |                               |                          |
|   | Sensemaking                         | Cognitively                   |                          |
|   | Differing worldviews                |                               |                          |
|   | Constructive learning               |                               |                          |
|   | Avoid                               | Avoid                         |                          |
|   | Attack                              | Attack                        |                          |
|   | Shut down                           |                               |                          |
|   | Throwaway comments                  | Ubiquity of division          | Context of conversations |
|   | Social media                        |                               |                          |
|   | Political leaders                   |                               |                          |
|   | Disputed sources of information     |                               |                          |
|   | Condescension                       |                               |                          |
|   | Race                                | Race                          |                          |
|   | Positive contextual factors         | Positive contextual factors   |                          |
|   | Overall context                     | Overall context               |                          |
|   | Outside forces and disruptors       | Outside forces and disruptors |                          |
|   | Tribalizing behavior                | Escalating conflict dynamics  |                          |
|   | Intraparty conflict                 |                               |                          |
|   | Changing norms of personal behavior |                               |                          |
|   | Change over time                    | Changing social norms         |                          |
|   | Changing social norms               |                               |                          |
|   | Avoid                               | Avoid                         |                          |
|   | Attack                              | Attack                        |                          |
|   | Shut down                           |                               |                          |
| Do you think these conversations are important to have?                                       | Importance                          |                               | Importance               |
| What motivates you/would motivate you to have such conversations                              | Religious duty                      | Religious duty                | Motivations              |
|   | Intellectual rigor                  | Intellectual rigor            |                          |
|   | Civic duty                          | Civic duty                    |                          |
|   | Change minds                        | Change minds                  |                          |
|   | Build bonds                         | Build bonds                   |                          |
|   | Be heard                            | Be heard                      |                          |
| What are barriers you perceive to   | Lazy thinking                       | Lazy thinking                 | Barriers                 |
|   | Lack of opportunity                 | Lack of opportunity           |                          |
|   | Risking reputation                  | Fears                         |                          |

|  |                            |                        |                      |
|--|----------------------------|------------------------|----------------------|
| having constructive conversations?                                 | Jeopardizing relationships |                        |                      |
|  | Fear of offending          |                        |                      |
|  | Ego and certitude          | Ego and certitude      |                      |
|  | Confirmation bias          |                        |                      |
|  | Too emotional              | Assumptions            |                      |
|  | No point                   |                        |                      |
|  | No listening               |                        |                      |
| What might make it easier to have more constructive conversations? | Validity of views          | Validity of views      | Facilitating factors |
|  | Trust                      | Trust                  |                      |
|  | Sincerity                  |                        |                      |
|  | Respect                    |                        |                      |
|  | Existing relationships     |                        |                      |
|  | Identify common ground     | Identify common ground |                      |
|  | Find solutions             |                        |                      |
|  | Humanizing                 | Humanizing             |                      |
|  | Some structure             | Formal process         |                      |
|  | Mediator                   | Mediator               |                      |
|  | Ground rules               | Ground rules           |                      |
|  | Separate ideas from people |                        |                      |
|  | Keep own opinion           |                        |                      |
|  | Capacity                   | Capacity               |                      |
|  | Skill of questioning       |                        |                      |
|  | Skill of listening         |                        |                      |
|  | Self-awareness             |                        |                      |
|  | Empathy                    |                        |                      |

Throughout my analysis I sought to pay attention to silences and omissions. This is particularly crucial when doing conflict research because we tend to pay attention to our ingroup more than our outgroup. In fact, we tend to dehumanize members of our outgroups (Bruneau et al, 2012). We tend neither to listen to them or weave them into our own stories. To understand the polarization and reluctance to talk, it therefore was important to understand the ways in which different groups were (or were not) considering the existence and circumstances of other groups. Analysis of the language used by both sides did become part of a finding.

**Issues of trustworthiness.** There is considerable debate in qualitative circles around the issues of validity and reliability that are emphasized in quantitative research. Cresswell, among others, prefers to see validity in qualitative research as a question of “accuracy” (Cresswell, 2013, p.250; Morse et al, 2002) and suggests that researchers

undertake a variety of strategies to ensure accuracy. I used many of those he suggests, including peer review and debriefing. For this, I sought the input of content experts such as two colleagues in the Alliance for Peacebuilding, as well as a conservative military scholar for a different, conservative perspective. Finally, I continuously engaged in reflexivity, working to understand how my researcher biases affected my perspective and analysis.

Internal validity was established in a variety of ways. First was saturation of information. The high degree of similarity across the 30 interviews, conservatives and liberals both, indicated I did achieve saturation. Second was triangulation of data. The data collected was compared with related, objective external studies such as Pew Research Center reports on polarization, and was found to be in high alignment.

With regard to transferability, or external validity, this largely was established through thick description as well as selection of a group of participants that represented the variety of demographics of people in the United States. Dependability comes from the audit trail of my research methodology design and implementation (many related documents included in the appendices). Intracoder reliability was established through creation of a code book as well as tracking of changes made. In analysis of all interviews, I found a number of statements from one side that mirrored those of the other side, indicating internal validity. Those instances of mirror-image comments are noted in the findings chapter.

**Ethical procedures.** The Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval constituted the main method for ensuring the ethics of this research, particularly the confidentiality statements. These outlined how data will be kept confidential. This included use of codes

and pseudonyms to protect participants' identity, storage of data on a hard drive rather than the Cloud, limited access to the data, and use in the write-up only of short quotes without specific attribution.

### **Summary**

In conclusion, I based my research in a pragmatic worldview. Pragmatism echoes many of the dynamics found in the research problem of polarization. This includes recognition of the cycle of belief and action as well as the search for social change. Specifically, I used an exploratory qualitative approach, with thematic and narrative analysis of interviews. This analysis allowed me to explore the values and identities that are at play in individuals Behavior in relation to talking across the political divide. Searching for commonalities and differences between and among the narratives allowed me to unearth the complexity of the polarization dynamic to fill a gap in the largely quantitative body of literature on the subject.

## Chapter 4: Results

### **Introduction**

This exploratory, qualitative study looked at the research question of how conservatives and liberals experience communicating across the political divide. One sub research question was around why people undertake such cross-divide conversations. Two other sub research questions were around barriers to these conversations and factors which might assist people have them more frequently and constructively. These research questions were examined through interviews with 15 self-identified conservatives and 15 self-identified liberals around the country.

Results of those interviews are presented in this chapter. First, I explain who the participants were, then I summarize the main findings. I then look at each finding separately, defining the finding and providing evidence as to how the analysis derived the result. Finally, I summarize the findings to lead into Chapter Five, the discussion of their significance within the literature as well as to future practice and research.

### **Interviews and Analysis**

Thirty interviews were conducted in April and May, 2019. Fifteen liberals and fifteen conservatives were interviewed for 30-60 minutes each, mostly by telephone. They were recruited largely by friends and family. Participants lived all over the country, including both urban and rural areas. They represented a range of experience levels with and attitudes about talking across the political divide. A few were very used to doing so and enjoyed it; others flatly stated that they avoid such conversations wherever possible. This sample did skew toward the well-educated. Only three of the participants were high-school educated -- all conservatives -- and at least three of the participants had PhDs.

I conducted a member check by sending a draft of preliminary findings (after the narrative coding) by email to all interviewees, asking them if they felt I had represented them fairly and if it provoked further thinking for them. Seven interviewees responded (four conservatives and three liberals), saying they felt well represented. Most added that they were interested in the fact that the emotions around these conversations are similar on both sides, but that the divide is stark. One older, conservative man said it painted a picture of “a whirlpool of enmity and confusion.” To further check any potential liberal bias on my part, I sent preliminary findings to two other conservatives for their feedback. Both responded that they felt my write up captured their feelings about the topic of polarization as well as their understanding of other conservatives’ views.

Results are presented below with pseudonyms for each interviewee to preserve anonymity. Quotations are largely verbatim. However, some have been slightly abridged for concision as marked by a long ellipsis (.....). A three-dot ellipsis marks a pause which I consider significant to show the participant’s state of mind. Sometimes language has been standardized, with filler words such as “kinda,” “you know,” “like” and “umm” removed so as not to negatively portray the person. Demographic information is specified in Table 1.

Table 2

Demographic information of participants (using pseudonyms)

| <b>Conservatives</b> |  | <b>Liberals</b>  |   |
|----------------------|--|------------------|---|
| <b>Benjamin</b>      | 30-something Washington DC area urban Asian-American man | <b>Brooklyn</b>  | 22-year-old urban Florida African-American woman        |
| <b>Betty</b>         | 64-year old rural Wyoming white woman                    | <b>Charles</b>   | 70-year-old rural Virginia white man                    |
| <b>Brian</b>         | 50-year-old urban Minnesota white man                    | <b>Cynthia</b>   | 50-year-old urban South Carolina African-American woman |
| <b>Darla</b>         | 21-year-old rural Virginia white woman                   | <b>Danielle</b>  | 25-year-old urban Ohio African-American woman           |
| <b>Doug</b>          | 67-year-old rural Virginia white man                     | <b>DeWitt</b>    | 70-year-old rural Virginia white man                    |
| <b>Edna</b>          | 75-year-old rural Wyoming white woman                    | <b>Hersch</b>    | 70-year-old urban Virginia white man                    |
| <b>Eli</b>           | 50-year-old urban California white man                   | <b>Jackie</b>    | 26-year-old urban Illinois African-American woman       |
| <b>Hank</b>          | 63-year-old rural Texas white man                        | <b>Jeff</b>      | 62-year-old rural Nebraska white man                    |
| <b>Howard</b>        | 75-year-old rural Vermont white man                      | <b>Kelly</b>     | 50-year-old urban Colorado white woman                  |
| <b>John</b>          | 29-year-old urban Minnesota white man                    | <b>Molly</b>     | 48-year-old urban Missouri white woman                  |
| <b>Madison</b>       | 32-year-old urban Colorado white woman                   | <b>Nathaniel</b> | 21-year-old urban Massachusetts white man               |
| <b>Rick</b>          | 65-year-old urban Missouri white male                    | <b>Sonia</b>     | 50-year-old urban California Latina                     |
| <b>Sally</b>         | 70-year-old rural Texas white woman                      | <b>Sue</b>       | 59-year-old rural Wyoming white woman                   |
| <b>Sarah</b>         | 55-year-old urban New York white woman                   | <b>Tanya</b>     | 50-year-old urban California white woman                |
| <b>Stan</b>          | 39-year-old urban Ohio white man                         | <b>Tim</b>       | 30-something urban California white man                 |

### Overall Results

In analyzing the interview data, ten main findings emerged. These findings will be explored in this chapter, broken out by research question. Many are interlinked. Table 2 presents the findings with the associated research question.



Table 3

## Findings Per Research Question

| Research Question   | Finding   |
|---|---|
| How do liberals and conservatives experience communicating across the political divide? | <b>Finding one:</b> Liberals and conservatives largely experience interacting across the divide in the same way.  |
|   | <b>Finding two:</b> Actual cross-divide conversations rarely happened, but shorter cross-divide interactions did.   |
|   | <b>Finding three:</b> Cross-divide interactions tended to be highly emotional, as they seemed to reveal a large, usually painful difference in worldviews between liberals and conservatives. |
|   | <b>Finding four:</b> Interactions occurred in a wider socio-economic and political context of stress and division.  |
|   | <b>Finding five:</b> Interactions both shaped and were shaped by escalating conflict dynamics.  |
|   | <b>Finding six:</b> Racial and ethnic issues were an intensification of all findings.   |
| What are the barriers to such conversations?  | <b>Finding seven:</b> Fears and assumptions about the other side led most participants to avoid cross-divide conversations.   |
| What motivates people to undertake such conversations?                                  | <b>Finding eight:</b> Most participants saw the importance of conversations and wished to have them, for a variety of social and civic reasons.   |
| What would assist people to have such conversations more frequently and constructively? | <b>Finding nine:</b> Most saw a need for greater capacity to have cross-divide conversations.   |
|   | <b>Finding ten:</b> Positive, but fragile, models exist of mini-cultures which promote and protect differing opinions.  |

### **Finding One: Liberals and Conservatives Largely Experienced Interacting Across the Divide in the Same Way**

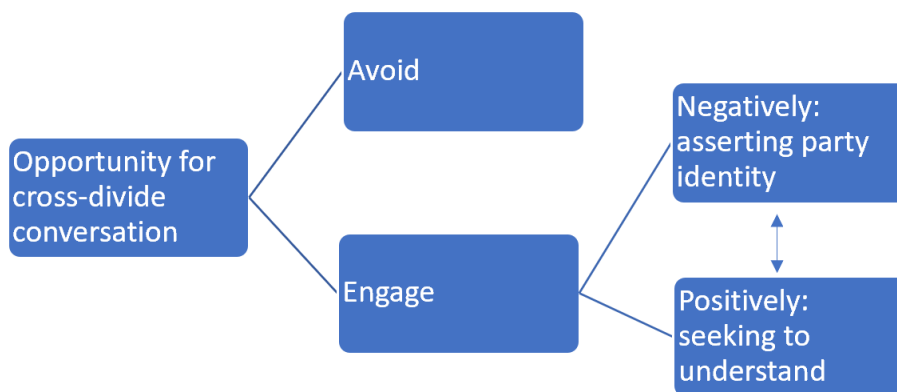
While liberal and conservative participants articulated very different worldviews, the way they described their experience of talking across the divide was similar. Both sides had similar fears and assumptions which caused them to avoid conversations, as will be discussed in finding two and finding seven. Both sides had largely similar reasons they wished they could have more cross-divide conversations, as will be discussed in

finding eight. Both sides had similar suggestions for how such conversations can be fostered, as will be explored in findings nine and ten.

The area of largest difference is around what several conservatives described as “throwaway comments.” These were defined as off-the-cuff remarks, usually about President Trump or conservatives in general, that were made by liberals in public venues and which conservatives found very disparaging. While two liberal participants did speak of feeling disdained by the other side, what they described was not as prevalent as the dynamic portrayed by conservative participants. All of this is discussed at greater length in finding five, on escalating conflict dynamics.

### **Finding Two: Actual Cross-divide Conversations Rarely Happened**

Simply put, cross-divide conversations rarely happened. However, many participants reported having cross-divide interactions that did not become full-blown conversations. Analysis of interviews revealed two types of these cross-divide interactions (spontaneous or planned) that led to three types of reaction: avoidance by one party; engagement by the other in ways that asserted his or her political beliefs; or engagement in ways to promote understanding or strengthen relational bonds. Spontaneous interactions were much more frequent, for example, prompted by a TV show or an off-the-cuff political comment to which someone responded. Planned conversations, in which someone deliberately chose to start a cross-divide discussion, were rare. Additionally, participants described how the course of the interactions could change. For example, they could start off positively but go off course (as explored in finding nine on capacity).



*Figure 2.* Cross-divide Interaction Patterns.

The vast majority of participants of both sides described situations in which their reaction was to avoid talking across the political divide. Reasons for this are explored in finding six on fears and assumptions. Several participants from both sides described interacting across the divide in ways that asserted their political beliefs. This usually was an announcement of their party membership or political preferences. Finally, about a third of the participants, also of both sides, reported at least one instance of deliberately trying to reach across the divide to promote understanding or to strengthen bonds. These instances were usually, but not always, with family or friends. It should be noted that sometimes a conversation would begin as an attempt to engage constructively in order to learn, but would soon become a series of assertions of (differing) identities and value systems (see finding three).

With regard to spontaneous interactions, participants described these usually as starting when one person made a remark, often while watching television or as part of a wider conversation at a book club or dinner party. Participants further reported usually choosing to ignore such comments and avoid a longer conversation on the topic. For example, Brian, a conservative, explained how it often plays out with his liberal in-laws: “You’ll see something on TV, and somebody will make a comment and you’ll just let it

go, it's not worth it.... That seems to happen more often now." Several other participants described similar situations and choices.

A few other participants reported that these spontaneous conversations happen with frequency. Often this was because of the proximity of family or colleagues. While some participants noted that they deliberately avoided conversations with family (see finding six on fears and assumptions), for others the regular interaction with family members meant that cross-divide interactions were frequent.

It's sort of an ongoing thing, especially in recent years, with my parents -- and with my dad especially -- which is really challenging because it's personal and it's hard to -- so, I'm 26 and I think it's also been part of our evolving relationship in a lot ways... (Jackie, liberal)

Being in the political minority, particularly in a rural area, for most participants seemed to evoke an avoidance reaction. They preferred not to "out" themselves, as several from both sides characterized it. However, Jeff, a liberal, seemed to find being a representative of a political minority increased other people's interest in talking to him across the divide:

There's a lot of people who want to talk about this stuff. I don't know if it's related to where I work or how I work but we have some down time. We have just some table time and if it weren't for cell phones, I suppose we would talk even more.

Very few interviewees reported having planned conversations across the political divide, which they deliberately started. "I've never really been in an actual elongated conversation of my side versus another side. I can't say how it would go" (Stan,

conservative). Those who reported doing so were from both parties and were people who had given previous thought to the fact that they wanted to try to understand the other person or to build bridges. They tended to be people who, by profession or personal inclination, had the requisite communication skills: reporter, mediator, diplomat, legislator, researcher, therapist. One of the few who reported doing so often, and with ease, describes a constructive conversation across the divide. He started in a joking manner that assured peoples' sense of safety and comfort (see finding nine on need for capacity).

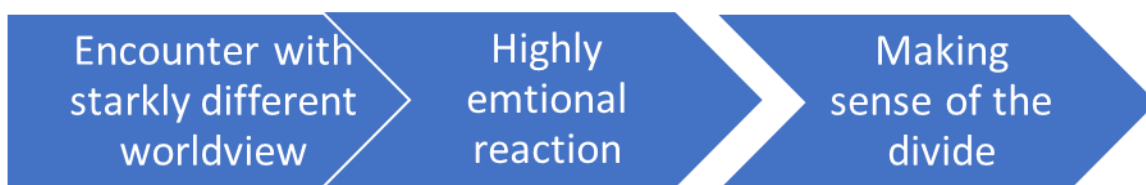
I was having lunch in the café, reading my paper. There were these three guys there with MAGA hats on. Fox was on, and it was a story about something, and they were talking about it. I said, "Mind if I come over there and straighten you out?" (DeWitt, liberal)

In sum, analysis of interviews revealed a pattern of responses. Interactions mostly occurred spontaneously, with one person making an offhand political comment and the other person avoiding further engagement. Sometimes they would respond with an assertion of political identity or belief. Infrequently, they would try to engage constructively.

### **Finding Three: Cross-divide Interactions Tended to be Highly Emotional, as they Seemed to Reveal a Large, Usually Painful, Difference in Worldviews Between Liberals and Conservatives**

In addition to showing that actual cross-divide conversations rarely happened, interviews illustrated that cross-divide interactions that did occur often were highly emotional, and usually negatively so. As described by participants from both sides, most

of these interactions were not rational exchanges of information and opinion. Quite the opposite, all participants described the variety and depth of emotions they experienced during these interactions across the divide. Most, on both sides, reported predominantly negative emotions -- anger, fear, sorrow, and pain. However, a few participants, also from both sides, spoke about enjoyable emotions on the rare occasions when the conversations went well. These emotions included feeling liberated, relaxed, or closer to the other person in coming to better understand their worldview. For several participants, but not all, these interactions led to an additional process of sensemaking, trying to understand the divide in our families and communities, and their own role in it.



*Figure 3. Typical Cross-divide Interaction.*

**Starkly differing worldviews.** In talking about cross-divide conversations, many on both sides described a fundamental part of the experience was the revelation of clashing worldviews, and that this clash was what prompted the negative emotions. Many from both sides described being confronted with a remark by another person and having an immediate response such as “Are you kidding me?” or “How could you possibly think....?” Participants expressed an angry disbelief that someone could actually think what the other person had just voiced. This was true for both conservatives and liberals, of all ages.

The starkness of these differences between worldviews was evidenced in the variety of ways in which they surfaced. Many reported negative interactions around

differing perceptions of socio-political and economic structures that embodied participants' fundamental beliefs and values. For example, Rick, a conservative, explained his disbelief at actions taken by his liberal daughter: "She told me she participated in [the Ferguson protests], and I just, I just, I almost lost it! I was like, "You were participating – in the *protest*?!"

In a similar articulation from the other side, Hersch, a liberal, described his own disbelief in a position taken by a conservative friend about the Supreme Court nominee Brett Kavanaugh:

I don't know how anybody can have watched that painful day of testimony and not come with – at the very least – questioning whether the U.S. people, as an employer, should employ somebody who got that emotional, got that angry and partisan, and obviously was doing hand flips to avoid doing some questions.

Whereas my friend saw it completely the other way.

Differing worldviews surfaced not only in conversation about current events. Participants from both sides reported that they also arose in discussions of issues such as immigration, sexual orientation, and electoral reform. As Jackie, a liberal, described a typical conversation with her father:

One of [Dad's] truths is, 'A man is a man is a man, and what makes a man is that men are stronger than women.' And it's like, 'That makes no sense! That's... not how gender works, Dad! Trans men are also MEN!'

Sometimes conversations would begin as an attempt to engage across the divide, but when the depth of the difference in worldviews became apparent, participants described moving into assertion mode. For example, Charles, a liberal, reported trading

barbs with his Trump-supporting friend who kept sending him newspaper articles to discuss, with the plea that they were friends and could not stop talking. Hank, a conservative, shared how he repeated many times the same question of “but where will the money come from?” as his new brother-in-law spoke of the need for universal healthcare. This switching between engaging and asserting further demonstrates the emotional nature of these conversations.

Not only did these differing worldviews seem insurmountable to the participants, but several participants pointed out that the differences engendered suspicion of the other side’s motivations and interests. Several from both sides described this stark division as not around issues but around values, leading to the judgment that the other was not a good person and not acting for the common good. Nathaniel, a liberal, spoke about the difficulty of distinguishing genuinely differing worldviews from actions undertaken in bad faith.

I think people like the president and his supporters are a lot of grifters and there are people who are acting in bad faith, and you have to deal with that differently than someone who just has a different worldview.

Participants from both sides explained they often felt the other person’s worldview showed that they did not have the interests of the country at heart. Seeing no point, therefore, participants said was a main reason not to want to talk across the divide. This dynamic will be further explored in finding seven around fears and assumptions.

**Pain and making sense of differing worldviews.** Because they involved encountering different worldviews, almost all participants who had cross-divide conversations reported them as difficult. Many spoke of them as undermining peoples’



sense of safety and comfort on various levels, particularly the comfort of being with likeminded people and the cognitive safety of hearing only ideas that largely conform with one's own. This desire for safety and comfort appeared to be widespread, with many participants from both sides describing the anger and fear associated with coming into contact with completely different worldviews. They also described pain around trying to understand, or make sense of, this polarized situation. As John, a conservative, summed up:

We're so afraid of being uncomfortable or in a spot where it's "safe," but that's how anybody grows, or anybody moves forward in any aspect of life – and this is no different. You have to be in positions where you're uncomfortable and you're discussing things that might make you uncomfortable, so that you learn how to cope with those things internally, or else you don't deal with it correctly. You're going to get angry, and you're going hate someone, and you're not going to talk to a family member because they might differ in their perspective and you've never dealt with that before.

This highly emotional nature of these encounters seemed to provoke a great deal of sensemaking, as the narrative analysis revealed. Participants from both sides were trying to figure out why completely different worldviews exist, why they cannot be bridged, and what the consequences were of not being able to bridge the divide. In particular, interviewees from both sides wondered why otherwise good people were making political choices and using modes of expression that seemed so wrong.

Liberals who spoke about this were shocked by what they perceived as conservatives' racist comments and general support for Donald Trump, especially when it

came from people who seemed otherwise to share so many of their values and sense of compassion. Kelly, a liberal, expressed her lack of comprehension after the husband of her colleague announced he was a white supremacist over a dinner with colleagues:

And it was just the most – the most uncomfortable and the most disappointing feeling, because I like these people and they do a lot of good in the community, and I just was so shocked.

While liberals struggled to understand the perceived racism of “good people”, conservatives expressed surprise at the total investment of liberals in their politics and their seeming inability to separate ideas from people. Many conservatives noted that this often seemed to result in liberals’ decisions to end relationships over political disagreements. Eli, a conservative man, articulating what others had described, spoke about a liberal friend of his who had been cutting off relationships with other conservatives:

I’m the only person this particular person speaks with who holds a point of view on the right side. He has other friends he won’t even speak to, he just is so – I guess “repulsed” is the word – that he doesn’t have a relationship anymore and I think that’s bad!

Yet Charles, a liberal, recognized that the frustration over encountering differing worldviews goes both ways:

In framing why we’re divided, when I talk to David, he gets red faced. I get red faced. We get angry. So why? I think because we like each other and don’t understand it. How can this perfectly reasonable human being be so Goddamned irrational?

Sorrow was another emotion that participants from both sides referenced. Some interviewees talked about the sorrow of being disappointed in what might be revealed by these conversations. Others spoke about worrying they had caused disappointment in others. The latter emotion was very prevalent with family members. John, a conservative, mused on the pain he felt in realizing his mother was disappointed in him:

I remember that hurt me as being my mother – my mother, you know – having issues with the way that I felt politically, and then I could see that externalized as almost anger or disappointment in a short period of time after that.

Not all experiences were painful, however. A few interviewees, both conservatives and liberals, spoke of how enjoyable it was to have conversations across the divide. When conversations unfolded for a while and went well, people reported enjoying the opportunity to learn. They reported learning a new argument or angle, learning about themselves and their own beliefs, and learning more dimensions of a person they care about. One liberal described how she used to have fun interactions with her conservative neighbor but noted those had not happened since 2016. One young conservative woman mostly had very painful interactions across the divide, but just a few nights before our interview had had a long and satisfying conversation with her best friend from childhood, a self-described “bleeding heart” liberal. Still others spoke about the enjoyment of being free to express oneself and explore another in an unpolarized environment. In this situation, a safe and comfortable atmosphere was created because the predominant, shared worldview was of people who wanted to escape the Red-Blue dichotomy. These positive dynamics will be explored further in findings eight and ten.

Everywhere you went [at the Better Angels Red-Blue convention], you saw a Red and a Blue walking together and it was so liberating to be – you don't realize how severe or strong the bubbles are until you're in an atmosphere that is really free of political bubbles. (Hersch, liberal)

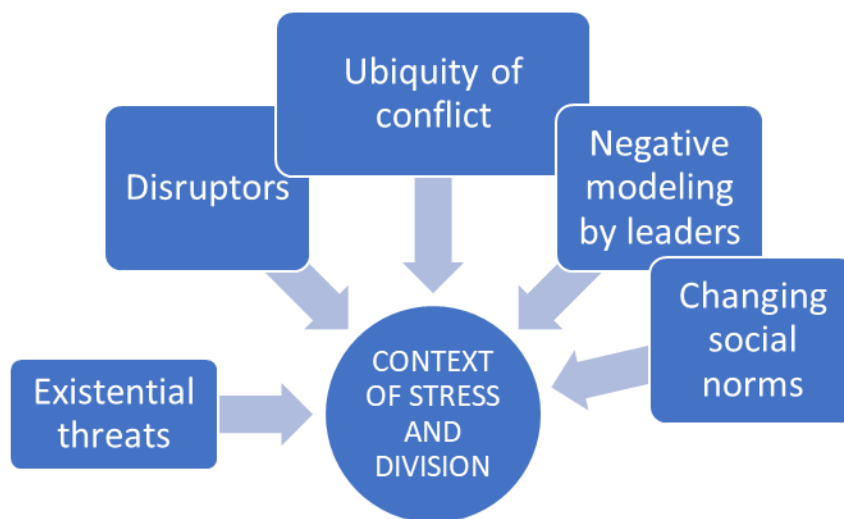
In sum, this finding revealed that participants' cross-divide interactions rarely were rational exchanges of ideas. Rather, they tended to be highly emotional interactions that involved anger in encountering a challenge to their worldview. That the differences between worldviews were stark and unsurmountable made many participants suspicious of the motivations of the other party. Only a few interactions provided space for a rational exchange of information and opinions.

#### **Finding Four: Interactions Occurred in a Wider Socio-economic and Political Context of Stress and Division**

Finding two was about how participants rarely had actual cross-divide conversations. Mostly they avoided the encounters, but occasionally would either respond to an opening with an assertion of their political identity, or – even more occasionally – engage constructively with sincere questions. Finding three was about how these situations usually were not rational exchanges of information, but rather highly emotional interactions involving anger at encountering a different worldview.

Finding four is about participants' portrayal of these cross-divide interactions as occurring not in a vacuum, but instead within the framework of a wider socio-economic and political context. Participants from both sides explained how the context affected their perceptions of a polarized society as well as their actions and reactions within that polarization. These contextual factors included changing social norms, a perceived

ubiquity of conflict, negative modeling by political leaders, and deliberately disruptive outside actors. Additionally, several participants on both sides referred to macro-level stressors such as climate change or economic hardship that create a general atmosphere of anxiety, which tends to dampen desire to talk across the divide.



*Figure 4.* Context within which Cross-divide Interactions Occur.

**Perceived ubiquity of conflict.** One of the most agreed-upon dynamics that affected cross-divide interactions, described by almost all participants, was the perceived ubiquity of conflict and division. Participants specified that, everywhere one looks, one sees references to and evidence of the political divide. The polarized context of these conversations was so important that almost all interviewees, in telling their stories of cross-divide interactions, would reference a precipitating external event. Several participants from both sides attributed this ubiquity to the 24/7 news cycle, which covers so much conflict and so sensationally. Several participants also referenced constant access to information through devices, as did Brian, the single conservative participant who did not see an increase in conflict:

What I don't believe is that the discord is getting worse. What I think is driving some of the challenges today is that we all see so frequently the discord. Social media, the news, whatever it might be... everything is in our face every day whereas 50 or 100 years ago you might bump into people you disagree with, but you might not see them again for two months.

Conservatives, in particular, spoke about how political division is not only constantly visible, but also has become interlinked with many other areas such as sports and entertainment. Many of them lamented the fact that conversations would turn abruptly political for seemingly no reason, and then cause them to shut down or duck out:

We [on our local board] go from talking about 'how do we fix the pool?' to 'why is Trump doing this?' It gets started and you just kinda throw everything up in the air and say, 'What's the point?' (Rick, conservative)

Sally, another conservative, spoke about how politics colors everything, making it difficult to find neutral topics.

Somebody said, 'Well, maybe we can just find a topic that people can all get around' and I said, 'That is part of our problem, that everything seems to be politically charged -- colors... food.... neighborhoods...' You know, you could hardly say anything anymore that doesn't have a trace of politics.

Yet another conservative, Betty, spoke about how this perceived ubiquity of conflict creates a negative reinforcing dynamic, causing positive dynamics not to be reported on or discussed. The implication was that, without knowledge of positive examples, people increasingly were losing the will to try to engage across the divide: "Sometimes the big issues get highlighted and overshadow everything else that's being

done, and I think that's partly what happens in DC." Seeing conflict everywhere – and resolution nowhere – therefore affected people's desire to engage in political crosstalk.

**Changing social norms.** In addition to feeling that they saw conflict everywhere, more than a third of participants, on both sides, also referenced changing values and social norms as negatively impacting their ability to have cross-divide conversations. Both liberals and conservatives spoke of the general uncertainty bred by the changing social norms. However, it was mostly conservatives who spoke of disagreeing with what the norms were becoming – particularly novel terms and questions around race and gender. Participants from both sides theorized that people were wary of getting into conversations for fear of transgressing new norms of which they were not aware. Participants also noted that the changes trigger new types of conflictual conversations as people fight back. As seen in the two quotes below, most conservatives expressed discomfort or even anger about changing norms and political correctness, while liberals tended to focus on reasons why these changes are needed:

I feel through the years it's almost like a double standard. It seems like it's gotten to the point where it's -- you can't say or really do anything. I mean, a lot of things are said in jest, but it's totally taken out of context sometimes. (Rick, conservative)

It seems to me that the level of common ground, and what is acceptable and not acceptable, is changing really, really quickly in many different respects. It used to be not acceptable for a presidential candidate to be caught in a major sex scandal, but at the same time those values are shifting, you also have values like the

#MeToo movement and people really having very different ideas about harassment, let's say, than they did even two years ago. (Sonia, liberal)

Some liberals saw an age gap in this dynamic. Jackie, a liberal, spoke about her conservative father's reaction to transgender issues and other modern conceptions:

I think the dads just -- they just don't get it. Especially the religious dads, they're like, 'The world is just fine! Why is everyone so upset? Can't things just go backwards?' and it's like, 'Well they CAN'T, because they would be worse, but....' Some weird nostalgia.

Doug, a conservative, was particularly worried about the issue of changing norms because it interfered with what he thought was the best way to find common ground between the parties. Far from seeing it as a route to common ground, he now perceives those changing ways of looking at our history as presenting a threat to some peoples' very existence:

We agreed between parties on what it means to be an American, and that's the missing link. Because now, from some sides -- or one side -- it's increasingly 'You're not American. The Founders, they were slave owners! They were bad!' You have got to look at context. Now we all have this woke thing, but if we look at everything we do through today's lenses, *you* could be obliterated next.

Other conservatives showed great anger about these changing norms, causing them to think all the more badly of liberals:

It's like [liberals] have sucked all of the fun and romance and everything we love about our country, our society, away with all this political correctness, and cultural appropriation and all these words, like 'cisgender.' The word 'cisgender'



drives me insane. Why do we need to have a word for normal? Why do we need to have a word for ‘your outside matches your inside and you were just born and functioning normal?’ (Madison, conservative)

But at least one liberal, Hersch, also articulated his own resentment of some of these new norms which were used against him. He related how one of his social media posts had been taken out of context to the point that he was attacked and labeled a racist by fellow liberal church members. Eventually the opprobrium became so intense that he left the church:

The one thing I have difficulty with is my own culture. I mean, I exist in a very progressive culture and my own culture’s intersectionality -- are you familiar with the term? Intersectionality is one of my least favorite things, but identity politics and intersectionality are things that do make me crazy. I have to control myself when I run into that one.

Changing social norms, participants therefore revealed, created worry about how to have conversations in this new context. They seemed to have a dampening effect on cross-divide conversations, or even a backlash -- as will be explored in the next finding -- as people sought to resist them.

**Negative modeling by political leaders.** In addition to ubiquitous conflict and changing social norms, many interviewees pointed to the poor role modeling of political leaders as also creating a negative dynamic. Participants on both sides did so, but tended to place the blame mostly on the party to which they do not belong. Edna, a conservative, spoke harshly of Democrats: “Those Democrats and those people in Congress they don’t

work together on anything.” Her comment was representative of participants on both sides talking about the negative modeling of the other side’s leaders.

However, at least one person saw the influence of political leaders as a potential way forward. As Darla, a conservative, noted: “I feel like a lot of Americans would follow suit if we saw that our politicians were working together. Then the news wouldn’t have too many bad things to talk about. There wouldn’t be too much controversy.” Thus, some participants indicated that, if the politicians could model more respectful behavior, there would be a trickle-down effect of more constructive dialogue amongst citizens.

**Outside forces and disruptors.** A few participants in both parties also described systemic forces in the overarching socio-economic and political context that are furthering division. While only one person mentioned the role of bots, several people described how the very methodology of media -- and social media in particular -- divides us. Benjamin, a conservative, summed it up well:

I think the main barrier is the fact that we’re all locked into platforms and devices that have built into their systems basically trying to feed us more of what makes us outraged, trying to filter us more into groups where we’re all like-minded.

Several others discussed the role of trolls and extremists who are stirring the pot of division -- again particularly on social media. While many people spoke about this, two liberal African-American women noticed a particularly racial aspect to this provocation:

We have more courage in those [online] situations! A lot more courage. And I think it’s really with black men. And it’s white men that challenge them on social

media and I don't think they'd do that one on one. But they come *hard* on social media. (Cynthia)

I remember a particular conversation. It must have been around 2016 -- like when there was a lot of Black Lives Matter activism going on, the whole Colin Kaepernick thing was still hot at that time.....This one guy in particular said to me once, 'Oh you know, I went to a Black Lives Matter rally and ..... they really could be better organized!' It's a white guy, and I'm like (adopts a naïve voice) 'So, did you offer to help organize?'... (sighs). [It was] just .... strange. (Jackie)

Thus, participants noted several ways in which outside forces affected conversation. In particular, many pointed to the silo mechanisms of social and traditional media as quelling cross-divide conversation. Other participants pointed to spoilers and people intentionally creating conflict as dampening will to engage.

**Existential issues affect conversations.** Several participants pointed to macro-level stressors that affected peoples' willingness to engage. In describing these issues, participants of both parties noted how these existential issues created a sense of angst or apathy which affected conversations across parties. Usually these were described as causing people to shut down rather than engage, which increased the distance between parties. For example, several liberals mentioned climate change in particular as a looming background issue that people found worrisome and overwhelming. Tanya spoke for them:

This climate change crisis is so glaringly obvious and apparent in the last few years -- like, you can see it. It's very depressing. And there doesn't seem to be

any -- there's got to be some way to protest but at the same time you think, like 'What's the point?'

The hardship caused by economic issues was raised by two liberals and one conservative. It, too, was seen as dampening desire for cross-divide communication:

On both sides of the divide, especially if you mean politically, there are people who are poor, who are miseducated on a number of different topics, and I think, ultimately, they're afraid. They're afraid of being taken advantage of, they're afraid of more of the same disappointment, I think it just creates a total sense of—not even apathy but I think it is... fear. It's fear of getting involved. (Danielle)

Physical safety was also raised as an existential issue, but was seen in different ways by liberals and conservatives. The following two quotes demonstrate the difference. Several liberals mentioned guns or potentially race-based violence as a safety concern in the immediate term. A few conservatives mentioned fears of criminal immigrants as a longer-term safety concern.

The first time I saw a guy doing open carry in Virginia, I was shocked. I thought, 'Is he a policeman? Secret Service?' Then I realized he was just open carrying. It does make me think twice. I wouldn't engage someone who is open carrying.

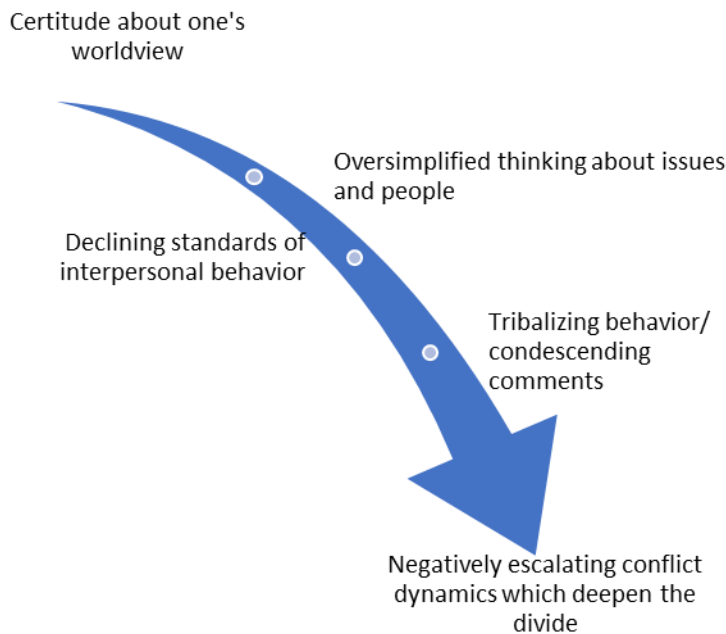
(DeWitt, liberal)

Our country is being invaded and the Democrats have switched their opinions and they have switched sides and they won't do anything. And why won't they realize the danger our nation is facing and come to the table and do something about immigration? (Edna, conservative)

To summarize this finding, many participants from both sides described how the external context had an impact on cross-divide interactions, making people reluctant to engage or apathetic – or even more belligerent. These contextual factors included the sense that conflict is everywhere, the uncertainty caused by changing social norms, negative modeling by political leaders, and disruptive forces and actors. They also included the dampening effect of perceived existential threats -- climate change perceived by liberals and border safety by conservatives.

### **Finding Five: Interactions Both Shaped and Were Shaped by Escalating Conflict Dynamics**

Finding four addresses participants' articulation of how an overarching context of uncertainty, change, and existential fears affected cross-divide interactions. Finding five is about participants' perception that, within this polarized context, individuals' actions during cross-divide interactions seemed to be deepening the divide. In particular, most participants from both sides pointed to a general deterioration of standards of interpersonal behavior as significantly, and negatively, affecting cross-divide conversations. Participants from both sides mentioned other dynamics such as an increasing sense of certitude in one's beliefs, patterns of oversimplified thinking, and a growing tendency to divide into 'us' and 'them.' Conservatives especially mentioned a new trend of public comments by liberals that denigrate conservatives.



*Figure 5. Polarized Individual Behaviors Further Deepen Divide.*

As noted in the first finding, analysis of interviews revealed three typical approaches to cross-divide interactions: avoidance (most frequent); an assertion of political beliefs; or positive engagement with the other side (least frequent). This finding is around how each of these actions prompted reactions in the other party, which further shaped the context of polarization. For example, moves to avoid conversation seemed to create more distance and lack of understanding between the two sides. Moves to assert one's political beliefs, depending on the level of aggressiveness, mostly seemed to result in a shutting-down or angry parting of ways -- often to the point of dropping relationships. Both of these results were reported to create even more distance in the divide. However, moves to engage constructively tended to help both sides see the humanity of the other party and often strengthened both bonds and understanding. They also gave parties confidence to have more such constructive cross-divide conversations.

In describing their experiences of talking across the divide, interviewees referenced the many levels at which these conversations occur.

Table 4

Level and Impact of Cross-divide Interaction

| Level of interaction | Impact of interaction  |
|----------------------|--|
| Individual level     | Most frequently prompt fears of jeopardizing relationships or losing face  |
| Family level         | Often generates pain from being out of step with someone close -- but also the care for family members can drive people to try harder to understand or try to accommodate differing worldviews |
| Community level      | Often seems to create a need to protect one's reputation or stake an identity  |
| National level       | Often involves dividing into political or ideological tribes which help create and sustain one's identity.   |

Analysis of the entire body of interviews revealed how individual-level interactions can affect family, community, and national level interactions. Comments by one participant would be mirrored by those of another participant from the other side. It therefore became possible to see conflict dynamics at the societal level, as individuals' comments played back and forth although they had never met.

Many of the mirror-image interviews were around fear, illustrating how the fears of one side caused a participant to say or do things that created fear or anger in the other side. Participants told stories that indicated how individuals of the other side then reacted either through speech or action. This reaction would further feed into the "first side's" perceptions, usually deepening the divide. In other words, these individual-level cross-divide conversations aggregated, according to participants. Some participants noted that when societal-level discourse went too far, in the estimate of one side, that party would react in a way which further changed the macro context.

The question of immigration was one example of this liberal/conservative mirror-imaging. One liberal described how his conservative sometimes-conversation partner admitted she was afraid of Hispanics, which is why she supported Trump. Another liberal, a Latina from a mixed family (Hispanic father, white mother), described how the anti-Hispanic rhetoric of her white, Trump-supporting relatives deeply scared her children. These two interviews show the reactive dynamic these conversations generated when aggregated to the level of society-wide narratives. This dynamic was particularly strong around racial issues, as will be examined more closely in finding six.

There are people who are afraid, if they will admit it -- and that's what happens when I talk to [her]. She will admit she's afraid of Hispanics. She likes them individually but as a group -- boof! So, I think there's fear. I think a lot of this is based on fear and what they think Trump, to the extent that he can, ameliorates, reduces -- is somebody who will look out after their interests. And my disenchantment is that those are not interests that I want to share. (Charles)

I don't know that they understand that the little children that they seem to take an interest in -- my children who are 11 and 12 -- the election literally made them cry. Like, the election made them feel that half of the country hated them and hated their heritage. (Sonia)

These instances of mirror-image comments are threaded throughout the findings. They reveal how individual level narratives and actions are both affected by, and further contribute to, society level meta-narratives.



**Ego and certitude.** While participants' comments revealed society-wide dynamics, particularly around fears, they also revealed individual attitudes that created reactions in cross-divide situations – usually negative reactions that served to deepen the divide. For example, many participants from both sides described the widespread phenomenon of people being righteously certain about their own viewpoint, which they found an obstacle to cross-divide conversations. Several participants couched this certitude in terms of an expression of a person's identity. They described people not only wanting to project their sense of self, but doing so with an almost aggressive defensiveness. This defensiveness, participants seemed to think, was an attempt to protect one's sense of self, and they found that it rose up particularly when people felt threatened. As Charles, a liberal, noted, "People, when they take a position, feel that they need to justify it. That position becomes who they are. That position becomes part of their expression of themselves."

This certitude has repercussions and tends to escalate a conflict, interviews revealed. Interviewees often found a link between certitude and a sense of wanting to convert the other person, of needing to change their mind so that they become more like you. Speaking about a conservative pastor trying to convince her to become a Republican, liberal Cynthia said of their cross-divide conversation:

He was the one who was trying to push his case and compel me, because I was being wrong even being open to the whole Democratic party because of their values -- which go against quote unquote our principles as Christians.

One person noted that dogged certitude seemingly has become a virtue in the world. Anything else, she felt, has been undervalued. This perception, too, serves to escalate conflict dynamics.

If you don't just pick a stance and keep saying it over and over again, then that is perceived as wishy-washy or a weakness, and not as growth or listening and integrating it and coming up with a slightly different position. (Kelly, liberal)

Certitude has its roots in confirmation bias, or the tendency to reject information that does not support one's existing theory. The majority of participants from both sides mentioned this tendency, both by name and by describing its effects in terms of escalating conflict. Some people also spoke about how hard it is to control one's own bias, as did Madison, a conservative:

There's a definite confirmation bias that's out there. You know, I can get into it myself. I can just watch Fox News and just certain Facebook pages and then next thing you know I have friends that think liberalism is a kind of mental disorder. And then I have to kind of check myself and say, no, pull yourself out of that stream.

Participants linked confirmation bias to ever more certitude, ever more extreme ideas, as well as to an ever-greater loss of ability to respect and engage with the other side. Taking this from an individual bias to a community-wide one, several participants from both sides referred to college campuses as being liberal echo-chambers, precisely when they should be promoting free exchange of ideas. Referring to his own college, Nathaniel, a liberal, articulated this danger:

If you have a group of people who are all pretty liberal and they're just discussing liberal ideas with no pushback from the right, then I think it's more likely that they'll just become -- you know, pushed further and further to the left without necessarily any kind of intellectual pushback. More importantly, it just becomes harder to engage with any kind of right-wing ideas.

Eli, a conservative, noted how his liberal nephew, on a liberal campus, experienced this lack of tolerance.

I started asking him questions -- gently, because I want to understand. I don't understand this concept of trigger space. I don't understand this concept on a college campus that you're being told you can't say something -- I don't understand!

College campuses were referred to specifically as echo-chambers by several participants. However, several more participants, from both sides, commented generally on how any group of like-minded people discussing politics can deepen the divide. Howard, a conservative, spoke of how such groups reinforce a majority opinion about certain issues and people, and then engage group members' sense of identity:

The people [in a political club] agree and if they don't interface with people across a divide, their opinions become stronger and the fact that all of their friends think this way only reinforces their beliefs and convinces them that they're right, their view is THE only view to have.

Thus, many participants noted a prevailing sense of certainty that most people carry about their political beliefs. This certainty was part of peoples' identity. Participants theorized that this certitude had many cross-talk dampening effects. It caused people to

seek out like-minded others, take their beliefs to extremes because they did not encounter any challenges, and then become aggressively defensive about their beliefs as a representation of their very identity.

**Oversimplified thinking.** While many participants brought up ego and certitude as attitudes that mostly increased conflict dynamics, many participants on both sides discussed the related problem of “lazy thinking.” By this they were referring to a societally-encouraged oversimplification of the gathering and processing of information – in part because one is certain already that one is correct. Participants discussed lazy thinking as a barrier both to wanting to have as well as actually having constructive conversations. Interviewees on both sides spoke about the danger of accepting the media’s soundbites around issues or events, as this reductive portrayal often mischaracterizes the other side. Other participants from both sides also spoke of needing to go beyond labels to describe people, as those tend to stop cross-divide conversations and deepen the divide. Sally, a conservative, summed up what people from both sides articulated: “It’s this shorthand of -- well, any label is shorthand of course -- but assuming you know what somebody’s beliefs are because of how they vote.”

Participants noted that these labels that foster assumptions also were used in connection with issues. An example surfaced in another set of mirrored interviews. Sue, a liberal, bemoaned the use of (politically constructed) labels for big ideas, which then lose intellectual nuance but gain the freight of emotion:

Once you label something, then you can’t talk about it. Like Obamacare became ‘socialism.’ It never was socialism, but suddenly we call it socialism and we can’t even have a rational discussion about it!

Sue argued that reducing complex concepts to labels increases the likelihood of topics not being discussed rationally. Her concern was reflected in a conservative's remark about wanting to reject, rather than discuss as a society, the entire idea of socialism. Stan, a conservative, said: "One thing I want to speak about [in conversations with liberals] is -- my opinion, to get this socialism idea to go away."

Both conservative and liberal participants saw people in general as arguing from emotions rather than facts (also explored in the finding on fears and assumptions). Participants from both sides described that as a negative dynamic in a cross-divide conversation, because it immediately eliminates potential common ground.

Everybody's kind of at that gut level which for me is a more uncomfortable place to be and I can't reconcile a lot of things if positions are based either on lies or incorrect data or just "because I said it, it's true." (Kelly, liberal)

One of the horrifying things in this post-modern era, we've lost facts: 'It's what I feel, and if you don't agree with what I feel then you are wrong and not only that, you're bad!' It's simplistic but that's where we are, which is why won't have dialogue. (Doug, conservative)

Several people also discussed that much of the oversimplified thinking stems from disputed sources of information. Some participants, mostly liberals, pointed specifically to politically-aligned media. Liberal participants argued that this has shaped how conservatives see the world and has made conservatives less able to think for themselves. This in turn caused liberal participants to be skeptical about engaging in cross-divide conversations. The attitudes liberals reported having about Fox News, in

particular, were dismissive. Brooklyn, a liberal, noted: “Sometimes I DO visit their sources. When I see that it’s from Breitbart or, I don’t know, Fox, or something, I’m going to be skeptical of it.” However, other participants argued that all sources are biased, which just adds to the general confusion in any cross-divide conversation. As Brian, a conservative, put it: “How do you tell what’s a fake source and what’s a legitimate source? But then everybody’s got a spin on things... and it’s just a whole mess!”

Thus, according to most participants, the oversimplifying of thinking was a serious element of our divide and one that helped to accelerate conflict dynamics. They found it caused by our 24/7 news culture with politically-flavored media outlets that no longer provide in-depth analysis. Participants also found that it causes us to receive only slanted views of the world and distils our own thinking to soundbites, furthering our negative, shallow, and self-righteous understanding of the other side.

**Declining standards of respectful personal behavior.** In addition to changing social norms and escalating conflict dynamics in general, people referenced changing norms of how individuals behave in conflict. Participants from both sides noted less interest in hearing what the other side has to say, increased use of personal attacks, and cooling off or ending of relationships.

All participants except one conservative said that the ability to talk across the divide has declined over time. About half the participants pointed to the 2016 election as being the turning point. A few -- both conservative and liberal -- went as far back as Ronald Reagan, while others variously looked to George H.W. Bush or George W. Bush.

A few others pointed to the Obama presidency, with liberals and conservatives having different views on how the first black president affected things:

I would say that President Obama brought out some negativity maybe in a few people who just couldn't handle a black president..... Then when President Trump got on the scene and has broken the mold of decorum, people are just more willing to say something that would be shocking or outrageous. (Jeff, liberal)

I think Obama took the pendulum and swung it very far to the left to the point that he upset a lot of people, right?.....And candidly, the whole use of the word "folks" is condescending, right? So, what happens? So, the pendulum swings back to the right -- and not just to the CENTER of the right, but harder to the right, ok? (Eli, conservative)

Participants found the effect of these political changes to be more division, hurt, and anger. Sue, a liberal, summed up what others were articulating: "I find it harder, as time goes on. Doing your best not to vilify the other side." Several participants from both sides noted an increased tendency to attack other people. Participants noted that this attack response seemed to come from a lack of trust in the other side, a sense of defensiveness, and a propensity quickly to personalize issues. Hersch, a liberal, put it most succinctly: "We assume the worst in the other and we take umbrage quickly." Madison, a conservative, went on to describe the effect of these negative assumptions on individuals' conflict behaviors: "I've noticed that people have absolutely no respect for the rules of debate anymore. They use *ad hominem*s and jump into personal attacks right away, instead of focusing on the topic at hand or the logic at hand."

Some described how much more painful this attack behavior had become within the context of a family. Referring to a series of anti-socialism/ anti-Obama texts that her uncle sent her, and that concluded with an aggressive, “So why don’t you think about THAT!” Sonia, a liberal, spoke of the anger that the attack provoked. She noted that the anger was not only related to the issue at hand, but to other dynamics in both her family as well as society at large.

I felt like, ‘I’m the most educated person in the family. I have a PhD. I’ve thought about a lot of stuff, dude, don’t tell me to –’ and I was just totally resentful and angry, and I felt like there was a gender aspect to that, and an age aspect to that, and it would be hard for me to pull that out from us just disagreeing about politics. Embedded in there was just a lot of other stuff going on.

One conservative man found such anger simply a state of being in this polarized environment, one that sustains and possibly increases the polarization. He found that the environment of polarization has created change in our very society. Hank, a conservative, explained: “Everybody is so comfortable being polarized. And it creates a society and a culture politically where people are not happy unless they’re mad.”

Several participants described the polarization as so extreme that they see a potential for civil violence. This was particularly true for conservatives:

I think that there are a group of Americans who have such blind hate for Donald Trump that they would rather see the United States of America burn than see him succeed and get it back..... Then I think on the other side that some people are so pro-Trump that they are ready to start Civil War Part Two any day now, and are buying guns like crazy while they can. (Madison, conservative)



In sum, while the civil war scenario was brought up only a few times, many participants from both sides decried declining standards of personal communication behavior. In particular they lamented lack of interest in listening as well as more frequent resort to personal attacks. They also catalogued the increasing number of relationships cooling or being shut off due to political disagreement.

*Attempts to re-establish respectful norms of behavior.* However, amidst these changing behavioral norms there were people who seemed to be trying to re-establish more respectful norms of conflict behavior. Describing an interaction at a birthday party, Sally, a conservative, described navigating the tension between different norms of conflict behavior. On the one hand, Sally wanted to respect the established norm of not bringing conflict into a party. On the other hand, she wanted to stop what she perceived as the new norm of liberals feeling free to denigrate conservatives in a public setting. Another guest at the party had been making derogatory comments about Sarah Palin. As Sally explained:

She lobbed out again about Sarah Palin. So, I said, ‘You know what, I really like Sarah Palin.’ And that was the end of it, so we moved on... I felt bad for saying anything because it was somebody’s birthday, but at the same time, I was kinda tired of her doing things like that. You know, it was like, ‘Maybe you’ll stop saying that if I say out loud to you that I like her.’

A few participants from both sides offered stories similar to Sally’s in which they tried to re-establish more respectful norms of communication. Madison, a conservative, went further in her comment. She articulated the difficulty of doing so in a time of such differing worldviews.

What I tell people on social media all the time is, ‘You know, the best thing you can do is just focus on yourself right now and not be saying things that are so far out of control, and be the best human being you can be, and be as kind to people you can be right now. Color, creed, it doesn’t matter -- you know, just be kind to each other.’ We need change, to revive humanity -- and being humane comes before any political affiliation... And I know that’s a loaded phrase there, because we have two very different views on how to be humane, right?

Benjamin, a conservative, described trying to steer his conversations with his liberal friends. After they talk about their very violent anger at President Trump, Benjamin explained that he responded carefully, in ways chosen to de-escalate the situation: “And I don’t say anything like, ‘How could you say that? You’re not my friend any longer’ I’m just saying things like, ‘Alright, calm down, we should focus on what we can agree on.’” It can be noted that Benjamin’s comment that he deliberately did not react by dropping them as friends is further indication of the social stakes of this polarization.

***Social media fights.*** Declining standards of individual conflict behavior seemed especially prevalent on social media. At least half of the participants pointed to social media as making conversations more negative or less frequent, and for several reasons. Many from both sides noted the tendency for people to type things they would not say to others in person, things that were much more disrespectful and inflammatory. Many -- mostly liberal women -- also said that reading such posts from people they had not expected to say such things had caused them to reconsider engaging because they felt they had learned that you never know how someone would react in a political discussion. Molly, a liberal, explained: “I don’t want to get into conflict, and I think maybe my

exposure to Facebook has made me that way because I see how angry people get when they discuss it. As a result, I don't have conversations very often." Molly spoke for several participants with this description of the chilling effect that witnessing social media fights had had on her desire to talk across a political divide.

**Tribalizing behavior.** The growing tendency to make personal attacks, as well as the increasing sense of certitude and righteousness, seemed to be linked in many participants' minds to another norm that was changing in individuals' conflict behavior: the propensity to divide into like-minded groups. Narrative analysis in particular revealed many aspects of tribalizing behavior. Participants from both sides told a variety of stories about identifying and forming bonds with other members of one's group. Several stories revealed that this process often had an element of defiance or resistance to it. Several participants noted how the tendency exacerbated the divide by causing greater trust of one's own side and greater mistrust of the other. Kelly, a liberal, spoke for many in saying: "Now people have divided into camps, and it's like you're stuck on one side and nothing the other side does is acceptable to you, even if it would have been if somebody on your side had proposed it."

Several participants from both sides told stories about feeling comfort in talking with others of their group with whom they shared a worldview. Similarly, participants from both sides cast their own side as more rational and correct than the other. A few from both sides described this tribalizing tendency as equally affecting both sides.

Tribalizing seemed particularly prevalent in political minorities (liberals in a conservative community, conservatives in a liberal community). Several participants -- mostly conservatives -- spoke of being "closeted" and feeling happy when they had found

other members of their group. Jeff, a liberal living in a conservative community, showed the same desire to find and band together with like-minded others for support:

We have a Friday night club, and we get together and we're of like mind. There's four to five of us, which is probably all in a small town. Really, it's our only time to really open up and talk about frustrations or 'can you believe what so and so did?' and it might be a bit of a bashing, but it's the only place we can do it. It's our relief valve.

Participants' stories revealed that finding other group members was not always done overtly. For example, after having proclaimed her liking of Sarah Palin at that birthday party, Sally reported receiving text messages of support the next day from other conservatives who had not spoken up but appreciated that she had: "Two of the women see the world kind of the way I do. And they were kind of like ...a thumbs up!"

Stan, a conservative, described a situation at work that allowed everybody in a coded way to identify other conservatives:

The other day, abortion was brought up and I think somebody said something like, 'It's funny that you don't look at that as a life, but if you were to kill a pregnant woman, it would be double homicide' and I was like, 'Wow, that's a really good point!' and I kinda made my point about -- I lean pro-life. It's not for religious reasons, because I'm not religious at all. But I knew where HE stood, just from that little interaction, and I could see where other people stand.

From stories like these, participants revealed that part of tribalizing is finding like-minded people to join with. Other stories, from participants from both sides, demonstrated that the use of negative language to describe the other side is another aspect

of tribalizing behavior. Several participants, from both sides, described how they became both the victim and source of cross-divide vilification. Jackie, a liberal, described how she was subjected to disparagement when she moved from her conservative family to a liberal collegiate environment: “After I moved to Stanford, I got all the taunts of “Oh you’re a liberal! You’re in the Green Party!”

Other participants, from both sides, engaged in such denigration of the other side during their interviews. In giving her opinion on the amount of collaboration in Congress these days, Edna, a conservative, used vilification herself:

I think [the Republicans are] trying but the Democrats appear to me to be blocking everything, blocking any good that could be done. Why can’t they at least talk about it? But they’re just hell-bound in ruining our president and our confidence in our system.

Similarly, when explaining why she would not want to talk across the divide, Tanya, a liberal, commented:

I think that the people who voted for Trump are not critical thinkers because they’re not actually exploring the political landscape or trying to learn anything. And if you actually voted for Trump then you probably don’t know what’s going on.

Other participants described how such comments have consequences, in the form of escalating conflict dynamics. They noted feeling hurt, angered, or misunderstood when they were vilified, and then reacted. For example, Sally, a conservative, related how she was so accustomed to liberals maligning conservatives and President Trump that she started with a plea for respectful behavior when trying to state her opinion at a mostly

liberal book club: “Please don’t call me names, but I voted for Donald Trump and I like Donald Trump!”

A few participants put this tribalizing behavior in the context of survival. Describing a formerly conservative friend who moved to liberal-leaning Boston, Howard, a conservative himself, said: “He’s interfacing with people all day long who are very liberal and I guess -- I think in order to survive, I don’t know -- or maybe he really believes it -- he’s become quite liberal.”

One participant described another aspect of tribalizing behavior in noting how people enforce norms of separation between the sides. Hersch, a liberal, recalled how his liberal wife engaged in such behavior:

Something came up recently and my wife, who’s a progressive -- and she understands my point of view [of the need for cross-divide dialogue] but is not quite in it -- I just mentioned ‘Oh, Joe M. was our speaker today’ and she tightened up and said [mimicking a suspicious voice], ‘He’s a Republican, you know!’

Thus, participants described that people not only were selecting to be in different tribes. They also were policing separation between different tribes.

***Condescension and throwaway comments.*** About a third of participants, from both sides but particularly conservatives, described a dynamic of political condescension in which members of one side publicly express disdain for the other side. It appeared to be a form of vilification, but one that was constant and corrosive. Sally, a conservative, gave a clear description of this particular new dynamic:

After about the third book club meeting, it became clear to me that everybody just felt real comfortable trashing Donald Trump! And, saying things like, ‘Oh, that sounds like Trump!’ or ‘Oh my God!’ You know -- things that they felt comfortable saying as if it was understood universally that that would be acceptable to say.

Analysis of interviews revealed that such throwaway comments, along with the conversational gambits of labeling and personal attacks, created an atmosphere of condescension that conservatives in particular spoke about. This perceived liberal condescension towards conservatives created reactions, including resentment and anger. In turn, most conservatives reported choosing either not to talk or to react defensively. The condescension -- predominantly felt by conservatives from liberals-- therefore was described as powering the escalating conflict dynamics.

While it was mostly conservatives who described these condescending throwaway comments, there were a few liberal participants who also noted them. Sonia, a liberal, noted having seen how these comments changed in nature, becoming increasingly pejorative:

More and more I started to hear him say things that I thought were totally racist, just more things that I thought ‘wait a minute, this isn’t just conservatism, this is... this felt like... you know a real racist dialogue they were expecting everybody to agree with.’ And we didn’t.

So many participants spoke about this dynamic that it is possible to examine it from many angles: how it unfolds, how it feels, at whom it is targeted, and what the results are.

You'll be talking and they'll say 'I can't believe someone as smart as you would think like that' I mean, it's really condescending. And the default assumption is usually that you'll agree. (Sarah, conservative)

I think one side still believes they are absolutely correct -- they hold all the truth, they hold all the facts, and the other side just needs to be tolerated and taught better. The current [Red-Blue dialogue] movement is condescending and more like, 'Ok, we shouldn't completely kick them in the gut as irredeemable -- they are redeemable, but they need to be enlightened.' And I don't feel like that's a genuine two-way engagement. (Benjamin, conservative)

This same conservative spoke with bemusement at the fact that his education and wealth of experience were not taken into account by people from the other side. Instead, he found liberal colleagues and even friends rejected what he had to say rather than looking at his strong credentials as reason for engaging with him:

If you're a Trump supporter, you can be educated like I am, you can have world experience -- very, very diverse experiences as an immigrant or a minority -- but I'm not really comfortable voicing it in public because I *will* encounter people who are just *triggered*, right? It's hard for them to listen, to see what we have in common.

While both sides reported feeling fear of being judged, many more conservatives than liberals spoke about being spoken to in condescending terms. For Doug, a conservative, this was to the point that he expressed it as an existential threat:



If I identified myself as a Republican, the immediate response is, ‘You are a bully! You are racist and a homophobe!’ We’re not talking about an issue. We’re talking through the barrier that you should be eliminated from the face of the earth!

Doug went on to describe the societal impact of such perceived liberal condescension, in the form of a conservative backlash. Three of the fifteen conservative participants brought up Hilary Clinton's "basket of deplorables" comment from the 2016 presidential campaign, all emotionally, and all revealing how deeply that single comment hurt and angered many conservatives. Doug explained how many conservatives are now rising up against this perceived liberal condescension:

You know what, I’m not a racist -- I know in my heart of hearts -- I’m not, so I’m going to continue! Where [conservatives] were rolling over because they didn’t want to be called bad names, they [now] are pushing back and saying ‘This doesn’t work!’ Now people are wearing shirts saying, ‘I’m a deplorable’ and they can’t suppress speech.

This liberal condescension towards conservatives was another topic that was mirrored in interviews from both sides. One liberal also perceived the condescension aimed at conservatives:

I do understand the critique that some of the talking heads come at it with a kind of ‘This is so stupid, why are the Republicans coming out with such stupid policy?’ I get that. Maybe because I grew up working class, I sense a kind of elitism, too, in the kind of people you might see on TV. (Sonia, liberal)

In another instance of interviews mirroring each other, Tim, a liberal, showed how the fear of condescension had changed the behavior of at least one conservative he interacted with. Tim told a story of learning that a friend's new boyfriend was a Republican and described the boyfriend's insistence that he was not a "crazy Republican" -- indicating for Tim that the Republican knew what liberals tended to think about conservatives. Then Tim demonstrated his own version of this liberal condescension by stating that it was precisely that insistence that let Tim think this was a conversation that would not waste his time:

He quickly did that familiar thing for Republicans I know -- he assured us that he wasn't a crazy Republican, or a Trump Republican, that he was a reasonable, rational, moderate Republican. That statement laid the ground to make it okay to continue talking politics.

Most of the stories of condescending throwaway comments came from or were about conservatives. However, a few liberals reported perceiving condescension directed at them from conservatives:

Gun rights people, second amendment people, disdain gun safety people. It's part of the divide. Guns -- outside of the city, they're part of the culture, and when we say to take away military rifles, they hear that we're going to take away their BB guns. (DeWitt, liberal)

In sum, all participants referenced how dynamics such as changing social norms and declining standards of respectful behavior both shape cross-divide interactions and are in turn further shaped by those interactions. The choice to avoid conversations or to engage in an assertive way tended to further distance the parties and deepen

misunderstanding and negative emotions. All of these situations demonstrated that conversations do not happen in a vacuum but are part of a changing socio-political environment.

**Finding Six: Racial and Ethnic Issues are an Intensification of All of the Findings**

While there was no specific question about race or ethnicity in the interview protocol, the issue was raised by about half of the participants. Liberals were twice as likely as conservatives to mention racial issues. Race was brought up by all five people of color (four liberals and one conservative). It was brought up far more often and more completely than other social and cultural divides, which were mentioned fleetingly if at all. Only four women (and no men) mentioned sexual harassment and/or gender dynamics. Only three liberals (two being people of color) mentioned class and income issues. Gender/transgender identity issues were brought up by only three liberals and two conservatives. The way participants discussed racial and ethnic racial issues was an intensification of all the dynamics in the previous finding.

**Race and worldviews.** With regard to the third finding, discussion of race and ethnicity revealed starkly differing worldviews both around what race means and about how important an issue it is in American society. Several liberals -- particularly people of color -- spoke about how they perceive racism as part of the system, but noted that it was hard to get others to understand that in conversation:

I think that it is very difficult to have conversations with a lot of people about black experience or black identity, because anti-blackness is so prevalent and just so engrained that I guess often people don't even realize how what they're saying is racist....Even one of my coworkers and friends here made a comment the other

day like, ‘Wow! I didn’t know that racism was real.’ And I don’t know how you could *say* that. I don’t know how you could *think* that -- that it somehow wasn’t real. (Brooklyn, liberal African-American)

Presenting the converse of that worldview, a conservative person of color noted that liberals seem to believe their perception of the ubiquity of racism so fully that they discount his personal experience of racism:

I’m not white. They are white. They’re the ones telling me racism is everywhere, and I’m telling them, ‘Well racism is real. But racism is not any worse than it’s been all my life.’ And in fact when I mention these things, they’ll say, ‘Well yeah, but...’ They’ll just dismiss them. And try to just move on. (Benjamin, conservative Asian-American)

Showing a drastically different worldview, several white conservatives said that racism is made up. As Madison said:

They’re inventing problems. They’re inventing division. To me, race -- this whole racism thing -- is just completely contrived and like time. Time is something we all have agreed on and agreed it exists and agreed that we’re all going to have talk, but we all know that time is relative. And I think it’s the same thing with racism. It’s like everyone’s decided that America’s this racist country, that conservatives and Trump supporters are racist people. And those preconceived notions are what are killing us.

Here again, interviewees mirrored each other. The conservative viewpoint that racism is made up echoed the hopelessness expressed by liberal participants of color at ever being able to talk about it.

**Race and the sense of safety and comfort.** Two liberals spoke about racial demographic change. Linking back to the angst and uncertainty of a changing overarching context, they noted how the changing demographics seemed to be perceived as threatening by conservatives. As Charles, a liberal, explained:

Because the liberals have been in power off and on for the last 25 years, and a lot of things have encroached upon the conservative view of themselves, and they have felt because of demographics and Hispanics, all these people coming across the border, ‘My God! How am I going to be able to keep going to my tony little [white] men’s club, and feel safe?’

A few liberals expressed a sense that racial fears were being stoked unnecessarily by conservative politicians, and that this was affecting discourse across the divide. Referring to conversations with what he termed as his more conspiracy-minded conservative community members, Jeff, a liberal, explained:

[They’re] seeing things from the wrong perspective. I mean, white people saying ‘There’s racism against whites!’ You’re like, ‘Really? Where? We live in a rural area that there’s 99% white people and you’re worried about immigration or black people harassing the police department?’ It just doesn’t make any sense!

A few conservatives voiced a concomitant view that liberals are stoking unnecessarily a narrative of racial discord, making it seem worse than it is:

We have Charlottesville, but it’s not the Alamo. It’s supposed to be indicative that we have tremendous white nationalism rising..... [It’s like] ‘Remember when we had white nationalists in Baltimore last year? Remember when we had white nationalists in Ferguson last year?’ No! Because it’s not happening! We’re a big

country and always have incidents, but we're not seeing it in our communities.

But there is this narrative about this surge in neo Nazis. (Doug, conservative)

However, one white liberal somewhat joined the opinion of conservatives who thought liberal discourse on race was overblown and actually undermined safety and comfort. As noted earlier, Hersch, a liberal, spoke of his perception of having been unfairly targeted after the misinterpretation of one of his social media postings about a change in his church's governance in which he used the terms "faction" and "coup" to describe what happened. He was deeply hurt by the event and cited it as a main reason why he is starting to turn increasingly towards conservatism:

I used the word 'faction' and I used the word 'coup.' Those two words were labeled as racist. And a woman who is a very well-known and respected leader of Black Lives of [my church] did an 18-and-a-half-minute video entirely of me. 18 and a half minutes of what a horrible person I am. Personal attacks.

A conservative mirrored Hersch's comment. Eli also spoke of what he saw as unfair excesses of liberal intolerance, but directed at other liberals. In this case Eli was speaking of the how his blond-haired, culturally Jewish nephew was bullied out of school for having worn something that was misperceived as a Nazi costume at a Halloween party:

He starts getting bullied that he is an elitist, that he is a Nazi, that he is white and privileged. And who's giving him the hard time? Who's bullying him? A black gay guy. Right? When you think about the scope of tolerance, right? Where does the scope of tolerance fall? I would say a black gay guy is certainly holding -- if there's a handful of tolerant bullet points, he's got two of them. Right?

Several participants of color described that threats to their safety and security are heightened. For example, Cynthia, a liberal African-American, described an interaction between a white store clerk and a black customer:

I had so much anger because I grew up in Chicago, a very segregated city. I went through some very racially intense moments, and in fact this morning I woke up to a call from a friend who still lives in Chicago. She went to the mall to return a bracelet and ended up getting arrested because the store manager wouldn't give her her money back. They called to the corporate office of [the store] and the manager in the corporate office, in Customer Care, said, 'Please give the client back their money' and the lady literally refused and called the police on [my friend]....So that's the kind of environment I grew up in, and it isn't because of something that you do, it's because of who you are!

Most participants of color described scenarios where the current political division had more serious consequences than white participants reported facing. Their stories had physical and legal ramifications that were greater than the social ramifications described by white participants. This shaped the way many participants of color perceived interacting across a divide.

**Race and escalating conflict dynamics.** Several white liberals spoke of being in situations where people felt free to say denigrating things about other groups -- a version of the condescending throwaway comments discussed earlier, but with a racial bent. A common scenario that these liberal participants described was a dinner party with neighbors or friends and acquaintances at which racial slurs were tossed around. Reactions differed. Some participants said they kept silent but felt badly afterwards.

However, Kelly, a liberal, described how her husband called someone on racist remarks, which started an argument:

[This one guest] tends to be negative and he will say negative things about women, about blacks, about Mexicans, about kind of any group of people. And my husband started saying, 'You're racist and I don't want to hear it. I'm sick of hearing it.' And so then [the hostess's] husband was saying, 'No, I'm not racist.'

This incident left the two men not speaking to each other, but the women managing to continue -- without mentioning the argument -- their well-established routine of walking their dogs together.

**Race and changing social norms.** Race also was a place where participants found norms changing (finding four), and a few participants told stories of how the very conversation about racial issues had created conflict. Danielle, a liberal African-American, described how a white male in her law school class had started to make remarks that she felt were meant to excuse something that would not be excusable, and the ensuing slight conflict between them that spilled out of class. She described how it started for her by quoting something he had said:

'I don't mean to be racist,' or 'I don't mean to be sexist, but ....' That was the disclaimer that was given, and I think that was really what was triggering.

Whatever came after it was sort of, you know, 'Let's just insulate me from any criticism I might be -- that you might justifiably have from anything I might say, because I'm telling you that I'm not trying to be these things.'

Danielle seemed to be attempting to set rules for how race should and should not be discussed across a divide. Several other participants, from both sides, also discussed



how changing norms of how and what we talk about had intensified around race. One example was Sue, a liberal white. She discussed her discomfort with one of the terms that has become part of how some people discuss race -- “white privilege”:

I’ve actually seen -- or heard some people on the left say -- that civility is like a ‘white privilege’ concept or something. I think they have a different definition of civility than I do -- you know, the sort of radical idea that you have to blow up the system to get anything done. I just don’t -- I don’t buy that!

While Sue expressed disagreement with the use of the conceptual term of white privilege, a conservative participant expressed annoyance and bewilderment about how seemingly any conversation could suddenly have racial ramifications. Rick described how he felt it was an erroneous conflation of issues:

I like golf, so when Tiger Woods does something, I’ll very infrequently look at some of the comments that people will make -- and before you know it, they’re talking about race and I’m like, ‘Race has NOTHING to do with it!’

A mirror-image of Rick’s comment was presented by a liberal Latina. Far from thinking that “race has nothing to do with it,” she explained how race now has everything to do with it. Sonia spoke about how changing norms of how we talk have become less about intellectually-defined issues and more about existential issues of identity -- and threats to one’s identity. She went on to say that, in a world of Trumpian anti-minority rhetoric, people of color were more sensitive to these changing norms around talking about identity, because their implications seem starker to minorities:

Culturally it's a lot harder because it's not just a divide about policies. It becomes—at least the way we receive it—it becomes a discussion about whether or not they are going to respect our humanity. And so, for me, that's harder to negotiate.

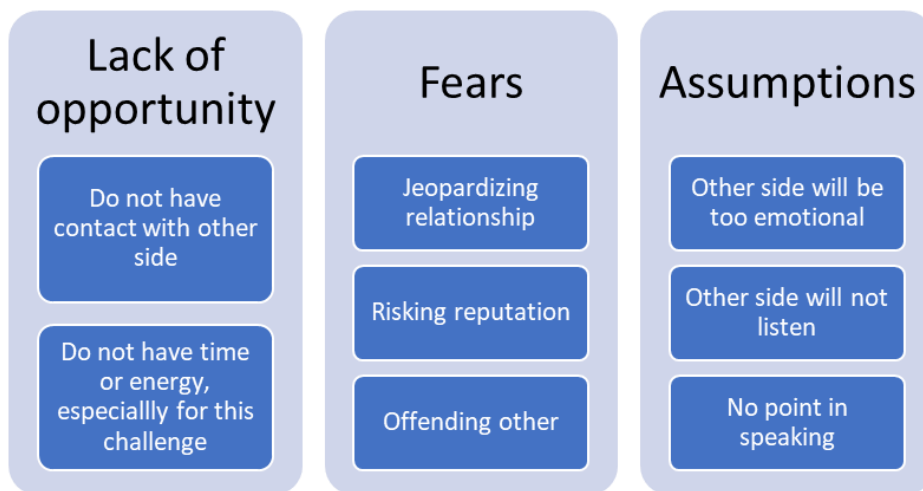
In sum, racial and ethnic issues were revealed by participants to be an intensification of all the other findings around the difficulties of cross-divide conversations. Issues of safety and security were spoken of as much more acute by people of color, who spoke of their perception that the whole socio-economic and political system made them less secure. Particularly for white people, changes in social norms around racial issues were described as even more confusing than changes in social norms around other divides. The differences between worldviews became even starker around racial and ethnic issues. All of these factors, participants felt, made talking across racial divides even more challenging than talking across other divides.

#### **Finding Seven: Fears and Assumptions About the Other Side Led Most Participants to Avoid Cross-divide Conversations**

As detailed in the first finding, when asked about the frequency of their conversations across the political divide, most participants, of both sides, indicated that they usually avoided doing so. While descriptions of the actual experience of communicating across the political divide were complicated and many-layered, the descriptions of the barriers to such interactions were straightforward. There were three types of barriers: structural barriers, social barriers, and cognitive barriers. For a few, the avoidance of conversations was necessary, structurally due to lack of time or opportunity. For the rest, participants of both sides tended to cite a combination of social fears and

cognitive or emotional assumptions about the other party in making their choice not to engage.

Almost every interviewee cited fear of jeopardizing relationships, while others noted a fear of risking their reputation, or a fear of offending others. Participants also said they avoided cross-divide conversations out of a set of assumptions: that the other person would be too emotional; that they would not listen; that there would be no point in speaking. Participants of both parties seemed to indicate particular challenges in talking within the family and across generations, where power differentials and a desire to please become more pronounced. As noted in finding six, participants of both parties also seemed indicate challenges in talking across racial divides and even about racial issues amongst people of the same race.



*Figure 6.* Barriers to Cross-divide Conversations.

**Lack of time or opportunity.** A few participants from both sides said they did not have cross-divide conversations as they simply did not know anyone from the other side. This was mostly true of liberals in urban areas. Brooklyn, a liberal, indicated that she had so little contact with conservatives that it had never occurred to her to even want

to ask a conservative about their beliefs: “I think that that thought has never crossed my mind, just because I don’t even know like what kind of person I could even ask about things.”

Some conservatives, however, also spoke of being in an all-conservative area, which hindered their ability to talk across the divide. As Darla explained:

I went to Liberty University for a semester immediately after I graduated from high school, so that was sort of the opposite scenario—predominantly Red, very few Blues. I didn’t have the opportunity there and even if I did, I would have been way too nervous at that time.

Others on both sides spoke of the need for both time and energy to engage, as well as optimism or curiosity about the potential. Benjamin, a conservative who said he liked to have such talks, reflected about his peers: “[My conservative colleagues and fellow church members] feel a little besieged.....Maybe they feel like it’s a waste of time. Maybe they feel like they don’t have time to engage.” Like Benjamin, Charles also pointed to the energy needed for such conversations -- although the liberal also engaged in them often: “How do we resolve the sense of polarization? It takes energy. It takes a lot of time. It takes concerted effort by at least one of the parties to come over and say, ‘Let’s talk about this.’”

Yet other participants identified notions of safety and comfort, and a fear of being challenged, as reasons why people avoided cross-divide conversations. Darla, a conservative, explained:

I feel like most of my family do not [engage in political conversations], unfortunately, and I think that a lot of that comes from a place of discomfort -- the

same place of discomfort that I came from, which is when you grow up in a particular environment and you hear the same thing, same narrative over and over again and you develop your beliefs, it's really hard ..... sit down and have a conversation with someone who would say, 'No, I disagree.'

Lack of opportunity and a sense of discomfort therefore were two reasons people spoke of avoiding cross-divide engagement. Opportunity, participants clarified, included being in contact with people from the other side. It also included having the time or energy for such difficult conversations.

**Fear of jeopardizing relationships.** The most prominent fear was of jeopardizing relationships, expressed by almost everyone -- both sides, both genders, and all ages. These relationships included those with peers, colleagues, customers, friends, and family. For example, Darla also explained how her fellow young conservatives had thought about potentially attending a recent campus event to promote Red-Blue dialogue. They were worried about ruining relationships with their classmates:

Much like myself, they were just nervous about how that was going to play out, especially when the conversation you're going to have is with some of your classmates and some of your friends, and whether or not it's going to be damaging to those.

Conservative participants more than liberals spoke of understanding a particular trigger that was very likely to come up—and very likely to agitate their liberal friends—the topic of Donald Trump. These conservatives reported that they chose to put friendship over conversation in order not to anger their friends.

I can sense that the topic of Donald Trump and his policies will enflame this person, and I appreciate the relationship and the friendship that we have, and I value that more than whether or not my opinion on this particular topic is accepted or not accepted. (Eli)

No liberal spoke of avoiding a conversation with a conservative out of fear of making the other person angry, but liberals did identify concern about a more generalized sense that the conversation could get emotional. As Molly, a liberal, put it: “I would like to have conversations with some people, but some people just get so emotional and kind of judgmental that I feel like I would lose friendships if I were to do that.”

A few participants, from both sides, spoke of being able to keep relationships even after a difficult conversation. For Kelly, a liberal, it was within the context of an ongoing, structured activity -- walking dogs together -- and in part it was a tacit agreement not to bring up divisive subjects:

So, we just decided at that point that we wouldn’t discuss some things anymore because we didn’t agree, and that was... I mean, that was two or three years ago, and we walk our dogs every Saturday and haven’t discussed anything political since.

For Sally, a conservative who had had an interaction with two liberal women in her community, it seemed to just blow over:

As far as I know both of those women are my friends, I’m their friend, we socialize, we—I don’t think it’s had anything to do with -- there hasn’t been any negative impact on the relationship.

Participants of both sides showed the greatest worry about putting family relationships to the test. Tim, a liberal, talked about family situations, noting that with family perhaps even more than other relationships it is better not to talk when doing so could create rifts:

In both cases instances where there was some family connection, it was imperative to preserve friendliness. At same time, we didn't know each other well enough to wade into a contentious conversation with the security that we would come out again together. It was easier to avoid a conversation rather than risk the end of relationships.

Hank, a conservative, speaks of the delicacy with which he and his liberal aunt tread these waters:

I love that woman dearly, I always have -- but I know without any doubt that her political outlook is far more liberal than mine. It doesn't matter -- doesn't affect the love I feel for her. But, generally we talk about family matters, we talk about what's going on in our lives, but on those rare occasions when we do talk politics, she listens respectfully even though I already know she doesn't agree with me ... and I listen respectfully to her.

Both liberals and conservatives, men and women, and people of all races and ethnicities spoke of the fear of jeopardizing relationships. Because of this fear, most participants chose sometimes or often to avoid engaging across the divide.

**Fear of risking reputation.** Another fear evinced by many interviewees of both sides was fear of risking one's reputation and good standing in a community. This was particularly true of political minorities -- a conservative in a liberal area or liberal in a

conservative area. John, a conservative, articulated this the way many other participants did, linking it with worries about emotionality and judgment described above. Working in a company that he estimates being about 70% liberal, he noted:

There's a reason that most people don't talk about politics with other people at work, with coworkers -- because some people do take it emotionally. Some people get upset. Some people change their viewpoint of you based off your political views.

Particularly for political minorities, fear of risking one's reputation was a strong reason for avoiding interaction across the divide.

**Fear of offending.** At least a third of participants, from both sides and genders and varying ages, described a fear of offending others as a barrier to conversations. As John also explained: "I just want to make sure I'm not offending somebody personally just because I want to tell them that I disagree with their viewpoint." His remarks were echoed by Jeff, a liberal:

I'm in a small town and I cannot offend one person because offending one person is like offending twenty, because one person is going to tell another who'll tell somebody else, tell somebody else, so and twenty customers in a small town is a big deal.

Some people spoke of being on the other side of that desire not to offend, which showed the extent of the norm against being offensive. Again referencing the argument in her law school class, Danielle, a liberal, described being pulled aside for an apology by a conservative man, who had been trying to contact her with that message for hours:



He said, ‘Did you see my messages?’ and I was like, ‘What messages are you talking about?’ He was like, ‘I just wanted to apologize if I offended you at all, that wasn’t my intention...’

However, Sonia, another liberal woman, described a situation where the norm of not offending others seemed to be used offensively, this time against her. She commented on her analysis of her cousin’s Facebook posting:

‘Hey—I don’t mean to offend anybody but I just want you to know that I’m an anti- feminist, pro-life, gun-toting Republican, and I’m in favor of law enforcement and I hope I don’t offend you with my saying that, and I’m going to vote for Donald Trump.’ That kind of thing. And -- it really comes from a place of they’re the victim.

Causing offense – and the desire to avoid causing offense – was another important reason people spoke of avoiding cross-divide interactions.

**Assumption that the other side will be too emotional.** Most participants indicated some fear that caused them to avoid cross-divide conversations. All participants, however, spoke of the assumptions they had about how such conversations would go: the other side would be too emotional, would not listen, or there would be no point in engaging. Some of these assumptions were based on previous experience, while some were construed from what they thought they knew of the other person and the other side.

Participants on both sides viewed the other side as too emotional. That both sides had this assumption was a point of surprise to most of the people who completed the member checks. In the interviews, some participants, mostly conservatives, linked the

assumption of emotionality to the assumption that the other side would be likely to quickly escalate the conversation into anger and personal attacks (finding five).

I find much more emotion on the -- not to disparage, but—liberal side, who will say, ‘How can you? How can you? But this! But this!’ Whereas I find the other side, when disagreeing about it, is less emotional about it -- more, ‘This is just what I think, not what I feel.’ (Sarah, conservative)

Liberals tended to say both sides would become emotional, rather than singling out conservatives. However, one liberal who frequently engages in these conversations did say that conservatives get angry easily. Jeff, a liberal, described a discussion with some younger military men about the issue of kneeling during the national anthem. He noted how their emotions prevented them from understanding the point he was trying to make: “When you try to explain to them the philosophy behind [kneeling during the anthem] and why they fought for what they fought for—it was emotional for them and so they feel very strongly that it’s anti-military.”

Many conservatives -- but fewer liberals—spoke of anger in terms of a reaction they had experienced in previous conversations and therefore expected in future ones.

With some [liberals], I actually have had some conversation but I find that it quickly deteriorates and, candidly, I feel that it is very much anger from the left that just cannot either see or understand or want to see or hear or understand why anyone would support Donald Trump. (Eli, conservative)

Thus, many participants spoke of having previously experienced anger in a cross-divide interaction which then made them wary of further such conversations. They tended to link the anger to what they perceived as a tendency to equate a person’s vote with their

entire value as a person. This equation seemed to create a judgment and a dismissal which participants wished to avoid.

**Assumption that there would be no point.** Half of the interviewees -- equal numbers of conservatives and liberals -- said that another reason they avoid cross-divide conversations is the assumption that there would be no point. In describing this, they said that they assumed they would not be able to agree on anything, or that it would not bring up anything new and useful. As Tanya, a liberal, put it: "It's always hard to talk about politics even if you agree on something. But I think it would be pointless to even try to talk to someone who supported Trump." Sarah, a conservative wary of opening herself up to liberal condescension, explained: "In general, I keep my mouth shut. It's like being closeted. Most of the time you know how it will go and it's just not worth getting into."

Much of the feeling that there is no point in engaging seemed to come from many participants' sense that people are too filled with their own ego and certain of being right—as discussed in finding five. This was a point on which there was the most agreement amongst participants. Fully two-thirds of the participants, from both sides, said that ego and certitude were a major barrier to cross-divide conversations. This held for getting into conversations at all, as participants believed that most people tend think they already have all the answers and perceive the other side as deluded or uninformed. Nathaniel, a liberal, noted: "There are some of my peers who are very sort of dogged and have these radical left-wing beliefs that they really hold on to and won't really budge from, so they probably won't see an interest in reaching out to Republicans." Thus, Nathaniel speculated that the certitude of his liberal peers prevented them from wanting to engage conservatives in discussion.

**Assumption that the other side would not listen.** Related to avoiding conversations because of an assumption that there was no point, some interviewees said they assumed the other side would not listen. Mostly it was conservatives saying that the other side would not listen, though some participants -- both liberals and conservatives -- said that neither side listens. Stan, a conservative, summed up the problem of differing worldviews as stemming from deeply held, incongruous beliefs of both sides, with neither side being open to listening to the other:

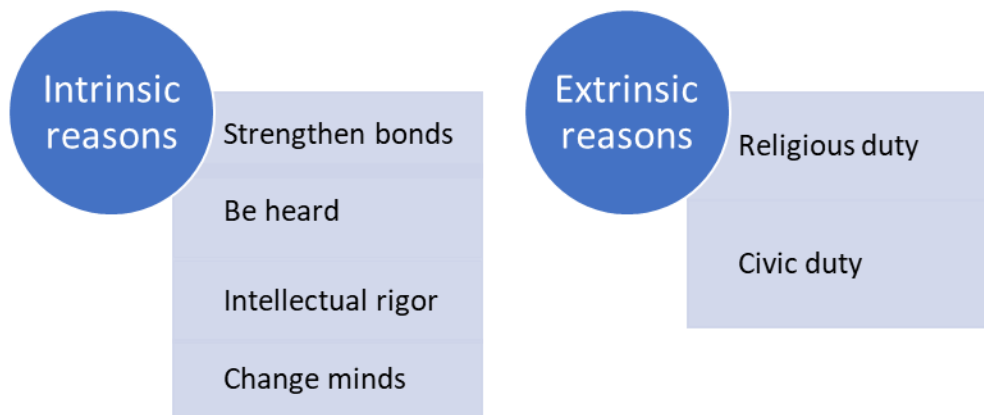
It's almost like an unhappy marriage where once the husband believes that things are happening one way and the wife believes another, you're not going to change their minds.... and then because of that you're not going to listen and accept another person's views.

Summing up finding seven, analysis of interviewed revealed three types of barriers to conversations. One set was structural, revolving around a lack of time or opportunity to talk to people from the other side. Another set was social, primarily fears about jeopardizing relationships or reputation. The third set was cognitive and emotional, involving assumptions about how the other side would respond. All of these barriers in this finding are connected to the findings around the emotional nature of cross-divide interactions (finding three) and how interactions both stem from and contribute to escalating conflict dynamics (finding five).

### **Finding Eight: Most Saw the Importance of Conversations and Wish to Have Them**

While most participants spoke of avoiding cross-divide conversations, many indicated a desire to be able to have them. Almost all interviewees -- from both sides -- said they were important. Motivations to engage in these conversations varied. A

prominent intrinsic reason was to strengthen bonds with family, friends, or acquaintances. Another intrinsic reason was the pursuit of intellectual rigor. Often-mentioned extrinsic reasons included a sense of civic duty and a desire to follow religious edicts to love fellow humans.



*Figure 7. Motivations for Talking Across the Divide.*

**Desire to talk to strengthen bonds.** Many participants, of both sides and all ages, spoke about a motivation to have these conversations as a way to build bonds, grow closer, or form more community -- the counterpart of avoiding conversations because of the fear of jeopardizing relationships. This response came more from conservatives than liberals, and more from men than women. Participants categorized this desire for stronger bonds not only with people they were already close to, but also colleagues and acquaintances. Several participants said this desire was about fully expressing oneself and one's values to people one cared about, rather than only discussing superficial things; in this vein, participants also described this desire as being about learning more about the other person, their entire self, not just their political views. Benjamin, a conservative in a liberal enclave, spoke about it as a way to overcome the loneliness and isolation of being a minority: "Related to colleagues, I don't want to be so alone, being a conservative in a

very left-leaning workplace. I feel like it's important to try to figure out how to talk to people." He was echoed by DeWitt, a liberal in a conservative community: "It's about... getting closer to my neighbors so I can be friendly. It feels good. It's educating. It's an act of friendship. I learn great things. It's because of all those things."

Other interviewees expressed another aspect of trying to strengthen interpersonal connections. They presented it as a way of getting around the conundrum of completely differing worldviews: when you come to like someone, there are more factors that weigh into your evaluation of the person, so you are more tolerant of their differing views.

Speaking about a friendly conservative colleague, Hersch, a liberal, said:

I approach conversations with him with a bit of trepidation but very often we come away liking each other more when we talk. We may not agree on everything, but we come out of usually -- not always but usually -- on my side feeling, 'Yeah, he really is a good guy even if he can be difficult sometimes.'

His feelings were echoed by Darla, a conservative woman:

I actually started learning that a lot of people I've knew growing up, and I've been close to, have been Blues and I didn't even know. So, it's been interesting to talk to them after having known them my entire life.

Many participants of both sides noted this benefit. Positive cross-divide conversations strengthened existing bonds. Positive cross-divide conversations also became more possible when both sides saw the other person holistically and within the context of existing bonds, rather than only as a one-dimensional stereotype.

**Desire to talk out of civic duty.** A third of participants spoke of their motivation for having these conversations in terms of their civic duty. Civic duty was seen by these participants in different ways. Some saw it as about survival as a country, articulating it as a pragmatic response: we all live here, so we have to figure out how to be together. Danielle, a liberal, put it most succinctly: “Neither side is going away, so we’ve got to talk and work together.” Benjamin, a conservative, painted a more vivid picture of the issues he perceived as needing to be resolved jointly:

As someone who works in this field [of diplomacy], to try to uphold our national security, I think not being able to talk with each other, fighting with each other -- mistrust and absolute rejection of each other -- how can we expect to come together when there’s a real challenge, whether it’s a terrorist attack, whether it’s a natural disaster, whether it is vast economic disparity?

Other participants articulated their desire to talk more in terms of contributing to the marketplace of ideas, and the need to explore a variety of ideas to arrive at the best policy. One liberal African-American woman presented it a bit more starkly, in terms of ensuring you are having your voice heard when there are important resource distribution issues at hand:

At the end of the day, politics is the study of who gets what and why. It’s all about allocating resources and really if we could just get people around the table and -- it sounds cliché -- really just have a conversation about the fundamental issues...you know. (Danielle)

Conservatives rather than liberals tended to use patriotic language in describing this motivation to speak. Two conservatives indicated that the stakes are high and the consequence of not talking is civil war.

We cannot sustain this level of division without even engaging in dialogue, as it is unsustainable over the long haul. You almost hate to say it because it sounds like conspiracy, but my characterization of where we are is that we are in a virtual state of civil war in terms of dialogue. There's not shooting... but I say not yet.

(Doug, conservative)

Civic duty therefore was an oft-cited extrinsic motivator of such conversations. It was described as a way to find solutions to common problems – necessary in a democracy. It also was described as a way to protect this country from descending into war.

**Desire to talk to change minds.** About a quarter of participants, on both sides but mostly men and mostly liberals, expressed the desire to talk in terms of seeking to change other peoples' minds. Some characterized it as having the explicit objective to change the other person's thinking. In another instance of comments mirroring each other, two conservatives spoke of liberals trying to change their minds and several liberals spoke about wanting to change others' minds. As Rick, a conservative, explained the prodding he receives from his liberal partner: "Well, she knows my viewpoints, so maybe it's a way for her to kind of challenge me, get me to change a little bit. But she also says it's good for us to talk about this stuff." From the liberal side, Charles acknowledged: "So yeah, I'm at it because I want to change their minds. And maybe in that quest to change someone's mind, you're guaranteed you never will. And vice versa."



A few other participants articulated a more backdoor approach. They theorized that if you make the other person feel psychologically comfortable, then they are more open to changing their minds.

My job is to love people and by loving them, I have a far greater chance of convincing them to adopt the things I believe than I will ever have in convincing them to adopt my beliefs by responding to them with anger, or hatred, or disapproval. (Hank, conservative)

Thus, almost all participants found it important to have cross-divide conversations, at least in theory. In particular, they cited intrinsic reasons including strengthening bonds and being more intellectually rigorous in looking at all dimensions of issues. They also cited reasons related to external obligations, such as religious or civic duty.

**Desire to talk for the sake of intellectual rigor.** A fifth of the participants, four conservatives and two liberals, pointed to intellectual honesty as being one of their motivations to talk across the divide. By this they meant ensuring that they were exposing themselves to all sides of an argument rather than accepting pat slogans.

When I find myself 100% sure of something, when I find myself on the side of the majority, that's when I want to talk to the minority, and I want to get their views because I want to be intellectually honest. (Madison, conservative)

They also meant a more specific wish to understand the other side -- although possibly as a precursor to then challenging the other side's argument. Nathaniel, a liberal, explained:

My interest is more about sort of curiosity. If there's an opinion that I don't immediately grasp or understand where the opinion is coming from or what the logic is, then I'd like to understand where's this person coming from, what sort of implicit foundations about their argument. Like if someone is arguing for something that I think is just totally misguided, it's worth looking at what are they basing their argument on.

For Nathaniel, as for a few other participants, his intellectual curiosity was piqued by the divide and beliefs of the other side that he thought were wrong.

**Desire to talk in order to be heard.** A few people stated that their desire to have conversations was about being heard and acknowledged. Both liberals and conservatives expressed this desire to be heard as a motivation for undertaking cross-divide conversations:

What I think I'm trying to achieve in these conversations, my biggest goal is to be what I consider to be heard. And there is a difference between being heard and being agreed with. It's a sense that someone else acknowledges that you have a point of view. (Charles, liberal)

I think I think one of the main reasons I do it, and one of the main reasons anyone would do it, is because when you feel very passionate about something, you want to share it with other people. Not necessarily to change their mind, but to just to get them to understand where you're coming from and why you feel that way.

(Darla, conservative)

This desire to undertake conversations is the converse of a dynamic discussed earlier. It is the opposite of the dynamic of avoiding conversations because of the assumption that the other side will not listen.

**Desire to talk to fulfill religious duty.** Another motivation to have cross-divide conversations, noted by two conservatives and one liberal, was an extrinsic one. They explained that their religious teachings compelled them to love fellow humans:

We've grown up with this erroneous belief system that says, that if I don't approve of you, I don't have to love you. And if I don't want to love you, all I have to do is either find some reason to disapprove of you, or make one up and then I'm justified in not loving you. That's not what God said! God said love your enemies.... Love the people who are diametrically opposed to you.... Now, is that easy to do? absolutely not! But am I obligated to try? You bet your bottom dollar I am. (Hank, conservative)

Thus, the two conservatives linked talking across the divide to the religious injunction to love other humans. In other words, they linked loving all to talking to people with whom they may not agree. One participant made it clear that this is not necessarily an easy thing to do.

### **Finding Nine: Most Saw a Need for Greater Capacity to Have Cross-divide Conversations**

While almost all participants indicated that they thought it was important to have such conversations, there seemed to be a tacit acknowledgement that more capacity was needed to do so. Analysis of interviews revealed three aspects to this capacity: conditions necessary to begin a conversation; skills and abilities to conduct the conversation; and

some form of structure in which to have the conversation. All of these were primarily about creating safe cognitive, emotional, social, and physical space – particularly through respect and trust. Almost half of the participants, from both sides, mentioned the need for the ability to demonstrate respect. Many also mentioned the ability to empathize. With regard to skills, participants from both sides noted a need to listen, ask sincere questions, and identify common ground. Participants' ideas about structure for these conversations included having formal processes with ground rules that would enable people to lower defenses to trust and then engage.

| Conditions  | Abilities   | Structure  |
|---|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Respect</li> <li>• Trust</li> <li>• Accepting validity of others' views</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Empathize</li> <li>• Humanize</li> <li>• Be self aware</li> <li>• Ask questions</li> <li>• Listen</li> <li>• Identify common ground</li> <li>• Be confident</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Formal process</li> <li>• Ground rules</li> </ul> |

*Figure 8.* Capacity Needed for Constructive Cross-divide Conversation.

Analysis of interviews revealed that those participants who were successful at keeping relationships despite worldview differences were able to compartmentalize the difference, separating the person from some of his or her ideas. Those who were not able to compartmentalize the difference were the ones who ended the relationship. It should be noted that two of the few participants who indicated that they had been able to have cross-divide conversations while compartmentalizing and maintaining relationships also indicated that they still try to avoid such conversations. Their responses appear to underscore the difficulty of such conversations.

### **Conditions Required to Foster Productive Conversations Across the Divide**

**Respect.** Respect was mentioned by about half the participants as being key to conversations. It was mentioned almost equally by men and women, conservatives and liberals. Participants spoke about respect in several ways, but primarily around respecting another's right to an opinion as a way to create a safer and more trusting environment for a conversation. Darla, a conservative, spoke specifically about how she used an articulation of respect for the other person in order to start a cross-divide conversation.

The issue of abortion was brought up and so, having a lot of respect for this person, I felt like we could have a conversation, and so instead of avoiding the issues and trying to change the topic, I took the opportunity to say, 'Why exactly do you feel the way you do? You know that I have a lot of respect for you as an individual, so this isn't going to change that, but I want to know why you feel the way that you do?'

Respect, then, was noted by participants as the positive counterpart to a commonly articulated fear. It was the antidote to the fear of not trusting the conversation to unfold in a way that was not insulting.

**Trust.** Trust came up for many participants, of both parties, as a prerequisite for a conversation. Mistrust between liberals and conservatives has been discussed at length in other findings. One liberal participant showed the importance of trust by contrasting the difficulty of cross-divide conversations with the ease of liberal-to-liberal conversations.

Tim emphasized that intra-party disagreements were easier to navigate due to being able to trust that both people shared the overarching vision:

It was a much friendlier conversation because we have the sense that we are on same side. We have more good faith that we have the same or similar vision for what we want to have happen, and just disagree on what will get us there.

In terms of cross-divide dynamics, Sally, a conservative, summed up well what other participants thought: “If somebody asked me a question and I trusted that person, I will say, ‘You know, I trust you, so I’m going to answer that.’ But if I don’t trust you, I’m not going to answer you.” Many participants linked respect and trust as a precondition for talking across the divide.

*Accepting the validity of others’ views.* Feeling validated was seen as both a necessity for good conversations and as difficult to achieve. Almost half of the participants spoke in some way about the need to understand that other people are entitled to their opinions as well. This topic brought out complexities. Many participants, more conservatives than liberals, spoke of understanding that other people also have valid opinions, but that they knew most people still had a hard time accepting another person’s opinion. They cited a variety of reasons for this resistance to others, not least because it challenges one’s own viewpoint and possibly also one’s entire value framework (finding two). Several conservative participants noted that liberals did not seem to grant them their right to an opinion (finding five).

Here again, interviews mirrored each other. Benjamin, a conservative, doubted he was able to induce his liberal friends to accept the validity of his opinion: “I don’t know

if I was able to convince them that conservatives were valid -- they had valid opinions. That they weren't just all greedy or bigoted."

While Benjamin could not convince his liberal friends that he had a valid viewpoint, Charles, a liberal, mused about his own inability to accept the validity of a conservative's view:

Why do I feel any more empowered or think I have any more right to my point of view in the belief that I'm dispassionate and objective and intelligent -- than another person whose belief is not based on any of these bases, but maybe on a very simple fear that Hispanics may take away his job?

As participants spoke of the need to respect the validity of other peoples' views, they brought up different elements of what this means. A few spoke of the need for humility, and to accept that no one person knows everything. As Howard, a conservative, said: "Nobody knows everything, so we ought to realize that and be receptive to listening to someone else's point of view and say, 'Well, what is this guy saying and does it have any merit?'" and think about it!" In doing so, he articulated what several participants noted, that there is a need to recognize that our views come from our experiences, which by definition are unique to each of us.

***Keeping your own opinion.*** Participants from both sides brought up the point that, related to seeing the validity of another's opinion, is the ability to let others keep their own opinion without trying to convince them of yours. About a third of interviewees, equally liberals and conservatives, spoke about being able to "agree to disagree." However, the conservative participants who addressed this issue did so at greater length and with more passion than liberals. Conservatives in particular spoke of their own ability

to refrain from anger and condemnation when encountering someone who disagrees with them. As Eli, a conservative, explained: “You have your opinion and I have my opinion! But I feel that there’s this larger segment on the left that actually gets angry and upset that I’m not holding where you’re holding.”

Buttressing the idea that letting others keep their own opinion is an ability, Cynthia, a trained mediator and a liberal, described the successful tactic of agreeing to let everyone keep their own opinion:

I think the number one factor that makes these conversations easier to have is just the fact that you’re not trying to persuade somebody, just having an informal dialogue for just conversation purposes. I think it makes it a lot easier.

Cynthia therefore noted that letting others keep their own opinion was a good trust-building factor for a conversation.

**Abilities required for constructive conversations.** Many participants from both sides mentioned abilities and skills that are necessary for constructive cross-divide conversations. Interviewees spoke about the need to be able to show empathy and to humanize the other. Interviewees from both sides noted the need to listen, ask non-threatening questions, “entertain thoughts without accepting them,” and assess information sources for their credibility.

However, only a few participants framed the overall question as a skills or abilities problem -- that we need, but do not really have, a number of specific skills to conduct these conversations well. Those few who did frame the question that way often did so with reference to what they had learned through their upbringing, inclination, or profession. For example, Benjamin spoke about being a diplomat now, but also having



grown up moving from city to city with a need to build bridges quickly with new classmates. Betty spoke of having learned about give-and-take in a family of seven children. Cynthia is a mediator, with all the communication and conflict resolution skills that come with that professional role:

It's recognizing that people come with -- I call it 'baggage'. There's something else connected to that and because of that the baggage that they carry, that's what gives them the passion for their argument. So, recognizing that what they're saying isn't at the top level, but it's going deeper than that.

A few others spoke about the need to feel confident enough to undertake such a conversation. Darla spoke of it in terms of being nervous initially because she did not grow up talking politics at home. Betty spoke of it in terms of seeing the young women she was mentoring feel challenged in cross-divide encounters:

I found out that lack of confidence is part of what happens about not being able to have a genuine conversation and looking at all sides of it, because they tend to look at the belief system and a role model and what they've learned and they're not comfortable reaching out and finding common ground.

Part of the need for confidence, some participants noted, is knowing that you will be able to handle the situation if it starts to go poorly. A few stated that humor helps both to start as well as to defuse a situation:

I'm pretty good at defusing these things, having been in contentious environments for over 20 years of my life. I've deflected. I somehow made some sort of a joke or something. (Charles, liberal)

A few others, on both sides, spoke about needing to understand when and how to have the conversation. They felt this particularly important given the fact that some people will get emotional and it might escalate.

Obviously, it's been a big learning curve because not everybody is willing to have that conversation. So, it's been a balancing act of figuring out first of all, when is it appropriate and second of all, who is going to be willing and who is not. And third of all, just accepting if someone isn't willing to have a positive discussion -- just to leave it there and not try to push the issue. (Darla, conservative)

John, a conservative, said he thought about cross-divide conversations similarly to all relationship issues. It was about strategy and not giving in to ego-driven desires to prove yourself right:

[I watched] the people who were respectful and compassionate and picked their battles, and not fight because you think you're right, because you want to be right, but picking the time -- here's the time I need to be right, here's a time when it's not a big deal.

John therefore was an example of someone who had learned how to have constructive. political conversations by reflecting on how people engaged with each other successfully on non-political issues.

***Ability to empathize.*** Empathy was mentioned as necessary for these conversations by half of the participants, evenly conservatives and liberals. Different aspects of empathy included putting yourself in the other person's situation, as well as listening. While it was presented as an ideal for fostering more and better cross-divide conversations, many participants had somewhat negative things to say about it. Some

spoke of skepticism that empathy could be taken to scale, and another said her ability to be empathetic was weakening in the face of the current political situation.

I think that it would be helpful, but you can never implement that on a mass scale, like ‘everyone practice having more empathy now!’ (Brooklyn, liberal)

I have this strong ability to see both sides of a situation normally, so I can really understand both sides. I’m think I’m getting to the point with political stuff that I can’t so much do that, but I used to pride myself that I could you know walk in somebody else’s shoes and even if I disagreed with what they believed, at least I could understand it. (Kelly, liberal)

***Ability to humanize.*** Related to empathy is the topic of humanizing, which many participants of both sides brought up as a way to have more productive conversations. Humanizing was seen in different ways. At its most basic, many interviewees spoke of needing to remember that we are all human beings and that we share a common humanity. At least one participant lamented the loss of capacity to see beyond stereotypes to the fellow human beneath:

In our digital society, we have lost ground in building relationships. Like you had with your own family, [and I with] my family, we could sit around the table and have these conversations because we valued each other as humans first, and then as we went on this journey we’ve acquired our opinions and our beliefs because of our experiences that have affected our opinions. (Betty, conservative)

Another aspect of humanizing brought up by several participants was trying to create a more holistic picture of the other. Participants seemed to feel that deeper, more wide-ranging conversation could achieve this.

I'm an NRA member. If they sit and talk to me, they'd probably say, "He seems to be a reasonable guy. He's got a master's degree and is thinking about a doctorate. He's not a wild guy who wants revolution, but he believes passionately in the Second Amendment." (Doug, conservative)

Here again, participants noted the importance of the ability to humanize others. Part of that, they indicated, was creating an image of the other that was more nuanced than political stereotypes.

***Ability to ask questions.*** Many people of both sides spoke about questioning as an important aspect of good cross-divide conversations, but only one spoke of it in terms of a skill that could be learned. The inverse of asking questions, as two people brought up, is that not asking questions in a conversation is perceived as a lack of genuine interest in the other person. Those who spoke about questioning referred to ways in which they had used it successfully: getting people to think outside the box, paraphrasing and then asking if they had understood the other person correctly, probing to find peoples' underlying interests and fears. A challenge raised was that this questioning has to be done carefully in a low-trust environment, so that it is not perceived (rightly or wrongly) as "gotcha" questions.

You have to start with a neutral, inquisitive question -- in a neutral voice, "What do you think about x?" not like a loaded question -- "what do you think about X?!?" and they will answer. (DeWitt, liberal)

Many participants suggested questions that are emotional in nature, designed to prompt a sense of safety and being heard. However, a few participants, from both sides, use questioning that makes people think more deeply rather than rely on superficial assumptions and repeated slogans. As Benjamin, conservative, described: “I tried to do certain things where I pose these theoretical questions that get people to think outside the binary box. And... I think that was successful.”

Yet another participant saw asking questions as a way to humanize the other person. Tanya, a liberal, suggested asking questions that would deliberately unearth complicated patterns of thinking that could not just be pigeon-holed as Democrat or Republican: “If you [get to] know them as people versus voters -- and then you can ask them, ‘How is it you come to do that?’” An ability to ask good questions was presented as a way to achieve the humanizing noted above.

***Ability to identify common ground.*** Many people, on both sides, spoke of the ability to identify common ground as a facilitating factor for such conversations – a more specific version of the questioning described above. Charles, a liberal, described how he tried to find common ground by exploring the fears of both himself and his conversation partner:

So instead of talking about Donald Trump, we discuss what is she afraid of? Is her fear legitimate? And likewise, what is my fear and is it legitimate? And if we can come to a common ground on why we view the world the way we do, then we potentially open up the door to having a conversation.

For conservatives, finding common ground particularly meant focusing on issues and taking personalities out of the conversation. Benjamin explained this in way

reminiscent of what a few other conservatives mentioned: “I tried to stay a little bit more measured, tried to focus on, ‘Hey, there are these things from the left that I think are not bad ideas. Let’s focus on that rather than on the people.’”

There were different definitions of finding common ground. Some participants from both sides spoke of finding common ground on an issue. An example was gun control, with the thinking most people could agree at least that innocent people should not get hurt. Several other participants from both sides spoke of finding common ground around approach to life -- being moral and wanting to be useful to others:

I see it from the perspective of pretty much everybody that I socialize with is a moral person. We all have an objective which is to try to make life better or try to make everybody’s lives better... and politics is a way all of us to achieve that goal, we just have different routes, right? (John, conservative)

I think that everyone could agree that we would want to not harm, we want to minimize harm, and there’s kind of some universal things that most good people could agree to. (Molly, liberal)

However, participants of both sides noted that there were challenges in identifying this common ground. One focused on the practical aspect of the time it takes to shift people out of partisanship and into more productive areas.

In these types of arguments, what comes first is ideology. So, I guess if people could see around that or just be able to have more patience, they’d be able to find these common threads. (Brooklyn, liberal)

A complicating factor occurs when there is a perception that the common ground needs to be a shared identity. Several conservatives pointed out that liberals and conservatives have differing ideas of what it means to be an American and, without this common ground of identity, there is an insurmountable gap. This was more frequently brought up by older generations. Doug, a 67-year-old conservative, explained: “If we don’t have 80% consensus around what it means to be American, then we aren’t a country -- we’re a collection of interest groups.” Sharing that viewpoint, Sue, a 60-something liberal, said: “Sometimes I feel we’ve lost sight of the fact that we DO share a history, and we don’t even necessarily agree about what those values are.”

To get around that problem of differing conceptions of identity, Doug proposed that the common ground which could be found might be the simple agreement that polarization is a bad thing. A young liberal expressed the same sentiment.

First, we need to find people that are willing from both sides that would agree on problem identification that this extreme polarization is not good and is unsustainable if we want to preserve our country. (Doug, conservative)

When it comes to getting people interested, I don’t know that there is a mass solution beyond just trying to keep encouraging people until more and more people start to realize well maybe this polarization -- maybe, my worldview about the other side, my enemy --maybe that’s not the helpful way. (Nathaniel, liberal)

In a similar vein, another man talked about how he and his liberal friend, who have remained friends over decades, have found common ground in lamenting the state

of politics. Howard, a conservative, explained: “We’ve agreed that not all, but many politicians -- probably most of them -- are lousy characters!”

*Ability to listen.* Given how deeply different the sides’ worldviews are, and the escalating conflict dynamics around them, perhaps it is not surprising that about a fifth of interviewees also brought up the need to listen. For four of those who did, listening was part of their profession (mediator, diplomat, researcher, and child advocate). They were the only participants who spoke of listening in terms of skills. However, others who mentioned listening stated that it must be done in a patient and respectful fashion. One woman who does engage in cross-divide conversations and clearly listens closely, spoke not only of skill but of years of practice:

Take time to listen to hear and not to respond. Because if you’re responding, you’re not listening, because you’re interpreting and you’re coming up with a response to what the person is saying .....So that has taken years of practice, lots of practice, to get to that point. And I still struggle sometimes. I say, “Wait a minute, are you listening or are you responding?” (Cynthia, liberal)

Two interviewees spoke about being natural listeners but also having taken active listening training. Both of them suggested that as a possibility for increasing general capacity for cross-divide conversations. As Kelly, a liberal, said: “Something in general that I found effective with people is to restate what they said in different words. Not just parrot it back, to show that you heard them, not necessarily that you agree, but that you heard them.” She noted that listening was linked to another necessary component of these conversations -- validating the fact that the other has a right to their viewpoint.



*Ability to be self-aware.* Fewer than a third of the participants mentioned some aspect of self-awareness. Those who brought it up did so in three ways. Some indicated understanding that they themselves were part of the problem, with their own behavior escalating conflict dynamics. Some indicated the related issue of being aware of their own biases and prejudices but not always being able to control them. Finally, some mentioned the need for recognizing they did not know the answer to an issue, and that self-knowledge and humility could be an opening for a conversation.

Demonstrating an awareness of his own, possibly biased, perception of the other, Eli noted:

I just feel that that bandwidth on the left of acceptance or lack of acceptance is bigger and bigger and is larger and closer to the center than I necessarily think it is on the right. And that could be a bias I have.

Another conservative noted his awareness of how he sometimes contributes to escalating conflict dynamics:

I think the number one barrier and I would beg *mea culpa* -- is I sound pretty reasonable when I'm talking about examples one on one and face to face with colleagues, and family and friends, but I think my worst instincts come out on social media. (Benjamin)

A third conservative referenced her choice not to take a stance on the hot-button topic of immigration because she does not feel she knows enough about it:

I never say anything about the border wall thing. Why? Because I haven't been to the border. All I can do is trust the media and they tell me diametrically opposed

things, so I have no clue. So therefore, I don't think I have the right to have an opinion on the border issue. (Madison)

Self-awareness therefore was brought up by several participants as helpful in stimulating productive cross-divide conversations. This self-awareness was described as a recognition that one's own behavior could be escalating the conflict dynamics and therefore be part of the problem. It was also described as an understanding of one's biases. Humility combined with self-awareness was posited to be an opening for conversation.

**Structure.** In addition to noting need for individual capacity, when asked about how to facilitate more frequent, constructive conversations, almost two-thirds of the interviewees -- from both sides and all demographics -- suggested some type of formal process or mechanism. Ideas ranged from having a third person (friend or family member) moderate the conversation to a highly structured town hall. Hersch, a liberal who is involved in Better Angels, an organization that creates fora for Red-Blue conversations, lamented the fact that this is even necessary:

There is something about our culture that has made it necessary to go out and recruit you and make you sit down for several hours and go through a series of exercises that go from you talking among yourselves, to you talking among yourselves and watching each other, to you talking among yourselves to formulate questions to ask of others -- to gradually remind you of something you knew all along anyway. But that to me is the essence of it, that we've forgotten that we are friends!

While Hersch was sorry the polarized situation had reached this state, he agreed with the many other participants who indicated that some form of intervention seemed necessary for us to have these conversations.

***Formal process.*** Two participants had well-developed ideas for how to phase such an intervention, but all seemed to think that what such formal dialogue processes can accomplish is small but worthwhile.

Invite people to be speakers, and have rules, and dialogue afterwards. People may leave not having changed but at least they will have heard reasonable dialogue, not just soundbites, and be exposed to both sides of an issue to a meaningful degree. (Doug, conservative)

Helping people break down stereotypes and see shared humanity could be a goal of such events. Several participants from both sides mentioned town hall-type fora during the time of a divide. Others suggested similar types of formally convened sessions to bring people together.

[Try] smart sorts of restorative justice-type discussions between people and I think people would begin to break down those stereotypes and the barriers that they have in their mind to actually make some meaningful connections with people. (Sonia, liberal)

***Ground rules.*** Almost half of the participants, from both sides, mentioned wanting to have ground rules in advance that would govern conduct in both formal and informal cross-divide conversations. Key factors participants brought up included mutual respect, genuine listening, and understanding that the other person has a valid viewpoint. This suggested solution is the inverse of the fear of being unsafe and uncomfortable.

Darla, a conservative, reflected on how one such Better Angels event could have been improved:

We got a flyer, and it said it was about discussing the current polarization. But we had no idea if there were going to be any rules or that disrespect was not going to be tolerated, or things like that. So, I think we were still under the assumption that there could be some conflict at this event, and we were nervous about that.

Others advocated for something similar before one-on-one cross-divide conversations. They suggested that, before talking, the participants have at least an upfront, shared understanding of expected conduct. Molly, a liberal, theorized it could work “if everyone who entered a conversation entered it with the idea that I’m going to respect the other person’s viewpoint and not try to change their mind -- and if they don’t change their mind, [I won’t] get angry and become insulting.”

One of the more popular ground rules proposed was to separate issues from people. This had a number of aspects. One aspect was to debate political issues, not political personalities. This suggestion was couched more frequently by conservatives in terms of wishing to be able to talk about what President Trump does on issues, rather than who he is as a person. Stan, a conservative, articulated what several other conservatives said: “As much as our President -- his mouth definitely gets in the way of his work -- I think the one thing we need to do is first of all look at what is being done right, right now.”

Another aspect of the suggested ground rule of separating issues from people was phrased in terms of separating passion about an issue from judgment about a person who holds a different opinion on that issue. Once again, this was an area where more

conservatives than liberals weighed in. Some said they thought it was wrong to drop friends or family because of a difference in political opinion. Madison, a conservative, exclaimed: “It’s ridiculous to think that we can’t be friends, that people weren’t talking to family members over politics. You know? It sickens me. It’s just politics.” A few others affirmed times when they held onto relationships across that political divide, as did Hank, a conservative: “I know without any doubt that [my cousin’s] political outlook is far more liberal than mine. It doesn’t matter -- doesn’t affect the love I feel for her.”

An African-American woman emphasized that it was important, before showing up at any sort of dialogue, to have assurance that she would be heard as a minority and not used as window dressing.

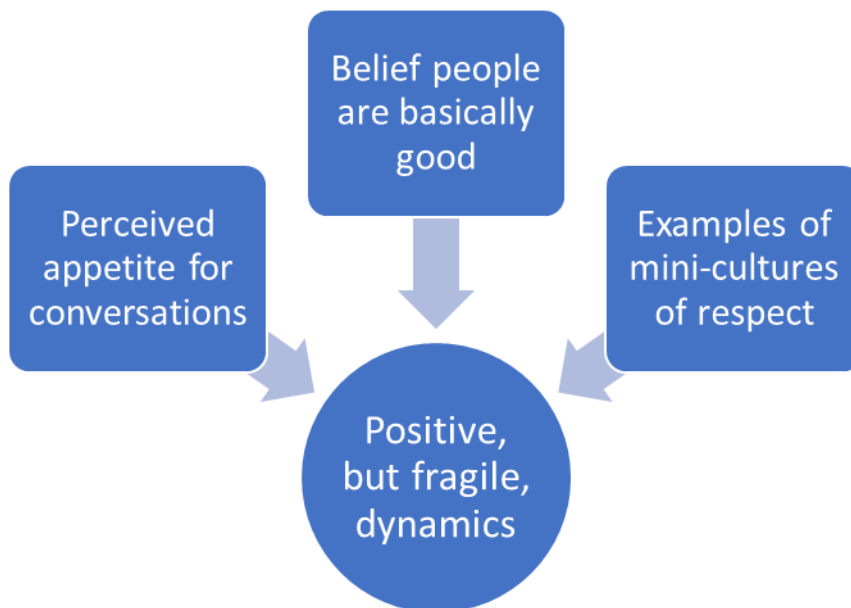
I think that people have to feel like, when they get there, they’re going to be heard, they’re not just going to be talking to a brick wall. That they’re not only there to serve as a spokesperson for a generally underrepresented community.

(Danielle, liberal)

In sum, many participants from both sides noted a general need to increase capacity for having cross-divide conversations. While few saw it specifically in terms of a need for training and development of specific abilities, they named the skills needed. These included skills of listening, questioning, reframing, and defusing. They also discussed the attitudes necessary for better cross-divide conversations, particularly self-awareness and empathy. In addition to discussing necessary skills, many participants also articulated the need for formal processes with ground rules.

**Finding Ten: Positive Dynamics Exist but are Fragile**

While the picture painted by interviewees was overwhelmingly one of division and stress, a significant number noted positive dynamics that can be built upon. The most frequently mentioned such dynamic was raised by about a quarter of participants, both conservative and liberal. It was the belief that most Americans are basically moral and agree on most things -- but that the extremes are drowning out the middle and creating confusion. Other participants from both sides noted the constructive learning that had occurred when they had had a successful cross-divide conversation. Four participants identified examples of institutions that had successfully created mini-cultures of respectful dialogue. However, even the positive contextual dynamics -- that most people are good, that racism is not as ubiquitous and paralyzing as some people make it out to be, that people are more curious about engaging than is generally assumed -- were tempered with statements highlighting the fragility of such positive dynamics.



*Figure 9. Dynamics Promoting Constructive Cross-divide Conversations.*

**Belief that the situation is basically good.** A positive dynamic upon which to build, as pointed out by several participants, is that, despite the perception of ubiquitous conflict and divide, there still is much that unites Americans -- and that most Americans realize this. It was mostly conservatives who articulated this view, but a few liberals did as well. However, they all seemed to qualify their statements about the positive dynamics with worries about fragility. Molly, a liberal, noted: "I come from a belief that most people are good -- but I want to think that, so I continue to think that!" Sally, a conservative, said: "I personally believe that the vast major of Americans see most things pretty similar. But they don't maybe know that?" Danielle, a liberal, added: "I think that fundamentally there is a lot on both sides that people agree about and we let people manipulate our feelings around election time."

Two conservatives went further and painted a picture of general harmony. However, both also referenced the fact that this picture of harmony is not widely acknowledged or is sometimes discounted. Doug, a conservative, explained the observation he made after attending a large summer event in his community:

Last year we had games and food in the park here and I wrote to the guy who organized the event, saying that, looking around you can see eight thousand of our fellow citizens, all different races, standing in line talking to each other....Generally speaking, folks are getting along. Let's not say we're a terrible place. Let's not make mass mischaracterizations.

Thus, several participants voiced the opinion that, in general, the polarization is not as crippling as the media and main parties present. In general, several participants

seemed to think, enough of us get along well enough that there is not great cause for alarm.

**Appetite for constructive learning.** A few interviewees reported having had successful cross-divide conversations, and that these created ground to build on. While many participants said people generally did not want to engage, those participants who regularly have these conversations said the opposite. They asserted that there was great appetite for talking across the divide if done correctly. As DeWitt, a liberal, put it: “People want to engage. You just have to ask in the right way.”

Not only did participants speak about there being some appetite for cross-divide conversations. Several on both sides spoke about the constructive learning that had come for them out of such cross-divide conversations:

I learned recently that monuments... renaming highways from Jeff Davis to Richmond Highway -- I learned that some of these monuments were put up in the 1920s when the civil rights movement was starting up, as a sort of in your face emblem [of white power]. (Doug, conservative)

In having conversations with friends in high school who hunted or were interested in or were proponents of guns, I guess I was able to understand why some might feel it is a necessity for them. I guess my opinion on that kind of shifted in having those types of conversations. (Brooklyn, liberal)

Thus, a few participants noted having learned something in cross-divide conversations. Still others spoke aspirationally about wanting to have conversations specifically so that they would be able to learn.



[I'd like to have conversations] with my extended family, my wife's parents.

Because they have different views than I do, and I can't say I'm up to date on every issue that's out there. So, they're smart people and I could probably learn from them as well. (Brian, conservative)

A desire to learn, therefore, was reported as a strong, positive dynamic that could fuel more constructive cross-divide conversations.

**Examples of mini-cultures of respectful dialogue.** In addition to the Better Angels workshops that one conservative and one liberal participant mentioned frequently, analysis of interviews revealed three other cases where mini-cultures of respectful debate had been created. The examples were described as being healthy places where quality work (advocacy, legislation, school policy making, and citizen-to-citizen discussion) could get done precisely because of the ground rule of respecting others' opinions. Those who mentioned the examples attested to how well such processes worked. They also gave various reasons as to why the processes were successful. For example, several of the processes created a sense of safety for those within the culture. Danielle, a 25-year-old liberal African-American, described the experience of her group of African-American law students who were in a disagreement with conservative students over policies to promote minorities. She noted that coming together in a formal setting helped reduce the threat each side perceived in the other: "We worked it out. We sat around the table, and we shared. The idea was that both parties were in a pretty organized setting, so I think that kind of let people let their guard down a bit."

Two other participants had similarly positive experiences with regular cross-divide interactions. They described how the mini-cultures in which they existed not only

created but also enforced norms of respect for different opinions. Nathaniel, a liberal, spoke of his experience working over the summer with people of all political opinions at an NGO that promoted free speech. He seemed to think that the fact that everyone believed in the rights aspect of the organization was key to creating the culture of respectful dialogue:

I think that everyone who applied to be in the program understood that FIRE, the nonprofit we worked for, is very big on being non-partisan, is very big on defending freedom of speech rights for people across the aisle whatever their political beliefs may be. So I think there was just this understanding that this is the culture of the office, of the company, and none of us were going to betray that, none of us had any sort of serious misgivings about that, so I think it was the work environment...

In a similar vein, Sue, a liberal, described the culture of her state legislature. She recounted how it drilled into freshmen legislators that they were supposed to debate issues, not people. Sue went on to detail her own experience seeing a legislator from the other party say something disrespectful and then being taken to task by a member of his own party's leadership. Sue compared her legislature with other legislatures that did not enforce rules of discourse as stringently: "Sometimes I'll hear speeches from other states and go, 'Gosh! you couldn't do that in Wyoming!' I mean, the leadership would shut you down."

It should be noted, however, that while there was much support for formal processes to foster cross-divide conversations, one person did say she would not attend such a formal process. Sarah, a conservative, explained that it felt artificial and

inconsistent with her “live and let live” attitude towards politics. When the idea of a Better Angels workshop was described to her, she exclaimed: “I wouldn’t go! It feels a little too focus group-y. It’s all these nice, feel good exercises but I don’t think anyone is really going to -- it should just be that -- it’s a political opinion!” It is important, therefore, not to overstate the interest in formal dialogue processes.

**The power of existing relationships.** Several participants from both sides spoke about the benefit of having these conversations within the context of existing relationships. This seemed to be for several reasons. For some, it meant that there is a certain level of trust already established. As Howard, a conservative, explained: “I have no trouble talking to [my long time liberal friend] and we are great friends and we’ve done each other some favors along the way and been nice to each other.”

Several other participants, from both sides, alluded to a level of confidence arising from the longevity of the relationship. This confidence in the foundation of the friendship lessened the fear that a conversation would jeopardize the relationship. Hersch, a liberal, spoke about a heated political argument he had had with an old friend: “I certainly didn’t have the feeling we’d never talk to each other again or anything like that.”

Several other participants observed that, in existing relationships, one has had a chance to see other aspects and dimensions of the person. That seemed to mean that one is more convinced that the other is a good person with whom one shares values, even if the issue under discussion is one in which both seem to be operating from entirely different worldviews. Jeff, a liberal, described the types of people with whom it was easiest for him to have a cross-divide conversation:

The more history I have with them in other parts of life, whether that be a family member or a friend or I've served with them on a committee or a club that we've been a part of, and I have seen that they are compassionate and caring and loving.

To summarize this finding, while much of the interview content revealed a conflictual, divided society, several participants reported positive dynamics that assisted better and more frequent cross-divide conversations. One aspect of this was a widespread belief that there is more generalized harmony in the United States than many meta-narratives paint. Another insight, gained from the participants who engage in these conversations the most deliberately and frequently, was that there was more appetite for talk and learning than most observers believe. A third insight was that there are examples of mini-cultures in which norms of expecting, valuing, and respecting other opinions are not only taught but enforced -- and lead to quality work and relationships.

### **Conclusion of Findings**

To conclude this chapter on findings, the interviews with 15 liberals and 15 conservatives -- from all corners of the country, all age groups, both genders, and different races and ethnicities -- revealed that conversation across the political divide is complicated. Participants described this interaction as painful because it forced recognition of greatly differing worldviews, when most people would prefer to remain in the comfort of likeminded groups that support rather than challenge each other's opinions. Most participants tended to avoid these conversations out of fear of risking relationships or reputations, and on the assumption that the other side will not listen. In fact, these conversations often were not conversations at all, but rather were highly emotional exchanges of identity assertions and personal attacks. These often conflictual

interactions both were shaped by and further shaped a context of worry, stress, and division. For example, years of condescending comments by many liberals had provoked some conservative participants to reclaim the term “deplorables” in a political backlash. Racial and ethnic issues were described as so pressing that fully half of participants raised them unasked, and revealed that they were a more intense version of all the previous findings.

In describing barriers to constructive cross-divide conversation, social media was referenced by almost everyone. It was mentioned both for the way it brought out the worst in individuals’ communication, but also for its business model of provoking outrage and funneling people into silos with likeminded people. Some participants also referenced the negative model provided by political leaders. Others spoke, often in terms of confusion, about changing social norms around race and gender and other issues. Many noted that conflict behaviors across society had coarsened: people were less able to listen, had more negative stereotypes about the other side, and quickly resorted to personal attacks. Others from both sides spoke about disputed sources of information, how both sides relied on their own media, and how the sides could not agree on facts anymore -- if, indeed, facts were even used in the conversation.

While all participants catalogued barriers to constructive cross-divide conversations, most participants spoke of the importance of such as well as the pro-social reasons they wished they were able to have them. Participants offered many practical as well as innovative suggestions of ways to foster such conversations. While most did not frame the paucity of constructive cross-divide conversations as a lack of skills, participants did acknowledge a need for external assistance in pursuing cross-divide

dialogue. In describing that assistance, many articulated a desire for rules agreed in advance to guarantee respectful listening, sincere questioning, and humanizing behavior. Finally, four examples were given of mini-cultures that successfully created and enforced the notion that differing viewpoints are to be valued, respected, and cultivated. These findings which point to potential solutions, as well as the findings which describe the experience of cross-divide interactions, will be analyzed next in chapter five.

## Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

This final chapter will sum up the dissertation with a discussion. In chapter four, I outlined my main findings. In this final chapter, I will summarize them and then interpret them through the study's conceptual framework, including a description of how the findings are situated in the literature. I also will describe the limitations of this study and then offer recommendations for practitioners and scholars. Finally, I will offer thoughts on the implications of this study.

### **Purpose of Research**

The purpose of this study was to explore the challenges of and possibilities for improved informal political talk between people with political opinions different from their own. Specifically, the purpose was to conduct a qualitative study to identify the beliefs and behaviors of people with respect to talking across the political divide. To do so, I examined the following research questions:

RQ1: How do liberals and conservatives experience communicating across the political divide?

RQ2: What motivates people to have such conversations?

RQ3: What are barriers to having these conversations?

RQ4: What factors would assist people to have these conversations more frequently and constructively?

## Summary of Findings

Table 5

### Findings Per Research Question

| Research Question   | Finding   |
|---|---|
| How do liberals and conservatives experience communicating across the political divide? | <b>Finding one:</b> Liberals and conservatives largely experienced interacting across the divide in the same way.   |
|   | <b>Finding two:</b> Actual cross-divide conversations rarely happened, but shorter cross-divide interactions did.   |
|   | <b>Finding three:</b> Cross-divide interactions tended to be highly emotional, as they seemed to reveal a large, usually painful difference in worldviews between liberals and conservatives.                         |
|   | <b>Finding four:</b> Interactions occurred in a wider socio-economic and political context of stress and division.  |
|   | <b>Finding five:</b> Interactions both shaped and were shaped by escalating conflict dynamics.  |
|   | <b>Finding six:</b> Racial and ethnic issues were an intensification of all findings, as most people of color perceived the barriers to conversations higher and the threats to safety greater than did white people. |
| What are the barriers to such conversations?  | <b>Finding seven:</b> Fears and assumptions about the other side led most participants to avoid cross-divide conversations.   |
| What motivates people to undertake such conversations?                                  | <b>Finding eight:</b> Most participants saw the importance of conversations and wished to have them, for a variety of social and civic reasons.   |
| What would assist people to have such conversations more frequently and constructively? | <b>Finding nine:</b> Most saw a need for greater capacity to have cross-divide conversations.   |
|   | <b>Finding ten:</b> Positive, but fragile, examples exist of mini-cultures which promote and protect differing opinions.  |

## Interpretation of Findings

In interpreting the findings, I first will synthesize the study's overall findings to discuss how they answered the research questions. Then I will summarize the study's conceptual framework and interpret the overall study in terms of that framework. Next I will examine the findings one by one. For each finding, I will note how it supports existing conclusions in the literature, as well as identify any ways in which the finding enhances or possibly contradicts the literature.



### **Summary of Overall Findings in Relation to the Research Questions**

Taken together, the findings of this study indicate that communication across the political divide, for both conservatives and liberals, was driven by needs for safety and comfort. Safety and comfort were described on many levels. Most frequently described was cognitive safety, in terms of not having existing belief systems challenged. Another often-discussed form of comfort was protection of social relationships by not exposing them to conflict. Physical safety was referred to in two ways. Some participants described heated cross-divide conversations that they feared could become violent. Some other participants – mostly people of color – noted that they felt rhetoric from the other side menaced their safety. Yet a few others, particularly conservatives, referenced existential safety and fears that their place in history would be eradicated.

Because of these safety and comfort concerns, most participants explained that they usually avoided talking across the divide. But the goal of safety and comfort was also discernable when participants spoke about the opposite situation – when they might want to speak across the divide. Many participants said they wished to have such conversations to overcome this polarized separation through having more, and stronger, social bonds which would provide both safety and comfort. Furthermore, when talking about factors that would assist bringing people into constructive cross-divide conversations, safety and comfort again came to the fore. Participants recommended actions such as providing ground rules, advertised in advance, to foster a climate of respect and “agreeing to disagree” which would increase the sense of safety and comfort.

Thus, in answer to the overarching research question of how liberals and conservatives experience communicating across the divide, participants indicated simply

that they rarely had such experiences out of fears for their safety and comfort. Further, when they did interact across the divide, it tended to be an angering experience of clashing worldviews. These interactions were highly emotional and uncomfortable, often involving challenges to their identity and values rather than exploration of policy and issues. Participants felt most Americans are changing to fit the polarization – simplifying thinking and relationships into more comfortable patterns, treating others more coarsely in an attempt to protect themselves, and banding more closely with likeminded others for safety. Some described trying re-establish pro-social norms that better promoted safety and comfort, such as urging kindness or standing up against condescending comments.

Despite this negativity, most participants still indicated a wish to be able to talk across the divide. Outlining another reason for their discomfort with such conversations, most participants were able to point to a general lack of the skills and capacity to make these conversations constructive rather than destructive, or safe rather than unsafe. A few participants described micro-cultures in which respect for other opinions was fostered, enforced, and protected – evidence that even now it is possible to create new expectations and norms that would promote a broader sense of safety and comfort.

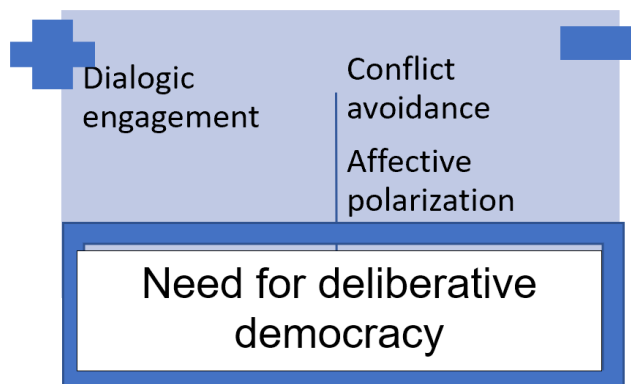
The figure below indicates how, when considering whether or not to interact across the divide, the individual interacts with the surrounding context. The individual reacts according to how she thinks she will achieve safety and comfort. This reaction then becomes part of the polarized society's conflict dynamics – very often in negative ways.



*Figure 10.* Context and Consequences of Cross-divide Conversations.

### Summary of the Conceptual Framework

The first element of the conceptual framework is the theory of deliberative democracy (Habermas, 1996). The framework holds that deliberative democracy is needed and can be achieved in part through informal political talk. The second element of the framework is that informal political talk is prevented both by a general tendency towards conflict avoidance (Eliasoph, 1998) and by emotional, partisan identity-based affective polarization (Iyengar & Westwood, 2015; Iyengar et al., 2018; Westwood et al., 2018). The final framework element is dialogic engagement (Nagda, 2006), an approach of skilled, reflective listening and speaking to promote the political talk required by deliberative democracy. These four theories, in three elements, together outline a framework for considering why political talk is needed, what obstructs it, and what could facilitate it.



*Figure 11.* Diagram of conceptual framework.

### **Interpretation of the Overall Study Through the Conceptual Framework**

Most, but not all, of this study is explained by the chosen framework. First, I will examine the aspects of the study that are explained by the framework. Then I will note how the framework could be extended to further explain results. Then I will outline aspects of the study that are not explained by the framework.

#### **Findings through the lens of conflict avoidance and affective polarization.**

Portrayed on the “minus” side of the diagram, the framework explained well the barriers to cross-divide conversations. Most participants, from both sides, reported avoiding such conversations for fear of jeopardizing relationships or self-image. This corresponds exactly with conflict avoidance theory. Most participants from both sides also described cross-divide interactions – when they did not avoid them – as filled with negative emotions around values and statements of identity, rather than rational discussion of issues. Many also noted a tendency in society for people to congregate in like-minded groups with little exposure to views that do not conform with their own. Several described coarsening standards of interpersonal behavior, particularly visible through social media, indicating that there are not norms to control political speech. All of these dynamics are described by the theory of affective polarization.

These two theories in the conceptual framework therefore explain many of the study’s findings. The study’s findings, in turn, illuminate a link between the two theories. While the theory of affective polarization on its own describes the state of two groups increasingly separated by emotional, partisan-based identity, the theory does not fully explain the mechanisms that create the polarization. However, this study reveals how conflict avoidance could be a strong dynamic within affective polarization. This could be

happening in two ways. both revolving around ever-deepening negative perceptions of the other group. First, conflict avoidance could be the result of affective polarization. Members of one side have little contact with the other, and as a consequence build increasingly negative perceptions of the other side. These negative perceptions feed an assumption that conflict will ensue from interaction, and therefore they deliberately avoid engagement with the other side. Second, this study also indicates the opposite dynamic, i.e., conflict avoidance could be the cause of affective polarization. By avoiding each other, members of both sides lose the chance to humanize the other. Quite the opposite, they deepen their negative stereotypes of the other in what becomes a vicious circle.

In looking at conflict avoidance, this study therefore brings the concept of intergroup anxiety into the dynamics of affective polarization. Intergroup anxiety theory posits that people experience worry or fear both when contemplating contact and when actually having contact with other groups (Stephan and Stephan, 1985). In part, this theory outlines how intergroup anxiety can feed itself, as when the interaction between groups negatively affects the groups' perceptions of each other: "e.g., intergroup anxiety leads to awkward intergroup interactions that then lead to increased prejudice" (Stephan, 2014, p. 4). Conflict avoidance and intergroup anxiety therefore provide an explanation for the escalating dynamics within a situation of affective polarization, and this study demonstrates the strong links between all three theories.

**Findings through the lens of deliberative democracy.** As described above, the conceptual framework helps explain the phenomenon and dynamics of polarization. However, it does not help elucidate the implications for deliberative democracy of the highly emotional, negative cross-divide interactions revealed by this study. Deliberative

democracy posits that political conversation is necessary because it gives legitimacy to laws. Yet, as described above, far from these conversations advancing the discussion of issues and formation of civic consensus, the overwhelmingly negative interactions reported by participants seemed to be deepening the divide. Participants reported that cross-divide interactions mostly increased suspicion of the other side and their motives – including their motives in governing. Thus, as described by participants, these cross-divide conversations did not seem to contribute to deliberative democracy in a significant or positive way.

Nor did the deliberative democracy lens account for the non-civic reasons that many participants gave for wanting to talk across political lines. These non-civic reasons very often focused on strengthening social bonds. Further, participants indicated that this bonding reason for cross-divide conversations seemed to have become even more salient as they perceived that polarization had weakened or even ended the bonds. The very lack of the conditions for deliberative democracy seemed to make the non-civic reasons for cross-divide interaction more relevant for participants.

**Findings through the lens of dialogic engagement.** While the theory of deliberative democracy aided interpretation of findings in a counterfactual way – highlighting how the majority of cross-divide conversations serve to undermine rather than support deliberative democracy – the theory of dialogic engagement did provide a way to consider findings about how to facilitate better cross-divide communication. Dialogic engagement emphasizes careful listening and questioning that paves the way for the humanizing and validating behaviors that participants identified as important for cross-divide conversations. The dialogic engagement theory also assists understanding

the finding around racial issues to some degree, as it notes that speaking about race is often considered a taboo, which makes people unsure how to talk about it safely even when they wish to do so (Nagda, 2006, p. 557). It addresses the dynamic that, in situations of inequality, dominant groups will want to perpetuate a narrative of harmony (Abu-Nimer, 1999) rather than unearth issues of racial oppression. By promoting deep reflection by dialogue participants on their power and privilege, dialogic engagement offers one method for addressing racial issues through conversation.

However, the dialogic engagement theory does not speak to the antecedents to dialogue that were brought up by participants. In particular, the theory does not address participants' safety and comfort concerns that individuals be able to keep their own opinion in a conversation. There is a tension unaddressed in dialogic engagement theory between cognitive safety and the deep – and often unsettling – self-reflection required to confront one's own prejudices. Relatedly, the theory does not address another part of the findings: how to bring people to the table to talk across the divide when they (strongly?) prefer to avoid such potentially conflictual conversations.

Here it might be useful to extend the conceptual framework by adding David Rock's (2008) "SCARF" (outlined in chapter two) for guidance on the overarching conditions conducive to successful dialogue. SCARF – standing for Status, Certainty, Autonomy, Relatedness, and Fairness – denotes the psychological needs humans wish to fulfill in social situations. We feel comfortable and safe when our status is affirmed and we have some certainty about what will be happening to us. We also prefer a sense of control, connection to others, and fair treatment. However, we feel threatened when these needs are not fulfilled in social situations. This lens helps us understand much of what

participants articulated. For example, it helps us understand conservatives' great anger over liberal condescension, as conservatives felt their status being degraded. It helps us understand participants' fear about the generalized uncertainty caused by changing social norms and behaviors. It explains the emphasis participants place on talking for the reason of forming social bonds, as well as their pain over relationship ruptures caused by the polarization.

SCARF is not only useful in understanding why participants articulated certain factors that would assist them to have better cross-divide conversations, for example, how the psychological need to have one's status affirmed explains participants' desire to be heard. SCARF also helps us understand how actively to create the conditions of safety and comfort needed for successful dialogic engagement. For example, knowing about the psychological need for certainty helps us meet participants' desire for ground rules, publicized in advance, guaranteeing that the dialogue will be conducted in a protective, respectful atmosphere. Thus, adding SCARF to the conceptual framework both deepens our understanding of the findings and suggests how to operationalize them.

### **Finding One: Liberals and Conservatives Largely Experienced Interacting Across the Divide in the Same Way**

Perhaps the most basic finding of this study was that people from both sides experienced cross-divide interactions in largely the same way. Liberals and conservatives mostly described the same reactions, fears, and hopes around such cross-divide conversations. This suggests that the cognitive, affective, and social issues participants faced are general to most Americans, rather than specific to a particular party. One dynamic surfaced, however, that was markedly different as between liberal and



conservative participants. That was a conservative perception of and reaction to a norm amongst many liberals of publicly denigrating conservatives. This does not align with the body of literature around the neuroscience of conservatives and liberals. Neuroscientists Jost and Amodio (2011) found greater ability in liberals than conservatives to shift their thinking to an unexpected "no-go" response. They found this ability correlated to a willingness to integrate new information and process it along with seemingly incompatible information. This is a level of openness which analysis of interviews (both descriptions of liberals' behavior by many conservative participants and liberal participants' self-reports of not ever wanting to talk to conservatives) in this study did not support. However, before disputing the neuroscientific argument, one would have to understand more why liberal participants were refusing to talk across the divide. Was it because of confirmation bias and lack of desire to be exposed to other ideas, or was it out of a desire to repudiate a perceived conservative value system with which they did not agree?

**Finding Two: Actual Cross-divide Conversations Rarely Happened, but Shorter, Usually Negative, Interactions Did**

As noted above in the discussion of this study's conceptual framework, another of the most basic findings from this study was that full conversations, in which information and opinions are exchanged rationally, rarely happened across the divide. The majority of participants reported avoiding these conversations. The main implication of this finding is that most participants were wary of being in conflict with another, which they felt was a strong likelihood in such a cross-divide situation. Participants who were successful at maintaining relationships despite serious political differences were able to

compartmentalize the areas of difference. Those who could not compartmentalize the differences tended to end relationships. Cross-divide conversations were reported as being so difficult that even those who were skilled often avoided them. Further, even positive engagement was often tinged with some assertion and even aggression, because these conversations were perceived not as about mutable policy choices but as about fundamental values.

This strong tendency to avoid cross-party conversation is borne out in the literature extensively. It is also borne out in the literature in many ways. These range from Eliasoph's (1998) work concerning political conversation patterns to Chen and Rohla's (2018) study on truncated holiday time for politically-divided families.

This finding also encompasses participants' reports that they sometimes did interact across the divide, but in a somewhat aggressive manner to assert their identity and beliefs. There is little in the literature on political talk about such conversational aggression. However, in one of the few other studies looking at political cross-talk, Wells et al (2017) found that people in cross-divide situations often choose to cut off the political talk altogether, and/or redirect the conversation to other topics. They also found some instances in which people ended the social relationship entirely. In terms of identifying both patterns of responses to cross-divide interactions and relationship-ending moments of aggression, Wells et al.'s findings are similar to those of this study.

Additionally, this finding reveals that occasionally some participants succeeded in having constructive, positive conversations across the divide in which the participants were able to exchange information and opinions without damaging their relationship. This reality of constructive engagement is another area that is not much covered in the

literature, with the exception of De Vries et al (2017) and their examination of conversation patterns that facilitate constructive dialogue. Even that examination does not talk about the ramifications of these positive conversations, which seemed to be increased skill, confidence, and willingness to try more. Finally, the literature also does not contain a mapping of the patterns of cross-divide interactions, as is done in this finding.

**Finding Three: Cross-divide Interactions Tended to be Highly Emotional, as they Seemed to Reveal a Large, Usually Painful Difference in Worldviews Between Liberals and Conservatives**

This finding emphasizes the emotional nature of cross-divide interactions. What it reveals is that participants did not have the rational, issue-based conversations that democracy theorists posit as necessary for good governance (Habermas, 1996). The implications of this for our democratic system are large, and will be discussed in the implications section.

Instead of rational conversations, participants described highly charged interactions in which they were usually angered by coming into contact with others' starkly different values and choices. They tended either to react with angry assertions or to shut down. Many found this division painful and were trying to determine why it was happening within their relationships as well as at the national level.

This finding is largely upheld in the literature in a variety of ways, starting with those outlined in the conceptual framework. Graham and Haidt (2009) describe the intractability of value-driven disputes, and that the value systems of liberals and conservatives have such different underpinnings as to be mutually incomprehensible. MacAdams et al (2008) speak about the sources of different worldviews, finding that

conservatives focus on issues of authority and rules, while liberals focus on care and fairness. Huckfeldt (2004) describes that meeting a differing worldview is cognitively painful and often causes people to shut down, while Crawford (2017) goes further to speak of both sides perceiving worldview challenges as a strong meaning threat. Walsh addresses the complicated, non-rational nature of these conversations, in which people are less communicating information and more communicating their images of themselves and their group (2004). Strickler (2019) finds a decline in reciprocal behavior, when people with different worldviews are less able to interact across the divide in good faith.

As detailed in chapter four, many participants in my own study, from both sides, articulated reactions compatible with all of these other studies. While I did not ask issue-based questions to determine whether answers were based in worldviews revolving around authority or fairness, per McAdams, I did find that almost all participants found incomprehensible the experience that worldviews could be so starkly different. Most interactions did not involve discussion of ideas, but more assertion of identity and values and the difference between “my side” and “your side.”

Another aspect of these conversations for many participants was the meaning-making aspect of encountering very different worldviews. While the political talk literature notes that the resulting cognitive dissonance is painful and often causes people to shut down, it does not discuss the further consequences of such interactions, including what many participants described as a painful process of thinking about how “good people” could think or act in such “wrong” ways.

#### **Finding Four: Cross-divide Interactions Occurred in a Wider Socio-economic and Political Context of Stress and Division**

This finding revolved around the impact of the overarching socio-economic and political context upon cross-divide interactions. Many political talk studies seem to approach these interactions as occurring in a vacuum, focusing on talk network size and composition, irrespective of current events or external context. In contrast, participants in this study revealed that their political cross-talk was particularly affected by the negative factors of perceived ubiquitous conflict, changing social norms, and the destructive influence of polarized political leaders and disruptors.

This finding indicates that participants were primed in many ways to be in conflict with each other, as they were influenced by all these forces. In navigating this divided, stressful context, participants were constantly receiving cues from traditional and social media that the two sides are no longer able to get along. Friends and family were modeling negative examples of how to handle conflict, and few participants reported having positive modeling of responses to conflict. The overarching context provided them with expectations and norms of destructive conflict rather than constructive engagement, which affected the way most participants experienced cross-divide situations.

There is ample evidence in the literature that bears out participants' perceptions both that the context is worsening and that there is more awareness of the increasing division. Westfall & Iyengar (2015) chart how Americans' perceptions of polarization have increased over the years, particularly amongst those who are strong partisans. Prior (2013) charts increased partisanship in media and Congress, while Levendusky &

Malhotra (2016a) show that the media has increased its coverage of the topic of polarization by 20% in recent years. In a global study of polarization, McCoy et al. (2018) found common patterns of affective polarization driving itself, as people in several different countries stopped communicating with the other side, did not seek to work collectively, and questioned the legitimacy of the other side and the country's institutions.

However, there is little in the literature specifically about how people perceive context as affecting whether and how they want to talk across the divide. A strong exception is that study of political talk during the time of a contentious governor's recall motion in Wisconsin (Wells et al., 2017). The authors charted how the fractious climate, in the midst of an economic downturn, changed patterns of political talk – sometimes stimulating it amongst groups who had not spoken of politics before, sometimes causing people to cut off conversation when they became an obvious opinion outsider. It should be noted that this study did not look exclusively at conversations across the divide. There also are many studies around the negative influence of social media (Shugars & Beauchamp, 2019) and about how negative tweets prolong online political disputes, and a few that examine how individuals' political talk networks change around elections (Sokhey, 2009). Thus, while the literature bears out participants' perceptions that the context is increasingly and visibly divided, it does not yet much address what these perceptions mean for peoples' willingness to engage across the divide.

### **Finding Five: Cross-party Interactions Both Shaped and Were Shaped by Escalating Conflict Dynamics**

Analysis of interviews showed that participants' cross-party interactions were started in a context of escalating conflict dynamics, but also furthered that escalation. This finding reveals that new norms of conflict behavior are developing in this context of polarization. Most of these are behavior norms that serve to deepen the divide. Examples of these new norms include condescending "throwaway comments" – widespread, constant, and public denigration of members of the other side. Other new norms include more widespread resort to cutting off contact entirely with friends and family as a result of cross-divide interactions. These new norms seem to have been generated precisely from this situation of increasing polarization, and for that reason were puzzling and unsettling to participants. A few people spoke of trying to create other, more respectful norms of behavior in this context. These included behaviors such as making statements to counter throwaway negative comments, as well as urging others to be kind in their social media posts. Thus, it seems that as (largely acrimonious) cross-divide interactions both spring from and contribute to escalating conflict dynamics, they are normalizing into expected behaviors.

Social psychology literature has a wing of research around the social norm approach and related issues. However, the political talk literature contains little around this finding. A strong exception is the Iyengar & Westwood (2015) observation that no norms exist to control negative political talk in the same way there exist taboos on discussing racial or gender topics. Their observation conformed with what most

participants in this study said, as they described others' (and sometimes their own) quick resorts to personal attacks and dropping relationships.

Few other political talk studies look at the role of norms, apart from a body of work by Elizabeth Paluck (2010) and colleagues (Paluck & Chwe 2017; Paluck & Green 2009). For example, from an experiment around reactions to a radio soap opera designed to reduce prejudice in Rwanda, she concludes that it might be more effective to seek to generate and reinforce prosocial behavioral norms than to try to shift prejudiced attitudes. More specifically, she theorized that to combat hate speech and persecuting action, elites of many communities must speak out against them and establish new, respectful norms.

#### **Finding Six: Racial and Ethnic Issues were an Intensification of all Findings**

Almost half of participants brought up race or ethnicity without being asked, in ways that indicated even more anger and incomprehension than around other issues. Because racial and ethnic issues were an intensification of all the other findings, this implies that racial issues are a tangible manifestation of our value system. They reveal how we think about ourselves and other human beings. We have deeply different notions of what rules to use to determine how to treat other human beings, and minority groups may have completely different perceptions of the world than majority groups. In other words, racial and ethnic issues form core parts of our worldviews.

Bruneau & Saxe (2012) looked at this subject from a neuroscientific perspective, examining empathy, validation, and perspective-taking. They found that, in a situation of power asymmetry, perspective-taking created positive attitude changes for the dominant group but not the non-dominant group, as they were already familiar with the dominant



group's viewpoints. Perspective-giving created positive attitude changes for the non-dominant group, who benefited from the opportunity to be heard.

Cramer Walsh (2016) found similar results in a study on dialogues around racial justice issues. She also found that marginalized groups, when invited to public forums, often need to start by speaking about their history of subjugation in a bid to be heard. She went on to explain that, for such marginalized groups, they speak up not as a contribution to democracy, but because their safety and survival may depend on it – a perspective which almost all people of color articulated in this study. Relatedly, Cramer Walsh also found that, for deliberative democracy truly to work for all of society, leaders of the dominant group need to learn how to listen to minority representatives.

#### **Finding Seven: Fears and Assumptions about the Other Side Led Most Participants to Avoid Cross-divide Conversations**

While some of the barriers to cross-divide conversations listed by participants included lack of opportunity, time, or energy, most were fears and assumptions about negative ways in which the conversation would unfold. This finding reveals that many of these barriers are ones which participants created themselves, as they tried to protect themselves from interactions they feared would be uncomfortable or make them feel unsafe. Most of the barriers were ones that, given a less polarized context, or possibly with more contact, could be lowered.

The literature bears out this finding with regard to the persistence and impact of negative stereotypes. Ahler & Sood (2018) found that most Americans carry greatly inaccurate stereotypes of the other party, and confirmation bias merely entrenches those stereotypes. Westfall (2017) found that people tend to think the other side is more

polarized than their own. Frimer et al. (2017) found that liberals and conservatives engage equally in selective exposure, seeking both cognitive safety and the comfort of social bonds.

The literature also bears out this finding with regard to the impact on conversation of these persistent, negative stereotypes. Lyons & Sokhey (2017) found that even perceived polarization can make conflict-avoidant people fear conversations. Conover & Searing (2005) found people avoid everyday political talk out of fear of jeopardizing relationships, offending others, and lack of skill. All of these consequences were mentioned by participants from both sides in this study.

**Finding Eight: Most Participants Saw the Importance of Conversations and Wished to Have Them, for a Variety of Social and Civic Reasons**

This finding was that many people want to talk across party lines for a variety of reasons, including intrinsic reasons (bonds, learning, change minds) and extrinsic reasons (civic duty and religion). It should be noted that most **participants** indicated that not many in their circles wanted to have these conversations. However, this finding indicates that there is untapped potential for catalyzing conversations, even in our polarized society. It also means that there are many avenues to be used in trying to foster such conversations, linked to the many different reasons why people wish to undertake them.

The literature provides varied reasons why people would undertake conversations. Most of the literature is about political talk in general, not specifically talk across the political divide. Communications literature says that one of the reasons people talk at all is to form social bonds. Political talk literature is mixed, but most studies show that people do the opposite. They avoid political talk precisely in order to preserve bonds.

Participants in this study articulated both situations. Many avoided conversations in order also to avoid rupturing relationships, but many also reported wishing they were able to have such conversations in part to be able to create or strengthen social bonds. For example, Gil de Zuniga et al. (2016) found that people engage in political talk for both social and civic reasons, but that women do so more for civic reasons than men. Eveland (2011) found that people engage in political talk primarily for non-civic reasons, and that the desire to persuade another of one's political view was the least popular reason for doing so. Kim & Kim (2008) found that people undertake political talk to make decisions but also to create their sense of self and of their community. Hackett et al. (2017) found that those who believe in the marketplace of ideas experience less intergroup anxiety when encountering people from the other party. The findings of my study are in alignment with those of all of these studies.

Another large branch of the political talk literature catalogues which personality types are most likely to talk across the divide. For example, Mondak (2014) found that liberals are more open to cross-talk. My study instead found that neither side is more open to cross-talk than the other. Rather, participants who had engaged in such conversations came from both sides, but tended to be people who had careers or experiences that gave them some level of skill for handling such conversations. Mondak notes that his finding about the greater openness of liberals is part of a larger observation that the desire to talk is an interplay of individual traits and context, which may account for findings in this study.

Conover & Searing (2005) concluded that political talk – not limited to cross-divide political talk – played a role in democracy by allowing citizens to do several

things: try out their viewpoints with others; build agreement around ideas, which creates political legitimacy; inform their vote; and form vibrant, tolerant civic communities. My study found that cross-divide interactions as described by this study's participants, almost 15 years after the Conover and Searing study, in this polarized atmosphere achieved little with respect to these democracy-enhancing activities.

### **Finding Nine: Most Participants Saw a Need for Greater Capacity to Have Cross-divide Conversations**

This finding captured **participants'** observations that most people lacked capacity for these conversations, and needed more skills, structure, and opportunity to be able to talk across the divide successfully. Most **participants** also suggested some form of mediated intervention or even formal process for cross-divide conversations, ranging from a third person to assist with a dyadic interaction to a town hall meeting called for the purpose of healing a divide. The strong request for some form of external assistance emphasized the observation that **participants** felt they lacked capacity for such conversations on their own.

As noted in the findings, the participants who reported having deliberately chosen to undertake cross-divide conversations were people who already had some capacity, whether from professional or personality disposition. Most of these participants reported some degree of success with the conversations, and a desire to have more. This implies that capacity can be created, and that successful conversations further build this capacity: the initiator gains more experience, the other participant sees that it can be done, and the possibility is increased that both would undertake more such conversations in the future.

However, because so few participants had held these conversations successfully, this finding means that a great deal of capacity must be built across society. This includes a more generalized knowledge of the causes and consequences of polarization, so that ordinary people, such as participants in this study, have a better way of understanding the dynamics in which all of us are operating. It also means vehicles to build peoples' conflict and communication skills, at a minimum to lessen the negative impact of cross-party interactions. Finally, given how so many Americans are sorted into spaces where they live and work only with fellow partisans, it means creating opportunities and fora for people to meet each other and engage in conversations across the divide. Some of this capacity already exists, and part of this finding is that when people do engage successfully across the divide, they gain skills and confidence and are more able – and often more interested – to do it again.

Conover & Searing (2005) found that a reason people avoided conversations was feeling they did not have the information or skill to undertake the political conversation. There is a great deal of literature in social psychology and conflict resolution around what principles and tactics work to foster dialogue. In the political talk literature, almost all of these are for formal processes rather than dyadic interactions. In an exception, Broockman & Kalla (2016) found that asking questions to prompt empathy is an effective bridge builder. In their study, asking someone to “recall a time they’d been marginalized” created support for LGBTQ rights. Many participants in this study noted a need for such empathy.

Most of the literature focuses on formal processes and covers specific tactics, many of which were requested by study participants. These include creating trust through

ground rules of respect (Dembinska & Montambeault, 2015), learning how to listen in order to open up avenues toward common ground (Dobson, 2012), and responding in ways that constructively build on and extend what the other party said (De Vries, 2017). Further tactics include shaping the cross-divide conversation in a way that fosters both decategorization (lowering the salience of divisive group identities) and recategorization (creating a more inclusive sense of identity) (Dovidio et al. 2017). In addition to the components of his approach described in the discussion of the framework, Nagda also emphasizes self-reflection as fundamental to successful dialogue processes. All of these were dialogue ideas suggested by participants, bringing this study into alignment with others.

**Finding Ten: Positive, but Fragile, Examples Exist of Mini-cultures that Promote and Protect Differing Opinions**

This final finding unearthed several cases of mini-cultures that created and enforced respect for a diversity of opinions. An important element of these mini-cultures seemed to be that not only is this ethos of respect taught, but it is also enforced. This finding means that, even in the current, intensely polarized climate, it is possible to foster such conversations. A range of projects, organizations, and even state institutions already promote the norms, attitudes, and processes that are needed for constructive cross-divide dialogue. This provides evidence of both the need for and the possibility to develop cultures in which people respect and protect conversation across a divide. These are rich cases for study.

In the political talk literature, a few case studies go beyond the principles and tactics noted in the finding above and look at structure and methodology for formal

dialogue processes. Their findings cohere with the examples that my participants presented, and several suggest a methodology that deliberately mixes cognitive and affective exercises to foster good dialogue. For example, participants from both sides independently suggested most of the elements of Ryfe's (2005) dialogue structure: (1) ground rules of equality, civility and inclusion; (2) stories for collective meaning-making; (3) leaders to guide this cognitively difficult process; (4) stakes to make people feel accountable; and (5) apprenticeship to learn necessary skills. Participants' suggestions similarly were echoed in the sequence offered by Corry (2012). He drew on Northern Ireland peace process workshops to identify four stages of intergroup dialogue. First is introductory chitchat, then emotional venting, followed by constructive sharing of needs and desires, resulting in a creative and humanizing conversation around commonalities and goals.

All of the elements described in these case studies also were found in suggestions by participants in this study. However, Ryfe's methodology comes closer to responding to the norm-creating function that was emphasized by participants here. Ryfe proposes a combination of rules, leaders, and standards of accountability, all of which can help inculcate the norm of respecting fellow dialogue participants. The need to create and enforce this norm of respect was a common – and lauded – theme across the examples presented by participants of how to assist people to have more frequent, constructive conversations across the divide.

### **Expected and Unexpected Findings**

Several of the findings were expected, given the research. These included the finding that most people avoid cross-divide conversations as a result of a set of

assumptions and fears about the other side. Also expected was the finding that people wish to have others listen respectfully to their opinion.

Unexpected findings included the centrality of racial issues to all of these questions. Another unexpected finding was the degree of escalating conflict dynamics visible in the conversations – that most of these interactions right now replicate and even exacerbate polarization and conflict. Yet another unexpected finding was the extent to which many participants felt confused by the polarization they were experiencing and were trying to understand it – a dislocation that many found to be painful and upsetting.

### **Limitations of the Study**

The main limitations of the study are the ones often associated with qualitative research. One limitation was diversity. While it did include people of all ages, both genders, and from all over the country, the sample was heavily white. Only 20% of participants were people of color. The sample also skewed towards the more educated. Several had PhDs and only three participants had a high school degree only. These caveats are important as the literature identifies level of education as having a significant influence, and racial minority status some influence, on whether or not people will talk across a political line. Relatedly, several participants in my sample had switched parties at some point, which could indicate an unusual level of open-mindedness amongst my participants.

Another limitation is the use of self-report, particularly around questions of what motivates people to talk across political lines. I was transparent about that being the nature of my study, so it is possible that people were interested in telling me what they thought I wanted to hear. To counter that, per Lyons & Sokhey (2014), I also took into



account the emotions participants described as well as evinced in the interviews, as that might be a truer indicator of their beliefs than their reputation-conscious verbal replies.

Another potential limitation was researcher bias. I am a liberal myself, and an activist one. To counter that, I not only engaged in self-reflection around my own biases and reactions to interviews, but also conducted member checks to ensure I was capturing interviewees' remarks accurately. Additionally, I shared initial findings with two conservative colleagues, specifically asking them to help me find any indication of liberal bias in my descriptions. Those reviews as well as the member checks assured me that I was representing both sides accurately. I also was aware of how people were reacting to me, including one participant who seemed particularly interested in telling me things I wanted to hear. Knowing that my bias is towards wanting people to want to have such conversations, and that I am intrigued by organizations such as Better Angels, I took care to probe the negative cases where people said they did not want to enter into such conversations.

With regard to internal validity, trustworthiness is achieved in several ways. The credibility of the study can be seen in how it aligns with other studies. My finding that most people avoid conversations and, when they have them, find them challenging, is echoed in other studies that show both that a majority of Americans describe talking across the divide to be frustrating (Pew Research Center 2017) and that families that encompass both Republicans and Democrats are spending less time together (Chen and Rohla, 2018). Trustworthiness is also achieved via an audit trail that confirms my work, including memos about how coding was done and data analysis decisions made. Peer and member checks also are part of the confirmability, showing that I accurately represented

information. Dependability is achieved in chapter three, where I explain my methodology carefully so that the study could be replicated.

### **Future Directions and Study**

Looking broadly at future directions for study of how to promote cross-divide conversation, one promising avenue is creating more practitioner-scholar partnerships. As noted in the introduction, many citizens' groups have been created in the last few years to try to heal the divide. Academics could work with these practitioners to infuse evidence-based theories into practitioners' work. Practitioners could share their evaluations with academics for further research.

In general, there are several directions for such partnered action. One is to learn more about why people might want to talk across divide and under what conditions.

Without knowing what brings people to the table, dialogue programs are working in the dark. This qualitative study revealed a great deal of information about the reasons why some people consider having such difficult discussions and what would help them to have such conversations more frequently and constructively – particularly given the concerted emotional and cognitive effort that cross-divide dialogue requires, and that most people wish to avoid conflict or assume there is no point in trying.

A next step therefore could be a quantitative study to gain a picture that is more representative of the United States. Of the motivations uncovered in this study, which is the most popular, and with which groups of people? Of the factors people in the study described as potentially helping them better engage across the divide, which are the most compelling, and to which groups of people? For example, there seems to be indication that conservatives are more motivated than liberals by extrinsic reasons to talk across the

divide. Is this so, and could more work with churches and schools help bring conservatives to the table?

Another area for further research is methods for building skills as well as approaches for holding conversations. With regard to skills-building, research could look into how important it is not only to teach skills of listening and asking questions. Research also could evaluate whether it is also effective to teach self-awareness. Does understanding their own triggers and biases help individuals have the confidence and skill to engage in cross-divide conversations? What are best ways to help people analyze their own role in escalating conflict? Are there skills that can be taught to help people deal with encountering starkly different worldviews?

Scholars and practitioners together also could evaluate the effectiveness of different approaches being used to foster dialogue. A range of questions remains to be investigated. In addition to the question of motivation, what are best practices in convening people? For what format, in what venue, with whom as a convener? With regard to overcoming worldview differences and widening identities, what are best practices and can they be scaled up?

Similarly, practitioners and scholars could work together to identify micro-cultures that create and enforce norms of respect. They could evaluate works in these micro-cultures and consider how to replicate or scale up these findings. Which norms have the greatest impact, who are the best members of society to promulgate them, and how? Which norms are most important for de-escalating conflict?

This study reveals many possibilities for future research. It shows that practitioners and scholars should work together in doing so. It indicates that more

investigation is needed not only into theory and principles, such as which kinds of motivations bring which kinds of people into conversation. It also indicates that more evaluation is needed of the existing examples of dialogue processes, including the possibilities for replicating and scaling up successful processes.

### **Implications for Positive Social Change**

Having outlined suggestions for future research, in this section, I will look at the suggestions from this study for action. I will start by examining the implications of this study with regard to the future of our democracy. I then will discuss potential next steps. I also will discuss some of the challenges that will be found.

Implications of the findings are manifold. There needs to be a more generalized awareness of what polarized conflict is about and the options for handling it. We need to invest in individuals' capacity, knowing that cross-divide conversations are very difficult even for those who have relevant skills and tools. We need to understand the contextual forces to which we are responding unconsciously, and when appropriate seek ways to push back against them. In doing so we should seek to reinforce or create more constructive norms of conflict behavior. We need to think about why we have these barriers against cross-divide conversations and whether we might achieve more safety and comfort without these barriers against political cross-talk, but with more social bonds with a wider group of people. We need to look carefully at why we believe we are divided from each other and determine the degree to which this needs to be identity-based. Success is possible and there are examples to build upon, but we need to figure out ways to motivate those who are willing.

The picture this study paints for conflict and for democracy is a complicated one. Political talk is often conceived of as a way for citizens to clarify positions and gather information about issues for use in civic activities. However, this study reveals that, in cross-divide political talk situations, most participants were either protecting themselves by avoiding conversation or making value or identity assertions in opposition to others. Only rarely were they exchanging information and opinions. Many participants also were trying to understand the escalating conflict dynamics around them, and some were trying to create new, more prosocial norms for cross-divide interactions.

Should something be done to foster more conversations across the divide? The study seems to indicate that something should be done – but in a way that does not further exacerbate tensions, and without an expectation of quick and lasting harmony. In many ways, an implication of this study is that, before we can get to deliberative democracy, we need to be doing peacebuilding along party lines. Actions should be taken recognizing that differing worldviews likely will not be changed or unified. Instead, new understanding of issues, more common ground, and better social relations could ensue. It also should be recognized that, even with ways to promote and enforce norms of respect, not all or even most people will want to have these conversations. However, there is evidence of enough appetite and need for better cross-divide conversation that it is important to undertake action.

This research has the possibility to achieve positive social change in several ways. It can help individuals understand their role in polarization, such as when they make disparaging, politicized, throwaway comments without knowing the political beliefs of those within earshot, or when they fall victim to their own confirmation bias. It can help

people understand that talking across the political divide requires skills – and that it is possible to gain those skills. With the outline of the different motivations that people have in wanting to have such cross-divide conversations, this study can help practitioners, such as leaders of Better Angels and other Red-Blue dialogue groups, to consider new outreach to different groups – particularly starting with those who are most willing to undertake these conversations. With the listing of ground rules and other factors that would help people feel safe and ready to discuss difficult issues, it can help practitioners design ever more effective programs to bring Reds and Blues together. For example, one young conservative woman noted that, before a Better Angels workshop, she and her colleagues were worried that there might not be a ground rule of respect. Making this assurance part of their promotion could help Better Angels attract more people who are interested but skeptical.

Once the workshops begin, practitioners could benefit from study information about tactics that work, as described in the literature review and chapter five. This includes recategorizing people by helping them explore and develop holistic views of "the other" to replace flat stereotypes. Workshops could create and model fora where the existence of different opinions is expected and celebrated and where respect for such differences is enforced. Workshops could be an opportunity to learn and practice skills and to see role models.

Other things can be done on a societal level in addition to creating discussion venues. These include trying to build new norms of respect, starting with those micro-cultures that already foster such norms. Relatedly, political leaders can be urged to model more respect for each other, especially during elections. This can be done via public

appeals over social and traditional email as well as by PACs and organizations such as those noted in the introduction. We can build capacity to understand and deflect disruptors on social media, for example, with tips on spotting and revealing trolls and bots. Finally, we should create and share more stories of constructive interactions – from intimate conversations between two citizens from different sides to effective group dialogues.

The challenge that will always exist is how to deal with the tension of differing worldviews. In a democracy, different views and opinions form the marketplace of ideas, which ideally leads to well thought-out policy. Worldviews are those issues and elements about which we care deeply. We consider these values morally right, and non-negotiable. How then can someone pledge to respect another’s moral stance if it is diametrically opposed to one’s own? It is difficult to balance this with listening and finding common ground – but that is what is nonetheless needed for our democracy to function.

### **Conclusion**

This dissertation began with an assertion that polarization has increased to the point that more than half of Americans find it “stressful and frustrating” to talk across the political divide. It then put forward the main research question of how liberals and conservatives experience communicating across the divide, with sub-questions around what motivates people to do so, and what factors obstruct and ease such conversations. It then introduced a conceptual framework to examine these questions. This framework started with the theory of deliberative democracy (Habermas, 1996) as an assertion of the need for cross-divide conversation. Next it brought in conflict avoidance (Eliasoph, 1998) and affective polarization (Iyengar and Westwood, 2015) as theories of what prevents

these conversations. Finally, it brought in dialogic engagement (Nagda, 2006) as a way to promote constructive conversations.

The exploratory qualitative study involved interviewing 15 liberals and 15 conservatives, from different backgrounds, about their experiences talking across the divide. Findings revealed the complexity of these experiences. Largely, they were avoided for fear of jeopardizing relationships or reputation. Instead of rational, information exchanging conversations, if people interacted across the divide, they had highly emotional interactions, usually charged with anger and pain at encountering starkly different worldviews. Race and ethnic issues were deeply interwoven into these differing worldviews. These interactions were set in a context of great perceived division in the United States, and tended to contribute to already escalating conflict dynamics. Yet participants articulated a wish to be able to talk across the political divide, noting that respectful listening would be key to having constructive conversations. Several offered examples of micro-cultures where a diversity of opinions was valued and protected.

The meaning of these findings was then explored, along with how they fit into the literature. While avoidance of political conversation is widely acknowledged, and tactics to promote better cross-divide conversation are well researched, this study offered more insight into what motivates people to talk across a political divide. It also brought out how many people experience the divide – and the resulting separation from family and friends and colleagues – as a painful one. This study also offered further insight into how linked to context these interactions are, and the degree to which they play a role in escalating conflict dynamics. As part of this, it began to shed light on new norms of



conflict behavior that are developing in this context – mostly negative but some positive as people seek to reclaim relational ground they see as having been lost.

As a summation, participants from both sides revealed that they exist and interact with each other in a “whirlpool of chaos and confusion,” primed by division around them and creating new norms of conflict behavior. Many participants at some level nonetheless found this an uncomfortable and unsafe way to live in society. They had many motivations to try to talk across the divide, as well as suggestions for how to do it. The task is to conduct further research and then assist more Americans to do so.

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## Appendix A: IRB Exempt Initial Approval

**MEMORANDUM**

**To:** Melinda Burrell  
College of Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences

**From:** Nurit Sheinberg, Ed.D.  
Chair, Institutional Review Board

**Date:** January 14, 2019

**Subject:** IRB Exempt Initial Approval Memo

**TITLE:** Why would I want to talk to them?  
An exploration of perceptions of talking across political divides– NSU IRB Protocol Number 2018-625

Dear Principal Investigator,

Your submission has been reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board on **November 29, 2018**. You may proceed with your study.

*Please Note: If you receive stamped copies of consent, assent, and recruiting materials indicating approval date, these documents must be used when recruiting and consenting or assenting participants.*

**Level of Review:** Exempt

**Type of Approval:** Initial Approval

**Exempt Review Category:** Exempt 2: Interviews, surveys, focus groups, observations of public behavior, and other similar methodologies

**Post-Approval Monitoring:** The IRB Office conducts post-approval review and monitoring of all studies involving human participants under the purview of the NSU IRB. The Post-Approval Monitor may randomly select any active study for a Not-for-Cause Evaluation.

Page 1 of 2

**Final Report:** You are required to notify the IRB Office within 30 days of the conclusion of the research that the study has ended using the IRB Closing Report Form.

**Translated Documents:** No

*Please retain this document in your IRB correspondence file.*

CC: Ransford Edwards

Elena P Bastidas, Ph.D.

## Appendix B: Interview Protocol

### **Polarization research narrative interview protocol (as per Rubin and Rubin, 2012)**

*Note: The researcher is conducting this research alone, with no co-investigators. As these are questions around perceptions about the importance of speaking with people who have different political opinions, as well as challenges of and possibilities for making such conversations more constructive. These are generally low-risk questions.*

#### Introductory statement:

Thank you for agreeing to talk with me today. I am looking forward to this. As you know from the recruitment flyer, I'm researching polarization in the United States. Some people say it is happening and even getting worse. Other people say that the polarization is really only felt by people who have strong political beliefs, but that most Americans do not feel very polarized.

I am going to be interviewing many people, in different parts of the country and from all parts of the political and ideological spectrum. I very much appreciate your stories and your thoughts. Shall we begin?

#### Warm up questions (choose one or two, based on how it seems to be starting):

- What made you agree to this interview?
- Have you been talking with family or friends about recent political controversies? How has that made you feel?
- What do you make of all this fear and anger out there? What do you think is going on? (to get at meta-narrative)

#### Definition question

- What does "talking about politics" mean to you? What do you associate with it?

#### Main (scaffolding or generative) questions:

1. Can you remember a particular time when you talked about politics with someone with a very different political opinion than yours? Or a time when you wanted to talk about politics with someone with a different political opinion? Can you tell me about it? Why does that time stand out/why is this story important? How do you feel when you tell me about it?
  - a. (If they cannot answer this, I can broaden the question to "can you tell me about a time when you encountered someone with whom you disagree politically?")
2. Have you ever seen two people talking across a political divide? What happened? How did that make you feel? How did you react?

Follow up questions:

1. What motivated you to have/want to have this conversation(s)?
2. Would you like to have more such conversations? If so, with whom? On what topics? (get at norming of conversations)
3. What do you think is good, and what is bad, about talking to people with different political opinions from your own?
4. Has your desire to talk to people with different political opinions changed at all in the last few months or years? If so, what has made it (harder/easier)?
5. What are factors you find that help having such conversations?

Probes:

Questions as needed to obtain details about characters, sequence of events, outcomes, context.

Final question:

1. Is there anything I should have asked about but didn't?

Closing:

- Thank them for their time
- Ask them if they would like to see the transcript
- Ask them if they wouldn't mind filling out a sheet with a few demographic questions (age range, education level, income level, etc.)
- Thank them again

## Appendix C: Informed Consent Form



NOVA SOUTHEASTERN UNIVERSITY  
College of Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences

**General Informed Consent Form****NSU Consent to be in a Research Study Entitled**

*Why Would I Want to Talk to Them? An Exploration of Perceptions of Talking Across Political Divides*

**Who is doing this research study?**

College: College of Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences; Department of Conflict Resolution Studies

Principal Investigator: Melinda Burrell, Master of Arts of Law and Diplomacy

Faculty Advisor/Dissertation Chair: Dr. Elena Bastidas

Site Information: There is no specific site for this research, although interviews will be conducted in Warrenton, VA and Pittsburgh, PA as well as an online survey.

Funding: Unfunded

**What is this study about?**

This is a research study, designed to test and create new ideas that other people can use. The purpose of this research study is to explore how ordinary Americans perceive polarization. Specifically, it will look at what Americans think about talking to people with whom they do not agree politically. This study is meant to help us understand polarization in the United States.

**Why are you asking me to be in this research study?**

You are being asked to be in this research study because I am interested in learning what both liberals and conservatives say about their experiences in talking to people from “the other side.”

This study will include about 30 people who are interviewed: 15 conservatives and 15 liberals, from a diversity of backgrounds. It also will include about 1,000 people from around the country who will be surveyed online in a few months.

**What will I be doing if I agree to be in this research study?**

3301 College Avenue • Fort Lauderdale, Florida 33314-7796

(954) 262-3000 • 800-672-7978 • Fax: (954) 262-3968 • Email: [cahss@nsu.nova.edu](mailto:cahss@nsu.nova.edu) • Web site: <http://cahss.nova.edu>

While you are taking part in this research study, you will be talking to me one time, for about 30 minutes. I will ask you to tell me stories about your experiences in talking to people with who you do not agree politically.

**Are there possible risks and discomforts to me?**

This research study involves minimal risk to you. To the best of my knowledge, the things you will be doing have no more risk of harm than you would have in everyday life.

**What happens if I do not want to be in this research study?**

You have the right to leave this research study at any time, or not be in it. If you do decide to leave or you decide not to be in the study anymore, you will not get any penalty or lose any services you have a right to get. If you choose to stop being in the study, any information collected about you **before** the date you leave the study will be kept in the research records for 36 months from the end of the study but you may request that it not be used.

**What if there is new information learned during the study that may affect my decision to remain in the study?**

If significant new information relating to the study becomes available, which may relate to whether you want to remain in this study, this information will be given to you by the investigator. You may be asked to sign a new Informed Consent Form, if the information is given to you after you have joined the study.

**Are there any benefits for taking part in this research study?**

There are no direct benefits from being in this research study. I hope the information learned from this study will help Americans understand how polarization is affecting us.

**Will I be paid or be given compensation for being in the study?**

You will not be given any payments or compensation for being in this research study.

**Will it cost me anything?**

There are no costs to you for being in this research study.

**How will you keep my information private?**

Information we learn about you in this research study will be handled in a confidential manner, within the limits of the law and will be limited to people who have a need to review this information. The transcript from this interview will be coded and identifying



information cleaned from it. This data will be available to the researcher, the Institutional Review Board and other representatives of this institution. If we publish the results of the study in a scientific journal or book, we will not identify you. All confidential data will be kept securely in my computer, which is password-protected. All data will be kept for 36 months from the end of the study and destroyed after that time by deletion.

### **Will there be any Audio or Video Recording?**

This research study involves audio recording. This recording will be available to the researcher, the Institutional Review Board and other representatives of this institution. The recording will be kept, stored, and destroyed as stated in the section above. Because what is in the recording could be used to find out that it is you, it is not possible to be sure that the recording will always be kept confidential. The researcher will try to keep anyone not working on the research from listening to or viewing the recording.

### **Whom can I contact if I have questions, concerns, comments, or complaints?**

If you have questions now, feel free to ask me. If you have more questions about the research, your research rights, or have a research-related injury, please contact:

Primary contact:  
Melinda Burrell, at **202-352-4085**

If primary is not available, contact:  
Dr. Elena Bastidas can be reached at 954-559-5068

### **Research Participants Rights**

For questions/concerns regarding your research rights, please contact:

Institutional Review Board  
Nova Southeastern University  
(954) 262-5369 / Toll Free: 1-866-499-0790  
[IRB@nova.edu](mailto:IRB@nova.edu)

You may also visit the NSU IRB website at [www.nova.edu/irb/information-for-research-participants](http://www.nova.edu/irb/information-for-research-participants) for further information regarding your rights as a research participant.

### **Research Consent & Authorization Signature Section**

**Voluntary Participation** - You are not required to participate in this study. In the event you do participate, you may leave this research study at any time. If you leave this research study before it is completed, there will be no penalty to you, and you will not lose any benefits to which you are entitled.

If you agree to participate in this research study, sign this section. You will be given a signed copy of this form to keep. You do not waive any of your legal rights by signing this form.

**SIGN THIS FORM ONLY IF THE STATEMENTS LISTED BELOW ARE TRUE:**

- You have read the above information.
- Your questions have been answered to your satisfaction about the research.

**Adult Signature Section**

I have voluntarily decided to take part in this research study.