Belief in the Utility of Cross-Partisan Empathy Reduces Partisan Animosity and Facilitates Political Persuasion

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Belief in the Utility of Cross-Partisan Empathy Reduces Partisan Animosity and Facilitates Political Persuasion

Competing Interest Statement: No competing interests.

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Abstract

In polarized political environments, partisans tend to deploy empathy parochially, furthering division. We propose that belief in the usefulness of cross-partisan empathy – striving to understand others with whom one disagrees politically – promotes outgroup empathy and has powerful ramifications for both intra- and interpersonal processes. Across four studies (total \( n = 4,748 \)), we examined these predictions using surveys, social network analysis, pre-registered experiments, and natural language processing. Believing cross-partisan empathy is useful is associated with less partisan division and politically diverse friendship networks (Studies 1-2). When prompted to believe that empathy is a political resource – versus a political weakness – people become less affectively polarized (Study 3) and communicate in ways that decrease outpartisans' animosity and attitudinal polarization (Study 4). These findings demonstrate that belief in cross-partisan empathy not only impacts individuals’ own attitudes and behaviors, but also the attitudes of those they communicate with.

Keywords: empathy, emotions, intergroup dynamics, political psychology, persuasion
Significance Statement

Partisan animosity has risen dramatically in the United States in recent decades (Iyengar et al., 2019). Cross-partisan empathy—people’s efforts to understand the perspectives of outparty members—can reduce partisan animosity and help build political consensus, but individuals are often reluctant to empathize with their perceived rivals. Across four studies, people who believed cross-partisan empathy was useful, versus harmful, reported greater interest in bipartisan cooperation, and were more likely to befriend individuals with differing political views. When we experimentally increased people’s beliefs in the usefulness of cross-partisan empathy, they produced messages that were viewed as more empathic and persuasive by individuals with whom they disagreed. These results highlight that belief in empathy can not only increase people’s interest in engaging across political divides, but also makes them more convincing advocates of their own beliefs.
Belief in the Utility of Cross-Partisan Empathy Reduces Partisan Animosity and Facilitates Political Persuasion

Over the last several decades, political divisions in the US have become personal. Republicans and Democrats increasingly fear and loathe one another (Iyengar et al., 2019) and are less willing than in the past to have outparty romantic partners, in-laws, or friends (Iyengar et al., 2012; Huber & Malhotra, 2017). These bitter divisions hinder responses to pressing issues - such as the COVID-19 pandemic and climate change (Druckman et al., 2021; Hetherington & Rudolph, 2015) - and may undermine bipartisan governance (Abramowitz & Webster, 2016; Hetherington, 2015).

Despite rising animosity, most Americans want less political division. In a 2018 poll, the majority of respondents reported that recent divisions between Republicans and Democrats were a very serious problem (NBC News/Wall Street Journal Survey, 2018).

Additionally, we surveyed 523 Americans (52% Democrat, 48% Republican) in October of 2020, and found that over 85% of respondents viewed positive cross-party relations, such as having outparty members as friends, building consensus, and supporting bipartisan cooperation, as valuable (Figure S1).

What role does empathy play in helping people achieve these valuable outcomes? Evidence is mixed. In polarized environments, people often feel empathy only for members of their own group, stoking parochialism and outgroup animosity (Bloom, 2016; Simas et al., 2020). However, people can also purposefully focus their empathy on outgroup members, which can mitigate their animus toward these individuals (Todd & Galinsky, 2014). Here, we refer to such efforts to understand the views of political outgroup members as cross-partisan empathy. When people engage in cross-partisan empathy -- for instance taking the perspective of, or non-judgmentally exchanging narratives with, an outparty member -- they
are often able to discover common ground and make arguments that are more persuasive to outpartisans (e.g., Kalla & Broockman, 2020).

In other words, empathy can both amplify and reduce partisan division—depending on who an individual focuses it on. What might shape people’s decisions for whom to feel empathy? We focus on a novel factor: people’s belief in the utility of empathizing with outgroup members. Decades of work demonstrate that people’s beliefs affect their motivations and actions (e.g., Dweck, 1986; Weiner, 1985). People’s beliefs also impact their emotional lives: individuals control their emotions, including empathy, based on their beliefs about which emotions are useful in a given context (e.g., Zaki, 2014; Tamir, 2009). For instance, when people believe a particular emotion will help them attain a goal – e.g., anger in the face of a negotiation – they upregulate that emotion (Tamir et al., 2013). However, work has not yet established the causal effects of empathy beliefs in intergroup political contexts.

Here, we leverage the US partisan context to test the causal force of empathy beliefs on intergroup emotions, attitudes, and behaviors. We predict that belief in the utility of cross-partisan empathy (BCPE) will causally impact people's outparty evaluations, their support for bipartisan governance, and their behavior toward outpartisans. For example, a person who learns that outgroup empathy could be a political resource (e.g., could allow them to be more persuasive with political rivals) — versus a weakness — will be more open to empathizing with outpartisans, taking part in intergroup interactions, supporting bipartisanship, and perspective-taking when communicating across party lines. Thus, although initially tactical, positive BCPE may lead to actual improvements in interparty relations by encouraging empathic engagement across divides.

This prediction that belief in the utility of cross-partisan empathy will mitigate intrapersonal markers of political division is not trivial. In the US political climate, positive
beliefs about cross-partisan empathy may conflict with group norms that encourage partisans to openly disapprove of the political outgroup (Iyengar & Westwood, 2015). Such group norms have been shown to increase individuals' tolerance to outgroup animus and to decrease the positive effects of intergroup contact (Crandall et al., 2002; Ata et al., 2009). Thus, even if a person saw value in trying to understand the views of outpartisans, it is possible that this belief may be ineffective in reducing their partisan animosity and increasing empathic behaviors across group divides. In our experiments, we attempted to help people overcome these psychological barriers by offering an instrumental reason to empathize with outpartisans (i.e., that it would lead them to become more persuasive advocates of their group’s beliefs).

A fundamentally novel question surrounds whether an individual's belief in the utility of empathy could impact the experiences and attitudes of other people. Virtually every study on emotion beliefs and motives stops at the border of the individual (e.g., Porat et al., 2016; Schumann et al., 2014). Researchers manipulate one’s beliefs or motives, and then examine their affect or their behavior. However, people's expectations can shape their social realities (Merton, 1948). A powerful and intriguing feature of emotion beliefs is that - through one’s behavior- they can impact others. For instance, might individuals who believe cross-partisan empathy to be useful actually be more able to persuade and connect with people on the other side of political issues? This would provide powerful evidence for emotion beliefs as “self-fulfilling prophecies,” crucially expanding the knowledge about the extent to which emotion beliefs can affect not just intrapersonal, but also interpersonal outcomes.

To examine these questions, we first validated the Belief in Cross-Partisan Empathy Scale (BCPES) on a national sample of Americans — representative across age, gender, region, and ethnicity — and demonstrated that BCPE uniquely predicts measures of partisan division (Study 1). Then, via network analysis, we corroborated insights from Study 1 on an
ecologically valid measure — networks in a real-world college community — and found that
individuals high in positive BCPE had more politically diverse friendships (Study 2). In
Study 3, as pre-registered, manipulating BCPE altered interest in bipartisan collaboration and
partisan animus. Finally, in Study 4, a manipulation of positive (versus negative) BCPE drove
individuals to empathically advocate for their political views on a contentious topic. This, in
turn, led outpartisans—who were unaware of any experimental manipulation—to be less
affectively polarized and more persuaded by positive BCPE writers. Together, this work
highlights a novel factor that shapes emotions, attitudes, and behaviors in intergroup conflicts
and empirically demonstrates how these empathy beliefs can have reverberating effects on
the emotions and attitudes of outgroup members.

**Study 1**

In Study 1, we assessed the validity of the BCPEs in a national sample benchmarked
to demographic quotas that are representative of the US population on gender, age, region,
and ethnicity. To test the scale’s convergent and discriminant validity, we examined its
correlations with theoretically related measures that have been posed to either exacerbate
(e.g., partisan strength, Huddy, et al., 2015) or decrease (e.g., dispositional empathy, open
cognitive style, Todd & Galinsky, 2014; Sibley & Duckitt, 2008) intergroup division. To
evaluate BCPEs unique predictive validity, we tested if the scale predicted measures of
partisan division even after controlling for these other predictors.

**Methods**

**Participants.** A priori power analyses with GPower (Faul et al., 2007) suggested that
400 participants would give us the recommended 80% power (Cohen, 1988) to detect a small
effect (r >= 0.15) or 95% power to detect the average effect size in social psychology (r >=
0.21, based on meta-analyses by Richard et al., 2003).
We recruited a representative sample of 435 Democrats and Republicans (including Independents who leaned Democrat or Republican) from ForthRight, a panel managed by Bovitz Inc. Participants were excluded from analyses for having duplicate IP addresses ($N = 3$), using a foreign IP address ($N = 4$), using a virtual private network (VPN, $N = 7$), or for failing a simple attention check ($N = 10$), resulting in a final sample size of 411 participants (46% Republican). Our final sample was nationally representative in terms of age, gender, race, and US region (Table S1).

**Procedure & Measures.** After consenting to take the survey, participants completed a series of measures presented in randomized order (see Supplemental Materials for all measures and sources).

To assess belief in cross-partisan empathy, participants were asked to complete BCPES ($\alpha = .76$): an eight-item scale that captures people’s views about the utility of cross-partisan empathy - e.g., that it would make them better able to understand the other side—as well as its disutility—e.g., that it could threaten their own political views. The items in the scale were designed to reflect the two sources of empathic motives outlined by Zaki (2014): the desire to identify positively with the ingroup and negatively with the outgroup. Thus, some items relate to the concern that empathizing with the outgroup could be detrimental to one’s standing in their own group (e.g., "empathizing with [outparty members] would constitute a betrayal of my own party") or that it would make it harder to differentiate their own thoughts from those of the outgroup (e.g., "empathizing with [outparty members] would lead me to compromise too much on political issues I care about"). The scale is coded so that greater values reflect more positive beliefs about cross-partisan empathy (see Supplemental Materials for all items).

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1 VPN use has been associated with an increase in fraudulent responses (Kennedy et al. 2020). We used the R package “rIP” and the IP Hub (https://iphub.info/api) API license to detect VPN use on all studies conducted online (Study 1, 3 and 4). In all studies, removing participants who used VPNs and foreign IP Addresses did not significantly alter our findings (see Supplemental Materials for details).
We compared the BCPES with other established measures (e.g., dispositional empathy, partisan social identity, open cognitive styles), which have been shown to predict shifts in intergroup conflict. Our goal was twofold. First, we hoped to situate BCPE as a new construct by assessing its relationship to the broader intergroup conflict literature. Second, we wanted to test if BCPE tracked measures of partisan division even after controlling for these other relevant factors.

**Potential predictors of partisan division.** Dispositional empathy was measured using the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (Davis, 1983). Given that empathy is a multi-faceted construct involving affective (e.g., empathic concern) and cognitive (e.g., perspective-taking) components (Davis, 1983), we separately measured participants' empathic concern (e.g., “I would describe myself as a pretty soft-hearted person.”, $\alpha = .81$) and perspective-taking (e.g., “I try to look at everybody's side of a disagreement before I make a decision.”, $\alpha = .76$).

Perspective-taking involves explicitly considering a social target’s viewpoints and experiences (Zaki, 2017), and has reliably been associated with reductions in prejudice and stereotyping of outgroup members (Todd & Galinsky, 2014). As such, we predicted that positive BCPE would be more strongly associated with perspective-taking, than with empathic concern.

We also collected information on people’s mindsets about the controllability of empathy (Schumann et al., 2014), their endorsement of tradition and hierarchies (system justification, Kay & Jost, 2003, and social dominance orientation, Ho et al., 2015), their partisan social identity (Huddy et al., 2015), as well as their openness to experience (e.g., Soto & John, 2017), tolerance of ambiguity (Budner, 1962), and need for cognition (Cacioppo & Petty, 1982). All these measures have been associated with either increases or decreases intergroup prejudice and division (see Supplemental Materials for more details) and as such, provided useful benchmarks to test BCPES convergent and discriminant validity.
Measures of partisan division. To test the predictive validity of the BCPES, we examined four key outcomes related to political division: two items of partisan animosity (e.g., “Please indicate how favorably or unfavorably you feel towards the average [outparty] voter”, $\alpha = .91$), two items on their desired outparty social distance (e.g., “How willing would you be to accept someone who votes for the [outparty] as a close friend?”, $\alpha = .78$), four items on their partisan moral disengagement (e.g., “[Inparty members] are not just better for politics—they are morally right.” $\alpha = .82$), and three items on their support of bipartisan cooperation (e.g., “To what extent would you like to see more bipartisan collaboration?.” $\alpha = .75$).

Measures of partisan animosity and social distance have been widely used in political science to assess people’s evaluations of the outparty and their comfort in interacting with outparty members (see Iyengar et al., 2019 for a review). Partisan moral disengagement reflects peoples’ tendency to vilify outparty supporters, while seeing the inparty as morally righteous (Kalmoe & Mason, 2019). Lastly, while the first three measures of partisan division were related to interpersonal relations, support for bipartisan cooperation is a political measure meant to assess BCPE’s connection to views regarding the merits of bipartisan governance.

Results

There was considerable variability on Americans’ reported BCPE ($M = 55.31$, $SD = 18.46$; Range: 0-100; Figure S2-S3). BCPE also tracked a number of other relevant measures. People with positive BCPE tended to also report higher levels of perspective-taking ($r = 0.28$) and empathic concern ($r = 0.16$), need for cognition ($r = 0.27$), tolerance of ambiguity ($r = 0.28$), openness to experiences ($r = 0.22$), and desire for bipartisan cooperation ($r = 0.29$). BCPE was negatively correlated with partisan social identity ($r = -0.22$), social dominance orientation, ($r = -0.19$), partisan animosity ($r = -0.25$), social distance ($r = -0.35$), and moral
disengagement \((r = -0.45)\). For information on phenomena with which BCPE was weakly correlated or uncorrelated, as well as a full correlation matrix of measures, see Figure S4.

To assess the unique predictive validity of BCPES, we ran separate multiple linear regression models predicting partisan animosity, desire for bipartisan cooperation, social distance and moral disengagement, while controlling for sixteen other covariates. These covariates included demographics (i.e., age, gender, income, and education), political identification (i.e., political ideology, partisan strength, party identification, and partisan social identity), empathic concern, perspective-taking, openness to experiences, tolerance of ambiguity, need for cognition, mindsets about the controllability of empathy, social dominance orientation, and system justification. Given the number of predictors, we probed multicollinearity using variance inflation factors (VIF). All VIF values were below 2.5, which is below the customary 10 cut-off for high multicollinearity (Vittinghoff et al., 2012).

Importantly, model comparisons indicated that BCPE explained unique variance when predicting all collected measures of partisan division: partisan animosity \(F(1, 371) = 9.04, p = 0.003\), social distance \(F(1, 371) = 17.12, p < 0.001\), moral disengagement \(F(1, 371) = 40.68, p < 0.001\), and desire for bipartisan cooperation \(F(1, 371) = 6.72, p = 0.01\) (Table 1).

<table>
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<th>Criterion</th>
<th>(M (SD))</th>
<th>BCPE (\beta) [95% CI]</th>
<th>BCPE (r)</th>
<th>Model Fit</th>
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<tr>
<td>Desire for Bipartisan Cooperation</td>
<td>0.66 (0.24)</td>
<td>0.13** [1.03, 1.25]</td>
<td>0.29</td>
<td>(R^2 = 0.31^{***}) (\Delta R^2 = 0.01)</td>
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<td>Partisan Animosity</td>
<td>0.60 (0.24)</td>
<td>-0.16** [0.77, 0.95]</td>
<td>-0.25</td>
<td>(R^2 = 0.21^{***}) (\Delta R^2 = 0.02)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Social Distance</td>
<td>0.39 (0.25)</td>
<td>-0.21*** [0.73, 0.90]</td>
<td>-0.35</td>
<td>(R^2 = 0.29^{***}) (\Delta R^2 = 0.03)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moral</td>
<td>0.51</td>
<td>-0.30*** -0.45</td>
<td></td>
<td>(R^2 = 0.39^{***})</td>
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Disengagement  (0.24)  [0.68, 0.81]  ΔR² = 0.07

Note. Mean and standard deviations are on a normalized scale ranging from 0 to 1. r² coefficients represent zero-order correlations with BCPE. ΔR² reflect the improvement in R² after adding BCPE as a predictor to models that adjusted for openness to experiences, empathic concern, perspective-taking, mindsets about the controllability of empathy, tolerance of ambiguity, need for cognition, partisan social identity, partisan strength, political ideology, party identification, system justification, social dominance orientation, income, gender, education and age. * indicates p < 0.05. ** indicates p < 0.01. *** indicates p < 0.001

Discussion
Study 1 provides evidence that BCPE is related, but not reducible to, other constructs relevant to empathy and partisan animosity. Importantly, even when controlling for a range of established constructs, positive BCPE uniquely predicted measures of partisan division (Table 1), further demonstrating the relevance of BCPE as a new construct.

Study 2
In our next study, we examined whether BCPE was associated with a real-world behavior: people’s tendency to have positive relationships with outparty members. We hypothesized that participants with greater positive BCPE would be more likely to have more ideologically diverse friend groups.

Methods
Participants. In the Spring of 2020, we sent an online survey invitation to all first-year students at a Western U.S. University and to students who live in dorms that include freshmen. We successfully recruited 46% of all students contacted for a total of 1038 participants. All participants received monetary compensation for completing the survey. In order to calculate the ideological homophily of their networks, both participants and their friends needed to provide information on their ideology. To this end, participants

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2 We ran a smaller version of Study 1 using a Mechanical Turk sample and again found BCPE to be highly predictive of measures of partisan division (see Supplemental Materials for details).
were excluded from data analysis if they only nominated friends who did not participate in the study – precluding us from quantifying those friends’ political ideology – or if they self-identified as ‘moderate’ in the political ideology scale (n = 350). This exclusion criteria left us with a total sample of 688 participants: mean age 19 years old (SD = 2.16), 35% male, 23% White, 9% Black/African-American, 10% Latino/Hispanic, 19% Asian and 39% Other or Multiracial, 16% extremely liberal, 50% liberal, 25% slightly liberal, 5% slightly conservative, 3% conservative, 1% extremely conservative.

**Procedure.** Participants completed an online Qualtrics survey that included demographic questions, social network nominations, as well as the perspective-taking and empathic concern measures from Study 1. Due to completion time constraints, we measured beliefs about cross-partisan empathy using two BCPES items that had reliable internal validity (i.e., “empathizing with [outgroup members] would be threatening to my beliefs as [an ingroup member]” and “empathizing with [outgroup members] would lead me to compromise too much on political issues I care about”, anchored at 1 = a great deal, 5 = not at all, α = 0.65, \( r_{\text{Spearman-Brown}} = 0.71 \). To quantify participants’ friend groups, each person was asked to nominate others in the University with whom they had positive relationships with by answering four prompts (e.g., “Who makes you feel supported and cared for?”, “Who are your closest friends?”). Each prompt allowed participants to nominate a maximum of six to ten friends (see Supplemental Materials for materials). There was significant overlap between friends nominated across prompts, resulting on an average of 8 unique nominations per participant.

**Analysis Strategy.** We calculated the ideological strength by collapsing the typical political ideology measure (anchored at 1 = extremely liberal to 7 = extremely conservative) into 1 = slightly liberal/conservative, 2 = liberal/conservative, 3 = extremely liberal/conservative.
To calculate political homophily, we used the Coleman Index (Coleman, 1958), which is derived by:

$$C_i = \frac{H_i - w_i}{1 - w_i}$$

The Coleman Index quantified the degree to which students preferentially nominated peers who shared their political ideology, while accounting for the fact that the sample skewed liberal. It is calculated by subtracting the share of ingroup members in the whole sample from the share of nominated friends who are ingroup members and then dividing this result by the share of outgroup members in the whole sample.

For example, suppose Participant A is part of a sample size of 100 people. Ten people in this sample share their ideology and ninety people in this sample do not. If they nominated 10 friends and 7 of them shared Participant A's ideology this would mean that their homophily index would be $(7/10 - 10/100)$ divided by $(90/100) = 0.77$. Given that the maximum homophily score is 1 (i.e., all friends are ingroup members), this means that Participant A has a fairly homophilous friend group even though their group is the minority in the sample. As evidenced by this example, the Coleman Index also adjusts for the number of friends each person has. For example, a person who nominates twenty friends will have the same Coleman Index as a person who nominated ten friends if their proportion of ingroup-to-outgroup nominations is the same.

**Results**

Aligned with our hypothesis, students who had more positive BCPE were more likely to have ideologically diverse friend networks, $\beta = 0.12$, SE = 0.04, $t(685) = 3.08$, $p = 0.002$, 95% CI for $\beta = [0.83, 0.96]$ (Figure 1). BCPE remained a significant negative predictor of political homophily even when adjusting for empathic concern, perspective-taking, political ideology, ideological strength, and gender $\beta = -0.10$, SE = 0.04, $t(661) = -2.44$, $p = 0.01$. Moreover, there was also no significant interaction between participants' BCPE and political
ideology when predicting political homophily $F(1, 683) = 0.94, p = 0.33$, indicating that political ideology did not moderate the effects of BCPE.

**Figure 1**

In Panel A, for illustration purposes, we dichotomized BCPE using a median split: networks for those who believe cross-partisan empathy is disadvantageous (i.e., below the median) are on the left and for those who believe who believe cross-partisan empathy is advantageous (i.e., above the median) are on the right. Each node represents a participant and the connections between nodes represent participants’ friend nominations. Isolated nodes were removed from the visualization. Size of nodes is dictated by outdegree – i.e., the number of people who they nominated as friends –, the color of the nodes reflects participants’ political ideology, and arrows indicate the directionality of the friendship. Panel B displays a coefficient plot from a multiple regression model showing the importance of BCPE as a predictor of political homophily even after adjusting for dispositional levels of empathic concern (EC) and perspective-taking (PT). We report beta estimates with a green circle surrounded by a 95% confidence interval (bold lines). Coefficients with 95% CI that do not overlap zero are statistically significant ($p < 0.05$).

If participants only nominated friends whose BCPE score was in the opposite category as their own, they would be displayed as isolated nodes. For example, if a person with a high BCPE score (Person A) nominated a single friend whose BCPE score is below-the-median (Person B), both people would be represented as isolated nodes. Person A would be an isolated node in the rightmost graph and Person B would be an isolated node in the leftmost graph. As these isolated nodes are not interacting with their broader networks, we removed them from the visualization.
**Discussion**

Study 2 allowed us to assess BCPE predictive validity in a new sample with an ecologically valid dependent variable. These results highlight BCPE’s relation to real-world social ties: individuals who hold positive beliefs about cross-partisan empathy are less likely to have politically homophilous friend networks. We note that correlational findings can’t establish a clear causal relationship between BCPE and ideological homophily. Those who hold positive BCPE may be more open to connecting across political divides; alternatively, having ideologically diverse friend groups could lead people to develop positive beliefs about cross-party empathy. To provide more direct evidence about the effects of BCPE on relevant outcomes, Studies 3 and 4 move to an experimental approach.

**Study 3**

Studies 1 and 2 demonstrated that BCPE is associated with measures of partisan division. In Study 3, we used a pre-registered experiment to examine the causal effects of a BCPE manipulation on downstream outgroup evaluations and support for bipartisan governance.

**Methods**

**Participants.** A priori power analyses suggested that 1550 participants would give us approximately 80% power to detect a small effect ($f \geq 0.08$) or 95% power to detect a medium effect size ($f \geq 0.2$). A recent review of anti-bias interventions suggests that it is reasonable to expect small effect sizes in experiments (Paluck et al., 2020).

To account for potential attrition, we recruited 1615 U.S. adults from a large panel of pre-screened Mechanical Turk (MTurk) workers that is maintained by the Laboratory for Social Research at [University]. This sample had previously passed a number of quality checks including routine attention checks. To further maximize data quality, we only invited participants that had an approval rate of at least 90%. We also only recruited
MTurkers who had previously self-identified as either Democrat or Republican. Participants were paid $2 for completing the study.

As pre-registered, subjects were excluded for using the same IP address ($N = 3$) or for having missing values ($N = 61$) for a final sample of 1551 participants (51% Democrat, 49% Republican). Mean age 41 years old ($SD = 12.90$), 39% male, 78% White, 8% Black / African-American, 6% Latino/Hispanic, 7% Asian and 1% Other. We did not pre-register the exclusion of participants who failed attention checks because, in experimental designs, excluding participants from analyses post-manipulation can interfere with randomization and lead to selection bias and differential attrition (Fisher et al., 1990). However, to check if our results were biased due to inattentive responding, we ran a robustness check (see Supplemental Materials) excluding all participants who failed attention checks ($N = 60$) and found that removing these participants’ data did not change our results (i.e., no findings went from being significant to non-significant).

**Procedure.** In this between-subjects experiment, participants were either given no information about cross-partisan empathy (**control condition**) or read a text arguing that cross-partisan empathy generally increases (**high utility condition**) or decreases (**low utility condition**) an individual’s political persuasiveness (see Supplemental Materials for full texts).

After reading the manipulation text, participants completed the BCPES, one measure of empathic motivation (“How much empathy do you **want** to feel toward Democratic/Republican voters?”), anchored at $1 = \text{no empathy at all}$ and $5 = \text{a great deal of empathy}$ and one measure of empathic feelings (“How much empathy do you **feel** toward Democratic/Republican voters?”), anchored at $1 = \text{no empathy at all}$ and $5 = \text{a great deal of empathy}$). Participants completed these measures for both the ingroup and the outgroup, followed by our Study 1 partisan division measures in randomized order. We hypothesized that inducing people to hold more positive (versus negative) BCPE would **lead** them to
perceive cross-partisan empathy as more useful, and experience more outgroup empathic motivation, increased outgroup empathy, reduced animosity, and greater desire for bipartisan cooperation. We explored if these treatment conditions would be significantly different from a neutral control and if the manipulation would also produce changes in social distance and moral disengagement.

**Analysis Strategy.** As pre-registered, data from this study were analyzed using multiple regressions adjusting for gender, education, ethnicity, age, and political ideology.

**Results**

**Manipulation Check.** The treatments successfully manipulated beliefs in cross-partisan empathy. Our three conditions significantly impacted participants’ BCPE. In comparison to a no treatment *control condition* ($M = 3.46$, $SD = 0.87$), the *high utility condition* increased participants' positive BCPE ($M = 3.65$, $SD = 0.70$), $\beta = 0.23$, $SE = 0.06$, $t(1536) = 3.98$, $p < .001$, 95% CI for $\beta = [0.12, 0.35]$, and the *low utility condition* decreased positive BCPE ($M = 3.05$, $SD = 0.84$), $\beta = -0.48$, $SE = 0.06$, $t(1536) = -8.14$, $p < .001$, 95% CI for $\beta = [-0.60, -0.37]$.

**BCPE Manipulation Drives Outgroup Empathy.** We proposed that BCPE is an important factor in shaping people’s decisions to empathize with outgroup members. Aligned with this idea, in comparison to the *control condition* ($M = 2.38$, $SD = 1.06$), the *high utility condition* increased participants' outgroup empathic motivation ($M = 2.62$, $SD = 1.00$), $\beta = 0.24$, $SE = 0.06$, $t(1536) = 4.06$, $p < .001$, 95% CI for $\beta = [0.12, 0.36]$, and the *low utility condition* decreased it ($M = 1.92$, $SD = 0.84$), $\beta = -0.46$, $SE = 0.06$, $t(1536) = -7.68$, $p < .001$, 95% CI for $\beta = [-0.57, -0.34]$. Compared to the *control condition* ($M = 2.04$, $SD = 0.92$), the *high utility condition* also increased participants' outgroup empathy ($M = 2.25$, $SD = 0.92$), $\beta = 0.22$, $SE = 0.06$, $t(1536) = 3.64$, $p < .001$, 95% CI for $\beta = [0.10, 0.34]$, and the *low utility condition* decreased it ($M = 1.80$, $SD = 0.80$), $\beta = -$
0.28, SE = 0.06, \( t(1536) = -4.57, p< .001 \), 95% CI for \( \beta = [-0.40, -0.16] \). These treatments did not significantly change people’s ingroup empathic motivation or ingroup empathy (see Supplemental Materials for details), suggesting that BCPE increases outgroup empathy without having to lower the empathy individuals feel for ingroup members.

**Positive BCPE’s role in lessening political division.** Compared to the *low utility condition*, participants in the *high utility condition* reported decreased desire for party-based social distance, less partisan animosity, decreased moral disengagement, and increased desire for bipartisan cooperation (Figure 2 and Table 2). On average, the *high (vs low) utility condition* led to a 0.26 (out of a 7-point scale) decrease in desire for social distance, a 6.40 (out of a 100-point scale) decrease in animosity, a 0.34 (out of a 7-point scale) reduction in moral disengagement, and 0.28 (out of a 5-point scale) increase in desire for bipartisan cooperation.
### Table 2
Effects of the Experimental Conditions on Dependent Variables in Study 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DV</th>
<th>High Utility</th>
<th>Low Utility</th>
<th>Control</th>
<th>Low Utility vs Control</th>
<th>High Utility vs Control</th>
<th>High Utility vs Low Utility</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M (SD)</td>
<td>M (SD)</td>
<td>M (SD)</td>
<td>β (SE)</td>
<td>t-value (p-value)</td>
<td>β (SE)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Distance</td>
<td>-0.11 (0.94)</td>
<td>0.08 (1.02)</td>
<td>0.03 (1.03)</td>
<td>0.05 (0.06)</td>
<td>0.85 (0.39)</td>
<td>-0.14 (0.06)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partisan animosity</td>
<td>-0.13 (1.04)</td>
<td>0.15 (0.93)</td>
<td>-0.02 (1.00)</td>
<td>0.19 (0.06)</td>
<td>3.03 (0.002)</td>
<td>-0.10 (0.06)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moral Disengagement</td>
<td>-0.12 (0.99)</td>
<td>0.12 (1.00)</td>
<td>0.001 (1.00)</td>
<td>0.12 (0.06)</td>
<td>1.99 (0.05)</td>
<td>-0.13 (0.06)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Desire for Bipartisan Cooperation</td>
<td>0.11 (1.02)</td>
<td>-0.16 (0.97)</td>
<td>0.05 (0.99)</td>
<td>-0.22 (0.06)</td>
<td>-3.55 (&lt;.001)</td>
<td>0.06 (0.06)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes. df = 1536. Mean and standard deviations are z-scored. Regression coefficients based on pre-registered linear regression analyses, adjusting for age, gender, political ideology, educational attainment, and ethnicity. Comparisons between the high and low utility condition reveal significant effects of the manipulation across all four measures of partisan division (rightmost column).
Notes. Main effect of condition on measures of support for bipartisan cooperation, partisan animosity, moral disengagement, and social distance. The x-axis reflects z-scored ratings. Circles represent the average z-scored rating per condition, the error bars reflect standard errors, and the colors denote condition type.
The effect of BCPE on strong versus weak partisans. Our manipulation shifted all four measures of partisan division, but it is possible that our effect is driven by partisans who are not strongly associated with their party and, thus, are more open to the idea that cross-partisan empathy can be useful. If so, this would be an important limitation of our results as it would indicate that those who are particularly prone to view the outgroup negatively – i.e., strong partisans – are not moved by our manipulation. To test this, we checked if our results were moderated by partisan strength. Although, interactions between condition and partisan strength were not significant for social distance $F(2, 1545) = 1.54, p = .22$ and desire for bipartisan cooperation $F(2, 1545) = 2.19, p = .11$, we did find a significant interaction for moral disengagement $F(2, 1545) = 5.86, p = .003$, and a marginally significant interaction for partisan animosity $F(2, 1545) = 2.71, p = .07$. We ran follow-up analyses to examine whether these marginal and significant interaction effects were driven by stronger partisans being more resistant to our experimental manipulations. According to Tukey HSD comparisons, weak partisans in the high (vs low) utility condition were not significantly different in their levels of partisan animosity or moral disengagement (see Supplemental Materials for all group comparisons). However, for strong partisans the high utility condition led to an 8.30-point (out of a 100-point scale) animosity reduction ($p < 0.001$) and a 0.51-point (out of a 5-point scale) decrease in moral disengagement ($p < 0.001$) relative to the low utility condition. Additionally, across all our dependent variables, the treatments effects were similar for Democratic and Republican participants (i.e., there was no significant interaction between condition and party affiliation).\(^4\)

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\(^4\) We also did not find strong evidence for differential attrition across conditions (see Supplemental Materials for details).
Discussion

These results suggest that belief in cross-partisan empathy has important causal effects on people's feelings and attitudes towards outpartisans as well as on their level of support for bipartisan governance (see Table 2). Moreover, these findings indicate that strong partisans are not “unmovable” by beliefs about cross-partisan empathy. If anything, our manipulations had, in some cases, stronger effects on more partisan individuals.

Study 4

Study 3 highlighted the importance of belief in cross-partisan empathy in shaping outgroup evaluations. In a fourth study, tested the powerful idea that, through changes in behavior, an individual's belief in the utility of cross-partisan empathy can impact the emotions and attitudes of rival partisans they communicate with.

Methods

In a yoked-dyadic, pre-registered, online experiment, we examined persuasion in the context of gun laws, a particularly polarizing issue in the United States. In 2020, representative polling findings indicated that about 85% of Democrats and 22% of Republicans supported stricter gun laws (Gallup Poll Social Series, 2020).

In the first part of this study (Part A), we experimentally manipulated participants’ belief in the utility of cross-partisan empathy by presenting them with high or low utility texts from Study 3. Participants were then asked to write a message to convince an outparty member on their views on gun laws. This data collection procedure gave rise to a corpus of over a thousand participant-generated political messages. These naturalistic stimuli allowed us to study downstream effects of BCPE in a setting that more closely resembles real-life political exchanges than most laboratory experiments (see Table S2 for sample messages).

In the second part of this study (Part B), a new set of participants were randomly assigned to read one of the outparty messages from the first part with whom they disagreed.
with about gun control and preferred political party. After reading, participants rated how empathic and persuasive they perceived the message to be, how much they liked the message writer, and how favorably they felt towards the writer’s whole group (i.e., Democrat or Republican voters in general).

We pre-registered that readers of high (versus low) utility writers would feel warmer towards them and find their messages more empathic. We explored if these readers would also find these messages more persuasive and if they would feel more positively toward the writer’s whole group (i.e., Democrat or Republican voters in general).

Participants. A priori power analyses indicated that 1050 participants in each part of Study 4 would give us approximately 80% power to detect a small effect (d >= 0.18). We recruited 2138 U.S. adults from MTurk (through Cloud Research – previously known as TurkPrime) and paid participants $2 for completing the study. Cloud Research manages a large panel of MTurk workers and we only recruited those who identified as Democrats or Republicans in previous Cloud Research surveys, were part of a high data quality subsample (which is curated via routine attention and fraud checks, see Litman et al., 2017), were 18 years and older, and were based in the United States. To further maximize data quality, we set an MTurk approval rate of at least 98%. To ensure we had a different group of participants for each part of Study 4, we prevented participants who had completed Part A from being recruited to Part B. Participants were paid $2 for completing Part A and $1 for completing Part B.

Six participants were excluded in Part A and 32 participants were excluded in Part B due to missing values. Two participants were excluded in Part B due to identical IP addresses. After these exclusions, we had a final sample of 2098 participants (50% Republican, 50% Democrat). In Part A (N = 1,049), participants’ mean age was 42 years old (SD = 13.60), 40% male, 81% White, 8% Black/African-American, 4% Latino/Hispanic, 5%
Asian and 2% Other. In Part B (N = 1,049), participants’ mean age was 40 years old (SD = 12.94), 46% male, 79% White, 8% Black/African-American, 6% Latino/Hispanic, 5% Asian and 2% Other.

Similar to Study 3, we did not pre-register the exclusion of participants who failed attention checks. However, to check if our results were biased due to inattentive responding, we ran a robustness check excluding all participants who failed attention checks (N = 34) and found that removing these participants’ data did not significantly change our results (see Supplemental Materials).

Procedure. Participants were asked prescreen questions before starting the study. These questions included their self-identification with the two major political parties in the U.S. and their views on gun laws (i.e., In general, do you feel that the laws covering the sale of firearms should be made more strict, less strict or kept as they are now?). Participants were only filtered into the study if they endorsed views on gun laws that were congruent with the typical view of their political party (i.e., Democrats who supported stricter gun laws and Republicans who opposed stricter gun laws) and if they answered "yes" to a question asking: “Do you plan to complete the full study and follow all instructions?” These filtering criteria were made a priori and are documented in our pre-registration documents at the Open Science Framework (https://osf.io/r7bes/).

Part A. Participants were randomly assigned to read either the high or low utility texts from Study 3. After reading the manipulation text, participants were then asked to write a 2-3 paragraph message intended to convince an outparty member to change their views on gun laws. Subjects were told that their messages would be shared with future outparty participants.
Part B. For each participant who completed Part A, we assigned one participant in Part B. Participants in Part B were randomly assigned to read one message written by an outparty participant in Part A.

After reading the message, participants were asked two items on how empathic the message was (e.g., “In your view, how empathic toward [inparty members] was the message you just read?”, α = .89), three items on how persuasive the message was (e.g., “To what extent do you feel that you are more likely to oppose [support] stricter gun laws after reading the message from the Republican [Democrat] participant?”, α = .74), two items on how they felt towards the writer (e.g., “Please indicate how positively or negatively you feel towards the person who wrote the gun control message.”, α = .95), and one item on how they felt towards the writer’s whole group (“Please indicate how favorably or unfavorably you feel towards the average [outparty] voter”).

Analysis Strategy. Language Analysis. To assess linguistic differences between the high utility and the low utility conditions, we employed data-driven and theoretically derived approaches. First, we determined the relative frequency with which participants used words and two-to-three-word phrases using DLATK, an open-source Python language analysis package (Schwartz et al., 2017). To prune very infrequent terms, we selected words that had been used in at least 3 messages and two-to-three-word phrases that were more likely to co-occur than chance (Kern et al., 2016). These yielded a final set of 12,507 words and phrases. To detect if there were systematic differences in language use across conditions, we correlated these word-and-phrases with conditions while adjusting for writers’ party identification and correcting for multiple comparisons.

Moreover, to explore the broader semantic framings that emerged from each condition, we used Latent Dirichlet Allocation to extract the 20 principal topics found in our message corpus (Blei et al., 2003). After modeling the topics, we extracted the relative
frequency with which participants in each condition used each of the 20 topics, thus summarizing condition language use over these semantic clusters (see Table S3 for a description of all 20 topics).

Lastly, we asked two coders, blind to condition, to rate the messages across three different dimensions: extremity of position (anchored from 1 = extremely less strict gun laws to 7 = extremely stricter gun laws, ICC = 0.77), conciliatory tone (anchored from 1 = not conciliatory at all to 5 = extremely conciliatory, ICC = 0.61), and number of arguments (i.e., “How many arguments did the writer make to support their position?”, ICC = 0.76).

**Outparty Ratings.** To assess the effect of writers’ messages on readers’ attitudes, we ran pre-registered multiple linear regression models predicting each dependent variable while adjusting for the readers’ age, gender, political ideology, educational attainment, and ethnicity.

**Results**

We first explored the effects of our manipulation on the language participants used when communicating with outpartisans. While the low utility condition was not significantly correlated with any specific words or phrases, the high utility condition was significantly associated with the use of perspective-taking language (e.g., “I understand that”) and the acknowledgement of common ground (e.g., “We all want”, “I agree”). In fact, compared to the low utility condition, writers in the high utility condition were almost twice as likely to use these linguistic markers of cross-partisan empathy, \( OR = 1.82 \) (95% CI: 1.57, 2.10).

Further, topic analyses showed that, while writers in the high utility condition made arguments that appealed to superordinate groups (e.g., “Americans”, “citizens”) and common goals (e.g., “safety”, “security”), writers in the low utility condition focused on crime (e.g., “police”, “armed”), violence (e.g., “deaths”, “violence”), and partisan divides (e.g., “Democrats”, “Republicans”; Figure 3). Although research has shown that appeals to broader
group identities and shared goals can decrease intergroup conflict (e.g., Levendusky, 2018), our work is the first to show that positive beliefs about empathy can lead people to spontaneously generate these conciliatory frames.

**Figure 3**

*Topic Analysis*

Notes. Topics significantly associated with high and low utility conditions when controlling for party identification. Of the 20 topics modeled on this dataset, we found three to be significantly associated with the high utility condition (reducing mass shootings, increasing safety, American citizens and institutions) and three to be significantly associated with the low utility condition (violence in the U.S. compared to other countries, crime, and partisan divides). The size of the word in the topic signifies prevalence within the topic, color shading is random for readability. Topics are ordered from least to most associated per row. Topics were labeled by the authors for central themes (box titles).

We then examined the effects of these notes on readers (Figure 4 and Table 3). High utility writers wrote messages that were seen as more empathic ($M = 39.52$, $SD = 26.94$) than low utility writers ($M = 27.99$, $SD = 25.28$), $\beta = 0.44$, $SE = 0.06$, $t(1035) = 7.37$, $p< 0.001$, 95% CI for $\beta = [0.57, 0.72]$. Messages from high utility writers were also perceived to be more persuasive ($M = 24.00$, $SD = 19.96$), than messages from low utility writers ($M = 19.35$, $SD = 25.89$), $\beta = 0.41$, $SE = 0.06$, $t(1035) = 6.92$, $p< 0.001$, 95% CI for $\beta = [0.54, 0.68]$.
BELIEF IN EMPATHY SHIFT POLITICAL ANIMOSITY AND PERSUASION

High utility writers were also better liked by outpartisans ($M = 45.74$, $SD = 25.38$) than low utility writers ($M = 37.95$, $SD = 25.77$), $\beta = 0.30$, $SE = 0.06$, $t(1035) = 5.00$, $p < 0.001$, 95% CI for $\beta = [0.66, 0.83]$ and reduced outpartisans’ animosity toward their whole group ($M = 2.34$, $SD = 1.52$) compared to low utility writers ($M = 2.14$, $SD = 1.40$), $\beta = -0.14$, $SE = 0.06$, $t(1035) = -2.44$, $p = 0.01$, 95% CI for $\beta = [0.77, 0.97]$.

The effects on message ratings are sizable: messages from the high utility condition were 98% more likely to be seen as empathic and 64% more likely to be seen as persuasive by outpartisan readers than ones from the low utility condition. Across all our dependent variables, there were no significant interactions between condition and party affiliation or condition and partisan strength.

Table 3
Effects of the Writers’ Condition on Readers’ Responses in Study 4

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DV</th>
<th>High Utility</th>
<th>Low Utility</th>
<th>Low Utility vs High Utility</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$M$ ($SD$)</td>
<td>$M$ ($SD$)</td>
<td>$\beta$ ($SE$)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived Empathy</td>
<td>0.39 (0.27)</td>
<td>0.28 (0.25)</td>
<td>0.44 (0.06)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persuasion</td>
<td>0.35 (0.29)</td>
<td>0.28 (0.27)</td>
<td>0.24 (0.06)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liking Message</td>
<td>0.46 (0.25)</td>
<td>0.38 (0.26)</td>
<td>0.30 (0.06)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writer</td>
<td>0.22 (0.25)</td>
<td>0.19 (0.23)</td>
<td>0.14 (0.06)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes. df = 1035. Means and standard deviations are normalized (scale ranges from 0 to 1). Regression coefficients based on linear regression analyses, adjusting for age, gender, political ideology, educational attainment, and ethnicity.

5 These percentages reflect odds ratios increases when predicting binarized versions of our measures on empathy and persuasion (see Supplemental Materials for details).
Figure 4

Downstream Effect of Writers' condition on Readers' Responses

Writers’ condition

Notes. Main effect of writers’ condition on readers’ attitudes. Circles represent the average response per condition, the error bars reflect bootstrapped confidence intervals, and the colors denote the writer’s experimental condition.

* = p < 0.05, ** = p < 0.01, *** = p < .001

One potential explanation of these effects is that writers prompted to have high BCPE might be softening their arguments, thus making them more palatable to cross-party readers.

To test this possibility, we analyzed coders’ data. First, we transformed our ‘extremity of position’ measure to reflect the extremity of attitudes towards gun laws irrespective of political side. The midpoint of the scale (i.e., supporting neither less strict nor stricter gun laws) was coded as a 1, those supporting "slightly stricter" or "slightly less strict" gun laws were coded as a 2, those supporting "stricter" or "less strict" gun laws were coded as a 3, and, lastly, those supporting "extremely stricter" or "extremely less strict" gun laws were coded as a 4.

As shown in Figure 5, participants in the high utility condition did not express significantly less extreme arguments around gun laws (M = 2.56, SD = 0.63) than those in the
low utility condition ($M = 2.63$, $SD = 0.67$), $t(1017) = -1.62$, $p = 0.10$. There was also no significant difference in the number of arguments used by those in the high utility condition ($M = 2.44$, $SD = 0.89$) compared to those in the low utility condition ($M = 2.33$, $SD = 0.92$), $t(1017) = 1.88$, $p = 0.06$. Aligned with our NLP analyses and readers' ratings, high utility writers used a more conciliatory tone in their messages ($M = 2.58$, $SD = 1.02$) than low utility writers ($M = 1.96$, $SD = 0.75$), $t(1017) = 11.13$, $p < 0.001$. In brief, our conditions had no significant effect on the extremity of writers' arguments (negligible effect size, $d = -0.10$), but did impact the conciliatory tone of their messages ($d = 0.70$). Moreover, bias-corrected bootstrapping with 5,000 samples revealed that the indirect effect of extremity of position did not mediate the effect of condition on persuasion, $\beta = -0.001$, $SE = 0.004$, 95% CI = [-0.012, 0.004]. The indirect effect of argument count also did not mediate the effect of condition on persuasion, $\beta = -0.003$, $SE = 0.004$, 95% CI = [-0.016, 0.003], but the indirect effect of conciliatory tone is significant $\beta = -0.10$, $SE = 0.02$, 95% CI = [-0.155, -0.061].
We found evidence that people's belief in cross-partisan empathy alters their behavior and creates reverberating effects on the attitudes of outparty members. Writers who learned that empathy can be useful spontaneously produced messages that signaled perspective-taking and appealed to shared goals and identities. This, in turn, led readers to report greater warmth toward the writer and their group, and to be more persuaded by their message.

Importantly, our results suggest that our persuasion effects do not arise merely because writers who believe in the utility of empathy moderate their opinions. Rather, they make arguments that are similar in the extremity of their positions, but do so in a conciliatory manner (Figure 5).
There are several ways in which these findings are nontrivial. First, individuals’ attitudes don’t always translate into congruous behaviors (e.g., Wicker, 1969) especially if those behaviors clash with existing group norms (e.g., White et al., 2002). Given the acrimonious partisan backdrop in the US, it is possible that even participants convinced of empathy’s utility would remain hesitant to engage empathically with outparty members, especially when discussing a contentious issue. Second, even if individuals acted empathically, there is no guarantee that this would shift attitudes and emotions of outparty members. In intergroup contexts, people are motivated to maintain pre-existing, group-relevant beliefs (Kunda, 1990) and tend to disregard information that is belief-incongruent (Lodge & Taber, 2006). However, despite these potential psychological barriers, we found that our manipulation significantly changed not only people's behaviors, but also the views of those they disagreed with.

General Discussion

Across four studies, we demonstrate that empathy beliefs drive not only group-based emotions (e.g., increased empathy and reduced animosity), but attitudes (e.g., increased desire for cooperation, decreased moral disengagement, lower desire for social distance), and communication tactics (i.e., political rhetoric regarding a contentious topic). These beliefs further operate in self-fulfilling ways. In Study 4, when writers believed empathy could be useful, it became useful: leading them to produce more persuasive messages that reduced outpartisans’ animosity and persuaded them more effectively.

From a theoretical perspective, our findings significantly add to the basic science of emotion and lay theories. Previous work has highlighted that empathy can either increase or mitigate intergroup conflict based on how people deploy it (e.g., Bruneau et al., 2017; Zaki & Cikara, 2015). Our findings indicate that BCPE is an important driver of people’s motivation to empathize with the political outgroup. We demonstrate that these emotion beliefs have
significant intrapersonal consequences - improving individuals' intergroup attitudes and
eliciting empathic cross-partisan communications - even in active intergroup conflicts.
Importantly, our findings also provide a clear example of the reverberating effects of one
person’s emotion theory on the experiences of others through a mechanistic interpersonal
process centered on empathic engagement. Converging NLP and human annotation analyses
indicate that people in our high (vs low) utility condition were able to change outgroup
members’ views not by tempering their own beliefs, but by communicating them in a more
empathic and conciliatory manner.

**Future Research**

We hope that this work provides a generative framework for future intergroup
research. In the partisan environment of US politics, empathy tends to be biased towards
ingroup members, furthering parochialism and division (Simas et al., 2020). However, we
demonstrate that this bias can be downshifted by altering people’s emotional lay theories.
When people believe in the utility of cross-party empathy, they intentionally divert their
empathy to those who disagree with them. In the context of our work, this renders them more
compelling advocates for their own political views. We hope that future work adapts this
framework to different intergroup conflicts to test the robustness of these effects in other
settings.

More work is also needed to establish all processes underlying our effects. In Study 3,
changes in BCPE reduced participants’ partisan animosity even absent any new interactions
with an outpartisan. This raises questions regarding exactly how empathy beliefs can impact
information selection and processing. For example, to feel more positively towards the
outgroup participants may be employing emotion regulation strategies, such as reappraising
their outgroup attitudes or suppressing their negative feelings. They could also be retrieving
different prototypical group members from memory, for instance thinking about a friendly
acquaintance who supports the outparty, versus an extreme outparty talk-show host. Future research should aim to disentangle these strategies and test differences in effectiveness.

We did not measure the longevity of our effects. Meta-analyses on anti-bias interventions suggest that such effects tend to be short-lived (Paluck et al., 2020). However, it’s possible that prompting positive BCPE can act as a 'wise intervention' (Walton, 2014). For instance, a person who learns about the utility of cross-partisan empathy may start communicating with outpartisans in more empathic ways, leading them to have better cross-party interactions which could, in turn, further propel the belief that empathy is useful. Therefore, even though brief, an intervention that increases people’s BCPE could cause long-lasting change by targeting a reiterative process that has cascading effects in their daily lives.

Conclusion

Growing animosity can hinder support for efficient bipartisan coordination around vital national matters (e.g., Druckman et al., 2021, Hetherington & Rudolph, 2015) – such as the COVID-19 pandemic, climate change, and electoral integrity – and affects nonpolitical social relationships - e.g., friendships, hiring decisions, and dating choices (see Iyengar et al., 2019 for a review). We propose that belief in the utility of empathizing across party lines can shape people’s openness to potentially productive contact and dialogue. Believing in cross-partisan empathy’s usefulness helps people attain shared goals of decreasing partisan animosity and building consensus around critical issues. In this light, cross-partisan empathy can be a valuable resource - an instrumental tool for not only connecting minds, but also changing them.
Ethics Statement and Reproducibility

All studies were approved by the Institutional Review Board at [redacted]. All participants provided informed consent prior to the beginning of all four studies and were paid for their participation. Given that our manipulation involved deception, participants in Study 3 and 4 were debriefed at the end of the study. The data, code for analyses, and pre-registrations are available via https://osf.io/r7bes/
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https://doi.org/10.1515/for-2015-0030


https://doi.org/10.1037/met0000091


