“You Need to Calm Down”: How Tone Shapes Political Discussion
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Abstract. Political discussions—especially when they involve disagreement—have the potential to decrease polarization and better inform the public. Yet people are strongly averse to them. We propose that this aversion is driven primarily not by an aversion to disagreement but by an aversion to heated discussions. Further, we propose that the benefits of political discussions depend on whether the discussion is heated or calm. Using four survey experiments (N=1,045; N=391; N=1,000; N=1,805), we find support for these predictions and demonstrate the importance of tone in discussion engagement, process, and outcomes. Our results show that tone drives much of the political discussion avoidance and is a key moderator in determining if heterogeneous discussions are beneficial. Further, our findings imply that political discussions only have the power to decrease polarization and inform the public if they are calm enough for people to engage in, and reap the benefits of, the interaction.

Keywords: political discussion; political disagreement; polarization

Word count: 9,597

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Introduction

Worries about the current state of America include concerns about the rising levels of affective and social polarization—whereby partisans dislike, distrust, and want to socially avoid out-partisans (see Iyengar et al. 2019 for review). These types of attitudes can lead, and have been leading, to political sectarianism—the “othering, aversion, and moralization” of political groups (see Finkel et al. 2020)—which raises concerns about how people navigate the political world, representative democracy, anti-democratic attitudes, support for political violence, and susceptibility to fake news (Finkel et al. 2020; Kingzette et al. 2021; but see Broockman, Kalla, and Westwood 2022). Related concerns point to the dehumanization of out-partisans (Cassese 2021; Martherus et al. 2021) and a more policy-based polarization whereby partisans have increasingly party-aligned views (e.g., Webster and Abramowitz 2017; but see Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope 2008).

One potential solution to these ills is more political discussion, especially across party lines. These types of discussions have been shown to increase tolerance of others and their views (e.g., Allport 1954; Kalla and Broockman 2020; Levendusky and Stecula 2021; Mutz 2006; Pettigrew and Tropp 2006; Rossiter 2022); moderate political attitudes and decrease partisan motivated reasoning (Klar 2014); and increase learning (e.g., Ognyanova 2020), as people often learn about politics through political discussion (Carlson 2019). These findings align with research noting that discussing politics is vital to democracy (Almond and Verba 1963; Delli Carpini, Cook, and Jacobs 2004). In fact, Iyengar et al. (2019) suggest this exact solution:

“One potentially promising strand of research is to build on the insights of intergroup contact theory (Pettigrew & Tropp 2011) and examine whether constructive engagement between Democrats and Republicans could potentially reduce partisan animus. This is also related to a long tradition of work showing that diverse social networks—which expose individuals to different political points of view—foster tolerance for opposing viewpoints, which should also ameliorate affective polarization (Mutz 2002).”

Yet people hate discussing politics, especially across party lines. Research finds that most people try to avoid discussing politics generally (Carlson and Settle 2022; Huckfeldt et al. 2013; Mutz 2002, 2006)—and that this avoidance is stronger for discussions with out-partisans (Settle and Carlson 2019), but also exists with in-partisans (Klar, Krupnikov, and Ryan 2018). Recent research even finds that partisans feel less out-party animus when they are told out-partisans rarely discuss politics (Druckman et al. 2022; see also Klar et al. 2018).

This avoidance of political discussion has two important implications. First, it suggests that political discussions may not be the cure to democratic ills—given how averse people are to having them. Second, this avoidance harms social relationships: research finds that avoiding political discussions because of underlying disagreement can strain familial relationships (Chen and Rohl 2018; Warner, Colaner, and Park 2021) and lead to shorter Thanksgiving dinners (Frimer and Skitka 2020)—and that having these discussions can improve relationships (Warner et al. 2021).

Thus, the very discussions that have the power to improve society are being avoided by most people. We propose, though, that this disengagement is largely driven not by the avoidance of political disagreement, but by the avoidance of the heated tone with which political discussions can occur. Further, we propose that when political discussions are heated, they will be less beneficial than when they are calm. We test these expectations with four surveys experiments and find substantial evidence for the importance of tone in political discussion. We find, for example, that
people have a strong aversion to heated political discussions—even more so than to disagreement—and that heated tones undermine the benefits of political disagreements, suggesting an important moderator in determining the outcomes of heterogeneous interactions. Further, we find that while only the conflict averse (sometimes) avoid disagreement in political discussions, both the conflict averse and the conflict acceptant avoid heated political discussions—and both to a greater extent than they avoid disagreement.

Our findings have important implications for understanding polarization and political interactions. It is not necessarily disagreement that is driving people away from having important political discussions—it is the heated tones with which political discussions can occur. Thus, how we talk about politics is vitally important to if people want to engage in these discussions, how they unfold, and the benefits people receive from them. Our research suggests that we do not merely need more political discussions across party lines to cure some of democracy’s ills, but more calm political discussions across party lines—we need people to simply calm down.

**Theoretic Expectations**

**Political Discussions.** In this piece we focus on informal political discussions—or, what Mansbridge (1999) terms “everyday talk.” This is different from political deliberation (see Elster and Przeworski 1998), which is more formal and requires certain conditions be met. The discussions we examine, however, include informal in-person and online discussions with friends, family, acquaintances, or even strangers (see Walsh 2004). As Mansbridge (1999) explains, “Everyday talk, if not always deliberative, is nevertheless a crucial part of the full deliberative system” (p. 211).

Scholars have long believed these types of discussions are important for the transmission of political information, moderation of attitudes, feelings towards outgroups, and social relationships, with some even noting that it can be used as an “indicator of democratic health” (Delli Carpini et al. 2004). Downs’ (1957) economic theory of democracy, for example, identifies everyday conversation as an important source of “free” information that helps inform citizens about who to vote for. Similarly, Ognyanova (2020) finds that having high-frequency general conversation partners can spread political knowledge, which can also help mitigate the information losses and distortions associated with single-channel political communication (Carlson 2018, 2019). In fact, the mere anticipation of a political conversation can improve political knowledge as much as the actual content of the discussion itself (Eveland 2004). Further, political discussions with opposing views can even decrease partisan motivated reasoning and moderate attitudes (Klar 2014).

Beyond learning and attitude moderation, though, discussing politics with contrasting viewpoints can improve feelings towards outgroups, something noted as early as Allport’s (1954) classic intergroup contact hypothesis. These types of discussions can increase people’s value in the free exchange of ideas and thus tolerance of others and their ideas (see Huckfeldt, Mendez, and Osborn 2004; Huckfeldt et al. 2013; Mutz 2002, 2006; Mutz and Mondak 2006; Pattie and Johnston 2008). For example, Kalla and Broockman (2020) find that face-to-face conversations have the power to reduce exclusionary attitudes and both Levendusky and Stecula (2021) and Rossiter (2022) find that they have the power to decrease affective polarization. These types of

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1 We believe tone should matter similarly in each of these informal discussion contexts, but should not vary much in deliberative contexts, where moderators and rules should keep tones largely calm.

2 Although see Connors, Pietyka, and Ryan (2022) for how motivations influence how useful interpersonal interactions are.
findings are behind Iyengar et al.’s (2019) recommendation for interparty contact to improve out-party attitudes.

Lastly, discussing politics—especially when there is disagreement—is important to our social lives. Underlying political disagreement in familial and social relationships often leads people to avoid talking about politics. For example, research has found that politically diverse Thanksgiving dinners were shorter than politically uniform ones, controlling for other factors (Frimer and Skitka 2020). Behavioral data confirms this, finding that people speak less to out-party family members, especially after contentious elections (Chen and Rohla 2018). Similarly, Warner et al. (2021) explain how political disagreements within families can lead people to avoid political discussions and thus communication generally, which ultimately hurts shared family identity. Further, they note that these types of discussions are vital to improving these relationships.

Although scholars do note the trade-off of heterogenous discussions for participation (Mutz 2006, though see Sumaktoyo 2021) as well as identify ways in which these conversations can instead increase the salience of identity and negative out-group feelings in group settings (Walsh 2004), many of these results demonstrate how discussing politics, especially when it involves disagreement, is beneficial to society (e.g., Mutz and Mondak 2006; Kwak et al. 2005; Minozzi et al. 2020; Pattie and Johnston 2008). As Mutz (2006) summarizes, “hearing the other side has long been considered important for democratic citizens” (pg. 9).

However, research finds that most people do not want to discuss politics (e.g., Carlson and Settle 2022; Huckfeldt et al. 2013), even distancing themselves from people in their social network who do (see Klar et al. 2018) and lowering their out-party animus to those who don’t (Druckman et al. 2022). Although the “disappointing frequency of cross-cutting conversations” (Mutz 2006, pg. 61) is not just driven by disagreement, disagreement within these discussions makes people even more averse to them (Settle and Carlson 2019). People even use apotitical cues to draw inferences about people’s political beliefs and then use those inferences to guide decisions about whether they will interact with them—when they infer disagreement, they are less likely to do so (Lee 2021; see also Huckfeldt and Sprague 1995).

This tendency to avoid discussing politics with contrasting viewpoints is likely driven by various factors, including that people across the ideological spectrum would rather avoid the “other side’s” opinions (Frimer, Skitka, and Motyl 2017), as well as simple affective distaste for out-partisans (see, e.g., Iyengar and Westwood 2015; Mason 2015). Certain issues—especially those on divisive topics and provoking visceral reactions—also limit discourse (Goodin 2006). And, as polarization increases, individuals with contrasting views are even less likely to share their opinions and more likely to cut off conversations with those who disagree with them (Wells et al. 2017), limiting the range of opinion in discourse as people avoid discussing politics altogether. Thus, the very discussions we hope could improve polarization (see Iyengar et al. 2019) will happen less often because of polarization.

Research also finds that discussion aversion—while quite common and exacerbated by polarization—also varies by individual with one’s level of conflict orientation (see Ulbig and Funk

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3 This might also suggest there are conditions under which political discussions are useful versus detrimental (see also Allport 1954). In fact, Connors et al. (2022) find that interaction outcomes are shaped by individual motivations. Similarly, our research speaks to conditions under which political discussions are beneficial—arguing that tone also shapes these outcomes.

4 At the time of writing at least, the lack of cross-cutting exposure was even more pronounced among whites, the highly educated, and those with higher incomes (Mutz 2006).
Conflict orientation measures one’s comfort with conflict, where people range from conflict averse to conflict acceptant. Thus, this trait often shapes how people react in political conversations (Huckfeldt and Mendez 2008). Sydnor (2019a), for example, finds that conflict orientation shapes how people respond to discussion incivility.6

Thus, many, if not most, people want to avoid talking about politics.7 This aversion is shaped both by context (e.g., polarization) and individual variation in conflict orientation—and although it is stronger for conversations that involve disagreement, it remains for conversations that do not. Yet research on the value of these discussions (e.g., Mutz 2006) as well as research suggesting these discussions could be a cure to democratic ills (e.g., Iyengar et al. 2019) demonstrate the importance of understanding what drives this disengagement. Further, examining what variables shape how beneficial heterogeneous discussions are would demonstrate if more of these discussions are really the cure—or if there are conditions under which they are harmful rather than beneficial.

**Tone.** We expect that people’s willingness to engage in political discussions, as well as the processes and outcomes of these discussions, are largely determined not by whether or not the conversation includes political disagreement,8 but by the tone of the conversation (i.e., whether it is heated or calm). By “tone” we mean the overall feel of the discussion—this could involve incivility (see Mutz and Reeves 2005); as well as anger (see Webster 2020 and Webster, Connors, and Sinclair 2022), among other emotions; and/or even the volume with which the discussion takes place and intensity with which people are speaking.9

Previous research suggests that tone should matter (e.g., Sydnor 2019a). First, research finds that the public reacts to tone-related behavior at the elite level. Mutz and Reeves (2005), for example, show how witnessing others’ incivility on TV reduces trust in government, and Druckman et al. (2019) show that media incivility influences polarization—where out-party incivility polarizes and in-party incivility depolarizes. Similarly, Huddy and Yair (2021) find that witnessing elites’ either hostile or warm interactions influences affective polarization.10

Second—and more relevant to our particular endeavor—research shows that tone-related behavior can drive people away from politics, suggesting it could also drive people away from political discussions. Studies have shown that the intensity of today’s political climate is a motivator behind people’s dislike of politics and the politically engaged (Krupnikov and Ryan 2022; see also Klar et al. 2018; Klar and Krupnikov 2016). Krupnikov and Ryan (2022), for example, demonstrate that the discussions people witness on the news are heated (i.e., intense and angry) and suggest that these types of interactions are fueling the “other divide” between the deeply involved and everyone else. In fact, people even feel aversion to in-partisans who are highly engaged

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5 Emotions can also motivate people to discuss politics (see Wolak and Sokhey 2022).
6 See also Wolak (2022) who examines conflict avoidance and gender.
7 Walsh (2004), however, notes that people often talk about politics without realizing they are doing so.
8 For ease of understanding the effect of tone, we conceptualize disagreement as either occurring or not (i.e., as dichotomous)—yet note that other research uses a more nuanced approach to disagreement by conceptualizing it as continuous (see Klofstad et al. 2013).
9 Although determining which factors drive the effect of tone is not the goal of this manuscript, we do examine people’s conceptions of tone in Study 4 using these (as well as other) factors.
10 In comparison, they find that witnessing elites compromising on policy has no effect on affective polarization.
(Klar et al. 2018), suggesting that it is not simply disagreement turning people off from politics, but something else about today’s political climate.

Lastly, research also demonstrates that the success of political interactions depends on variables related to tone. For example, Warner et al. (2021) find that “respecting divergent opinions”—including respecting one’s beliefs and active listening—is the only effective strategy to deal with political disagreement.\footnote{The other mechanisms they explored were: supportive communication (family supports political choices); inappropriate self-disclosure (family talks too much about politics); and emphasizing divergent values (family emphasizes conflict).} Similarly, Masullo and Kim (2021) show that when comments attempting to correct misinformation are uncivil, people dislike out-partisans even more than they already do. Further, Peacock (2019) finds that conflict causes people to avoid expressing their opinion in conversations, especially when their conversational partner is perceived as being uncivil. Even in Kalla and Broockman’s (2020) findings on reducing exclusionary attitudes with conversations, they note that the conversations must involve “non-judgmentally exchanging narratives.” And Levendusky and Stecula’s (2021) finding that these discussions can reduce affective polarization have the added nuance that their most influential treatment was that of engaging in “civil discussion” across party lines.

These findings suggest both that tone can shape political attitudes and drive disengagement as well as that there are conditions under which interactions may either not be beneficial or be harmful. Indeed, in explaining the importance of discussion disagreement, Pattie and Johnston (2008) note that some discussions may be “extremely undesirable” and create greater division rather than bridge gaps. Thus, inspired by these findings, we expect tone to matter in willingness to engage in political discussions as well as the processes and outcomes of these discussions. In particular, we expect people to want to engage less and react more negatively in heated discussions than in calm discussions. Further, we expect tone to matter more than the presence of disagreement (i.e., whether the discussion involves disagreement of not) and to be important for both the conflict averse and the conflict acceptant. These findings would suggest an important and missing piece to research on political discussion.

Empirical Approach

To examine tone and its effect on political discussion, we ran four survey experiments with US adults, using both convenience samples (Prolific\footnote{For more information, see https://www.prolific.co.} and Lucid\footnote{For more information, see https://luc.id/theorem.}, online platforms where participants sign up to get paid to take surveys) and a national stratified sample from YouGov (Cooperative Election Study [CES]\footnote{For more information, see https://cces.gov.harvard.edu.}) that we weighted to be nationally representative.\footnote{See Appendices A, B, C, and D for sample demographics.} Our goal was to understand how people conceptualize heated and calm political discussions, the proportion of political discussions people have that are heated versus calm, how tone influences people’s willingness to engage in political discussions as well as the outcomes of those discussions, and how the effect of tone relates to disagreement as well as is shaped by conflict orientation.\footnote{Studies 2, 3, and 4 were pre-registered (see Appendices B, C, and D).}

Study 1 (N= 1,045) was run in September, 2020 on Prolific. It used recall and imagination tasks to examine how respondents react to political disagreements that are heated versus those that
are calm—including how they treat others, learn, and feel about their discussion partners, outcomes that previous research on discussions have looked at. Study 2 (N=391) was run in November, 2021 on Prolific and Study 3 (N=1,000) was run in November and December, 2021 with CES. These studies asked respondents about a future event, varying whether that event included disagreement or agreement and if it was heated or calm and examining how these two factors (agreement and tone) influence respondents’ likelihood of attending the event. Studies 2 and 3 not only explicitly examined the effect of disagreement in comparison to tone but also incorporated conflict orientation (see Ulbig and Funk 1999). Further, Study 3 asked respondents the proportion of political discussions they engage in that are heated versus calm, helping to put our findings into context. Study 4 (N=1,805) was run in May, 2022 on Lucid and asked respondents to help define different types of discussions, again varying agreement and tone. Study 4 also asked respondents the proportion of political discussions they engage in that are heated versus calm, but varied whether these discussions were online or in-person. Lastly, Study 4 asked respondents about engagement in political discussion while controlling for issue content (Rossiter 2021) and disagreement. Full survey questionnaires can be found in Appendices A, B, C, and D.

Between the four studies, we were able to replicate our general findings on the effect of tone across different points in time, samples, operationalizations of variables, and designs. This speaks to the robustness and applicability of our findings, as they do not seem to be driven by any one design choice but by the strong effect of tone—which was shown to shape discussion outcomes as well as be more important than the presence of disagreement (and for both the conflict avoidant and the conflict acceptant) in determining people’s desire to engage in political discussions.

One concern about our approach may be that our studies were online and used recall and imagination rather than actual discussion engagement. Yet the online nature of our study allowed us to not be restricted by geographic limitations—increasing our external validity—and the recall and imagination tasks allowed us increased control over our treatments—increasing our internal validity (Shadish, Cook, and Campbell 2002). For example, our goal in Study 1 was to manipulate the tone of political discussions, and while we could attempt this by using a confederate to help guide tone, this would prove a difficult task for one person to accomplish. Once those assigned to a calm treatment had one person alter the tone to be more heated, those participants would no longer be in a calm discussion, even though they were assigned to one. This possibility is more likely with online discussions, as they are generally more hostile (Barnidge 2017) and less civil (Coe, Kenski, and Rains 2014) than in-person discussions. Lastly, we felt comfortable with our approach because research shows that imagined experiences can elicit emotional responses to real-world situations (Dadds, Bovbjerg, Redd, and Cutmore 1997), and imagined intergroup contact functions largely the same way as it does in the real world (see Crisp and Turner 2009).

Of course we realize that randomly assigning actual discussions could offer more realism and potentially stronger treatment effects. There is always a trade-off in design choice (see Shadish et al. 2002; see also Mutz 2006 who discusses issues with deliberative polls, causal inference, and external validity). However, we feel that once we acknowledge that our estimates will likely be conservative—as we are asking about hypothetical events and surveying people after recalling or imagining conversations, rather than just having actually had them—our method of examining political discussions could be a promising one. Thus, our hope is to not use our approach as a one-shot method, but for the field to continue to use it to examine an area that is relatively under-

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17 We note that our designs do not address potentially important factors such as gender (see Djupe, Mcclurg, and Sokhey 2016 and Wolak 2022) and race—we believe this is important to explore in future research.
studied, potentially because of the onerous task at hand in randomly assigning social interactions at a level that allows for valid statistical tests.

The following sections will proceed as follows. First, we will examine how people conceptualize different types of discussions as well as the proportion of political discussions people have that are heated versus calm. Second, we will explore how tone influences people’s willingness to engage in political discussion—controlling for disagreement and topic and then comparing the effect of tone to the effect of disagreement. Third, we will analyze these aforementioned results controlling for conflict orientation and then modeling conflict orientation as a moderating variable. Lastly, we will see how tone shapes the outcomes of heterogeneous interactions. Our findings unambiguously demonstrate the importance of tone in political discussions.

**Empirics 1: Defining Tone**

In this section we use Studies 3 and 4 to both define tone and assess the proportion of political disagreements that are heated versus calm. We do this as a conceptualization endeavor, but also to examine where respondents see dividing lines in political discussions: by disagreement, by tone, or by both? Further, by asking respondents the proportion of disagreements that are heated versus calm we can address the worry that all disagreements are perceived as heated—if this were the case, respondents would report that most or all disagreements are heated, which would suggest that tone and disagreement cannot be disentangled. Yet, as we will show, this is not the case. Our findings here thus demonstrate that people do recognize the difference between (for example) a calm disagreement and a heated disagreement and that they have had both.

First, then, we define tone using data from Study 4, where we randomly assigned respondents to one of four conditions, varying both tone and agreement and asking respondents: “What do you think of when you think of a [heated/calm] political discussion where people [agree/disagree]?” Respondents were given a variety of descriptors to choose from (see Appendix D). The most chosen descriptors are in Table 1—they show that the biggest dividing lines are between the heated and calm conditions, rather than the agree and disagree conditions. They also help to illustrate what happens in these discussions (although Empirics 4 will further illustrate this). Heated political discussions often involve loud voices, anger, and lack of reason—and heated disagreeable discussions also include incivility and anxiety, while heated agreeable discussions also include interest and people listening, suggesting the dividing lines between these two types of discussions. Calm political discussions—both agreeable and disagreeable—include respect, civility, people listening, reason, and interest.
Table 1. Descriptors of Political Discussions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Condition</th>
<th>Word 1</th>
<th>Word 2</th>
<th>Word 3</th>
<th>Word 4</th>
<th>Word 5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Heated, Agree</td>
<td>Loud voices (188)</td>
<td>Interesting (144)</td>
<td>Anger (121)</td>
<td>People listening (111)</td>
<td>Unreasonable (101)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heated, Disagree</td>
<td>Loud voices (273)</td>
<td>Anger (231)</td>
<td>Uncivil (205)</td>
<td>Unreasonable (191)</td>
<td>Anxiety (174)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Calm, Agree</td>
<td>Respect (288)</td>
<td>Civil (249)</td>
<td>People listening (249)</td>
<td>Reasoned (222)</td>
<td>Interesting (208)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Calm, Disagree</td>
<td>Respect (276)</td>
<td>People listening (257)</td>
<td>Civil (250)</td>
<td>Reasoned (232)</td>
<td>Interesting (202)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table shows the most clicked descriptors in each condition along with the number of respondents who chose that descriptor.

We next examine the proportion of heated versus calm political disagreements. Study 3 asked a third of respondents (N=348) to estimate the proportion of political disagreements they have had that have been calm versus heated. On a scale from “all have been heated” (1) to “all have been calm” (100), the average response was 53.55 (SD=22.29)—demonstrating that people are largely having a mix of heated and calm disagreements, but that they are more calm than heated (p=.030). Study 4 asked the same question, but randomized participants to be asked about online conversations or in-person conversations. On a scale from “all have been heated” (0) to “all have been calm” (100), the average response of those in both conditions was 57.62 (SD=24.90)—demonstrating again that people have more calm than heated political disagreements (p<.001). Splitting this up by condition, we find—unsurprisingly, given findings by Barnidge (2017) and Coe et al. (2014)—that people have more heated disagreements online (55.38, SD=25.63) than in person (59.74, SD=23.98; difference: p<.001), although both are more often calm than heated (both p<.001).18

Together, these data help to define tone—what, exactly, a heated political discussion is compared to a calm political discussion and how much disagreement shapes that—as well as to demonstrate that people have both calm and heated political disagreements—although they have more calm than heated disagreements, especially when they are in person. This demonstrates that not all political disagreements are heated—that it is possible to have calm political disagreements. In fact, people have more calm disagreements than heated disagreements. It also shows when political disagreements occur, people are not inferring a heated tone. Instead, they seem both able to differentiate heated disagreements from calm disagreements as well as to define the two differently, where the former have loud voices, emotions (including anger and anxiety), incivility, and a lack of reason—and the latter have quite the opposite: respect, people listening, civility, reason, and interest.

18 We note that these data suggest there are a fair amount of heated political disagreements occurring, even though, as we note, people would rather avoid them. This makes sense, as people often have to engage in political discussions when they would rather not (see Carlson and Settle 2022). Indeed, as Huckfeldt et al. (2013) note in referencing Walsh (2004): “Political discussion is often unplanned. When talking, people jump from topic to topic, as different statements cue new thoughts and recollections” (pg. 676; see also Sinclair 2012). Given research on the benefits of political disagreements, we might think of this as positive—yet, as our data will show, heated political discussions are far from the ideal discussions researchers often write about, and thus having these conversations could actually be detrimental rather than beneficial.
Empirics 2: Does Tone Drive Discussion Disengagement?

In this section we use Studies 2, 3, and 4 to show that people do not want to engage in heated political discussions and that this—even more than disagreement—drives discussion disengagement. First, we asked respondents in Study 4 if they would “rather take part in a political discussion that is calm or one that is heated, assuming the issue being discussed and level of disagreement was the exact same?” providing them a sliding scale from 0 (the calm discussion) to 100 (the heated discussion), with “either/neither” at the mid-point (50). Even though past research suggests most people do not want to engage in political discussion, responses were significantly different from the midpoint, at 35.47 (SD=30.03; p<.001). Thus, given equal conversations on dimensions of topic and disagreement level, people chose the calm conversation.

Studies 2 and 3 take this further, and—rather than controlling for disagreement and giving respondents the choice between conversations—manipulate both tone and agreement and then measure discussion engagement. Participants were randomly assigned to be asked about their desire to participate in: 1) a calm political discussion with agreement; 2) a heated political discussion with agreement; 3) a calm political discussion with disagreement; or 4) a heated political discussion with disagreement. To measure attendance desire, they were given a 100-point scale from “I would not like to participate” to “I would like to participate.” This design allowed us to directly compare the effect of tone to that of disagreement. Further, if it were the case that heated tones could make people choose disagreement over agreement, this would suggest that we have overestimated the importance of disagreement and missed an integral factor in discussion engagement.

Using OLS models to predict attendance desire by tone and agreement, we find that the heated tone makes participants 28.46 points (Study 2) and 25.76 points (Study 3) less likely to want to engage in the discussion (both p<.001), while the presence of disagreement (as compared to agreement) makes participants only 7.41 points (Study 2) and 4.42 points (Study 3) less likely to want to engage (p=.015 and p=.056, respectively)—see Figure 1. These rather shocking results demonstrate that tone matters more than the presence of disagreement: people would rather take part in a political disagreement that is calm than a political discussion with agreement (i.e., likely with their co-partisans) that is heated.19

19 Of course, it is possible that some individuals actually enjoy heated discussions with the co-partisans. Indeed, in the previous section, respondents said heated, agreeable discussion could be interesting. Here, though, we see that on average, people would rather take part in calm conversations.
Figure 1. Attendance Desire by Tone and Agreement Treatments

Dependent variable is from “not like to participate” (0) to “like to participate” (100). Left figure is from Study 2 and right figure is from Study 3. 95% confidence intervals shown.

Empirics 3: How is This Shaped by Conflict Orientation?

We next examine conflict orientation (e.g., Ulbig and Funk 1999), which should influence how people react to these political discussions. Thus, Studies 2 and 3 included a measure, taken from Ulbig and Funk 1999, to examine if controlling for this trait changes results as well as if this trait moderates the effect of tone or disagreement on the desire to discuss politics.

We first add it as a control to the previous two models, finding that while it does not influence the effect of the heated treatment, it does make the disagreement treatment no longer significant in Study 3 ($p=.999$).\textsuperscript{20} We next examine if this trait moderates treatment effects by modeling two interactions (separate models) between each treatment and conflict orientation (which varies from 0 to 100, most to least conflict averse; see Figure 2). We find that in Study 2, disagreement only decreases attendance desire for the conflict averse (i.e., the effect of disagreement is only significant for those at 57 or below on the conflict orientation scale—interaction coefficient: .23, $p=.026$). However, in Study 3, there is no interaction between disagreement and conflict orientation ($p=.500$)—that is, neither the conflict averse nor the conflict acceptant are less likely to want to attend because of disagreement.\textsuperscript{21}

\textsuperscript{20} For Study 3, only a random third of the participants were asked about their conflict orientation, limiting these analyses to a sample size of 327.

\textsuperscript{21} In this model, conflict orientation is significant ($p<.001$)—the more conflict averse are less likely to want to engage in the discussion—while neither disagreement ($p=.552$) nor the interaction is significant.
**Figure 2.** Effect of Disagreement on Attendance Desire by Conflict Orientation

Dependent variable is from “not like to participate” (0) to “like to participate” (100). Disagreement is in comparison to agreement. Conflict orientation is from avoidant (0) to accepting (100). Left figure is from Study 2 and right figure is from Study 3. 95% confidence intervals shown.

In comparison, as shown in Figure 3, the heated tone decreases attendance desire for all participants—although in Study 2 the effect is stronger among the conflict averse (interaction coefficient: 0.35, *p*<.001). Together, these findings suggest that conflict aversion is indeed about aversion to disagreement—and that this varies by individual—but that a more universal trait is aversion to heated discussions. While some (the conflict averse) may avoid political discussions because of fear of disagreement, both the conflict averse and the conflict acceptant avoid them because of fear of a heated discussion. Further, even among the most conflict averse, tone is more important than the presence of disagreement: for the most conflict averse, the marginal effect of disagreement in the previous interaction model was -20.76 (Study 2) and -4.01 (Study 3), but the marginal effect of the heated tone in this interaction model was -44.74 (Study 2) and -21.54 (Study 3)—over twice the magnitude in both.

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22 This interaction was not significant, however, in Study 3 (*p*=.478).
Figure 3. Effect of Heated Tone on Attendance Desire by Conflict Orientation

Dependent variable is from “not like to participate” (0) to “like to participate” (100). Heated tone is in comparison to calm tone. Conflict orientation is from avoidant (0) to accepting (100). Left figure is from Study 2 and right figure is from Study 3. 95% confidence intervals shown.

Empirics 4: Does Tone Change Discussion Outcomes?

We now know that tone influences the desire to engage in political discussions and is arguably more important here than disagreement. Our last question is if tone influences what happens during—and thus the outcomes of—these discussions. To do this, we use Study 1, which randomly assigned participants to think about either calm or heated political discussions that involved disagreement and then asked respondents a myriad of questions that we think measures qualities of the beneficial heterogeneous interactions scholars often discuss. Because we are examining how tone could potentially undermine the positive benefits of heterogeneous interactions, we focus solely on heterogeneous (disagreeable) interactions—rather than also examining homogeneous (agreeable) interactions, as we had done previously.

Thus, in the study, participants were randomly assigned to one of three conditions: 1) a calm condition, which asked respondents to, “Please write about a time someone brought up politics in a social setting where you didn’t agree with what people said but the conversation was calm and reasoned. Be as specific as possible. If you have not been in this situation, write about an imagined time”; 2) a heated condition, which asked respondents the same question but said “heated and tense” rather than “calm and reasoned”; or 3) a control condition, which asked participants to
write about what they had for breakfast that morning. This technique, which helps people imagine themselves in situations to examine the effects of those situations, is common in psychological studies (e.g., Lerner and Keltner 2001) and has been used in political science (e.g., Webster 2020; Valentino et al. 2009). Note, again, that the writing prompt asked respondents to think about not just political discussions, but disagreement within those discussions. That is, the only difference between the two treatment conditions was the *tone* within the discussions’ disagreement—one was calm and one was heated.

After writing their responses, respondents in the two treatment groups were asked if they wrote about a real or imagined time. 79.08% of respondents said they wrote about a real time, while 16.02% said they wrote about an imagined time, and 4.91% said they couldn’t remember. Importantly, these percentages did not differ by condition. If they said they wrote about a real time, respondents were asked how they reacted in the conversation, if they reacted differently depending on if they liked the people they were talking to, if they learned anything from the conversation, and if the conversation changed how they thought about the people they were talking to. Then, everyone (including those in the control condition) was asked a series of questions, including support for opinion diversity and enjoyment in talking about politics (see Appendix A).

We first examine what people wrote about in the two treatment groups. Overall, the responses demonstrate that those who wrote about a calm disagreement had a more positive experience and those who wrote about a heated disagreement had a more negative experience—when we conduct text analysis of participants’ responses, we find that those in the calm condition used more positive words than both those in the heated condition (\(p<.001\)) and those in the control condition (\(p<.001\)), and those in the heated condition used more negative words than both those in the calm condition (\(p<.001\)) and those in the control condition (\(p<.001\)). Thus, while previous research finds that most people want to avoid discussing politics, these findings suggest that when these discussions are calm—even when there is disagreement involved—people actually have a positive experience (even more positive than breakfast!). It is when these discussions are heated that people have negative experiences.

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23 This operationalization of political disagreement fits with Mutz’s (2006) conception of “exposure to oppositional political views,” which “requires only that people talk politics with someone who has political views that are to some recognizable degree different from their own” (pg. 79). Thus, partisan disagreement—while likely a sufficient condition—is not necessary for disagreement, or “exposure to oppositional political views.”

24 Note the relatively high percentage of people who said they have been in political discussions with disagreement even though most people would rather avoid them. As Huckfeldt et al. (2013) explain, “avoidance is not always a practical or even viable option” (pg. 678).

25 A participant in the calm condition, for example, wrote: “Following George Floyd’s death I went on a golfing weekend with a number of guys and a couple of them were cops. It was interesting getting their view point, and while I disagreed with them by and large, it helped me to understand what issues they see from their side.” A participant in the heated condition, for example, wrote: “I often am in social situations where my father (who is very opposed to my views) brings up politics. One example is when at my grandmother’s house (his mother) he brought up that he thinks Trump is a great president, my grandmother called him an idiot, and the entire social situation devolved into chaos. We ended up leaving all angry for different reasons.”

26 In conducting this text analysis, we used the VADER (Valence Aware Dictionary for Sentiment Reasoning) sentiment analysis model to evaluate both polarity and intensity of emotion. Since the data are not normally distributed, we performed a Wilcoxon signed-rank test to compare the means.
The results of our post-treatment questions align with this (see Figure 4). Those in the calm condition—as compared to those in the heated condition\(^{27}\)—were more likely to say that they tried to find common ground \((p<.001)\), did not try to leave the conversation \((p<.001)\), did not try to change the topic \((p=.012)\), did not attack others’ views \((p<.001)\), tried to learn in the discussion \((p<.001)\), did learn in the discussion \((p<.001)\), and liked the people they were talking with more afterwards \((p=.016)\). They were also less likely to say they liked the people they were talking with less afterwards \((p<.001)\). There was no effect of tone on whether or not respondents pretended to agree with others in the conversation (Carlson and Settle 2016) nor on whether or not people said they reacted differently depending on if they liked or disliked the people they were talking to (although people were generally more likely to say they would react differently because they liked someone rather than because they did not like someone). Thus, political discussions went completely differently depending on tone—even though both discussions involved disagreement.

**Figure 4. Reactions by Tone Treatments**

![Graph showing reactions by tone treatments](image)

Dependent variables are coded as likelihood of choosing certain responses (as compared to *not* choosing them). 95% confidence intervals shown. Full scale: 0-1.

We next examine respondents’ beliefs by condition (see Figure 5)—a more conservative test of the effects of these discussions, as these questions were asked at the end of the survey without asking participants to draw on the discussion experiences. We find that tone only matters for two of the measures. First, those in the calm condition were more likely to agree with the statement “it is helpful to hear the political views of friends who disagree with me” (“diversity”) than both those in the heated condition \((p=.006)\) and the control condition \((p=.003)\). This aligns with past research on heterogeneous discussions’ influence on toleration of views (e.g., Kalla and Broockman 2020) and desire for more diverse networks (Klar 2014), but suggests that tone is an important moderator.

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\(^{27}\) Note that because these questions were about reactions during the discussions, they were not asked to the control condition and thus the comparison is only between the heated and calm treatment conditions.
Second, those in the heated condition were less likely to say they enjoy talking politics with other people in their lives ("enjoy") than both those in the calm condition \((p=.024)\) and the control condition \((p=.014)\). This aligns with our findings from the open-ended responses, which suggested that people had negative experiences in the heated discussions, as well as with findings from previous sections that people do not want to engage in heated political discussions. Yet note that this question does not ask about enjoying heated versus calm discussions—all three conditions were asked about enjoyment in discussing politics generally—suggesting that recalling or imagining heated discussions made participants project this negative experience on future discussions which are not necessary going to be heated.

**Figure 5. Outcomes by Tone Treatments**

Dependent variables are coded as likelihood of choosing certain responses (as compared to not choosing them). 95% confidence intervals shown. Full scale: 0-1.

Lastly, as a robustness check, we examine if responses differed by whether respondents discussed out-partisans and/or in-partisans, but find that this is not driving our findings (see Appendix A). This aligns with our previous findings that incorporated agreement and found that tone influenced engagement separately from disagreement. Overall, then, these results demonstrate that political discussions are shaped by the tone with which they occur, where heated discussions are less enjoyable, constructive, and beneficial than calm discussions.

**Discussion & Conclusion**

We began this exercise with two shared beliefs: that discussing politics—especially with those with which you disagree—is vital to democracy, but that people are avoiding these discussions. We then argued that this avoidance is being driven not by an aversion to disagreement but by an aversion to the heated tones with which political discussions can occur. Further, we argued that tone is an important moderator that helps to determine how beneficial these discussions can be. We found that people are especially averse to heated political discussions over calm ones—that
this can even lead people to choose disagreement over agreement—and that heated tones undermine the benefits of heterogeneous discussions. For example, heated political disagreements lead people to try to leave the conversation and change the topic, attack others’ views, like the people they were speaking with less afterwards, and say they enjoy talking about politics less. Yet calm political disagreements lead to quite the opposite—people report trying to find common ground, trying to learn and actually learning, liking the people they were speaking with more afterwards, and endorsing a diversity of views.

We thus find that the tone with which political discussions occur is vitally important to discussion engagement as well as what happens during, and the outcomes of, these discussions. Findings on the processes and outcomes of these discussions illustrate how heated conversations get out of control—once they become heated, people are more likely to react in aggressive ways. These findings also help to explain what is driving people away from talking politics: if heated discussions take place the way people report, it is no surprise that people want to avoid them.

Unfortunately, though, this all suggests a terrible snowball effect: once a discussion becomes heated, it will spiral out of control, leading to worse (and less enjoyable) processes and outcomes, ultimately motivating people to avoid future political discussions for fear that they will become heated. But avoiding them has consequences for our political and social lives. Not having political discussions decreases potential learning and increases (or fails to decrease) affective polarization as well as puts strain on current relationships and precludes new relationships.

This high level of political discussion avoidance and the repercussions from it seem to be where we are today—and today’s political environment doesn’t help matters. Homogeneous social networks—which are driven by, but also drive, polarization (Butters and Hare 2020)—make political discussions that involve disagreement less likely to happen simply by chance (Huckfeldt and Sprague 1995). Further, as affective polarization increases and political disagreements (likely) become more heated, we may see more people not only avoiding political discussions with those with which they disagree, but also reacting negatively when they are placed in these discussions. Indeed, Warner et al. (2021) find that disagreement and affective polarization are associated with less communication accommodation—i.e., communication that respects divergent opinions—which they find is ironically the best strategy to deal with political differences but also the most negatively impacted by them.

Similarly ironic, the very communications that are negatively impacted by affective polarization could—when they involve “civil discussion” across party lines—ameliorate affective polarization (Levendorsky and Stecula 2021; see also Rossiter 2022). Thus, respectful, civil discussions could be the cure to polarization and political differences—but are less likely to happen because of polarization and political differences (Wells et al. 2017). What we see, then, is a “spiral of silence” (Noelle-Neumann 1974), but likely driven by the worry that political communication will be heated. This is doubly worrisome as political conversation moves online, where disagreement is more hostile (Barnidge 2017), less civil (Coe et al. 2014), and more heated (Study 4).

Thus, although Mutz (2006) notes that “civility does not appear to be a necessary condition for benefits [of cross-cutting discussions] to occur” (pg. 76), what we find suggests that it indeed

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28 Although Minozzi et al. (2020) note that discussion networks are shaped more by incidental, than purposive, processes.
may be a necessary condition—when these discussions are heated, likely involving a level of incivility (Study 4), they are quite costly.\textsuperscript{29} We thus close this exercise with a call to the public to not only involve themselves in political discussions with those with which they might disagree, but also to treat those conversations in a way that could help society: with a calm tone. Lee (2021) finds that in close elections—in a time of high politicization—people’s social relationships are harmed (see also Chen and Rohla 2018 and Frimer and Skitka 2020). These kinds of divides are what tear down society: strong political divides between groups that cannot see what they have in common because their social lives are subsequently so divided. Collectively, we have the power to change this.

\textsuperscript{29} Although there could be times when heated discussions are beneficial or necessary—perhaps, for example, to communicate to people that an issue is important. Sydnor (2019b) similarly argues that there are cases where incivility could be useful. Yet we believe it is possible to approach important political discussions in a calm manner and have a meaningful, positive impact. As Mahatma Gandhi says, “In a gentle way, you can shake the world.”
References


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Appendix A: Study 1 (Prolific), 2020

**Participant Descriptives.**
The sample (N= 1,045) was 65.1% Democrat, 20.36% Republican, and 14.53% pure independents; with a mean of 3.02 and standard deviation of 1.65 from extremely liberal (1) to extremely conservative (7); 50.48% women and 49.52% men; a mean of age 32.13 with a standard deviation of 12.17; and 61.91% white and 38.09% either mixed or full minority.

**Survey.**
1. [self-monitoring 1] When you are with other people, how often do you put on a show to impress or entertain them? [always / most of the time / some of the time / once in a while / never]
2. [self-monitoring 2] When you are in a group of people, how often are you the center of attention? [always / most of the time / some of the time / once in a while / never]
3. [self-monitoring 3] How good or poor of an actor would you be? [excellent / good / fair / poor / very poor]
4. [gender] What is your gender? [male / female / other]
5. [age] What is your age? [ ]
6. [race] What racial or ethnic group or groups best describes you? [white / black / Hispanic / Asian / Native American / other]
7. [education] What is the highest level of education that you have completed? [did not complete a high school degree / high school degree / some college / Associate’s degree / Bachelor’s degree / graduate or professional degree]
8. [religiosity] Aside from weddings and funerals, how often do you attend religious services? [more than once a week / once a week / once or twice a month / a few times a year / seldom / never]
9. [employment] What is your current employment status? [full-time / part-time / temporarily laid off / unemployed / retired / permanently disabled / homemaker / student / other:____]
10. [state] In what state do you currently live?
11. [ideology] We hear a lot of talk these days about liberals and conservatives. Here is a 7-point scale on which the political views that people might hold are arranged from extremely liberal to extremely conservative. Where would you place yourself on this scale, or haven’t you thought much about this? [extremely liberal / liberal / slightly liberal / moderate / slightly conservative / conservative / extremely conservative / don’t know]
12. [PID] Generally speaking, do you think of yourself as a Republican, a Democrat, an Independent, or what? [Republican / Democrat / independent / something else [____]]
   a. Do you think of yourself as closer to the Republican Party or the Democratic Party? [closer to the Republican Party / closer to the Democratic Party / neither]
   b. Would you call yourself a strong [Democrat/Republican] or a not very strong [Democrat/Republican]? [strong [Democrat/Republican] / not very strong [Democrat/Republican]]
13. [PID identity] How important is being [a Democrat / a Republican / an Independent] to your identity? [not at all important / a little important / moderately important / very important / extremely important]
14. [affective polarization] Next, we’d like to get your feelings toward the two national parties. Ratings between 50 degrees and 100 degrees mean that you feel favorable and warm toward the party. Ratings between 0 degrees and 50 degrees mean that you don’t feel favorable
toward the party and that you don’t care too much for that party. You would rate the party at the 50-degree mark if you don’t feel particularly warm or cold toward the party. [randomize order of a and b]
a. How would you rate Democrats? [0 to 100 degrees]
b. How would you rate Republicans? [0 to 100 degrees]
15. [randomize order of a and b]
a. [social polarization 1] How would you feel if you had a son or daughter who married someone who votes for the Democratic Party? Would you feel unhappy or happy? [very unhappy / unhappy / neutral / happy / very happy]
b. [social polarization 2] How would you feel if you had a son or daughter who married someone who votes for the Republican Party? Would you feel unhappy or happy? [very unhappy / unhappy / neutral / happy / very happy]
16. [polarization behavior measure] If you were trying to sell something and two people wanted it, and you knew one was a Democrat and one was a Republican, what would you do? [sell it to the Democrat / sell it to the Republican / find another way to sell it]
17. [randomize to treatment a, b, or c]
a. [control] Please write about what you had for breakfast this morning. Be as specific as possible.
b. [treatment 1] Please write about a time someone brought up politics in a social setting where you didn’t agree with what people said but the conversation was calm and reasoned. Be as specific as possible. If you have not been in this situation, write about an imagined time.
c. [treatment 2] Please write about a time someone brought up politics in a social setting where you didn’t agree with what people said and the conversation was heated and tense. Be as specific as possible. If you have not been in this situation, write about an imagined time.
18. [if treatment b or c] Have you been in situations like the one from before or did you write about an imagined time? [yes I have been in situations like this / no I haven’t been in situations like this / I can’t remember]
a. [if yes] How did you react in the conversation? (check all that apply) [pretended I agreed with them / tried to find common ground / left the conversation / tried to change the topic / attacked their views / tried to learn]
b. [if yes] Did how much you liked the people you were with change how you reacted? [yes, I reacted differently because I liked the people I was with / yes, I reacted differently because I didn’t like the people I was with / no, I would have reacted the same either way]
c. [if yes] Did you learn anything from this conversation? [yes I learned a lot / yes but not really / not really / nothing]
d. [if yes] Did the conversation change how you thought about the people you were talking to? [yes, I liked them more after the conversation / yes, I liked them less after the conversation / no, I thought about them the exact same]
19. If you were invited to a social gathering where political discussions might happen, would you go? [certainly not / probably not / maybe / probably / certainly]
20. How well do the following statements fit with your own views? [not well at all / slightly well / moderately well / very well / extremely well]
a. You shouldn’t expect others to adopt the same ideas of right and wrong as you, because there will always be a diversity of viewpoints in the world  
b. Diversity of opinion is valuable in any group or organization  
c. It is helpful to hear the political views of friends who disagree with me  
d. I enjoy talking politics with other people in my life  
e. I am interested in following what’s going on in government and public affairs  
f. There is always more to learn about politics  

21. If you had to make your best guess, what percentage of people currently serving in Congress are women?

22. Do you agree or disagree with the following statements? [strongly disagree / disagree / neither agree nor disagree / agree / strongly agree]
   b. People like me have a say in what the government does.

23. Please identify the political party associated with each of the options below: [the Republican Party / the Democratic Party / other / don’t know]
   a. Currently holds the majority of seats in the U.S. House of Representatives  
   b. Currently holds the majority of seats in the U.S. Senate.  
   c. Currently holds a majority of seats in the Lower Chamber of your state  
   d. Currently holds a majority of seats in your state Senate  
   e. Is the party of the current governor of your state

24. Which of the following best describes the party of the two senators from your state?
   a. Both are Democrats  
   b. Both are Republicans  
   c. One is a Democrat and one is a Republican  
   d. Not sure

25. If you would like to add comments or feedback: [______]

Partisanship. Out of the 1,045 participants, only 381 explicitly mentioned partisanship (43 talked about co-partisans and 338 talked about out-partisans). Dropping these from the analyses to ensure they are not driving the results, leads to same general findings (although with larger confidence intervals, of course). See Figures 1 and 2 from the main text dropping those participants below.
Figure A1. Reactions by Tone Treatments

Dependent variables are coded as likelihood of choosing certain responses (as compared to not choosing them). 95% confidence intervals shown.

Figure A2. Outcomes by Tone Treatments

Dependent variables are coded as likelihood of choosing certain responses (as compared to not choosing them). 95% confidence intervals shown.
Appendix B: Study 2 (Prolific), 2021

**Participant Descriptives.**
The sample (N=391) was 66.92% Democrat, 20.55% Republican, and 12.53% pure independents; with a mean of 2.95 and standard deviation of 1.64 from extremely liberal (1) to extremely conservative (7), and 2.50% saying “don’t know”; 48.46% women, 51.54% men, and 2.50% other; a mean of age 34 with a standard deviation of 13.92; and 64.25% white and 35.75% either mixed or full minority.

**Survey.**
1. [PID] Generally speaking, do you think of yourself as a Republican, a Democrat, an Independent, or what? [Republican / Democrat / independent / something else [____]]
   a. [if Democrat or Republican] Would you call yourself a strong [Democrat/Republican] or a not very strong [Democrat/Republican]? [strong [Democrat/Republican] / not very strong [Democrat/Republican]]
   b. [if independent or something else] Do you think of yourself as closer to the Republican Party or the Democratic Party? [Republican / Democrat / neither]
2. [identity] How important is being a [Democrat / Republican] to your identity? [not at all important / a little important / moderately important / very important / extremely important]
3. [ideology] We hear a lot of talk these days about liberals and conservatives. Here is a 7-point scale on which the political views that people might hold are arranged from extremely liberal to extremely conservative. Where would you place yourself on this scale, or haven’t you thought much about this? [extremely liberal / liberal / slightly liberal / moderate / slightly conservative / conservative / extremely conservative / don’t know]
4. [interest] Some people don’t pay much attention to political news. How about you? Would you say that you are very much interested, somewhat interested, or not interested at all interested in political news? [not at all interested / somewhat interested / very much interested]
5. [media] During a typical week, how many days do you watch, read, or listen to news on the following medium: (the internet (including online newspapers), the TV, print newspapers, the radio) [0 days / 1 day / 2 days / 3 days / 4 days / 5 days / 6 days / 7 days]
6. [discuss] During a typical week, how many days do you discuss politics with your family and/or friends? [0 days / 1 day / 2 days / 3 days / 4 days / 5 days / 6 days / 7 days]
7. [general confidence] How often do you feel confident in your knowledge and opinions in politics? [sliding scale from 0 to 100, from never to always]
8. [discussion confidence] Think about the political conversations you’ve had in your life. In terms of your confidence in your knowledge and/or opinions in these discussions, what do you think the proportion of discussions where you were confident versus were not confident is? [scale: I’ve been not confident in all of them → I’ve been confident in all of them]
9. [general strength] How often do you feel strongly about your opinions in politics? [sliding scale from 0 to 100, from never to always]
10. [discussion strength] Think about the political conversations you’ve had in your life. In terms of your attitude strength in these discussions, what do you think the proportion of discussions where you held strong attitudes versus did not hold strong attitudes is? [scale: I’ve had not strong attitudes in all of them → I’ve had strong attitudes in all of them]
11. [conflict orientation] Some people try to avoid getting into political discussions because they think that people can get into arguments and it can get unpleasant. Other people enjoy
discussing politics even though it sometimes leads to arguments. What is your feeling on this—do you usually try to **avoid** political discussions, do you **enjoy** them, or are you somewhere in between? [scale: I avoid them → somewhere in between → I enjoy them]

[random assignment to a, b, c, or d]

12. [tone 1] How much would you like to participate in a political discussion where people **agree** and the tone is **calm**? [scale: I would not like to participate → I would like to participate]

13. [tone 2] How much would you like to participate in a political discussion where people **agree** but the tone is **heated**? [scale: I would not like to participate → I would like to participate]

14. [tone 3] How much would you like to participate in a political discussion where people **disagree** but the tone is **calm**? [scale: I would not like to participate → I would like to participate]

15. [tone 4] How much would you like to participate in a political discussion where people **disagree** and the tone is **heated**? [scale: I would not like to participate → I would like to participate]


17. [age] What is your age? [ ]

18. [race] What racial or ethnic group or groups best describes you? (select all that apply)[white / black / Hispanic / Asian / Native American / other (please specify):____]

19. [education] What is the highest level of education that you have completed? [did not complete a high school degree / high school degree / some college / Associate’s degree / Bachelor’s degree / graduate or professional degree]

20. [self-monitoring 1] When you are with other people, how often do you put on a show to impress or entertain them? [always / most of the time / some of the time / once in a while / never]

21. [self-monitoring 2] When you are in a group of people, how often are you the center of attention? [always / most of the time / some of the time / once in a while / never]

22. [self-monitoring 3] How good or poor of an actor would you be? [excellent / good / fair / poor / very poor]

23. Thank you for your participation! If you have any comments or feedback, add them below (if not, leave blank): [_____]
Preregistration.

CONFIDENTIAL - FOR PEER-REVIEW ONLY
Tone, Prolific 2021 (#81134)

Created: 11/26/2021 08:07 AM (PT)

This is an anonymized copy (without author names) of the pre-registration. It was created by the author(s) to use during peer-review. A non-anonymized version (containing author names) should be made available by the authors when the work it supports is made public.

1) Have any data been collected for this study already?
No, no data have been collected for this study yet.

2) What’s the main question being asked or hypothesis being tested in this study?
Does agreement (versus disagreement) or tone (heated versus calm) matter more in people’s desire to take part in political discussions?

3) Describe the key dependent variable(s) specifying how they will be measured.
Participation desire, measured as “How much would you like to participate in a political discussion” [scale from “I would not like to participate” [0] to “I would like to participate” [100]].

4) How many and which conditions will participants be assigned to?
Four randomly assigned conditions:
1) How much would you like to participate in a political discussion where people agree and the tone is calm?
2) How much would you like to participate in a political discussion where people agree but the tone is heated?
3) How much would you like to participate in a political discussion where people disagree but the tone is calm?
4) How much would you like to participate in a political discussion where people disagree and the tone is heated?

5) Specify exactly which analyses you will conduct to examine the main question/hypothesis.
We will run OLS predicting participation desire by tone (heated versus calm) and agreement (agreement versus disagreement).

6) Describe exactly how outliers will be defined and handled, and your precise rule(s) for excluding observations.
Only those over 18, in the US, and with a 95% approval rating on Prolific will be recruited to take the survey. Because of previous concerns on Prolific, the sample will be 50% male and 50% female.

7) How many observations will be collected or what will determine sample size? No need to justify decision, but be precise about exactly how the number will be determined.
400 people will be recruited from Prolific.

8) Anything else you would like to pre-register? (e.g., secondary analyses, variables collected for exploratory purposes, unusual analyses planned?)
We will examine if conflict avoidance moderates the effect of tone and/or agreement on participation desire.
Appendix C: Study 3 (Cooperative Election Study [CES]), 2021

Participant Descriptives.
The unweighted sample (N=1,000) was 51.40% Democrat, 30.57% Republican, and 18.03% pure independents; with a mean of 2.96 and standard deviation of 1.20 from very liberal (1) to very conservative (5), 58.46% women and 41.54% men, a mean of age 48.73 with a standard deviation of 17.61, and 64% white and 36% either mixed or full minority. Weighted, the sample was 43.59% Democrat, 35.84% Republican, and 20.57% pure independents; with a mean of 3.12 and standard deviation of 1.18 from very liberal (1) to very conservative (5), 51.61% women and 48.39% men, a mean of age 48.49 with a standard deviation of 18.09, and 66.80% white and 33.20% either mixed or full minority.

Survey.
1. [tone—1/3 of respondents received this question] Think about the political discussions that involved disagreement you’ve had in your life. In terms of the tone of these discussions, what do you think the proportion of heated versus calm discussions is? [scale: all have been heated → half have been heated and half have been calm → all have been calm]
2. [conflict orientation—1/3 of respondents received this question] Some people try to avoid getting into political discussions because they think that people can get into arguments and it can get unpleasant. Other people enjoy discussing politics even though it sometimes leads to arguments. What if your feeling on this—do you usually try to avoid political discussions, do you enjoy them, or are you somewhere in between? [scale: I avoid them → somewhere in between → I enjoy them]
3. [random assignment to a, b, or c]
   a. How much would you like to participate in a political discussion where people agree and the tone is calm? [scale: I would not like to participate → I would like to participate]
   b. How much would you like to participate in a political discussion where people agree but the tone is heated? [scale: I would not like to participate → I would like to participate]
   c. How much would you like to participate in a political discussion where people disagree but the tone is calm? [scale: I would not like to participate → I would like to participate]
   d. How much would you like to participate in a political discussion where people disagree and the tone is heated? [scale: I would not like to participate → I would like to participate]
Preregistration.

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Tone, CES 2021 (#84567)

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1) Have any data been collected for this study already?
No, no data have been collected for this study yet.

2) What's the main question being asked or hypothesis being tested in this study?
Does agreement (versus disagreement) or tone (heated versus calm) matter more in people's desire to take part in political discussions?

3) Describe the key dependent variable(s) specifying how they will be measured.
Participation desire, measured as "How much would you like to participate in a political discussion" (scale from "I would not like to participate" [0] to "I would like to participate" [100]).

4) How many and which conditions will participants be assigned to?
Four randomly assigned conditions:
1) How much would you like to participate in a political discussion where people agree and the tone is calm?
2) How much would you like to participate in a political discussion where people agree but the tone is heated?
3) How much would you like to participate in a political discussion where people disagree but the tone is calm?
4) How much would you like to participate in a political discussion where people disagree and the tone is heated?

5) Specify exactly which analyses you will conduct to examine the main question/hypothesis.
We will run OLS predicting participation desire by tone (heated versus calm) and agreement (agreement versus disagreement).

6) Describe exactly how outliers will be defined and handled, and your precise rule(s) for excluding observations.
We will not remove any outliers or exclude any participants.

7) How many observations will be collected or what will determine sample size? No need to justify decision, but be precise about exactly how the number will be determined.
1000 participants will be recruited through CES and randomly assigned to one of the four treatment conditions. Only one third of participants will receive the conflict orientation question.

8) Anything else you would like to pre-register? (e.g., secondary analyses, variables collected for exploratory purposes, unusual analyses planned?)
We will examine if conflict avoidance moderates the effect of tone and/or agreement on participation desire.

Available at https://aspredicted.org/RVx_F32
Appendix D: Study 4 (Lucid), 2022

Participant Descriptives.
The sample (N=1,805) was 50.73% Democrat, 31.60% Republican, and 17.67% pure independents; with a mean of 3.94 and standard deviation of 1.80 from extremely liberal (1) to extremely conservative (7) and 6.62% saying “don’t know”; 52% women, 47.23% men, and 0.78% other; a mean of age 45.84 with a standard deviation of 16.91; and 71.80% white and 28.20% either mixed or full minority.

Survey.
1. [randomize to heated, agree / heated, disagree / calm, agree / calm, disagree]
   a. [heated, agree] What do you think of when you think of a heated political discussion where people agree? (check all that apply) [loud voices / quiet voices / anger / anxiety / sadness / non-emotional / reasoned / unreasonable / uncivil / civil / fun / interesting / unenjoyable / terrible / other: ___]
   b. [heated, disagree] What do you think of when you think of a heated political discussion where people disagree? (check all that apply) [loud voices / quiet voices / anger / anxiety / sadness / non-emotional / reasoned / unreasonable / uncivil / civil / fun / interesting / unenjoyable / terrible / other: ___]
   c. [calm, agree] What do you think of when you think of a calm political discussion where people agree? (check all that apply) [loud voices / quiet voices / anger / anxiety / sadness / non-emotional / reasoned / unreasonable / uncivil / civil / fun / interesting / unenjoyable / terrible / other: ___]
   d. [calm, disagree] What do you think of when you think of a calm political discussion where people disagree? (check all that apply) [loud voices / quiet voices / anger / anxiety / sadness / non-emotional / reasoned / unreasonable / uncivil / civil / fun / interesting / unenjoyable / terrible / other: ___]
2. [randomize to online or in-person]
   a. [online] Think about the political disagreements you’ve had in your life that were online (not in person). In terms of the tone of these discussions, what do you think the proportion of heated versus calm discussions is? [scale: all have been heated → half have been heated and half have been calm → all have been calm]
   [in-person] Think about the political disagreements you’ve had in your life that were in person (not online). In terms of the tone of these discussions, what do you think the proportion of heated versus calm discussions is? [scale: all have been heated → half have been heated and half have been calm → all have been calm]
Preregistration

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Tone, Lucid 2022 (#96637)

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1) Have any data been collected for this study already?
No, no data have been collected for this study yet.

2) What’s the main question being asked or hypothesis being tested in this study?
Question 1: what do people think about when they imagine heated versus calm political discussions (both those with agreement and disagreement)?
Question 2: do people have more heated than calm political disagreements online as compared to in person?

3) Describe the key dependent variable(s) specifying how they will be measured.
For question 1: potential descriptors of the four types of conversation: loud voices, quiet voices, anger, anxiety, sadness, non-emotional, reasoned, unreasonable, uncivil, civil, fun, interesting, uncomfortable, terrible. For question 2: the proportion of heated versus calm political disagreements online versus in person (sliding scale).

4) How many and which conditions will participants be assigned to?
First, participants will be randomly assigned to one of four conditions (for question 1):
1) What do you think of when you think of a heated political discussion where people agree?
2) What do you think of when you think of a heated political discussion where people disagree?
3) What do you think of when you think of a calm political discussion where people agree?
4) What do you think of when you think of a calm political discussion where people disagree?
They will then be given the descriptors listed above as options and can choose as many descriptors as they'd like. Then, participants will be randomly assigned to one of two conditions (for question 2):
1) Think about the political disagreements you’ve had in your life that were online (not in person). In terms of the tone of these discussions, what do you think the proportion of heated versus calm discussions is?
2) Think about the political disagreements you’ve had in your life that were in person (not online). In terms of the tone of these discussions, what do you think the proportion of heated versus calm discussions is?
They will then be given a sliding scale from "all have been heated" to "all have been calm."

5) Specify exactly which analyses you will conduct to examine the main question/hypothesis.
For question 1: we will run OLS predicting each descriptor by tone (heated versus calm) and agreement (agreement versus disagreement). For question 2: we will run OLS predicting the proportion of heated versus calm political disagreements by condition (online versus in person).

6) Describe exactly how outliers will be defined and handled, and your precise rule(s) for excluding observations.
We will not remove any outliers or exclude any participants. There will be an attention check at the beginning of the study that may remove participants, but this will be before participants answer any of the questions of interest (or are randomly assigned).

7) How many observations will be collected or what will determine sample size? No need to justify decision, but be precise about exactly how the number will be determined.
1750 participants will be recruited through Lucid and randomly assigned to one of the four treatment groups (question 1) and then one of the two treatment groups (question 2). This sample size was decided to have enough power for a survey that will be given prior to this survey.

8) Anything else you would like to pre-register? (e.g., secondary analyses, variables collected for exploratory purposes, unusual analyses planned?)
We will examine if those who are deeply involved (measured with two questions) have different perceptions of conversations and/or have more heated conversations (both online and in person).