1 Introduction

Social groups are a critical part of political life. However, group attachments and thinking can lead to conflict, prejudice, and intolerance. In response to this reality, many political theorists propose that harmonious relationships between groups provide democracies with important benefits and are *requirements* for democratic government (Barber 1984; Dahl 1989; Taylor 1994). From this point of view, attitudes toward outgroups – groups to which one does not belong – are especially important, as many people spontaneously provide tolerance, inclusivity, and recognition to members of their own groups (e.g., Balliet, Wu, and De Dreu 2014; Greenwald and Pettigrew 2014). The challenge for democratic societies, then, lies in promoting tolerance, inclusivity, and support toward outgroups.

In this Element, I consider this challenge directly, examining one prominent avenue for improving support for other groups: intergroup contact. In the sections that follow, I summarize contact research, explore the application of this work to political science, and discuss the limitations of those studies. I then present an outline of this Element, which lays out a framework for studying contact through experimental methods. Using this framework as a guide, I describe a set of four experiments that explore the democratic consequences of different kinds of interracial and interethnic contact. These studies consider multiple facets of contact: the difficulty of communicating across groups, the decision to opt in or out of contact, the durability of contact's effects, and more. The results of these experiments reveal important insights into the political role of intergroup contact; specifically, they suggest that common forms of intergroup interactions can promote more positive impressions of outgroup individuals. However, those impressions and contact experiences do not translate into political support for outgroups. In fact, such encounters can, under some conditions, *undermine* support for other groups.

1.1 The Promise of Intergroup Contact?

Social scientists have devoted a great deal of effort to understanding individuals' attitudes and behaviors toward social groups. By social groups, I mean subsets of individuals, the boundaries of which are recognized by those who do and do not belong to that group (Tajfel 1982). These include religious groups (Protestants, Jews, Muslims, Hindus, etc.), political groups (Democrats, Republicans, Independents, etc.), racial and ethnic groups (African Americans, Latinxs[1], Whites, etc.), and more.

[1] I use the terms Latinx and Latinxs, instead of the more common Latino or Latina, to avoid gendered language when speaking about individuals.

One of the more troubling conclusions of this work is the persistent finding that people strongly prefer their own groups and seem all too willing to lash out against other groups. In a general sense, these patterns can lead to prejudice, intolerance, and distrust (e.g., Greenwald and Pettigrew 2014; Fiske 2015; Vermue, Seger, and Sanfey 2018). In the realm of politics, many majority group members defensively react against social and demographic change with increased support for anti-minority beliefs and political ideologies (e.g., Craig and Richeson 2014b; Abrajano and Hajnal 2015). Ethnocentrism, or a strong preference for one's own groups over others, shapes reactions to political candidates, support for war, and more (Kinder and Kam 2009; Kam and Kinder 2012). Media messages amplify these tendencies and prime group-based ideas (Mendelberg 2001; Hopkins 2010; Klar 2013). This tendency to think in groups and take sides seems to be increasing in the political world (Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes 2012; Mason 2018; Jardina 2019), posing major challenges to democratic societies.

Given these troubling findings, social scientists have vigorously explored ways to promote harmony, understanding, and tolerance between groups. One prominent body of research considers how interactions between groups (intergroup contact) can promote positive attitudes toward, and tolerance for, those groups. Drawing on a foundation of ideas from the mid-twentieth century (e.g., Allport 1954; Blalock 1967), contact theory suggests that when experiences between group members occur under certain circumstances, these encounters promote more understanding, tolerance, and support for social outgroups. Most famously, Allport (1954) suggested four key conditions that promote understanding between groups: equal status, collaboration, common goals, and authority approval. Others have added additional conditions, such as friendship potential (Pettigrew 1998) and group salience (Voci and Hewstone 2003), but the original four continue to hold a special place in contact theory.

A large body of empirical research concludes that intergroup experiences improve group harmony. For example, diverse classroom settings correspond with reductions in group-based prejudice (Patchen 1982; Stringer et al. 2009), interracial roommate arrangements reduce prejudice and interracial anxieties (Shook and Fazio 2008), workplace contact and intergroup friendships reduce anti-foreigner sentiments (Sønderskov and Thomsen 2015; Tropp et al. 2018), and contact with outgroups can increase support for political policies in favor of those groups (Barth and Parry 2009; Finseraas and Kotsadam 2017). As such, intergroup contact seems to offer a promising path to the tolerance, support, and inclusivity advocated for by democratic theorists.

Underneath these positive findings, however, a string of criticisms has developed into a robust counter-literature. These critiques include concerns about the

contact experiences researchers usually study (Dixon, Durrheim, and Tredoux 2005; MacInnis and Page-Gould 2015), gaps in understanding what predicts negative reactions to contact (Pettigrew 2008; Paolini, Harwood, and Rubin 2010; Barlow et al. 2012), and summaries of this literature that point out severe methodological and inferential limitations in many existing studies (Paluck, Green, and Green 2018).

Uncertainty about the effects of contact increases further when political scientists attempt to connect the attitudes and behaviors explored by psychologists to the types of political support and tolerance that are critical to democratic societies. Researchers who make too quick a leap from the attitude- and prejudice-focused variables considered in psychology to more political or collective concepts may unintentionally lead themselves astray. By and large, contact research has emphasized reducing prejudice and anti-outgroup attitudes, and it is here that contact research has the most consistent results (Pettigrew and Tropp 2011). However, individual-level prejudice and outgroup attitudes may or may not operate similar to more political concepts, like support for affirmative action policies or tolerance for specific kinds of political demonstrations. For example, individuals often maintain a gap between their general attitudes and their willingness to support concrete policies or political actions related to those attitudes; this is the so-called principle-implementation or principle-policy gap that has been robustly documented with regards to racial attitudes and racial policies (Jackman 1978; 1996; Rabinowitz et al. 2009; Tuch and Hughes 2011). This gap seems to persist in the face of intergroup contact: empirical studies considering political attitudes have a mixed track record of extending the effects of contact to specific political attitudes, sometimes finding that contact increases political support for outgroups, has no effect, or reduces support for collective action in support of outgroups (e.g., Jackman and Crane 1986; Barth and Parry 2009; Cakal et al. 2011; Enos 2014). Similarly, contact studies that focus on support for concrete political and social action find that some forms of contact may improve attitudes while simultaneously undermining support for actions and movements addressing group-based inequities (Saguy et al. 2009; Dixon et al. 2010; Reimer et al. 2017; Bagci and Turnuklu 2019).

As such, the overall picture from contact research remains unclear. While a popular notion among academics and the public, the proposition that contact improves group relationships has, at best, only mixed empirical support. In the end, social scientists and policymakers still wrestle with the same question proposed by Allport and the original versions of contact theory: Under what conditions does contact generate more or less political support for outgroups?

1.2 Moving Forward

In response to this lingering question, this Element proposes a framework for studying the political consequences of intergroup contact through experiments. As discussed in Section 2, carefully designed experiments provide an avenue for considering what forms of intergroup contact promote and discourage increased political support for social outgroups. This framework requires researchers to intentionally create specific forms of intergroup contact, integrate multiple relevant social science theories, consider a range of attitudes and behaviors, and intentionally design experiments to boost external validity. Contributing to the large and mixed literature on contact requires this type of systematic and careful research; otherwise, additional studies are unlikely to clarify the consequences of intergroup experiences. In the rest of the Element, I apply this framework by reporting on four experiments that: (1) focus on short interactions with strangers, varying the difficulty of communicating; (2) compare contact and group threat theory; (3) consider political, interpersonal, and behavioral outcomes; and (4) rely on different samples and varying treatments to improve the generalizability of the experiments.

Section 3 demonstrates this framework in an initial study of interracial contact. In this laboratory experiment, respondents interacted with trained outgroup members who varied their nonverbal behavior (eye contact, pauses, body language, etc.) in ways that made them easier or harder to understand and correspond with Allport's condition of equal status. The results of this experiment indicate that interracial contact that is structured to improve communications between groups does not improve political support and tolerance for outgroups. Instead, it can undermine, rather than bolster, White Americans' political support for racial outgroups. In this setting, easy-to-understand interracial contact fails to produce an increase in political support for racial outgroups the way contact theory would predict.

Section 4 evaluates the temporal, contextual, and sample-based limitations of Section 3 through three additional experiments. These three experiments build on the earlier study by considering the choice to engage in contact, the specific group division involved in contact, and differences in the medium through which contact occurs. These studies both support the findings of the first experiment and indicate the limitations of applying those conclusions in an overly broad way. In the end, the full set of experiments provides much broader insight into the role of intergroup contact in democratic societies. Section 5 summarizes the results of all four experiments and brings them into conversation with the framework proposed in Section 2.

The approach I advocate for in this Element allows researchers interested in contact to contribute to ongoing academic, political, and social debates about how to improve group relationships and to do so in a way that relies on solid causal inferences and robust research designs. As social diversity increases in established democracies and changes in the technological environment make more and more types of social experiences possible, careful studies of intergroup contact are needed now more than ever.

2 A Framework for Studying Intergroup Contact

To date, contact theory has enjoyed a long, productive tradition in the social sciences. Reviews of this body of research often conclude that contact nearly always results in a reduction of prejudice and increase in pro-outgroup attitudes (e.g., Pettigrew and Tropp 2011). However, this consensus is far less universal than it seems at first glance. Here, I briefly review contact research and conclude that the main question posed by the original proponents of contact theory – when contact improves and worsens social divisions – remains unanswered. I then propose a framework relying on specific kinds of experiments to productively answer this question about the role of groups and group divisions in democratic politics.

2.1 Proponents of Contacts

As summarized in the previous section, social science research on contact is extensive and largely falls into two camps: those who conclude that contact has a positive effect on intergroup attitudes and those who are more skeptical. An exhaustive review of research on contact is outside of the scope of this Element and is better accomplished with meta-analyses than narrative reviews of the literature. However, the following section describes the main conclusions and limitations of this research as a backdrop for the ideas and experiments that follow.

Contact theory proposes that interactions between members of different groups improve attitudes toward outgroups, reduce prejudice, and address the problems often created by group divisions. The original formulations of this theory suggested that contact would only provide these benefits when specific conditions were met (Allport 1954; Pettigrew 1998). Most prominent among these are four original criteria suggested by Allport that continue to permeate contact research: collaboration, common goals, authority approval, and equal status. Collaboration suggests that people in the contact experience actively work together, as opposed to ignoring one another or completing tasks isolated from one another. Common goals indicates that participants' objectives align

closely, which prevents competition between social groups in the contact experience. Authority approval involves the explicit endorsement of a contact scenario by influential figures of some kind (religious leaders, government officials, military officers, etc.). Finally, equal status focuses on the position of individuals within the contact experience – are participants placed on equal footing within the interaction and positioned as social equals? This kind of status can be conveyed in different ways, ranging from membership in different socioeconomic groups to the amount of competence and confidence individuals convey (Riordan 1978; Riordan and Ruggiero 1980).

Allport's conditions connect to key ideas about power and politics, making these conditions relevant for political scientists as well as psychologists. For example, some link authority approval to the messages sent by prominent Democrats and Republicans about racial and ethnic groups (Pearson-Merkowitz, Filindra, and Dyck 2015). Even more so, equal status has special relevance to political science and theories of democracy. Deliberative theories of democracy often require equality and mutual respect between participants in deliberation (Thompson 2008; Mansbridge et al. 2012). Without this equal status, deliberation does not serve to improve the quality of democracy or operate as intended (S. Chambers 2003, 322). Other versions of democratic theory list mutual tolerance, recognition, and equality between citizens as criteria that define democratic societies (Dahl 1989; Taylor 1994; Mansbridge et al. 2010) – these standards are difficult, if not impossible, to meet without equal status. The connections further emphasize the importance of contact research and discussions of the four original conditions to scholars of politics and democracy.

Many empirical studies are supportive of contact theory, providing evidence that intergroup experiences could benefit individuals, groups, and society. This evidence comes from a variety of settings, including in schools (Robinson and Preston 1976; Cohen and Lotan 1995), neighborhoods (Deutsch and Collins 1951; Wilner, Walkley, and Cook 1955), the military (e.g., Moskos and Butler 1996), and sports teams (Brown et al. 2003). A prominent review of contact research has found strong evidence in line with these individual articles, concluding that contact reduces prejudice toward specific outgroup members, the group an individual is associated with, and even unrelated groups. Relying on an extensive meta-analysis of more than 500 empirical studies, this research finds that the benefits of contact seem robust to publication bias, geographical location, the immediate setting of contact, the age of the individuals in the contact encounter, general quality of the research, and different types of group divisions like race, age, gender, sexual orientation, and more (Pettigrew and Tropp 2011). Ultimately, the authors conclude that their findings "provide

compelling evidence that intergroup contact is universally useful in reducing prejudice across a great range of intergroup situations" (Pettigrew and Tropp 2011, 61). Because of its scope and depth, this meta-analysis forms the bedrock of current contact research – as an illustration, publications from this analysis have been cited more than 10,000 times. And while the meta-analysis is not the final word on contact – newer studies explore other elements of contact such as the role of contact in computer mediated settings (e.g., Alvídrez et al. 2015) or placing intergroup contact within larger social, political, and temporal contexts (such as Paolini et al. 2014; Enos and Celaya 2018) – most make some kind of connection to this thorough summary of contact theory.

2.2 Contact's Critics

Despite this large body of research, a consistent group of researchers remains skeptical about the positive potential of contact. These critiques center on two major points: what counts as contact and the original conditions of contact.[2]

The first of these issues is how to decide which social experiences count as contact. In the original formulation of contact theory, Allport proposed that not all kinds of intergroup interactions were equivalent; his discussion covered at least four different kinds of experiences, including causal interactions, acquaintances, neighborhoods, and workplaces (Allport 1954, 262). Social experiences with outgroups can differ both in the specific relationship people have with the outgroup member and the characteristics of the encounter itself. These relationships can range in intimacy from immediate family members to complete strangers. The characteristics of contact can differ in both location – e.g., work, home, the bowling alley, etc. – and duration – e.g., a few minutes, weeks, or years. For example, intergroup contact can occur with a coworker over the course of a months-long collaboration, or someone could experience contact with a stranger as they are visiting a grocery store. Should academics and policymakers treat all of these different experiences the same way?

With few exceptions, contact research sidesteps these questions even though the implications of contact with these different features may vary greatly. Most research simply chooses one kind of social experience to study without much consideration or explanation; for example, some focus on in-depth interactions with strangers (e.g., Trawalter and Richeson 2008), others on the importance of close outgroup friendships (Turner et al. 2007; Newman 2014), and still others on the mere physical presence of outgroup members (e.g., Enos 2014; Sands

[2] There are other important, less explored criticisms of contact research, such as that contact may simultaneously reduce prejudice among advantaged groups while undermining support for social change among disadvantaged groups (Saguy et al. 2009; Dixon et al. 2010; Glasford and Calcagno 2012).

2017). The rare studies that have directly compared various kinds of intergroup interactions often find that both the amount and intimacy of contact influence how much it reduces prejudicial attitudes (Jackman and Crane 1986; Stringer et al. 2009; Ellison, Shin, and Leal 2011); attempts to harmonize these different choices indicate that what researchers conclude from their study of contact depends on what kinds of social experiences they examine (MacInnis and Page-Gould 2015). At a more basic level, most studies of contact are not clear enough on what kind of contact they consider and why they make those choices; a recent attempt to summarize current experimental research on contact ultimately concludes that researchers report too little detail about the version of contact they consider for others to replicate or even categorize these studies (Paluck, Green, and Green 2018).

A second area of concern about contact research is the status of Allport's original four conditions. As mentioned already, Allport and some of the research that followed him considered these conditions to be crucial to reducing prejudice and group-based bias through contact. Some take issue with these conditions from a theoretical perspective. One critique centers on how different perspectives in the social sciences would predict different things about authority approval, common goals, cooperation, and equal status. From the view of racial threat theory, for example, prejudice stems from a feeling of superiority and privilege among advantaged groups and a fear that subordinate groups will attempt to take away those privileges. Efforts to intrude on the status of majority groups therefore arouse suspicion and antipathy (Blumer 1958, 5). Numerous empirical studies support this perspective, concluding that when people perceive threats to their social position from outgroups, they display more prejudice and political opposition to those groups (e.g., Key 1949; Quillian 1995; Bobo and Hutchings 1996; Norton and Sommers 2011; Enos 2016; Mutz 2018). The conditions proposed by Allport could be perceived as attempts to undermine the position of one's own group. For example, members of majority groups may feel threatened by equal-status contact experiences, as these encounters undermine both their view of the group-based hierarchy and threaten privileges they enjoy. Consequently, this would translate to increased prejudice and a lack of political support for these groups.

Empirically, support for the conditions is also more mixed than it seems on the surface. On one level, some specific studies find that Allport's conditions magnify the benefits of intergroup contact (e.g., Riordan and Ruggiero 1980; Gaertner et al. 1990; Cohen and Lotan 1995; Pearson-Merkowitz, Filindra, and Dyck 2015). However, attempts to summarize this literature have been far less conclusive. The major meta-analytic summary of contact research concludes that the four basic conditions are not

necessary to generate pro-outgroup reactions (Pettigrew and Tropp 2011). Specifically reviewing studies that emphasized one or more of the conditions, the authors find that intergroup contact typically results in a moderate reduction in anti-outgroup attitudes even when the key conditions proposed by contact theory are absent. The authors ultimately state that "Allport's conditions are not essential for intergroup contact to achieve positive outcomes . . . [and] should not be regarded as necessary" (Pettigrew and Tropp 2006, 766; see also 2011, 67–68). This conclusion contrasts sharply with Allport's ideas, as he warned that many forms of intergroup experiences would exacerbate, rather than address, group differences (Allport 1954, 263). An updated, more focused meta-analysis raises additional concerns on this point, finding that no recent experimental studies of contact explicitly considered and randomized any of Allport's conditions. The results of the meta-analysis lead the authors to conclude that even when researchers document that contact reduces prejudice, "we learn little about what specific aspects of the contact are reducing participants' prejudice" (Paluck, Green, and Green 2018, 25).

In brief, the following points emerge as major conclusions from research on the democratic benefits of intergroup contact:

- *Allport proposed that contact could, under specific conditions, reduce prejudice and resolve conflicts between groups. This proposition created an expansive body of research.*
- *Despite this, two points remain unclear: what experiences count as intergroup contact and what role Allport's conditions play.*
- *As a result, the basic question posed by Allport – when contact can resolve problems between groups – remains unanswered.*

2.3 A Productive, Experimental Framework

In response to these lingering uncertainties, I propose the following framework for productively studying the political consequences of intergroup contact through randomized experiments. This perspective recommends that contact experiments include four components: (1) controlled, researcher-created social experiences; (2) the integration of other competing social science theories like those on group threat theory, stereotypes, and conversational norms; (3) measuring a range of attitudes and behaviors; and (4) intentional design choices to boost generalizability. I begin with a discussion of the benefits of the experimental method in this area and then take up each part of the proposed framework.

2.3.1 The Experimental Method

A review of political science research about intergroup contact reveals that experiments in this area are rare; instead, many studies rely on observational data paired with details about the geographic and social environments in which individuals reside (e.g., Oliver and Mendelberg 2000; Barth, Overby, and Huffmon 2009). While there are some creative and important exceptions (e.g., Enos 2014; Sands 2017), by and large, political scientists rely on observational and survey data to understand how interactions with social others influence political attitudes and behaviors. To a lesser extent, the same is true of psychology research on contact; in the most extensive meta-analysis, for example, only 5 percent of contact studies used experimental designs (Pettigrew and Tropp 2006, 759).

There are many advantages to these nonexperimental approaches. These kinds of data allow for explorations of real-world trends and representative slices of different communities. Further, they can consider comparisons across time, showing how patterns of intergroup experiences shift with contemporary political and social events (such as Sigelman et al. 1996; Eller and Abrams 2004).

However, nonexperimental approaches face key limitations. First and foremost, these studies may suffer from selection bias. Individuals can self-select into different forms of contact based on their preexisting views about social groups. If researchers do not randomly assign contact, then, whatever motivates this self-selection may confound any observed relationship between contact and group-based attitudes. Observational research on contact often wrestles with this possibility, considering if contact reduces prejudice, if prejudice reduces contact, or both (Binder et al. 2009).

Observational approaches also leave open precisely what counts as contact. Many such studies measure contact using self-reports of interaction with groups or overall geographic diversity. But such diversity does not ensure intergroup contact of any particular kind, and self-reports fail to capture differences in what people count as friendships, contacts, etc. This raises questions about what exactly intergroup contact entails, how comparable contact is across studies, and if "effects" from contact are really the product of something else (institutional rules, historical experiences, etc.). For example, is it fair to equate someone who lives in a racially diverse area with someone with a racially diverse extended family? Does everyone mean the same thing when they say they come into "contact" with minority groups? These questions are particularly important given some of the differences described earlier in studies that emphasize different kinds of intergroup contact.