Do We Want Them to Understand Each Other? Perceptions of Political Perspective-Takers

Ian Beatty
University of Northern Iowa

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Do We Want Them to Understand Each Other? Perceptions of Political Perspective-Takers

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts

Ian Beatty
University of Northern Iowa
July 2023

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Abstract

America has been more divided along partisan lines in recent years (Pew Research Center, 2019). One major factor contributing to this polarization is a lack of understanding regarding why members of political out-groups maintain their beliefs. The simple act of perspective-taking may help to counter the negative effects of this ideological division. Although the benefits of perspective-taking are well documented (Batson, Polycarpou et al., 1997), less is known regarding perceived perspective-taking or perceptions of perspective-takers. In this study, I explore whether the benefits of perspective-taking can be achieved by witnessing a member of the political in-group take the perspective of a member of the political out-group. 297 Prolific participants read one of three fabricated transcripts between two gubernatorial candidates with the independent variable being which candidate (if either) reported taking the perspective of their opponent. Participants then reported their attitudes toward the candidates, and the degree to which they felt the political parties understood each other, along with a measure for affective and ideological polarization. This study utilized a 2 (political orientation: liberal vs conservative) x 3 (perspective-taking: Republican vs Democrat vs control) experimental design and found that, whereas Democratic candidates were better liked by voters regardless of partisanship when they took the perspectives of their opponents, Republican candidates were not. Perspective-taking also influenced felt understanding and perceptions of ideological polarization. The results of this study suggest that it would behoove Democratic candidates to take the perspective of their opponents, while Republicans may not necessarily be perceived more favorably if they do the same.
Keywords: Polarization, Social Identity Theory, Perspective-taking, Political psychology
This Study by: Ian Beatty

Entitled: Do We Want Them to Understand Each Other? Perceptions of Political Perspective-Takers

has been approved as meeting the thesis requirements for the

Degree of Master of Arts


Date
Dr. Nicholas Schwab, Chair, Thesis Committee

Date
Dr. Helen Harton, Thesis Committee Member

Date
Dr. Tom Hall, Thesis Committee Member

Date
Dr. Stephanie Huffman, Dean, Graduate College
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“I must admit, I am not an expert on transgenderism. I struggle to understand so much of it and the science is conflicting. When in doubt, however, I always try to err on the side of kindness, mercy, and compassion.” – Spencer J. Cox (2022, 22 March).

The above quote was taken from a letter that the Utah governor sent to the Utah House and Senate regarding why he chose to veto House Bill 11 (HB11). The proposed HB11 bill would create a commission to decide on a case-by-case basis regarding whether transgender people could participate in gender-designated school sports. This would serve as an alternative to the current system, where students can participate in gender-based school sports corresponding with the gender with which they identify. The proposed bill had passed in the Utah House and the Senate before being vetoed by Governor Cox. Utah is overwhelmingly conservative, with both its Congressional senators and all four of its representatives registered as Republicans. Governor Spencer also happens to be a Republican, which makes the veto all the more notable. Issues regarding the rights of transgender people have become a partisan issue, and it has become uncommon for politicians to vote across party lines. What Governor Cox demonstrated with the above statement was a willingness to try to understand the perspective of others. Taking others’ perspectives within government may lead to more cooperative legislating, greater intergroup trust, and more amicable intergroup relations.

In the following pages, I review the literature regarding how people incorporate political affiliations into their social identities and how that influences their perceptions
of political out-groups. I elaborate on how people misperceive out-groups and how this tendency is exacerbated by a tendency to avoid their perspectives. I then go on to establish perspective-taking as an ideal that is associated with several interpersonal and intergroup benefits. I discuss the research regarding how the benefits of perspective-taking extend to the individual or group having their perspective taken, rather than simply the perspective-taker. I discuss the emerging research on perceptions of perspective-takers and whether there are extenuating circumstances that influence those perceptions. Finally, I establish how these concepts relate to one another before elaborating on how I built upon this research in the current study.

**Political Identities Influence Perceptions of Others**

**Political Identities**

Social identity theory (SIT; Tajfel & Turner, 1979) suggests that people define their sense of self through the groups that they identify with. Affiliating oneself with a group provides a sense of belonging and all of the psychological benefits that come with it. According to SIT, people draw boundaries between the groups that they identify with (i.e., in-groups), and the groups that they do not identify with (i.e., out-groups). The boundaries between the in-group and the out-group may lead to biased perceptions of these groups, which may be expressed as in-group favoritism and out-group prejudice. Put another way, the motivation to maintain a positive social identity compels people to draw favorable comparisons between the groups that they identify with and the groups that they do not (Tajfel & Turner, 1986).

The research regarding SIT is consistent, with studies having explored the concepts of in-group favoritism and out-group prejudice from many different
perspectives. People tend to perceive their group as performing better than the out-group, even when no difference exists (Molenberghs et al., 2012). People show less empathy toward out-group members than in-group members (Harris & Fiske, 2009). People even perceive out-group members to smell worse than in-group members (Reicher et al., 2016). The research regarding social identities suggests that the simple process of affiliating oneself with a group contributes to polarization between these groups. There are two key types of polarization that are discussed in this paper: affective and ideological. Affective polarization is the difference in partisans’ attitudes towards co-partisans and contra-partisans. Ideological polarization is the difference in beliefs or opinions between co-partisans and contra-partisans.

**Misperceptions of Out-groups**

By and large, partisans do not understand what members of their ideological out-group think and feel. The average American tends to hold relatively moderate positions but assumes that the average Democrat and Republican hold more extreme positions than they do (Westfall et al., 2015). Although people misperceive the extremity of the beliefs of all partisans, they are significantly less accurate at assessing the beliefs of political out-groups (Levendusky & Malhotra, 2016). The misperception that people hold more extreme attitudes than they do in reality gives rise to a sense of false polarization, which is perceived as greater by individuals with strong partisan identities and extreme partisan attitudes (Van Boven et al., 2012), and this false polarization can increase levels of actual polarization (Lees & Cikara, 2021).

In addition to misperceiving the ideological beliefs of the out-group, people also tend to misperceive the attitudes of the out-group toward the in-group. Partisans often
hold inaccurate meta-perceptions that influence the way that they think and feel about political out-group members. Meta-perceptions are the beliefs that people have regarding how they are perceived by others (Carlson & Barranti, 2016). Whereas it is true that Republicans and Democrats dehumanize and are prejudiced toward one another, and these biases are held equally by both parties, each party perceives that they are dehumanized by the out-group twice as much as they are in reality (Moore-Berg, Ankor-Karlinisky et al., 2020). Inaccurate meta-perceptions increase prejudice and dehumanization, which leads to polarization (Moore-Berg, Hameiri, et al., 2020) and a greater willingness to engage in political violence (Mernyk et al., 2022). Inaccurate meta-perceptions are sustained by unfamiliarity with political out-groups.

**Selective Exposure to Out-groups**

One reason why people may be familiar with the attitudes and beliefs of their political out-groups is selective exposure. Selective exposure is an aspect of motivated reasoning where an individual seeks out and engages predominantly with information that is consistent with their previous beliefs (Garrett, 2009). Although several unique news sources are readily available, people’s choices of which news sources to engage with may limit their worldview rather than expand it. Partisans typically choose to engage with news sources that align with their political parties (Barnidge et al., 2020) and perceive news sources that align with the opposing political party as biased and untrustworthy (Baum & Gussin, 2008). Avoiding news sources that are perceived to be affiliated with one’s political out-group may cause an individual to become more reliant on the news sources that they trust, which then leads to more extreme beliefs (Davis & Dunaway, 2016). People most likely avoid opposing perspectives due to a naïve realism,
or a sense that their view of the world is objective and unbiased (Minson & Dorison, 2022). This bias that deters people from seeking out other perspectives can be lessened by seeking out other perspectives.

Having an accurate understanding of the way out-groups think about in-groups is fundamentally crucial to having positive relations between those groups. Inaccurate meta-perceptions can be corrected with exposure to the views of out-groups (Ruggeri et al., 2021) or exposure to the out-groups themselves (Bruneau et al., 2020). Simply informing people of the inaccuracy of their meta-perceptions can be effective in correcting them and can subsequently reduce negative out-group attributions (Lees & Cikara, 2020) and the willingness to engage in political violence (Mernyk et al., 2022). If people perceive that they are less dehumanized by the out-group, they will dehumanize the out-group less themselves (Landry et al., 2021). The research suggests that if intergroup conflicts are strained by misunderstandings, then they can be ameliorated by attempts at understanding.

**Perspective-Taking as a Path to Understanding**

**Perspective-Taking as an Ideal**

Typically, Americans want the elected officials that represent them to be moral individuals who act with civility (Frimer & Skitka, 2018), but the relationship between politics and morality is a complicated one. Partisans moralize attitudes when they are perceived through the lens of being fundamentally right or wrong (Garrett, 2016). When partisans moralize attitudes, they are more likely to express out-group prejudice and are less willing to support political compromises (Ryan, 2017). Although the moralization of politics discourages understanding and working with political out-groups, the act of
moral deliberation requires an active attempt to understand the perspective of the out-group (Herold, 2014). In fact, the cognitive basis for the development of morality itself is perspective-taking (Kurdek, 1978).

Perspective-taking is the process of trying to understand another person by considering their particular point of view. Perspective-taking can be thought of as a two-stage process consisting of anchoring and adjustments (Tversky & Kahneman, 1974). Anchoring refers to a person’s initial perspective and their willingness to deviate from it, whereas adjustments refer to the series of alterations that a person makes to their perspective until it becomes an appropriate approximation of the target’s perspective (Tamir & Mitchell, 2013). Whereas perspective-taking can be thought of as “the act of imagining the thoughts and feelings of others” (Batson, 2011), empathy is defined as the “reactions of one individual to the observed experiences of another” (Davis, 1983). The two processes are deeply related to one another (Longmire & Harrison, 2018) and any distinction between them is unnecessary for the purposes of this study. Both empathy and perspective-taking improve perceptions of out-groups.

**Perspective-Taking & Intergroup Relations**

The act of perspective-taking can influence perceptions of others in several ways. In general, people tend to develop more favorable impressions of others when they take the other’s perspective (Batson, Polycarpou et al., 1997). Not only does perspective-taking improve perceptions of out-group members, but it also improves perceptions of the out-group as a whole (Batson, Polycarpou et al., 1997), as well as of the relationship between the in-group and the out-group (Livingstone, Fernández et al., 2020). Perspective-taking reduces out-group prejudice, as well as the availability and expression
of stereotypes (Galinsky & Moskowitz, 2000). Additionally, perspective-taking leads to increased helping behavior (Batson, Sager et al., 1997) and an increased willingness to interact with members of the out-group (Wang et al., 2014). Perspective-taking can be made easier by the same process that inaccurate meta-perceptions are corrected: exposure to the opinions of the out-group.

A greater familiarity with the out-group fosters a sense of understanding and facilitates the development of good counter-attitudinal arguments. Counter-attitudinal arguments are the arguments that a person thinks their ideological opponents may use to defend their opinions. When people develop counter-attitudinal arguments that are in opposition to their moral values, they may be less likely to change their attitudes (Catapano et al., 2019). People may develop straw-man arguments if they have difficulty taking the perspective of ideological opponents, but they are capable of developing better, more convincing counter-attitudinal arguments with proper motivation (Yeomans, 2021). People tend to develop more favorable impressions of their opponents when they are exposed to actual arguments from the opposition, as opposed to the straw-man arguments that they may develop without proper motivation (Stanley et al., 2020). When a legitimate effort is put forth to try to understand the perspectives of the out-group, people develop more favorable perceptions of the out-group.

Not only are intergroup relations better when groups have an accurate understanding of one another, but they are also better when groups perceive that they are understood by one another. Intergroup felt understanding, the perception that out-group members understand and accept the perspectives of in-group members (Livingstone et al., 2022), is associated with benefits for intergroup relations. Feeling that one’s group is
understood is associated with greater feelings of trust and clemency toward the out-group (Livingstone, Fernández et al., 2020). When people believe that they are understood by the out-group, they are more likely to have favorable impressions of and action intentions toward out-group members (Livingstone, Windeatt, et al., 2020). People like to be understood, like the people that understand them, and generally, like the people who understand others.

**Perceptions of Perspective-Takers**

People like perspective-takers. Taking another’s perspective is indicative of a willingness to search for common ground (Galinsky et al., 2005). People think more favorably of, and report more positive action intentions toward, others who have taken their perspective (Goldstein et al., 2014). People respect authorities more when they believe that those authorities have taken their perspectives (Ng et al., 2019). People report more favorable opinions of out-group members and the out-group as a whole when an out-group member takes the perspective of an in-group member, even when that out-group member does not change their opinion to be in accordance with the in-group (Beatty, 2023. Additionally, people also like in-group members more if those in-group members allow themselves to be exposed to the perspectives of the out-group (Heltzel & Laurin, 2021).

In general, people like perspective-takers; however, there may be boundary conditions to this preference for perspective-takers. There are reasons why people may form negative impressions of perspective-takers, and those reasons are more compelling when the perspective being taken is perceived as exceptionally unfavorable. For example, one study found that people consistently like empathizers provided that the targets of the
empathy were not White supremacists (Wang & Todd, 2021). If issues are perceived as moralized, perspective-takers may be viewed negatively because of the implied potential of compromise (Ryan, 2017). Given that Republicans and Democrats view one another as being more immoral than other Americans (Pew Research Center, 2019), perceptions of political perspective-takers warrant further study.

**Current Study**

People incorporate their political beliefs and group affiliations into their sense of self. This can give rise to a positivity bias toward their political in-group (in-group favoritism) and a negativity bias toward their political out-group (out-group prejudice). Democrats and Republicans are similarly biased and equally misperceive how they are viewed by the other group (Moore-Berg, Ankor-Karlinsky et al., 2020). These meta-perceptions have consequences for intergroup relations, but they can be corrected with proper information. Impressions of out-group members, as well as impressions of the out-group as a whole, can be improved through the process of perspective-taking. Perspective-taking increases understanding, and understanding the arguments for why the out-group believes what they do is integral to improving relations with that out-group. Less is known about the concept of perceived perspective-taking and whether or not the benefits of perspective-taking can be achieved if the perspective being taken belongs to a disliked out-group member.

In this study, I utilized a 2 (political orientation: liberal vs conservative) x 3 (perspective-taking: Republican vs Democrat vs control) between-subjects experimental design, in which I examined the relationship between perspective-taking and perceptions of the out-group. Participants were presented with one of three sets of candidate
statements in which either (1) the Republican candidate took the perspective of the Democratic candidate, (2) the Democratic candidate took the perspective of the Republican candidate, or (3) neither candidate reported taking the perspective of their opponent. Participants then answered questions regarding their perceptions of the individual candidates, their respective political parties, and the political issue being discussed.

No predictions were made regarding partisan differences in results; however, partisan differences observed in previous work on moral values and cognitive processing suggest that the effect of perspective-taking would not be the same between groups. Previous research suggests that conservatives and liberals differ in several ways ranging from endorsement of moral values to cognitive processing. Whereas liberals are more likely to care about the harm/care and fairness/reciprocity dimensions of moral foundations theory, conservatives seem to endorse them all equally (Graham et al., 2009). Liberals tend to be higher in generalized empathy than conservatives (Eisenberg-Berg & Mussen, 1980; Sparkman et al., 2019). Conservatives perceive in-group harm more negatively than liberals (Pliskin et al., 2018). Additionally, conservatism is associated with low-effort thought (Eidelman et al., 2012) and impairments in strategic information processing (Zmigrod et al., 2021). These intrinsic differences between liberals and conservatives may help to explain any variation between the groups’ results.

I expected to find that participants would rate perspective-takers more favorably than non-perspective-takers. I predicted that participants would perceive the out-group as more understanding of their in-group when an out-group member claimed to understand the perspective of a member of the in-group. I predicted that participants would perceive
less affective polarization in perspective-taking conditions as indicated by perceived
closeness between parties. Similarly, I expected that people would perceive less overall
ideological polarization in the perspective-taking conditions, regardless of whether the
perspective-taker was a co-partisan or contra-partisan. These predictions were consistent
with prior research. The hypotheses that I tested in this study are outlined below.

**Hypothesis 1:** Participants will report more favorable impressions of perspective-takers
relative to non-perspective-takers.

**Hypothesis 2:** Participants will report greater felt understanding from the out-group when
an out-group member reports having taken the perspective of an in-group
member, compared to when an in-group member reports having taken the
perspective of an out-group member or when no such perspective-taking has
occurred.

**Hypothesis 3a:** Participants will perceive less ideological polarization in perspective-
taking conditions compared to the non-perspective-taking condition.

**Hypothesis 3b:** Participants will perceive less affective polarization in perspective-taking
conditions compared to the non-perspective-taking condition.

**Method**

**Participants**

The participants were 297 Prolific users (80.68% White; 52.9% Male; 51.2%
liberal). Age ranged from 18 to 74 with a mean age of 39.6 years (see Table 1).

Participants were prescreened through Prolific to provide an even number of liberals and
conservatives. Participants received $2 for their participation upon completion of the questionnaire.

Table 1

Demographics by Ideology

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Liberals</th>
<th></th>
<th>Conservatives</th>
<th></th>
<th>Total</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$M$</td>
<td>$SD$</td>
<td>$M$</td>
<td>$SD$</td>
<td>$M$</td>
<td>$SD$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>35.49</td>
<td>12.072</td>
<td>43.84</td>
<td>13.434</td>
<td>39.6</td>
<td>13.406</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SES</td>
<td>2.73</td>
<td>0.897</td>
<td>2.77</td>
<td>0.922</td>
<td>2.75</td>
<td>0.908</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>44.1% Male</td>
<td></td>
<td>62.9% Male</td>
<td></td>
<td>52.9% Male</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race / Ethnicity</td>
<td>74.3% White</td>
<td></td>
<td>86.2% White</td>
<td></td>
<td>80.1% White</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A power analysis was conducted using G*Power (Faul et al., 2007) for fixed effects, special, main effects, and interactions ANOVA using an effect size of 0.20, a significance level of 0.05, and a power of 0.9. For six groups with two numerator degrees of freedom, G*Power recommended a sample size of 320. The estimated effect size was based on previous studies by Livingstone, Fernández et al. (2020). Across four studies, the authors demonstrated an overall effect size of $r = 0.25$ for felt understanding and an overall effect size of $r = 0.24$ for felt liking. However, a post hoc analysis reveals that their study was slightly underpowered, which could have inflated their reported effect sizes. For that reason, I chose to use a smaller effect size of 0.2.

Due to a procedural error, the data were collected in two waves. The initial data collection occurred on February 7th, 2023 and supplemental data collection occurred on March 6th, 2023. 353 participants were recruited in the first wave of data collection, but
100 cases were removed during data cleaning. To achieve the desired power level, an additional 71 participants were recruited during the second wave of data collection, however, 27 of these cases were removed during data cleaning as well (see results section for a detailed list of exclusions). A sensitivity analysis conducted in G*Power revealed that this study was sufficiently powered to find an effect size of .207.

Procedure

Participants were presented with an informed consent page upon opening the link to the survey. Participants were told that the purpose of the study was to examine how the views held by political candidates influence others’ perceptions of them. Participants responded to a few questions assessing their baseline opinions towards various groups of people, with transgender individuals being one of the groups listed. Participants were then presented with information regarding the proposed house bill 11 (HB11; see Appendix A). Participants then read one of three transcripts depicting an interaction between a Democratic and a Republican gubernatorial candidate as they debated HB11 (see Appendix B). As an attention check, participants were then asked to identify which candidate, if any, reported understanding the perspective of their opponent.

Participants then answered questions regarding their perceptions of the political candidates and their prediction for which candidate would be more likely to win the election. Participants also completed measures of felt understanding at the candidate level, as well as at the party level. Participants reported whether they support or oppose HB11 and how confident they were in their position. Next, participants estimated the level of support from both Democrats and Republicans for HB11, as a measure of perceived polarization. Participants then completed a series of demographic questions.
Participants were presented with a textbox and were encouraged to leave feedback for the researchers. Participants then responded to an honesty check before being presented with the debriefing message. Participants were directed back to Prolific upon completion of the survey.

**Materials**

Participants were presented with the following message regarding HB11: “HB11 is a proposed state bill that would create a commission that would make decisions on a case-by-case basis as to whether or not to allow transgender persons to participate in gender-designated school sports. Without this bill, transgender students can participate in gender-designated school sports in accordance with the gender that they choose to identify with.” Participants were told that they would be reading transcripts of gubernatorial candidates discussing their attitudes toward HB11 and that they were to use the transcripts as the basis for reporting their opinions of the candidates. Participants were then randomly presented with one of three transcripts in which either the Republican candidate reported understanding the perspective of the Democratic candidate, the Democratic candidate reported understanding the perspective of the Republican candidate, or neither candidate reported understanding the perspective of the other.

The candidates’ statements were largely similar between conditions. The Republican candidate reported supporting the bill and asserted that it would protect the integrity of women’s sports for the value of competition. The Democratic candidate reported opposing the bill and asserted that it would be needlessly discriminatory towards an already marginalized group of people. In the perspective-taking conditions, the candidate who would have their perspective taken presented their stance first. Then, prior
to presenting their stance, the perspective-taker included a few additional sentences establishing that they believed that they understood the reasoning of their opponent. In the version of the transcript where neither candidate took their opponent's perspective, the order of the statements was randomized.

**Measures**

*Attitudes Towards Transgender Individuals*

To assess participants’ pre-existing attitudes towards transgender individuals, participants were asked to report their attitudes towards 5 groups of people with transgender individuals being the only group of interest (“How positive or negative do you feel about the following groups of people on the scale of 0 to 100, where 0 represents very negative, and 100 represents very positive?”; see Appendix C).

*Attention Check*

Participants responded to a single multiple-choice attention check (“Which candidate, if any, said that they understood the perspective of their opponent?”).

*Manipulation Check*

Participants provided their responses to a question assessing the level of perceived understanding between candidates (e.g., “Regarding the topic of HB11, how well do you feel that the Republican [Democratic] candidate tried to understand the Democratic [Republican] candidate?”) on a 7-point Likert scale with labeled endpoints (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *extremely well*). The measure assessed the level of felt understanding from the candidate who reported understanding the perspective of their opponent. In the control condition, the measure assesses felt understanding for the candidate who provided their statement after their opponent.
Perceptions of Candidates

Participants completed a feeling thermometer for each candidate on a sliding scale ranging from 0 to 10 (e.g., “Using the feeling thermometer below, please rate how you feel about the Democratic [Republican] candidate. Ratings between 5 and 10 mean that you feel favorable and warm toward the person. Ratings between 0 and 5 mean that you don't feel favorable toward the person. You would rate the person at 5 if you don't feel particularly warm or cold toward the person.”). The feeling thermometers were presented to the participants in a randomized order.

Predictions of Election Outcomes

Participants responded to a dichotomous question assessing which candidate they believed would be more likely to win the election based on the provided interaction (1 = the Democratic candidate; -1 = the Republican candidate). Participants then used sliders to indicate the percentage of the vote that they believed each candidate would receive from Republican, Democratic, and independent voters.

Felt Understanding

Participants then completed a measure of felt understanding, consisting of 7 items (e.g., “In general, Republicans [Democrats] do not ‘get’ the views of Democrats [Republicans]”), asking people to indicate the extent to which they agree or disagree with the statements on a 7-point Likert scale with labeled endpoints (-3 = completely disagree, 3 = completely agree). This measure was adapted from a measure used by Livingstone, Fernández et al. (2020; $\alpha = 0.80$). I adapted the original measure replacing the words ‘in-group’ and ‘out-group’ with ‘Republican’ and ‘Democrat’. The adapted measure assessed the level of felt understanding from the political party that the perspective-taker was
affiliated with. In the control condition, the measure assessed felt understanding for the political party of the candidate who provided their statement after their opponent. The adapted measure was reliable in the context of this study ($\alpha = .935$ for felt understanding from Republicans; $\alpha = .92$ for felt understanding from Democrats).

**Closeness**

A measure of perceived closeness was included to assess the participants’ perceptions of the relationship between the in-group and the out-group. The Inclusion of Other in the Self (IOS) Scale (Aron et al., 1992) presents participants with seven images of increasingly overlapping circles labeled "Self" and "Other" and asks people to circle (or click on) the image that best describes the relationship between themselves and the target. In the context of this study, participants were asked to click on the image that best describes the relationship between Republicans and Democrats. The labels on the circles have been changed from “Self” and “Other” to “Republican” and “Democrat”.

**Policy Support**

Before being asked to provide their positions on HB11, participants were presented with a reminder about the content of the bill. This reminder was the same text provided earlier in the study. Participants then responded to a dichotomous question asking whether they supported (coded as 1) or opposed (coded as -1) HB11. After providing their response, participants reported how confident they were in their position on a 5-point Likert scale ($1 = not at all confident, 5 = fully confident$). Participants’ responses to the dichotomous question were multiplied by their confidence level to create a 10-point scale ranging from -5 to 5.
**Perceived Issue Polarization**

As a measure of perceived issue polarization, participants were asked to estimate the degree of support for the issue from both Republicans and Democrats (e.g., “Please enter below the percentage of Republicans [Democrats] that you believe support HB11.”). The difference in estimated support between Democrats and Republicans is used in analyses as perceived polarization (e.g., |% of Republicans who support HB11 - % of Democrats who support HB11|).

**Demographics**

Participants responded to a series of political demographics questions, starting by reporting their political beliefs on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = very liberal, 7 = very conservative). Participants reported which political party, if any, they were affiliated with, along with the degree with which they identified with their political party on a 7-point Likert scale with labeled endpoints (1 = not at all, 7 = very much). Participants also responded to a series of general demographic questions, asking them to self-report their age, racial/ethnic identity, gender identity, and socio-economic status.

**Honesty Check**

Participants responded to a single-item honesty check (“Sometimes, people are in a rush and don't answer questions entirely honestly. You will still be compensated for your time regardless of your response here. How honest were your answers throughout this survey?”) on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = not at all honestly, 5 = extremely honestly).

**Feedback**

Before being debriefed, participants were thanked for their time and presented with a text box, given the opportunity to provide any comments or feedback to the investigators.
Results

Preliminary Analyses

Exclusion Criteria

The exclusion criteria for this study were preregistered and are available on a linked page on the open science framework (OSF) website. Participants were assigned a hard ID to keep track of the cases that were to be removed during data cleaning. Liberal and conservative participants were targeted and recruited through Prolific. Participants' responses were removed prior to data analysis if they reported that their ideological beliefs were on the other end of the scale than what their Prolific profile indicated (e.g., if they identified as conservative on their Prolific profile but self-reported 1-3 on the demographics question regarding ideological beliefs; 1 = very liberal, 7 = very conservative) If participants indicated that they were moderate within the survey, their data were preserved. No participants were excluded due to ideological inconsistency.

Participants’ data were to be discarded if a participant self-reported less than three on the honesty check; No cases were discarded due to this criterion. Participants’ data were to be discarded if an entry was missing more than 30% of their data; No cases were discarded due to this criterion. Four cases were removed due to the participants having completed the questionnaire in under two minutes. Sixty participants failed the attention check. Analyses were run and reported with and without the entries of participants who failed the attention check (see Appendix M). The results presented below do not include participants who failed the attention check.

The survey was split into two versions to simplify the display logic within the questionnaire: a control version and an experimental version. Twice as many participants
were recruited for the experimental version of the survey, in which the experimental conditions were randomly assigned so that participants were randomly presented with either a Republican or Democratic perspective taker. The order of the candidate statements was also randomized in the control version. Within Prolific, researchers can only exclude participants from participating in an experiment on the basis of previous participation if those previous studies have been completed. Because the experimental and control versions of the survey were put up simultaneously, participants were not prohibited from completing both versions of the questionnaire. If multiple responses were identified as coming from a single IP address due to participants attempting both version of the experiment, the first entry was preserved, and the subsequent entries were removed prior to analysis. Sixty-three cases were removed after being identified as duplicate entries.

After the data had been cleaned, 239 cases remained from the first wave of data collection and 58 cases remained from the second wave. The only significant difference in demographic composition between participants in either wave of data collection was a higher number of participants self-reporting as American Indian / Alaska Native in the second wave \( F(1, 295) = 4.32, p = .039, (n1 = 1, n2 = 2) \). To assess whether the results of the analyses differed by phase of collection, an independent samples t-test was conducted with the phase of collection as the grouping variable. The results indicated that the groups did differ significantly in their responses to the manipulation, \( t(294) = 2.129, p = .034 \), and IOS, \( t(288) = 2.234, p = .026 \), measures, with participants reporting lower scores in the second phase of data collection.
After cases were removed, IP addresses and Prolific IDs were deleted from the data set, and the data set was uploaded on OSF. I recoded the reverse-coded items within the felt-understanding scale before consolidating the individual items into one average number for each participant before checking the reliability of the scale.

**Tests of Assumptions**

An analysis of variance indicated that the manipulation was effective as indicated by a main effect of perspective-taking, $F(2, 293) = 111.44, p < .001, \eta^2 = .44$. Democratic perspective-takers ($M = 5.1, SE = .14, 95\% CI [4.82, 5.38]$) and Republican perspective-takers ($M = 5.26, SE = .13, 95\% CI [5.0, 5.52]$) were reported as being more understanding than their counterparts in the non-perspective-taking condition ($M$ for Democrat = 2.32, $SE = 0.21, 95\% CI [1.9, 2.73]$; $M$ for Republican = 2.78, $SE = 0.19, 95\% CI [2.41, 3.16]$).
For each analysis, the dependent variables were continuous, the independent variables were categorical, and the samples were independent of one another. The remaining assumptions were tested using SPSS. Boxplots were used to look for outliers, Shapiro-Wilk’s tests were used to assess the normality of the data, and Levene’s tests were used to assess the homogeneity of variance.

A Shapiro-Wilk’s test revealed that the responses for ratings of both Democrats ($W = .93, p < .001$) and Republicans ($W = .92, p < .001$) were not normally distributed. Additionally, responses were not normally distributed on the felt understanding scale ($W = .96, p < .001$), IOS scale ($W = .84, p < .001$), or the measure of perceived ideological polarization ($W = .93, p < .001$).
Levene’s tests showed that the variance for ratings of Democratic candidates was equal, $F(5, 272) = 0.97, p = .438$; but not for ratings of Republican candidates, $F(5, 269) = 4.05, p < .001$. The variance for responses to the felt understanding scale was not equal, $F(5, 291) = 4.56, p < .001$, however, the variance of responses to the IOS scale $F(5, 284) = 0.59, p = .707$. and measure of perceived ideological polarization were equal $F(5, 291) = 0.71, p = .614$.

To account for the non-normally distributed data, all analyses were run with and without bootstrapping. The bootstrap was set to 1000 samples. Robust means, standard deviations, and confidence intervals are provided (see Table 3). The results of the ANOVAs did not differ when using bootstrapping.

**Analyses**

All data were analyzed in SPSS. To test each hypothesis, I ran a 3 x 2 ANOVA with ideology and perspective-taking as the independent variables. The dependent variables were ratings of candidates, responses to the felt-understanding measures, the inclusion of other in self scale, and the difference between perceived support for HB11 among Democrats and Republicans. In this study, liberals and conservatives differed significantly in their attitudes toward transgender individuals, $t(270.943) = 15.212, p < .001$, with conservatives ($M = 33.89, SD = 26.41$) reporting considerably more negative attitudes than liberals ($M = 76.3, SD = 20.99$). All analyses were run with and without controlling for attitudes toward transgender individuals, and no significant differences were observed between the results of these analyses (see Appendix L). The results presented below do not control for attitudes toward transgender individuals.
### Table 2

**Mean Scores by Condition**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Control</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th>DPT</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th>RPT</th>
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<td>SD</td>
<td>Lower</td>
<td>Upper</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>Lower</td>
<td>Upper</td>
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<td></td>
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</table>

**Note.** N = 297. Control = no perspective-taker condition; DPT = Democratic perspective-taker; RPT = Republican perspective-taker.
Table 3

**Bootstrapped Mean Scores by Condition**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
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<th>95% CI Lower</th>
<th>95% CI Upper</th>
<th>DPT M</th>
<th>95% CI Lower</th>
<th>95% CI Upper</th>
<th>RPT M</th>
<th>95% CI Lower</th>
<th>95% CI Upper</th>
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<td>1.25</td>
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<tr>
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*Note. N = 297. Control = no perspective-taker condition; DPT = Democratic perspective-taker; RPT = Republican perspective-taker.*
### Table 4

**Summary of ANOVA Results**

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<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
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<th>ANOVA</th>
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<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
</tr>
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</table>

*Note.* *N* = 297. Control = no perspective-taker condition; DPT = Democratic perspective-taker; RPT = Republican perspective-taker; ANOVA = analysis of variance; I = ideology; P-T = perspective-taking.

* *p < .05. ** *p < .01. *** *p < .001.

### Ratings of Candidates

All participants responded to how much they liked each candidate. Participants’ ratings of the candidates on the feeling thermometers were the dependent variables for
two separate ANOVAs. For these tests, and all subsequent tests, the independent variables are the participants’ ideologies and the assigned perspective-taking condition. The analysis of variance showed that the main effect of perspective-taking was significant for both ratings of Democrats, $F(2, 275) = 20.6, p < .001, \eta^2 = .13$ and Republicans, $F(2, 272) = 4.91, p = .008, \eta^2 = .04$. There were also significant main effects for ideology for both Democrats, $F(1, 277) = 201.51, p < .001, \eta^2 = .43$, and Republicans $F(1, 274) = 214.11, p < .001, \eta^2 = .44$. The interaction effect was not significant for ratings of either Democrats, $F(2, 276) = 1.13, p = .326, \eta^2 = .01$, or Republicans, $F(2, 273) = .68, p = .508, \eta^2 = .01$. Democratic perspective-takers were rated significantly higher by both liberal ($M = 7.47, SE = 0.32, 95\% CI [6.85, 8.09]$) and conservative participants ($M = 4.11, SE = 0.37, 95\% CI [3.38, 4.83]$) when compared to Democratic candidates in the control condition ($M = 5.76, SE = 0.37, 95\% CI [5.04, 6.49]$; $M = 1.36, SE = 0.34, 95\% CI [0.69, 2.02]$). Republican perspective-takers were rated significantly higher by neither liberal ($M = 3.96, SE = 0.36, 95\% CI [3.25, 4.66]$) nor conservative participants ($M = 7.97, SE = 0.32, 95\% CI [7.33, 8.61]$) when compared to Republican candidates in the control condition ($M = 2.68, SE = 0.38, 95\% CI [1.92, 3.43]$; $M = 7.48, SE = 0.37, 95\% CI [6.76, 8.2]$).
Figure 2

*Ratings of Democratic Candidate by Perspective-Taking Condition*

![Graph showing ratings of Democratic candidate by perspective-taking condition]

*Note.* DPT = Democratic Perspective-Taker, RPT = Republican Perspective-Taker

Error bars are 95% confidence intervals

Figure 3

*Ratings of Republican Candidate by Perspective-Taking Condition*

![Graph showing ratings of Republican candidate by perspective-taking condition]

*Note.* DPT = Democratic Perspective-Taker, RPT = Republican Perspective-Taker

Error bars are 95% confidence intervals
**Felt Understanding**

Participants’ average scores on the felt understanding scale were used as the dependent variable to test the second hypothesis. The main effect of ideology was significant, $F(1, 296) = 5.66, p = .018, \eta^2 = .02$. There was no main effect for perspective-taking, $F(2, 294) = 2.4, p = .093, \eta^2 = .02$, but there was an interaction effect between political ideology and perspective-taking $F(2, 294) = 52.38, p < .001, \eta^2 = .27$. Both liberals ($M = 4.8, SE = 0.18, 95\% CI [4.46, 5.15]$) and conservatives ($M = 4.71, SE = 0.17, 95\% CI [4.38, 5.04]$) reported that they perceived greater understanding from the out-group when the perspective-taker was an in-group member compared to when the perspective-taker was an out-group member ($M = 2.67, SE = 0.18, 95\% CI [2.32, 3.02]; M = 3.13, SE = 0.21, 95\% CI [2.73, 3.54]$) and the control condition ($M = 3.22, SE = 0.19, 95\% CI [2.85, 3.58]; M = 3.91, SE = 0.19, 95\% CI [3.54, 4.28]$).

**Figure 4**

*Felt Understanding by Perspective-Taking Condition*
**Note.** DPT = Democratic Perspective-Taker, RPT = Republican Perspective-Taker

Error bars are 95% confidence intervals

**Affective Polarization**

Participants’ responses to the IOS scale were used as the dependent variable to test the first part of the third hypothesis. An analysis of variance revealed there was not a significant effect for ideology, $F(1, 289) = 1.96, p = .162, \eta^2 = .01$, or perspective-taking, $F(2, 287) = 1.12, p = .329, \eta^2 = .01$, nor was there an interaction effect between them, $F(2, 287) = 0.75, p = 475, \eta^2 = .01$. Ratings on the IOS scale were not significantly different when the perspective-taking candidate was a Democrat ($M = 2.38, SE = 0.14, 95\% CI [2.1, 2.66]$) or Republican ($M = 2.37, SE = 0.13, 95\% CI [2.12, 2.63]$) when compared with the control condition ($M = 2.13, SE = 0.14, 95\% CI [1.86, 2.4]$).

**Figure 5**

*IOS Scores by Perspective-Taking Condition*
Note. DPT = Democratic Perspective-Taker, RPT = Republican Perspective-Taker

Error bars are 95% confidence intervals

**Perceived Ideological Polarization**

Participants indicated the percentage of Democrats and Republicans that they believed would support the proposed bill. The difference between these values was used as the dependent variable for the second part of the third hypothesis. The analysis of variance revealed that the main effect of ideology was insignificant, $F(1, 296) = 0, p = .986, \eta^2 = 0$. However, there was a significant main effect for perspective-taking, $F(2, 294) = 3.72, p = .026, \eta^2 = .03$ as well as an interaction effect between perspective-taking and participants’ political ideology $F(2, 294) = 6.6, p = .002, \eta^2 = .04$. Whereas liberals perceived greater ideological polarization when there was a contra-partisan perspective-taker ($M = 65.67, SE = 3.21, 95\% CI [59.35, 71.99]$) compared to the control condition ($M = 56.38, SE = 3.38, 95\% CI [49.74, 63.03]$), conservatives perceived less ideological polarization when there was a contra-partisan perspective-taker ($M = 50.49, SE = 3.71, 95\% CI [43.19, 57.78]$) compared to the control condition ($M = 69.68, SE = 3.38, 95\% CI [63.03, 76.33]$).
Figure 6

Perceived Polarization by Perspective-Taking Condition

Note. DPT = Democratic Perspective-Taker, RPT = Republican Perspective-Taker

Error bars are 95% confidence intervals

Additional Analyses

Using the same ANOVA as in previous tests, I conducted exploratory analyses to examine whether or not perspective-taking had any significant influence on participants’ support of the proposed policy or their perceptions of which candidate would be more likely to win the election. There was no main effect of perspective-taking on policy support, $F(2, 294) = 1.27, p = .282, \eta^2 = .01$, nor was there an interaction effect between perspective-taking and ideology $F(2, 294) = 0.9, p = .409, \eta^2 = .01$. There was a main effect of perspective-taking on participants’ perceptions of candidate electability, $F(2, 294) = 1.9, p < .001, \eta^2 = .08$. Liberal participants were significantly more likely to
believe that the Republican would win the election when the Republican was the perspective-taker ($M = 1.37$, $SE = .06$, 95% CI [1.26, 1.47]) relative to when the Democrat was the perspective-taker ($M = 1.72$, $SE = .06$, 95% CI [1.61, 1.83]). However, neither of these means were significantly different from the control condition ($M = 1.51$, $SE = .06$, 95% CI [1.4, 1.63]). The trend was similar for conservative participants as well, although none of the means were statistically significant from one another as indicated by overlapping confidence intervals ($M$ for control condition $= 1.06$, $SE = .06$, 95% CI [0.95, 1.18]; $M$ for Republican perspective-taking condition $= 1.03$, $SE = .05$, 95% CI [0.93, 1.14]; $M$ for Democrat perspective-taking condition $= 1.23$, $SE = .06$, 95% CI [1.11, 1.36]).

**Figure 7**

*Perceived Election Outcome by Perspective-Taking Condition*

*Note.* 1 = Perception that Democratic candidate will win the election, -1 = Perception that Republican candidate will win the election
Some research suggests that differences in ideological extremity supersede differences in ideology in and of itself (for a discussion, see Jost et al., 2003, and Greenberg & Jonas, 2003). Additional analyses were conducted to explore whether the results of this study differed drastically when using ideological extremity as an independent variable in the ANOVAs rather than ideology. The ideological extremity variable was computed as a 4-point scale utilizing the 7-point ideology scale. The midpoint was recoded as 0, 3 and 5 were recoded as 1, 2 and 6 were recoded as 2, and 1 and 7 were recoded as 3. Within the sample, only six participants placed themselves at the midpoint of the scale. These moderates were excluded from the exploratory analyses. The results of these analyses indicate that ideological extremity influenced participants’ perceptions of the candidates, although there were no significant effects observed for felt understanding, intergroup closeness, or perceptions of polarization (see Appendix N).

Discussion

Summary of Findings

The results of this study seem to indicate that there is a meaningful relationship between perspective-taking and political polarization, although there was only partial support for my hypotheses. First, I hypothesized that political perspective-takers would be liked more than non-perspective-takers. This hypothesis was supported partially, given that Democratic perspective-takers were better liked by participants regardless of ideology whereas Republican perspective-takers were not better liked by participants regardless of ideology. Second, I hypothesized that participants would report the greatest
degree of felt understanding from the out-group in the conditions where there was a contra-partisan perspective-taker. There was no support for this hypothesis. In fact, average felt understanding scores were lowest in the contra-partisan perspective-taking conditions. Finally, I hypothesized that participants would perceive less affective and ideological polarization in the perspective-taking conditions. There was no significant difference between groups on the measure of affective polarization, so this part of the hypothesis was not supported. There was partial support for the latter part of the hypothesis, with conservative participants perceiving less ideological polarization in the perspective-taking conditions. Liberal participants, on the other hand, reported perceiving more ideological polarization in the perspective-taking conditions.

**Interpreting Results**

On average, Democratic candidates were liked more by liberals and conservatives when they had their perspectives taken relative to when there was no perspective-taking, and they were liked even more so when they reported taking the perspective of the Republican candidate. This is consistent with prior research showing that perspective-taking leads to increased liking of perspective-takers as well as perspective-taking recipients (Batson, Polycarpou et al., 1997; Goldstein et al., 2014). The fact that this trend was not observed for the Republican candidate encourages speculation. Previous research found that people may not be liked more for trying to understand opposing viewpoints if those viewpoints are excessively disliked (Wang & Todd, 2021). This may suggest that conservatives perceive Democrats to be more unlikable than liberals perceive Republicans to be unlikable. This line of reasoning may be supported by the average ratings of candidates in the control condition. Conservative participants reported liking
the Democratic candidate less in the control condition than liberal participants reported liking the Republican candidate. An alternative explanation involves partisan differences in generalized empathy. As liberals are more empathic on average (Eisenberg-Berg & Mussen, 1980), it could be the case that the Democratic candidate was perceived as more of an exemplar for their party whereas the Republican candidate was not.

There was a significant interaction effect on the measure of felt understanding between ideology and perspective-taking. When this is graphed in terms of co-partisan and contra-partisan perspective-takers rather than Democrat and Republican perspective-takers, the interaction becomes easier to understand (see Figure 5). On average, participants perceived that their political parties were more understanding of the opposing party when the perspective-taker was a co-partisan and conversely perceived that the opposing party was less understanding of their party when the perspective-taker was a contra-partisan. Given that the manipulation was very effective, this may indicate that perceiving an individual candidate as more understanding does not generalize such that the group that they belong to is perceived as more understanding as well. The general positivity bias shown towards in-group members helps to explain why felt understanding was greater in the co-partisan perspective-taking conditions. It is unclear why felt understanding was lower on average in the contra-partisan perspective-taking condition relative to the control condition. This relationship reflects a potential backfire effect and could be attributed to the general reactance of partisan participants.

Although there were no significant effects of perspective-taking or ideology on perceptions of affective polarization, participants did report perceiving the relationship between Democrats and Republicans as closer on average in the perspective-taking
conditions relative to the control condition. However, these mean scores were not significantly different from one another as indicated by overlapping confidence intervals. Previous research suggests that greater felt understanding is associated with greater perceptions of closeness (Livingstone et al., 2022). The manipulation suggested that participants perceived the individual candidates as being more understanding when taking the perspectives of their opponents, but the felt understanding measure showed that this effect did not generalize to the political groups at large. This finding, or lack thereof, could indicate one of several things. First, the diminished power after data exclusion could have hidden a significant difference when one would have otherwise existed. Second, the manipulation may have insufficiently influenced perceptions of intergroup closeness whereas a stronger worded manipulation may have had a stronger effect. Third, the issue being discussed may have added too much variance to observe the relationship clearly. Furthermore, these possibilities are not mutually exclusive and there is the potential that an increased sample size and a stronger manipulation are both necessary to observe an effect. Alternatively, there is the potential that these findings were valid and that the act of seeing one candidate take the perspective of another candidate is insufficient for influencing perceptions of intergroup relations as a whole.

There was an interesting interaction effect for participants’ perceptions of ideological polarization. I hypothesized that participants would perceive less polarization in perspective-taking conditions relative to non-perspective-taking conditions. The results of this study indicate that this was the case for conservative participants, but not for liberal participants. Conservative participants perceived the greatest amount of polarization in the control condition. Conservative participants then perceived less
polarization when the perspective-taking candidate was a co-partisan and perceived the least polarization when the perspective-taking candidate was a contra-partisan. This trend was reversed for liberal participants, who perceived the least amount of polarization in the control condition. Liberal participants then perceived more polarization when the perspective-taking candidate was a co-partisan and the most polarization when the perspective-taking candidate was a contra-partisan. Previous research suggests that greater felt understanding from the out-group would be associated with lower perceived ideological polarization (Mernyk et al., 2022). In this study, felt understanding wasn’t correlated with perceived polarization in general ($r = .048, p = .408$), or among liberals ($r = -.051, p = .536$) and conservatives ($r = .145, p = .082$) separately. The correlation between felt understanding and perceived polarization among conservatives was almost significant and does reflect the perception of less ideological polarization in the perspective-taking conditions among conservatives. It is unclear why liberals perceived more ideological polarization in the perspective-taking conditions.

**Limitations & Directions for Future Research**

There was a procedural error during data collection which may have impacted the results of this study. Between the two waves of data collection, there were several policies that were passed or proposed relating to transgender rights, such as a Kentucky bill mandating disclosure of students’ LGBTQIA+ status to their parents (Brown, 2023) and a Tennessee bill that would ban gender-affirming medical care (Khan, 2023). However, the time between the two waves of data collection is plausibly unimportant given that transgender laws were widely discussed in the news before the first wave of data collection as well (Schoenbaum, 2023; Walsh, 2023).
To explore whether the results of this study could have been influenced by different demographic compositions between conditions, I conducted a one-way ANOVA with condition being the fixed factor. There were no significant differences in ideological extremity between conditions (see Appendix E). The analysis revealed a significant difference between conditions for age $F(5, 289) = 6.89, p < .001$, gender $F(5, 291) = 3.26, p = .007$, and race/ethnicity $F(5, 291) = 3.18, p = .008$. However, these differences can also be explained by the overall correlations between participant ideology and age ($r = .312, p < .001$), gender ($r = -.207, p < .001$), and race/ethnicity ($r = .149, p = .01$). In this sample, conservatives were more likely to be older and identify as White men.

The observed power for my analyses was lower than desired, in part, due to the total sample size being less than the number of participants suggested by the power analysis. The observed power may also have been less than the desired power due to an inflated estimated effect size. The power analysis was conducted with a desired power of .9, whereas the observed power for my analyses ranged from .07, for the effect of perspective-taking on perceived ideological polarization, to .99 for the interaction effect of perspective-taking and political ideology on felt understanding (see Table 4). The sensitivity analysis showed that the study was sufficiently powered to find an effect size of .207. There is a possibility that perspective-taking did have effects beyond what was observed and that this study was insufficiently powered to detect those effects due to their small sizes.

In addition to the possibility that the effect size was overestimated in the referenced studies, the effect size could have been diminished in the current study due to the politicized context and potentially moralized subject matter. The moralization of
topics and disliked political out-groups serve as two potential boundary conditions for the positive effects of perspective-taking. Future studies can address this limitation by using a substantially larger sample size. Those future studies can control for the difference in effect size when dealing with moralized issues by discussing both moralized and non-moralized issues, while also assessing the extent to which participants perceive those issues to have moral components. The inclusion of additional topics would help clarify if, when, and by how much perspective-taking can influence perceptions of contra-partisans as well as the broader political out-group.

One key limitation of this study is that there was a potential issue effect. I tried to select a topic that was sufficiently divisive along partisan lines. Americans’ perceptions of transgender individuals seem to be mixed. Some polls report that liberals and conservatives disagree on whether greater acceptance of transgender individuals is good for society (Brown, 2023), while other polls indicate that the majority of Americans oppose anti-transgender legislation, regardless of partisan affiliation (Loffman, 2021). The results of this study could have been influenced by American partisans’ complex perceptions of transgender individuals. Future studies would benefit from including multiple issues, ideally utilizing a within-sample design. In addition to including other issues, future studies could vary which party is proposing the bills related to those issues.

Ultimately, this study was limited by its brevity. The results may have been easier to understand if additional variables had been assessed. For the policy discussed in this study, it would have been helpful to have asked whether or not the bill was relevant to participants due to which state they reside in, whether or not they had children in schools, and whether or not they were familiar with the issue ahead of time, as well as their levels
of religiosity and political engagement. Future studies could also look for potential moderators by measuring out-group trust, perceived civility, perceived Machiavellianism, and perceptions of how well particular candidates represent their political parties at large.

Implications

It is important to keep the limitations of this study in mind when considering its implications. For example, as there was only one issue discussed in this study, and perceptions of moralization were not assessed, it is unclear whether the implications for politicians would vary based on these criteria. Similarly, these fictitious candidates were assessed in regard to their willingness to take their opponent’s perspective on an isolated scenario, and it would likely be important to consider the effects of perceived perspective-taking in the context of its influence on voting patterns. Having said that, this study does have important implications for polarization and for politicians.

This study revealed a partisan difference in perceptions of polarization, such that conservative participants perceived lower levels of polarization in perspective-taking conditions and liberal participants perceived greater levels of polarization in perspective-taking conditions. The interaction suggests that there may not be a scenario where perceived perspective-taking reduces perceptions of polarization among all partisans. Future research can explore whether perceptions of polarization were subjected to the influence of moderators within this study, but it may be inferred that alternate routes of polarization reduction should be explored beyond or in conjunction with perspective-taking.

The implications for politicians are more straightforward. Democratic candidates were better liked by liberals and conservatives when they indicated that they took the
perspective of their opponent. Although the means weren’t significantly different between conditions, Republicans were better liked on average by liberals and conservatives when they indicated that they took the perspective of their opponent. Additionally, perspective-taking candidates were perceived as being more likely to win the election by participants, regardless of ideology. That is to say that politicians should be encouraged to, or at the very least not discouraged from, taking the perspectives of their opponents; Perspective-taking candidates are perceived as more likable and more likely to win elections.

The governor’s veto of House Bill 11 was ultimately overturned by the House and Senate, going into effect on July 1, 2022 (Utah State Legislature, 2022). After vetoing the bill, Governor Spencer Cox was lambasted by former conservative talk show host, Tucker Carlson, for using pronouns when introducing himself (Romboy, 2022). A November 2022 poll showed Cox had a 63% approval rating, with the largest percentage of supporters identifying as ‘somewhat liberal’ (Dunphey, 2022). In January of 2023, several anti-trans bills moved through the Utah House and Senate without any veto from the governor (McKellar, 2023). When the following poll was conducted in April of 2023, Governor Cox had an approval rating of 64%, losing support from liberals but gaining support from conservatives and moderates (Dunphey, 2023).

The fluctuations in the approval rating of Governor Cox mirror the results of this study to an extent, but there are other factors at play that make direct comparisons difficult. Although support for transgender individuals does vary along partisan lines, the governor claimed an attempt to understand transgender individuals and not any singular opponent or political party. It would also stand to reason that the governor’s approval
rating was likely more influenced by the bills that he vetoed or failed to veto, rather than any claim of perspective-taking or understanding. These moderating factors can be explored more in future studies by potentially including the candidates’ fabricated voting histories and assessing participants’ perceptions of the candidates' willingness to deviate from partisan voting patterns in the future.

**Conclusion**

This research sought to understand how the process of perceived perspective-taking influenced perceptions of politicians and polarization. The results suggest that witnessing a politician take the perspective of their opponents does influence an individual's perceptions of that politician, making them seem more likable and more electable. However, the results also suggest that perceived perspective-taking may lead to a perception of greater ideological polarization among liberals. Returning to the titular question, “Do we want them to understand each other?”, the answer appears to be a very nuanced, “yes”.
References


understood by an out-group predicts more positive intergroup relations via perceived positive regard. PsyArXiv. https://doi.org/10.31234/osf.io/5u7pa


https://doi.org/10.1177/1368430218819794

https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2020.104030


https://doi.org/10.1037/a0028232


Appendix A: HB11

Please Read:
A message about House Bill 11

On the next page, you will be shown a transcript of an actual interaction between two gubernatorial candidates discussing their attitudes regarding house bill 11 (HB11).

HB11 is a proposed state bill that would create a commission that would make decisions on a case-by-case basis as to whether or not to allow transgender persons to participate in gender-designated school sports.

Without this bill, transgender students can participate in gender-designated school sports in accordance with the gender that they choose to identify with.

For the purposes of this study, the names of the candidates will not be included. Candidates will be identified by their party affiliation.

After reading the transcript, you will be asked to answer some questions regarding your opinions of the candidates and the likelihood that they will be elected governor.
Appendix B: Candidate Statements

Control Condition

Republican candidate statement:
I believe this bill to be a necessary piece of legislation. HB11 will create a statistical database, for each gender-specific sport, to establish a baseline for the physical characteristics of anyone participating in a sport of a specific age and gender. The purpose of this bill is not to discriminate against transgender students. Rather, this bill is proposed to protect the integrity of women’s sports for the value of competition.

Democrat candidate statement:
I believe this bill to be unnecessary, unpatriotic, and unkind. HB11 would create a commission to selectively decide when to exclude transgender students from participating in school sports. The idea that this commission is necessary by any means presupposes that these students are guilty of poor sportsmanship at best, and malicious intent at worst. This proposed bill is needlessly discriminatory toward a group of people who already are more at risk for mental health issues and suicide.
Democratic Perspective-Taking Condition

Republican candidate statement:
I believe this bill to be a necessary piece of legislation. HB11 will create a statistical database, for each gender-specific sport, to establish a baseline for the physical characteristics of anyone participating in a sport of a specific age and gender. The purpose of this bill is not to discriminate against transgender students. Rather, this bill is proposed to protect the integrity of women’s sports for the value of competition.

Democrat candidate statement:
I think I understand why you support this bill. You want to make sure that school sports remain a safe and fair place for cisgender female students. I too want school sports to be a safe place for students, but I don’t believe that excluding transgender students from participation is necessary for doing so. I believe this bill to be unnecessary, unpatriotic, and unkind. HB11 would create a commission to selectively decide when to exclude transgender students from participating in school sports. The idea that this commission is necessary by any means presupposes that these students are guilty of poor sportsmanship at best, and malicious intent at worst. This proposed bill is needlessly discriminatory toward a group of people who already are more at risk for mental health issues and suicide.
Republican Perspective-Taking Condition

**Democrat candidate statement:**

I believe this bill to be unnecessary, unpatriotic, and unkind. HB11 would create a commission to selectively decide when to exclude transgender students from participating in school sports. The idea that this commission is necessary by any means presupposes that these students are guilty of poor sportsmanship at best, and malicious intent at worst. This proposed bill is needlessly discriminatory toward a group of people who already are more at risk for mental health issues and suicide.

**Republican candidate statement**

I think I understand why you oppose this bill. You want to make sure that there are equal opportunities for transgender students and that they not be discriminated against. I too want transgender children to be included, but I want to know that we are not making an unfair playing field for women in doing so. I believe this bill to be a necessary piece of legislation. HB11 will create a statistical database, for each gender-specific sport, to establish a baseline for the physical characteristics of anyone participating in a sport of a specific age and gender. The purpose of this bill is not to discriminate against transgender students. Rather, this bill is proposed to protect the integrity of women’s sports for the value of competition.
Appendix C: Control

Attitudes Towards Transgender Individuals

How positive or negative do you feel about the following groups of people on the scale of 0 to 100, where 0 represents very negative, and 100 represents very positive?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Extremely negative</th>
<th>Somewhat negative</th>
<th>Neither positive nor negative</th>
<th>Somewhat positive</th>
<th>Extremely positive</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Transgender individuals</td>
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<tr>
<td>Politicians</td>
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<td>Baby boomers</td>
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<td>Members of generation Z</td>
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<td>Landlords</td>
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Appendix D: Attention Check

Which candidate, if any, reported understanding the perspective of their opponent?

a. The Republican candidate understood the Democratic candidate.

b. The Democratic candidate understood the Republican candidate.

c. Neither candidate understood their opponent.
Appendix E: Manipulation Check

Regarding the topic of HB11, how well do you feel that the Republican candidate understands the Democratic candidate? (1 = not at all, 7 = extremely well)

Regarding the topic of HB11, how well do you feel that the Democratic candidate understands the Republican candidate? (1 = not at all, 7 = extremely well)
Appendix F: Perceptions of Candidates

Using the feeling thermometer below, please rate how you feel about

the Democratic candidate.

Ratings between 5 and 10 mean that you feel favorable and warm toward the person.
Ratings between 0 and 5 mean that you don't feel favorable toward the person.
You would rate the person at 5 if you don't feel particularly warm or cold toward the
person.

Using the feeling thermometer below, please rate how you feel about

the Republican candidate.

Ratings between 5 and 10 mean that you feel favorable and warm toward the person.
Ratings between 0 and 5 mean that you don't feel favorable toward the person.
You would rate the person at 5 if you don't feel particularly warm or cold toward the
person.
Appendix G: Predictions of Election Outcomes

Based on the interaction above, which candidate do you think is more likely to win the election for governor?

a. The Republican candidate

b. The Democratic candidate

What percentage of the following groups do you think will vote for the Republican candidate?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>0</th>
<th>10</th>
<th>20</th>
<th>30</th>
<th>40</th>
<th>50</th>
<th>60</th>
<th>70</th>
<th>80</th>
<th>90</th>
<th>100</th>
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<td>Republican voters</td>
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<td>Democratic voters</td>
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<td>Independent voters</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

What percentage of the following groups do you think will vote for the Democratic candidate?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>0</th>
<th>10</th>
<th>20</th>
<th>30</th>
<th>40</th>
<th>50</th>
<th>60</th>
<th>70</th>
<th>80</th>
<th>90</th>
<th>100</th>
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<td>Independent voters</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Appendix F: Felt Understanding

Please use the table provided to answer questions about how well you feel Republicans understand Democrats (-3 = completely disagree, 3 = completely agree):

In general, Republicans do not ‘get’ Democrats' views
In general, Republicans respect Democrats' beliefs
In general, Republicans understand Democrats' values
In general, Republicans have a very good understanding of the views of Democrats
In general, Republicans have a good understanding of what Democrats think
In general, Republicans do not understand Democrats' perspectives
In general, Republicans have no understanding of the views of Democrats

Please use the table provided to answer questions about how well you feel Democrats understand Republicans (-3 = completely disagree, 3 = completely agree):

In general, Democrats do not ‘get’ Republicans' views
In general, Democrats respect Republicans' beliefs
In general, Democrats understand Republicans' values
In general, Democrats have a very good understanding of the views of Republicans
In general, Democrats have a good understanding of what Republicans think
In general, Democrats do not understand Republicans' perspectives
In general, Democrats have no understanding of the views of Republicans
Appendix G: Inclusion of Other in Self Scale

Please click on the picture below that best describes the relationship between Republicans and Democrats
Appendix H: Policy Support

As of today, which statement best describes your position on HB11?

a. I oppose HB11

b. I support HB11

How confident are you in your position on the issue of HB11? (1 = not at all confident, 5 = fully confident)
Appendix I: Perceived Issue Polarization

Please enter below the percentage of voters that you believe support HB11.

Percentage of Republicans that support HB11

Percentage of Democrats that support HB11
Appendix J: Demographics

What is your age?

What is your racial/ethnic identity or identities? Check all that apply.

a. American Indian or Alaska Native
b. Asian
c. Black or African American
d. Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin
e. Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander
f. White
g. Not listed (Please specify below)

How do you currently define your gender identity?

a. Male
b. Female
c. Non-binary / third gender
d. Prefer not to say
e. Not listed (Please specify below)

Where would you rate your political beliefs, on a scale of 1 (Very Liberal) to 7 (Very Conservative)? (1 = very liberal, 7 = very conservative)
What political party, if any, are you affiliated with?

a. Democratic Party

b. Republican Party

c. Green Party

d. Libertarian Party

e. Independent / no party affiliation

f. Not listed (Please specify below)

(If a party is selected)

Please indicate the degree with which you identify with your political party. (1 = not at all, 7 = very much)

This ladder represents people’s standings in society (or socioeconomic status). At the top of the ladder are the people who are the best off, those who have the most money, most education, and best jobs. At the bottom are the people who are the worst off, those who have the least money, least education, worst jobs, or no job. Please click on the rung that best represents where you think you stand on the ladder.
Appendix K: Demographic Data

Figure 8

Participant Distribution by State

Table 5

Ideological differences between groups

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Condition</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>SE</th>
<th>95% Confidence Intervals</th>
<th>Minimum</th>
<th>Maximum</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>1.80</td>
<td>.825</td>
<td>.116</td>
<td>1.57 - 2.04</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>5.72</td>
<td>.759</td>
<td>.122</td>
<td>5.47 - 5.96</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>1.88</td>
<td>.773</td>
<td>.109</td>
<td>1.66 - 2.10</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>57</td>
<td>5.74</td>
<td>.720</td>
<td>.095</td>
<td>5.55 - 5.93</td>
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<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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Note. Liberal participants were assigned to odd number conditions, whereas conservative participants were assigned to even number conditions. Ideology was measured on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = very liberal, 7 = very conservative)
Appendix L: Control for Attitudes Towards Transgender Individuals

Assumptions

A Levene’s test showed that the variance of ratings of candidate understanding was not equal between conditions, $F(5, 288) = 9.57, p < .001$. Similarly, Levene’s tests showed that the variance was not equal for ratings of Democratic candidates, $F(5, 270) = 2.284, p = .047$, ratings of Republican candidates, $F(5, 267) = 42.55, p = .028$, or responses to the felt understanding scale, $F(5, 289) = 4.2, p < .001$. The variance was equal for responses to the measures of affective polarization, $F(5, 282) = 0.49, p = .782$, and ideological polarization, $F(5, 289) = 0.72, p = .61$.

Manipulation Check

An analysis of variance indicates that the manipulation was effective as indicated by a main effect of perspective-taking, $F(2, 291) = 112.4, p < .001, \eta^2 = .44$.

Ratings of Candidates

The analysis of variance showed that the main effect of perspective-taking was significant for both ratings of Democrats, $F(2, 273) = 13.37, p < .001, \eta^2 = .09$ and Republicans, $F(2, 270) = 5.66, p = .004, \eta^2 = .04$.

Felt Understanding

There was no main effect for perspective-taking, $F(2, 292) = 2.17, p = .116, \eta^2 = .02$, but there was an interaction effect between political ideology and perspective-taking $F(2, 292) = 52.86, p < .001, \eta^2 = .27$.

Affective Polarization
An analysis of variance revealed neither a significant main effect for perspective-taking, $F(2, 285) = 0.42, p = .658, \eta^2 = .003$, nor an interaction effect, $F(2, 285) = 0.58, p = .563, \eta^2 = .004$.

**Perceived Ideological Polarization**

The analysis of variance revealed that there was a significant main effect for perspective-taking, $F(2, 292) = 3.45, p = .033, \eta^2 = .02$ as well as an interaction effect between perspective-taking and participants’ political ideology $F(2, 292) = 5.69, p = .004, \eta^2 = .04$. 
Appendix M: Results Without Excluding Failed Attention Checks

Assumptions

A Levene’s test showed that the variance of ratings of candidate understanding was not equal between conditions, $F(5, 333) = 12.75$, $p < .001$. Levene’s tests showed that the variance was not equal for ratings of Democratic candidates, $F(5, 311) = 2.73$, $p = .02$, ratings of Republican candidates, $F(5, 307) = 2.97$, $p = .012$, or responses to the felt understanding scale, $F(5, 334) = 4.71$, $p < .001$. The variance was equal for responses to the measures of affective polarization, $F(5, 327) = 1.02$, $p = .405$, and ideological polarization, $F(5, 334) = 0.64$, $p = .667$.

A Shapiro-Wilks’ test revealed that the responses for ratings of both Democrats ($W = .88$, $p < .001$) and Republicans ($W = .93$, $p < .001$) were not normally distributed. Additionally, the data were not normally distributed for responses to the felt understanding scale ($W = .97$, $p = .015$), IOS scale ($W = .77$, $p < .001$), or the measure of ideological polarization ($W = .94$, $p < .001$).

Manipulation Check

An analysis of variance indicates that the manipulation was effective as indicated by a main effect of perspective-taking, $F(2, 336) = 167.69$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .3$.

Ratings of Candidates

The analysis of variance showed that the main effect of perspective-taking was significant for both ratings of Democrats, $F(2, 314) = 11.53$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .07$ and Republicans, $F(2, 310) = 3.38$, $p = .035$, $\eta^2 = .02$.

Felt Understanding
There was no main effect for perspective-taking, $F(2, 337) = 2, \ p = .159 \ \eta^2 = .01$, but there was an interaction effect between political ideology and perspective-taking $F(2, 337) = 62.02, \ p < .001, \ \eta^2 = .27$.

**Affective Polarization**

An analysis of variance revealed neither a significant main effect for perspective-taking, $F(2, 330) = 1.24, \ p = .29, \ \eta^2 = .01$, nor an interaction effect, $F(2, 330) = 1.3, \ p = .273, \ \eta^2 = .01$.

**Perceived Ideological Polarization**

The analysis of variance revealed that there was a significant main effect for perspective-taking, $F(2, 337) = 3.39, \ p = .035, \ \eta^2 = .02$ as well as an interaction effect between perspective-taking and participants’ political ideology $F(2, 337) = 4.85, \ p = .008, \ \eta^2 = .03$. 
### Appendix N: Ideological Extremity Analyses

#### Table 6

**Ideological Extremity ANOVAs**

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Perceived Polarization

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*Note. N = 297. Control = no perspective-taker condition; DPT = Democratic perspective-taker; RPT = Republican perspective-taker; ANOVA = analysis of variance; IE = ideological extremity; P-T = perspective-taking.

* p < .05. ** p < .01. *** p < .001.
Appendix O: Additional Figures

Figure 9

*Main Effects of Perspective-Taking*