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Moving beyond us-versus-them polarization towards constructive conversations

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ABSTRACT

The global surge of political polarization poses a significant threat to liberal democracies. The prevailing “us-versus-them” mentality prevents leaders from effectively addressing societal issues. While intergroup dialogue shows promise in bridging divisions among diverse identity groups, the dynamics of real-life conversations between individuals with opposing political identities remain underexplored. This study investigates a unique case study of constructive face-to-face interactions among American political elites on a contentious issue. By examining how opposing leaders collaborate towards shared goals, the research identifies communicative actions that can reduce polarization. This study delves into the complex dynamics of polarization, as both an issue-based and identity-based conflict, focusing on interactional framing strategies leaders use to navigate their differences. The findings reveal that political leaders bridge ideological divides by embracing multiple frames, reconnecting conflicting frames, and developing neutral non-political frames. They also foster positive relations, use superordinate identities, and decrease social distance, thereby bridging their identity gap. By fostering convergence rather than accentuating differences, they effectively counteract polarization. Studying rare examples of constructive bipartisan collaboration offers valuable insights into reducing polarization, restoring political trust among the general public, and mitigating broader societal impacts, ultimately strengthening the foundations of a healthy democracy.

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KEYWORDS democracy; interactional framing; intergroup dialogue; intractable conflict; elite polarization; identity-based (affective) polarization; issue-based (ideological) polarization

Introduction

The global rise of political polarization has sparked concerns about the future of liberal democracies.¹ The division of societies into opposing camps with an “us-versus-them” mentality has not only led to a loss of important diversity² but also fostered a growing distrust and dislike towards out-groups.³ Political leaders increasingly treat their rivals as enemies, portraying them as a threat to the nation. The resulting political gridlock and lack of constructive communication prevent leaders from solving major societal

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problems. Experts have warned that when civil battles descend into political warfare, institutions can become weapons used by both sides to advance their own interests and power⁴, leading to democratic backsliding.⁵

Amidst deepening societal divisions, constructive intergroup dialogue has emerged as a potential solution to bridge gaps among diverse identity groups.⁶ These structured and facilitated face-to-face conversations on politically charged topics allow diverse individuals and groups to safely explore differences, develop understanding and relations, and work towards collective action.⁷ Key conditions for success include equal group status, common goals, intergroup cooperation, and institutional support.⁸ While partisan identities have become increasingly prominent in many democracies⁹, there remains limited understanding of positive intergroup contact among individuals with differing political affiliations¹⁰, as well as the content and dynamics of these interactions.¹¹ With a lack of natural cross-party interactions, scholars often rely on controlled experiments or imagined contact,¹² which typically show limited or no long-term impacts on reducing prejudice or polarization.¹³ Research in the field of deliberate democracy shows promise in mitigating political polarization in real-life conversations among citizens¹⁴, though underlying mechanisms remain unclear.¹⁵ Scalability of these interventions also poses significant challenges, highlighting the need for alternative approaches to enhance their efficacy and reach.¹⁶

One promising area is the vital role of political leaders in shaping public attitudes and interparty relations.¹⁷ Notably, exposure to simulated news stories depicting warm relationships between U.S. Senate leaders Chuck Schumer (Democrat) and Mitch McConnell (Republican) appears to mitigate polarization.¹⁸ However, the current political climate incentivizes animosity and adversarial relations over constructive conversation and collaboration.¹⁹

This research investigates rare instances of bipartisan collaboration on a divisive issue among U.S. political elites. By providing an in-depth analysis of the actual behaviour of political rivals during three constructive face-to-face interactions, it seeks to identify communicative actions that could foster depolarization. The study explores both *issue-based* and *identity-based polarization*.²⁰ While issue-based polarization relates to the growing division on policy issues²¹, identity-based polarization suggests that it is driven by an increasing dissimilarity in partisan identities.²² Applying a lens on conflict as a dynamic process of social interaction²³, this research focuses on the interactional framing strategies employed by political adversaries to reduce conflict dynamics.²⁴ Hence, the following research question will be explored: How do political leaders in constructive face-to-face interactions navigate framing differences on conflict issues and identities to facilitate depolarization? Examining these positive examples of constructive dialogues among political elites not only provides valuable insights into discursive strategies that may foster depolarization but also holds the potential to restore political trust and mitigate the adverse impacts of elite polarization on the general public²⁵ thereby strengthening the foundations of a healthy democracy.

Theoretical framework

To gain a deeper understanding of mitigating polarization in conflict interactions, this section begins with a brief overview of relevant literature on issue-based and identity-based polarization. Subsequently, it portrays conflict as a process of social interaction, emphasizing its general dynamics and patterns that shape the potential for

depolarization. The exploration concludes by discussing the interactional framing of issues and identities/relationships. It elaborates on strategies for addressing framing differences, underscoring the critical role of communication styles and language in this context.

Polarization: issue-based and identity-based

For a long time, political scientists have predominantly examined political divisions through the lens of ideology. This form of *issue-based polarization* explains the growing partisan divide by an increasing dissimilarity in beliefs between one's own party (in-group) and other parties (out-groups).²⁶ Some scholars argue that this widening gap is a result of ideological divergence with ideological stances and policy preferences moving away from the centre and clustering around opposite ends of the political spectrum.²⁷ Contrarily, others assert that the escalating polarization is a result of a process of alignment in which ideology and issue preferences have become more consistent and increasingly intertwined with partisanship.²⁸ In essence, issue-based polarization disperses parties as they shift further away from the ideological centre and/or become more ideologically cohesive.²⁹

Alongside ideological differences and the view of polarization as a conflict on issues, there is a perspective that depicts polarization as the primary result of a widening gap in political identities. This *identity-based polarization* fosters feelings of distrust, dislike, and animosity among supporters of opposing political camps.³⁰ People derive their identity from their membership of specific social groups, which provides them with a sense of belonging and self-esteem.³¹ Individuals generally prefer to maintain a positive self-image, seeking desirable characteristics like values, attitudes, and character traits within their in-groups.³² Consequently, when prioritizing their in-group identity, they tend to exhibit a positive bias towards members of their own party but also develop negative attitudes towards the opposing party.³³ Political partisanship has become a prominent social identity in the U.S.³⁴ leading to increasingly negative feelings and perceptions towards members of the opposing party. In-groups tend to stereotype the out-group as selfish, close-minded, unintelligent, dishonest, immoral, or hypocritical.³⁵ To protect or enhance a positive ingroup identity, political leaders try to maximize ingroup-outgroup distinction by magnifying partisan identities.³⁶ Furthermore, negative advertising in political campaigns exacerbates anti-pathetic views and political tensions between the two parties.³⁷ In short, identity-based polarization has fuelled deeply negative stereotypes and hostility towards the opposing party, along with a more favourable perception of one's own party.³⁸ Therefore, to comprehend how to mitigate polarization in conflict interactions, it is essential to consider the impacts of both issue-based and identity-based manifestations of the conflict. Next, we need a particular approach to understanding conflict as a process of social interaction.

Conflict as a process of social interaction

Conflicts can be defined as struggles arising from perceived incompatibility of interests, resources, beliefs, values, or goals by at least two interdependent parties.³⁹ Intractable conflicts, in contrast to manageable ones, are particularly trying as they are highly complex and adaptive systems characterized by the interplay of multiple elements:

context, actors, issues, processes, and outcomes. Intractability arises when the different elements of a conflict seemingly merge into a simplistic “us-versus-them” narrative that resists change.⁴⁰ The conflict between the two major U.S. political parties can be perceived as intractable due to growing animosity, irreconcilable differences on key issues, and clashes of identities.

This study views conflict as a process of social interaction, emphasizing its dynamic nature. Conflicts do not solely arise from differences between parties but also from how parties respond to those differences. They are shaped and sustained by moves and countermoves during interactions.⁴¹ Consequently, these moves and countermoves create and define the conflict. Depending on the context and the actors involved, a conflict can take a direction towards escalation, avoidance, or suppression, or move towards resolution.

General conflict strategies and patterns

Conflict resolution approaches of individuals are influenced by their balance between assertiveness (i.e. concern for self) and cooperativeness (i.e. concern for others). This balance is shaped by the (perceived) clash of goals and interdependence in the given situation. *Competing* and *avoiding* strategies, which prioritize assertiveness, are often seen as polarizing. On the other hand, *accommodating*, *collaborating*, or *compromising* strategies focused on cooperation facilitate bridging divides.⁴² Conflict studies unveiled three fundamental behavioural patterns that impact potential outcomes.⁴³ *Opposite strategies*, where participants use contrasting tactics (e.g. combining cooperative moves with controversial moves), tend to widen the gap. Conversely, *reciprocal strategies*, where parties directly match each other’s tactics, and *complementary strategies*, where parties use tactics that balance or complement each other⁴⁴ may foster depolarization. In the latter case, parties may share a broad orientation (i.e. cooperative versus competitive) towards the conflict but demonstrate different behavioural choices.⁴⁵ It is critical to acknowledge that these behavioural patterns tend to become self-reinforcing cycles.⁴⁶ For instance, polarizing behaviour triggers more polarization, while cooperative behaviour elicits cooperative responses. Examining general conflict strategies and patterns allows for the identification of bridging or polarizing dynamics within conversations.

Interactional framing strategies concerning issues and identities

An important strategy to transform intractable conflicts is changing the way they are framed.⁴⁷ Framing can be described as highlighting “some aspects from a perceived reality to make them more salient in a communicative context”.⁴⁸ In conflicts, opposing parties often hold differing views of the same events. Framing helps us to understand how parties define problems, identify their causes, make moral judgements, and propose actions and solutions.⁴⁹ Furthermore, adopting an interactional-constructivist approach of framing⁵⁰, which views frames as products of negotiation and interaction, proves to be a valuable approach for enhancing the understanding of conflict dynamics.

Interactional framing of issues

This research underscores the context-dependent nature of framing. It explores three face-to-face interactions involving Republican and Democratic members of an

unconventional initiative, the bipartisan “Climate Solutions Caucus” in the U.S. Despite the prevailing polarization and unwillingness to compromise on pressing and divisive issues, these political leaders collaborate towards a shared goal of finding bipartisan solutions for climate change. To grasp how political opponents align their issue frames in their conversations, it is important to consider the world-views⁵¹, values, and dominant frames adopted by Democrats and Republicans in the climate change debate. Previous research identified two overarching master frames for framing climate change.⁵² The *anthropocentric master frame* views humans as the primary victims of climate change and prioritizes human domination, economic growth, utilitarianism, and competition.⁵³ This aligns with Republican principles such as individualism and free market ideology. Republicans tend to express greater scepticism of climate change, doubt the effectiveness of government policies, and prioritize the economy.⁵⁴ In contrast, the *biocentric master frame* sees humans as a part of nature and advocates for environmental preservation.⁵⁵ This perspective aligns with Democratic values like preventing harm, fairness, and equality, often manifested in policies related to environmental protection and assistance for affected communities. When analysing the individual issue frames expressed by Republican and Democratic participants in this study, overarching master frames and values will be considered.

Interactional framing of identities

Identity work, as described by Bartel and Dutton⁵⁶, involves the “collaborative effort to give meaning to one’s self and others in a given context”. In conflict situations, individuals often maintain distinct identities related to either their self-conception or group affiliations (identity frame) and attribute specific characteristics to others (characterization frame).⁵⁷ Identity-based polarization typically involves positive characterization of the in-group (own party) and harbouring negative feelings towards the out-group (opposing party). In this study, identity frames were classified according to Brummans et al.’s (2008)⁵⁸ four categories: positive and negative identity (regarding oneself or one’s own group); and positive and negative characterizations of their relationship. The concept of “face” plays a critical role in establishing identity and relationship framing. Face can be negative, representing the desire for autonomy, or positive, reflecting the wish to the gain approval of others. Face-detracting strategies that compromise the respect, integrity, or credibility of the other party, contribute to polarization. In contrast, face-saving strategies that protect credibility and separate the message from the messenger⁵⁹ foster the bridging of divides.

Strategies for dealing with framing differences

As previously noted, this research interprets conflict patterns in terms of “moves” and “countermoves”⁶⁰ and seeks to identify strategies that foster depolarization. Participants may respond differently to each other’s moves, either through oppositional countermoves or by aligning their frames.⁶¹ Consequently, each move reveals whether the other’s framing is accepted or declined. The choice to maintain or modify their framing in subsequent responses is crucial.⁶² When participants use incompatible frames or struggle to develop a shared frame, conflicts persist, leading to sustained polarization.⁶³ Conversely, prioritizing convergence by aligning frames enhances the potential to resolve conflicts and bridge divides.

This research will focus on general behavioural patterns and the overall conversational tone to grasp how political elites mitigate polarization. To identify framing strategies related to issues and identities/relationships it draws upon Communicative Framing Theory (CFT) as proposed by Drake & Donohue⁶⁴ CFT combines elements of Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT), which explains how individuals accommodate (adjust) their communication styles⁶⁵ and Negotiated Order Theory⁶⁶, viewing communication behaviours as implicit negotiations. Participants can accept or reject frames presented by others, leading to *convergence* (i.e. transcending differences) or *divergence* (i.e. accentuating differences).⁶⁷ Convergence enhances mutual understanding or reduces social distance, while divergence may disrupt understanding and increase social distance.⁶⁸

As participants' behaviour can be observed in language, it is imperative to examine the communication styles and the language used by participants.

Communication styles and specific language regarding framing issues and identities

In this study, language is considered both expressive and performative. Language choices not only shape the context for discussing topics but also serve as proposals to maintain or alter existing frame boundaries.⁶⁹ Therefore, language significantly influences how issues and identities are framed and understood. The choice of communication styles and specific language can either contribute to polarization or help to reduce it. *Defensive communication*, characterized by judgement, control, neutrality, superiority, and unwillingness to compromise, tends to widen the gap. On the other hand, *supportive communication*, involving description, problem orientation, spontaneity, empathy, equality, and compromising, promotes bridging divides.⁷⁰ Additionally, political rhetoric often reflects a party's moral values⁷¹ with liberals endorsing values like preventing harm, care, and fairness and conservatives emphasizing loyalty, authority, and sanctity.⁷² Prior research⁷³ suggests that incorporating language associated with the opposing party's moral values can be an effective strategy to promote convergence and understanding. To achieve a comprehensive understanding of potential depolarizing strategies in constructive interactions across divides, this study will examine supportive communication, including specific (moral) language employed by participants concerning both issues and identities/relationships.

Methodology

Data collection

This research investigates a case study consisting of three constructive facilitated dialogues among three distinct pairs of U.S. Congress members regarding the contentious issue of climate change. The conversations occurred in real-life settings, each featuring one Democrat and one Republican, all of whom are members of the bipartisan Climate Solutions Caucus. With participants possessing equal power and status and collaborating towards a shared goal, these dialogues fulfil critical conditions for successful intergroup contact.⁷⁴ The conversations took place in Washington D.C., United States, throughout 2017, 2018, and 2019. The first two dialogues were organized by the Friends Committee on National Legislation (FCNL) with a neutral facilitator, while the third dialogue was convened by the Brookings Institution with an expert

facilitator actively participating. Both organizations, FNCL and the Brookings Institution, strive to foster bipartisan collaboration and policy solutions for critical issues such as climate change, utilizing lobbying efforts (FNCL) and research initiatives (Brookings Institution). The dialogues centred around key topics: the bipartisan Climate Solutions Caucus (Dialogue 1), bipartisan strategies for addressing climate change with a focus on resilient infrastructure against extreme weather (Dialogue 2), and leading carbon price proposals (Dialogue 3). The dialogues were designed for a diverse audience, including the organizational staff, policymakers, researchers, coalition partners, constituents, and congressional staff. Each conversation was documented through video-recordings⁷⁵ and transcribed, resulting in 70 pages of double-spaced transcript. Given the scarcity of recordings depicting constructive dialogues across political divides, these exchanges offered a unique opportunity to observe interactional dynamics unfolding in a real-world context.

Data analysis

This case study employs a form of discourse analysis⁷⁶ to examine the interactional framing of issues and identities among political adversaries in constructive interactions. For the analysis of the transcripts, the authors adopted a thematic approach, with “issues” (i.e. climate change) and “identities” serving as the primary units of analysis. This approach, similar to “framework analysis”, allowed the authors to concentrate on specific responses while disregarding others. Framework analysis is well-suited for research “that has specific questions, a limited time frame, a pre-designed sample and a priori issues”.⁷⁷

The data analysis encompassed four distinct steps. The *first step* involved the selection of relevant sequences related to the main themes, namely the issue of climate change and identity work in both dialogues. The authors thoroughly reviewed the entire transcripts, and quotations were systematically sorted based on the political identities of participants. In the *second step*, a detailed examination of the interactional framing of issues (i.e. climate change) and identities/relationships was conducted, including the use of specific communication styles and language choices. Participants’ issue frames were compared to dominant master frames on climate change, while identity frames were classified according to Brummans et al.’s (2008) four categories: positive identity: portraying oneself or one’s group in a positive, constructive, or optimistic way; negative identity: portraying oneself or one’s group in a negative, pessimistic or destructive manner; positive characterization: portraying another person or group in a positive, constructive, or optimistic way; negative characterization: portraying another person or group in a negative, pessimistic or destructive manner.⁷⁸ In the *third step*, interactional framing strategies regarding issues and identities/relationships were identified by analysing participants’ “moves” and “countermoves”. Given the structured format of the interactions, the analysis prioritized interactional strategies at the level of the entire conversation rather than delving into individual speech acts or single turn sequences.⁷⁹ This study applied the principles of CFT to discern how participants accommodated (adjusted) their communication behaviour to navigate their differences. The primary focus was on examining whether participants’ communicative actions facilitated convergence (i.e. transcending differences), instead of divergence (i.e. accentuating differences), thereby fostering depolarization. Effective strategies for achieving convergence included accommodating behaviours regarding

both issues (such as accepting frames, supportive communication, and language promoting mutual understanding across ideological differences) and identities/relationships (such as employing positive characterizations and using face-saving strategies to cultivate positive relations and reduce social distance). In the *final step*, overarching patterns on both issue and identity framing levels were analysed. This encompassed accommodating, collaborative, and compromising approaches, along with reciprocal and complementary strategies employed by participants. Furthermore, positive self-reinforcing cycles that foster cooperation and depolarization were investigated.

The analysis involved an interactive process where the first and second authors discussed the findings and modified the results until agreement was reached. Supplementary literature was also consulted to support the findings.

Results

The analysis of how political leaders framed issues and identities in both dialogues revealed diverse strategies employed by the participants to navigate framing disparities (see Table 1). Rather than accentuating their differences, participants dedicated significant effort to bridging their ideological and identity divides.

Depolarizing strategies at the issue framing level

Regarding issues, the following strategies were identified: embracing multiple issue frames, reconnecting conflicting issue frames, and developing shared neutral/consensus issue frames.

Embracing multiple issue frames

Rather than just relying on dichotomous frames, leaders from opposing parties used multiple frames to address the issue of climate change. Remarkably, participants not only embraced frames that resonated with their own party's worldviews and values but also those associated with the opposing party's values and perspectives (see Table 2). The three dialogues varied in their use of issue frames: in Dialogues 2 and 3, Democratic and Republican participants predominantly used *common* frames, whereas Dialogue 1 included distinct *individual frames*. Furthermore, in the third dialogue, the facilitator significantly shaped the conversation by using specific issue frames, a point that will be elaborated further.

In Dialogue 1, participants initially proposed distinct frames that accentuated their ideological differences, leading to a state of divergence. However, they achieved convergence by demonstrating the ability to hold multiple and sometimes opposing frames. For instance, the Democratic participant strongly articulated an individual *moral frame*, affirming, "God created this magnificent [planet and] ... we have a moral responsibility to protect it and pass it on to future generations". Her moral frame is deeply rooted in her Christian beliefs (e.g. responsibility of stewardship) as well as her liberal values (e.g. preventing *harm* to future generations due to climate change). Remarkably, she then introduced a *patriotism frame* emphasizing the United States' global leadership in addressing climate change, which aligns with Republican values. By embracing multiple frames encompassing both her own party's values and those of the opposing party, she bridged the ideological divide. The Republican participant adopted a similar strategy. He introduced an *economic*

Table 1. Overview Depolarizing Strategies at Issue and Identity/Relationship Framing Levels.

Framing strategy	Description + subcategories	Example quotes (including brief interpretation)
Strategies at issue framing level		
<i>Embracing multiple issue frames</i>	Adopting multiple issue frames that encompass values and perspectives of both the Democratic and Republican parties.	Participants in all dialogues used multiple issue frames from both political sides. In Dialogue 1, the Democrat presented a <i>moral frame</i> (“... for me this is a moral issue ”) reflecting Democratic values, such as preventing harm and addressing the unfair distribution of climate change burdens. Simultaneously, she embraced a <i>patriotism frame</i> (“ being the leader that we’ve always been [on the issue of climate change] ”) associated with Republican values, such as patriotism and America’s global leadership. In Dialogue 3, the Democrat highlighted an <i>economic frame</i> (“ They’re noticing the cost, the impact, the \$300 billion a year in damage that a change in climate is already imposing on the American economy ”) appealing to Republican values. Meanwhile, the Republican acknowledged the <i>science frame</i> (“ Trying to get a few people to talk about climate, having man having a role. I always say to my Republican friends, go read the IPCC, you know ”), a perspective typically associated with Democrats.
<i>Reconnecting conflicting issue frames</i>	Reconciling conflicting frames from opposing political sides by removing the perceived incompatibility between them.	In Dialogues 2 and 3, participants combined a <i>pollution mitigation frame</i> aligned with Democratic values, such as preventing harm and care for the environment, with an <i>economic frame</i> associated with the Republican party’s free-market ideology. Statements like “ We can have both environmental protection and economic growth ” and “ I think capitalism and environmentalism go hand-in-hand ” illustrate this approach.
<i>Developing consensus or neutral issue frames</i>	Portraying climate change as a consensus issue requiring bipartisan collaboration, or presenting it as a neutral, non-political issue.	In all three dialogues, participants emphasized the importance of bipartisan <i>climate policies</i> and collaboration, referencing efforts such as promoting “ a strong bipartisan bill in the Senate ”. They portrayed the issue as one of shared consensus (“ This should be a consensus issue ”) or as a <i>neutral, non-political matter</i> (“ I think that we don’t always have to talk about it in terms of climate change and making it a political issue ”). Additionally, participants proposed alternative, non-political frames, such as a “resilience” or “public health” perspective.
Strategies at identity / relationship framing level		
<i>Strategies fostering positive relations</i> (instead of negative stereotyping)	Portraying the other person or out-group in a positive, constructive, and appreciative manner.	Participants in all dialogues consistently used positive characterizations. For example, in Dialogue 1, the Democrat commended Republican members of the bipartisan Climate Solutions Caucus (“ this is new for a lot of Republicans. I mean ... it’s a huge step ”). Rather than relying on negative stereotypes, she recognized the valuable and constructive contributions of the opposing party towards addressing climate change.
<i>Face-saving strategies</i>	Preserving the credibility of the other speaker and demonstrating respect and/or warm feelings.	Participants in the dialogues, frequently expressed respect and warm feelings towards their counterparts. In Dialogue 1, the Republican participant demonstrated respect for the Democrat by seeking advice and acknowledging her seniority and expertise (“ given your expertise and your experience what do you see as the most prudent course [in addressing the issue of climate change] ”), thereby enhancing her credibility.
<i>Supportive communication</i>	Employing a compromising	Participants in the dialogues generally showed a compromising style and spontaneous behaviour. In Dialogue 3, during a discussion about taxes and regulations for funding climate solutions, the Republican spontaneously stated, “ First, I think

(Continued)



Table 1. Continued.

Framing strategy	Description + subcategories	Example quotes (including brief interpretation)
<p>Strategies related to a <i>superordinate (common) identity</i> (instead of emphasizing a partisan identity)</p>	<p>style, problem-solving approach, maintaining equal power relations, and showing spontaneity and empathy.</p> <p><i>Embracing a superordinate bipartisan identity</i></p> <p>Foregrounding of positive bipartisan identity as Caucus members.</p> <p><i>Distancing from a superordinate polarizing identity</i></p> <p>Criticizing a shared identity as Congress members.</p> <p><i>In-group or self-criticism</i></p> <p>Downgrading or criticizing their in-group identity or employing self-criticism.</p>	<p>you get – like the Senator said, there's a lot of different ways to figure out how to divvy up money that we don't have yet" (Laughter). His acknowledgment of the Democrat's contributions, problem-solving approach, and humour contributed to cultivate positive relations.</p> <p>Instead of emphasizing a divisive partisan identity, particularly in Dialogues 1 and 2, participants highlighted the unique character of their bipartisan collaboration within the polarized context of the U.S. They frequently portrayed their <i>superordinate identity as bipartisan Caucus members</i> in a positive way, exemplified by statements such as "Most members want to be bipartisan. They are looking for opportunities to do it" and "We all have a common interest. We all understand – members of the Solutions Caucus – the impacts of climate change".</p> <p>In contrast to the positive portrayal of their common identity as bipartisan Caucus members, participants distanced themselves from their superordinate identity as Congress members, depicting Congress as "dysfunctional" and portraying it a negative light. One participant expressed this sentiment bluntly: "... the most frustrating thing for me to be totally candid with everyone in this room – that Congress has like an 8% approval rating and obviously the question is who are the 8%?"</p>
<p>Strategies aimed at the <i>decreasing social distance</i> (instead of increasing the identity gap)</p>	<p><i>In-group or self-criticism</i></p> <p>Downgrading or criticizing their in-group identity or employing self-criticism.</p>	<p>In Dialogues 1 and 3, participants employed in-group or self-criticism to narrow the identity gap. The Republican in Dialogue 1 openly criticized the leader of his own party (President Trump), for relinquishing American leadership on climate change, stating "I think it's not being a leader". Similarly, in Dialogue 3, another Republican emphasized his efforts to convince fellow Republicans to acknowledge the human role in climate change, saying "Trying to get a few people to talk about climate, having man having a role". By implicitly critiquing Republicans who deny climate change he decreased social distance with the Democrats.</p>
<p><i>Spotlighting</i></p>	<p>Emphasizing that comments pertain to a specific subset of the (out)group rather than generalizing to the entire group, or highlighting a positive exception to challenge a negative stereotype about that group.</p> <p><i>Overcoming stereotypes</i></p> <p>Correcting stereotypes/biases about the in-group.</p>	<p>Rather than generalizing an entire group, participants in the dialogues frequently highlighted positive exceptions within specific subsets of their own or other's group to portray them positively. In Dialogue 3, the Democrat praised subsets of the Republican party, including "Evangelicals, Catholics, traditional sort of mainline Protestants, and more progressive Christians", for their engagement in addressing climate change. Meanwhile, the Republican spotlighted the younger generation within his own party, noting that "78 percent of millennials vigorously oppose offshore drilling" and praising their support for climate solutions.</p> <p>Participants also explicitly dismantled stereotypes to correct stereotypes about their parties. For example, while the Democratic participant in Dialogue 1 emphasized a typical liberal <i>moral frame</i>, she also took proactive measures to counter the bias of moral superiority within her party, stating, "I think... that there are many on my side of the aisle that don't feel morally superior, but they view it through a moral lens. And that's why there is eh such a passion about it".</p>

Table 2. Overview of Issue Frames Employed by Participants in Dialogues 1, 2, and 3.

Issue frames	Description	Dialogue 1		Dialogue 2		Dialogue 3	
		Dem.	Rep.	Dem..	Rep.	Dem.	Rep.
1. Moral	The moral frame emphasizes ethical imperatives, highlighting liberal values like preventing harm to future generations and fairness in the distribution of the burdens caused by climate change, or Christian values like stewardship to protect the environment.	√	-	-	-	√	√
2. Patriotism	The patriotism frame highlights the role of the United States as a global leader on climate change, linked to American and Republican values such as patriotism and word leadership.	√	√	-	-	-	-
3. Economic	The economic frame emphasizes the costs and benefits of climate change, and the potential of technological innovation, aligning with the free market ideology of the Republican party.	-	√	√	√	√	√
4. Public health	The public health frame links the impacts of climate change, like air pollution, to public health concerns, appealing across the political spectrum due to its focus on human well-being.	√	-	-	√	-	-
5. Consensus (neutral)	The consensus frame portrays climate change as a shared concern transcending political divides, emphasizing it as a non-partisan issue demanding collective action.	√	√	√	√	-	-
6. Global warming	The global warming frame connects global warming to changing weather patterns such as floods, storms, and draughts. This liberal-leaning perspective tends to garner bipartisan support, particularly from counties impacted by extreme weather events.	-	-	√	√	√	√
7. Resilience	The resilience frame emphasizes enhancing infrastructure and resilience in vulnerable communities, serving as a common strategy for climate adaptation that bridges political divides	-	-	√	√	√	√
8. (Pollution) Mitigation	The pollution mitigation frame focuses on reducing carbon emissions and restoring the environment to mitigate climate change's negative impacts. While Democrats are typically more concerned, this strategy finds bipartisan support.	√	√	√	√	√	√
9. Climate Policy	The climate policy frame highlights climate change as a bipartisan issue, emphasizing the importance of implementing effective climate policies across political lines.	√	√	√	√	√	√
10. Responsibility / Accountability	This responsibility / accountability frame underscores political, industrial, and individual accountability for causing climate change, emphasizing the obligation to act, often linked to liberal values like fairness and justice.	-	-	-	-	√	√

(Continued)

Table 2. Continued.

Issue frames	Description	Dialogue 1		Dialogue 2		Dialogue 3	
		Dem.	Rep.	Dem.	Rep.	Dem.	Rep.
11. Science	The science frame highlights the scientific consensus in understanding and addressing climate change. Democrats generally emphasize human impact and urgency, whereas specific subsets of Republicans express scepticism about its anthropogenic causes.	-	-	-	-	√	√

frame associated with Republican values, disregarding the moral frame of the Democratic participant. However, he simultaneously embraced the *patriotism frame* of the Democratic participant. Furthermore, he expressed a nuanced stance on the issue of climate change, using multiple frames that can be summarized as follows: “It is as much about public health considerations as it is about environmental outcomes. It is as much about economic growth in our country as being the leader we’ve always been”. By incorporating the patriotism frame and employing multiple frames, he effectively countered the divergence caused by dismissing the moral frame.

In dialogue 3, the Brookings Institution organizer set the stage by introducing multiple issue frames, such as global warming, (pollution) mitigation, climate policy, and economic perspectives. Both participants incorporated these frames into their discussion, though each emphasized different ones. The Democrat began with a *science frame*, asserting that “climate change is real, [and] ... humans are driving it”, a common Democratic stance. However, he also underscored an *economic frame*, discussing “the cost, the impact, the \$300 billion a year in damage that climate change is already imposing on the American economy” and the need “to invest in more research and innovation”. The Republican used conservative frames, such as *economic* and *moral* perspectives, highlighting “good stewardship”, while also embracing a liberal *science frame* acknowledging the human role in climate change and the importance of scientific studies by institutions like Brookings “to move the ball forward”. Prior research indicates that when elite Republicans recognize the scientific consensus on climate change, it reduces the ideological gap.⁸⁰ Notably, the Republican also used *ingroup criticism* (as discussed later) to distance himself from climate deniers within his party, thereby reducing the identity gap. Furthermore, both participants adopted issue frames introduced by the facilitator, such as the *responsibility/accountability frame* regarding energy companies’ liability for climate-related damages. Initially, the Republican supported some “protection for companies engaging in good practices”, while the Democrat focused on holding those “who funded and drove misinformation and disinformation campaigns to deny climate change and to undermine or marginalize scientific efforts” accountable. Eventually, both nuanced their views, distinguishing between responsible and irresponsible companies. By embracing a variety of frames and nuancing their perspectives, the participants bridged ideological differences and fostered convergence.

Reconnecting conflicting issue frames

In the second and third dialogues, both the Republican and Democratic participants surprisingly shared similar ideological views on climate change. They emphasized a

common goal and used corresponding issue frames to seek bipartisan solutions. Interestingly, participants demonstrated the ability to reconnect oftentimes incompatible frames, bridging ideological divides. In Dialogues 2 and 3, the Democrats' *global warming* and/or *pollution mitigation frames* were harmoniously combined with the Republicans' *economic frame*. To illustrate, the Republican participant in Dialogue 2 made a remarkable opening statement: "I think we have to address *man-made climate change* . . . in a way that is compatible with the economy". Additionally, by employing language such as "man-made climate change", which is typically associated with liberals, he transcended the boundaries with the opposing party. The Democratic participant in Dialogue 2 expressed a similar view, underscoring that "we can have both environmental protection and economic growth". Both participants accommodated each other's behaviour and adopted each other's language. When the Democrat argued, "We are actually going to *make money* on this thing" and "as we *move away* from a carbon-based economy", the Republican participant echoed this language saying, "We've got to gradually *move* the economy in *a way* . . . that we show people that they can *make money* and that we can economically prosper in order to do this". Through the use of shared language and by reconnecting conflicting frames, participants achieved convergence and facilitated depolarization.

Developing consensus/neutral issue frames

In all three dialogues, participants underscored the need for bipartisan collaboration and stressed the importance of transforming climate change into a consensus or neutral issue. Unlike typical situations where dominant worldviews and frames often impede the exploration of alternative solutions⁸¹ participants in this study also jointly crafted common perspectives.

In Dialogue 1, the Democratic participant proposed *public health* as a *neutral/consensus frame*, arguing, "I think public health is, it's not is not a Democrat or Republican issue". Interestingly, in their subsequent discussion, she highlighted the divergent viewpoints in Congress regarding regulations, using language associated with the values of both sides. Republicans view regulations as burdens limiting their freedom, emphasizing the need to "*lift the burden . . . of the regulations*". In contrast, Democrats are concerned about dismantling regulations describing it as "*unravelling . . . protections*" that ultimately "*hurt the American people*". By using a neutral public health frame and adopting both parties' language and perspectives⁸² she promoted convergence and contributed to depolarizing the issue.

In Dialogue 2, participants developed a *resilience frame*, advocating for the protection of vulnerable communities. When discussing the "Prepare Act", the Democratic participant of Dialogue 2 emphasized that the Act "does not talk about climate change, but we are really talking about climate change. We are saying, how do we build *resiliency* and support in those communities before there are disasters". The Republican participant embraced this resilience frame, echoing that "we should try to be looking at building more *resiliency* in . . . our public structures". Additionally, he advocated for depoliticizing the issue by stating: "So, it's all an effort to try to minimize some of the adverse effects of extreme weather . . . whether people say 'oh, this is climate change' or not. I don't think really matters. We want to really focus them on how are we going to *protect* these communities". By adopting a shared alternative frame and using inclusive language such as "protect", which resonates with liberal values, he promoted convergence and bridged divides with the opposing party.

Participants in Dialogue 3 frequently emphasized a *climate policy frame*, particularly advocating for a carbon tax, aligning with the Brookings Institution's mission to promote bipartisan policy solutions. Despite Republicans' general aversion to taxes, illustrated by the Republican participant's joke, "Note, it's the Republican says *carbon tax* and the smart Democrat says *carbon fee*", there was unanimous agreement on the need for consensus and bipartisan collaboration.

In addition to these issue-framing strategies, the authors identified various strategies employed by participants to reduce their identity conflict (as shown in Table 1) which will be further explained below.

Depolarizing strategies at the identity framing level

Upon analysing the data, it became apparent that participants employed diverse strategies to overcome their identity gaps and strive for convergence. Despite the common approach of cultivating positive relationships through identity and relationship framing, each of the three dialogues displayed distinct relational dynamics (see Table 3).

In Dialogue 1, despite ideological differences, participants invested considerable efforts in fostering positive relationships through identity and relationship framing, with 42 instances noted. Conversely, Dialogues 2 and 3 involved participants with similar ideological views, resulting in merely 8 instances of identity/relationship framing in Dialogue 2, all positive, and 34 instances in Dialogue 3. Notably, Dialogues 1 and 3 showcased not only *positive identity* (11 instances each) and *characterization frames* (19 instances in Dialogue 1, 12 in Dialogue 3) but also *negative identity frames* (10 in Dialogue 1, 8 in Dialogue 3), involving self-criticism regarding their personal or group identity, as well as *negative characterization frames* (2 instances in Dialogue 1, 3 in Dialogue 3).

The subsequent sections will portray three strategies employed by participants to reconcile their identity differences: strategies fostering positive relations, strategies highlighting a superordinate identity, and strategies aimed at decreasing social distance.

Table 3. Overview Frequency Identity and Relationship Framing in Dialogues 1, 2, and 3.

Framing category	Frequency			TOTAL:
	Dialogue 1	Dialogue 2	Dialogue 3	
<i>Positive Identity</i>				
Participant 1 – Republican	6	1	7	
Participant 2 – Democrat	5	4	4	
Subtotal:	11	5	11	27
<i>Negative Identity</i>				
Participant 1 – Republican	4	0	4	
Participant 2 – Democrat	6	0	4	
Subtotal:	10	0	8	18
<i>Positive characterization</i>				
Participant 1 – Republican	7	2	3	
Participant 2 – Democrat	12	1	9	
Subtotal:	19	3	12	34
<i>Negative characterization</i>				
Participant 1 – Republican	0	0	0	0
Participant 2 – Democrat	2	0	3	3
Subtotal:	2	0	3	5
TOTAL:	42	8	34	

Strategies fostering positive relations

Positive characterizations. The emphasis on maintaining positive relations became evident in the dominant use of positive characterizations in both dialogues. Instead of portraying their political rivals or the opposing party (out-group) in a negative way through stereotypes (e.g. labelling them as selfish, close-minded, immoral, or hypocritical), participants showed respect and appreciation for their counterparts. For example, the Democratic participant of Dialogue 1 praised the Republican, stating that “it takes courage to have courage” to openly criticize the Republican president for leaving the Paris Agreement. She continued emphasizing that it takes “more courage on the part of... Republican members” to express their views on the issue of climate, change as they are going up against the views of their own party. Simultaneously, she acknowledged that “It takes time and we have to have some patience” on the part of the Democratic side. The Republican participant reciprocated this behaviour expressing that he “could say the same about Democrats that are in the Caucus” praising them for their willingness “to work a bit slower”. In Dialogue 3, the Democrat also praised the Republican for his courage in addressing the divisive issue of climate change, acknowledging that he had “faced some withering criticism for co-sponsoring the Climate Solutions Caucus and co-sponsoring bills”. These instances underscore the exceptional nature of bipartisan collaboration amidst escalating elite polarization.

Face-saving strategies. Additionally, participants used face-saving strategies, such as preserving the credibility of the other speaker and showing respect and warm feelings, to foster positive relations. For instance, the Republican participant in Dialogue 1 acknowledged the Democratic participant’s extensive political knowledge and expertise on climate-related matters, stating that “She has a lot of... depth in this policy area”. Meanwhile, the Democratic participant expressed warmth and appreciation for the Republican, highlighting his fresh perspective and sincerity, stating: “I think it’s wonderful that he has the outlook that he has and he has an earnestness about it. And... I welcome that. He is unspoiled. You see? [laughter from the audience] You know, he’s not tainted. [Audience laughter]. He hasn’t been around for a long time.” Similarly, in Dialogue 3, the Republican stated, “I’ve already learned a lot from Senator [x Democrat], and I look forward to learning more from him”. Through their mutual respect and warm relations, participants created a positive atmosphere that facilitated convergence.

Supportive communication. Furthermore, participants engaged in *supportive communication* characterized by spontaneity, respect, empathy, and humour. For example, in Dialogue 1, the Republican jokingly expressed appreciation for the Democrat participant by stating that the best outcome of the bipartisan Caucus was “getting to work with her”. In Dialogue 3, the Republican humorously remarked, “You know, I’ll be a little bit more optimistic here, at the risk of getting in political trouble, which is a perpetual threat to me”. Dialogue 2, featured a problem-solving approach, equal power relations, and a willingness to compromise, fostering convergence. This was illustrated by the Democratic participant highlighting that members of the Caucus “all have a common interest”. Supportive communication created a friendly atmosphere and enhanced positive relational dynamics in the dialogues.

Strategies related to a superordinate (common) identity

Rather than amplifying partisan identities to bolster ingroup-outgroup distinctions⁸³, political leaders in this study adopted multiple identities, falling into three

subcategories: personal identity (of individual participants), group identity (relating to either the in-group or out-group), and a common superordinate identity. Regarding the latter, participants used two ways to mitigate identity differences.

Embracing a superordinate bipartisan identity. Firstly, participants of the dialogues portrayed their common identity as members of the bipartisan Caucus in a positive light. Notably, the Democrat in the first dialogue referred to Republican Caucus members as “*buddies* from the other side of the aisle”. She continued, “Once you have a relationship with someone, you are not going to ad hominem attack [against] them”. In Dialogue 2, the Republican noted that when “you know people a little differently” ... “you have deep appreciation for why they’re here, what they enjoy working on and you oftentimes find opportunities that you didn’t know existed in order to work on it”. Participants bridged their polarizing partisan identities by embracing their superordinate identity as Caucus members.

Distancing from a superordinate polarizing identity. Secondly, in contrast to positively portraying their superordinate identity as Caucus members, participants criticized their common identity as Congress members, labelling Congress as “dysfunctional” (Dialogue 1). In Dialogue 3, the Democrat criticized Congress members for their unwillingness to support bipartisan bills and their short-term thinking. In doing so, political rivals set a positive example of denouncing polarizing identities.

Strategies aimed at decreasing social distance

Political leaders employed the following compelling strategies to reduce social distance and bridge identity gaps in both dialogues:

In-group or self-criticism. In Dialogues 1 and 3, participants employed various negative identity and characterization frames without increasing polarization, thanks to their skilful handling of criticism. According to the *intergroup sensitivity effect*, criticism of outsiders is perceived as more threatening than from insiders.⁸⁴ However, the participants effectively reduced defensiveness and identity gaps by combining criticism with praise (see *spotlighting* below), criticizing their in-group identity, or engaging in self-criticism. For instance, in Dialogue 1, the Republican openly criticized his party leader [Trump] for leaving the Paris Accord, earning praise from the Democrat for his courage. In Dialogue 3, the Republican highlighted the irony that “the counties and cities that are going to pay the highest price for inaction [on climate change] are ours, the red ones”, thereby critiquing his own group. In Dialogue 1, the Democrat displayed self-criticism by candidly admitting to being “a very impatient legislator”, while also noting it helped her to get things done. In addition, she showed empathy towards Republicans adjusting to change (this “is new for a lot of Republicans. I mean it’s ... it’s a huge step”) and emphasized the need for Democratic patience as “this is going to take time”. In Dialogue 3, the Democrat also advised his fellow Democrats to set realistic expectations, cautioning against overly ambitious goals and timelines for regulations. He highlighted the importance of acknowledging current realities, adding, “But that’s not always what happens in my legislative environment.” Through self-criticism or critiquing their in-group (instead of negatively portraying the out-group), participants reversed the prevalent dynamics of issue-based polarization.

Spotlighting. Contrary to Hornsey and Esposito’s findings⁸⁵, participants effectively employed the strategy of *spotlighting*. This approach involves targeting comments at specific portions of the group rather than the entire out-group.⁸⁶ In this research, it

also includes highlighting positive exceptions thereby challenging negative stereotypes about both parties. To illustrate, the Democratic participant in Dialogue 1 critiqued the Republican party by stating that “something has been lost over the years in terms of Republicans being really out front and being known as environmentalists, very proud of it, and there was room in the party for them” but praised Republican bipartisan Caucus members as a positive exception, thereby reducing social distance between both parties. In Dialogue 3, the Democrat critiqued the majority of Republican Senate members for not publicly acknowledging that “climate change is real, that humans are driving it, and that we have to take action to address it”. However, he also praised a minority who are “willing to say the first now”. In addition, later in the conversation, he praised specific Republican supporters, such as “Evangelicals, Catholics, traditional sort of mainline Protestants, and more progressive Christians” for “aligning around an idea of stewardship”. By combining criticism with praise for particular subsets of Republicans, he mitigated the negative impact of his critique and bridged the identity gap.

Overcoming stereotypes. To mitigate their identity conflict, participants actively confronted stereotypes and biases related to their own group. For instance, the Democrat participant in the first dialogue challenged this notion of moral superiority within the Democratic party with regard to the issue of climate change. She explained, “I think that ... there are many on my side of the aisle that don’t feel morally superior, but they view it through a moral lens. And that’s why there is such a passion about it.” In Dialogue 2, the Republican participant countered the bias that Republican states are indifferent to climate change. He pointed out how conservative counties in California proactively addressed climate change impacts, especially in dealing with draughts. He clarified that these actions were primarily driven by economic reasons and concerns for draughts, emphasizing that “they did it for economics, they did it because of draught, they didn’t do it because of climate change – but to save every drop”. This perspective contradicts the stereotype that Republicans are passive on climate-related matters.

Overarching patterns at issue and identity framing levels

The analysis of overarching patterns in the dialogues revealed participants’ commitment to *collaborative* and *compromising* approaches, aiming for convergence to achieve shared goals. In all three dialogues, they *accommodated* each other’s behaviour on both issue and identity framing levels. In Dialogue 1, despite ideological differences, participants accommodated their behaviour by adopting other’s frames or using shared frames. Additionally, they made significant efforts at the identity framing level to uphold warm relationships. Furthermore, they employed *reciprocal strategies* such as mutual positive portrayal, thereby fostering *positive self-reinforcing cycles*. The utilization of *complementary strategies*, wherein they shared a broad cooperative orientation while also expressing differing viewpoints on issues, not only allowed them to effectively balancing concern for self and others but also to sustain positive relationships. In Dialogue 2, the strategies employed by participants primarily occurred at the issues framing level. Participants showed a strong focus on *collaboration* towards a shared goal. They *accommodated* their behaviour and employed *reciprocal strategies*, using shared frames and adopting others’ language. In Dialogue 3, participants strongly focused on bipartisan collaboration, emphasizing a shared *climate policy frame* to find climate solutions. They *accommodated* their behaviour

by employing similar issue frames and proactively fostered positive relationships through positive characterizations, in-group criticism (distancing themselves from negative aspects of their own party), and spotlighting particular subsets of the Republican party favourable to addressing climate change. This approach reduced social distance and bridged identity gaps. The facilitator significantly influenced the conversation through targeted questioning and active participation, shaping both content and dynamics. Participants adopted various issue frames and accommodated their behaviour at a relational level. Despite the dominant use of positive characterizations, occasional negative characterizations also occurred. Remarkably, when the facilitator implicitly criticized the Trump administration for not prioritizing climate change, noting that it would have been different under a Clinton Administration, the Republican responded with, “You think?”. The Democrat then bridged divides by citing the Bush administration as an example of a Republican administration that would handle the issue differently. Through proactive turn-taking and spotlighting a positive example, he mitigated the potentially negative impact and fostered convergence. When discussing issues, participants frequently expressed nuanced stances on issues. For example, when outlining his vision of the Green New Deal, the Democrat supported this “ambitious vision ... that also creates the opportunity for a more just society”, but simultaneously criticized it for lacking details and warned Democrats about setting realistic expectations. Rather than emphasizing differences, participants focused on collaborative and compromising styles, thereby fostering convergence.

In all dialogues, participants’ accommodative behaviour, along with the use of reciprocal strategies, led to positive self-reinforcing cycles, fostering a positive atmosphere and constructive communication. This facilitated the depolarization of both issues and identities.

Conclusion

This study explored a unique case study, examining constructive dialogues between political adversaries to uncover effective communication strategies for depolarization. The findings revealed how political rivals (unintentionally) used various tactics to foster convergence and reduce polarization. At the *issue framing level*, participants embraced multiple frames rather than fixating on dichotomous frames, some aligned with the values of their own party and others with those of the opposing party. Furthermore, they successfully reconnected conflicting issue frames and even crafted shared neutral/consensus frames to bridge their divergent perspectives on the issue. They reduced *issue-based polarization* by incorporating frames associated with the opposing party’s values and emphasizing climate change as a shared (non-political) consensus issue. At the core of *identity/relationship framing*, the participants prioritized warm relations with members of the out-group through positive characterizations, face-saving strategies, and supportive communication. Additionally, they underscored a common superordinate identity as members of the bipartisan Climate Solutions Caucus, highlighting positive aspects while distancing themselves from any potentially negative associations tied to their shared identity as Congress members. They decreased social distance by employing self-criticism, spotlighting, and dismantling stereotypes. Through these approaches, political adversaries effectively mitigated *identity-based polarization*. Furthermore, an analysis of overarching patterns revealed that the dialogues were marked by *collaborative* and *compromising*

styles, rather than competition and avoidance. Participants *accommodated* each other's behaviour and employed *reciprocal strategies* that fostered *positive self-reinforcing cycles*, thus facilitating depolarization regarding both issues and identities. The use of *complementary strategies* enabled them to overcome potential gaps and strike a balance between *assertiveness* and *cooperativeness*. Through seemingly simple adjustments in their communication behaviours, such as mutual positive portrayal and adopting similar language, political leaders moved beyond the "us-versus-them" polarization and engaged in constructive conversations.

In an endeavour to cultivate democratic values and address the harms of political polarization, this study examined depolarization strategies employed by political adversaries in constructive dialogues. Departing from traditional experimental designs, it explored a positive exception within real-life interactions. The findings offer valuable insights into the authentic behaviours of political elites and provide a pathway out of the polarization dynamics inherent within political identities. Through an analysis of interactional strategies related to both issues and identities, the research enhances our comprehension of mitigating polarization, whether rooted in issues or identities. Drawing upon Communicative Framing Theory (CFT) as a guiding framework, it elucidates how participants navigate (framing) differences within political discourse, thereby enriching our comprehension of this complex phenomenon. The study illustrates how polarization and depolarization are communicative accomplishments, where participants' communicative moves and counter-moves create either convergent or divergent dynamics in political discourse. Recognizing the influential role of political leaders, and promoting civil discourse among them holds the potential to cultivate trust and amicable relations among ordinary citizens,⁸⁷ thereby contributing to strengthening our democracies.

While this study provides valuable insights into potential strategies for mitigating elite polarization, it is constrained by its limited dataset confined to the American political context. As a case study of a positive exception, it offers directions for future research and highlights five pathways for strengthening democratic principles.

Firstly, the research underscores the importance of *transforming civil discourse*⁸⁸ to reduce polarization, highlighting the critical role of political leaders in shaping public discourse and interparty relations. Prior studies have shown that uncivil discourse among political elites erodes trust among citizens⁸⁹ and undermines their engagement with politicians' messages.⁹⁰ This study suggests that strategies like face-saving and positive characterizations can promote collaboration and reduce identity conflicts. However, current societal norms often encourage hostility and animosity.⁹¹ In this study, political leaders engaged in constructive bipartisan collaboration on a divisive issue, despite their differences. Future research should explore the motivations behind such collaborations and the barriers, such as party funding, ideological differences, contradicting economic interests, and fear of voter backlash, to promote constructive conversations and reduce societal polarization.

Secondly, the study shows how *effective criticism* can mitigate polarization. While criticism from out-groups often increases divisions, participants in this study used strategies like self-criticism, ingroup criticism, combining criticism with praise, or spotlighting positive exceptions to reduce defensiveness and bridge identity divides. Further research and political courage are essential to explore how these strategies can build empathy, reduce social distance, and foster constructive interactions with out-group members, thus mitigating polarization.

Thirdly, the study highlights that *embracing multiple and superordinate identities* can improve interactions among political rivals. Despite the prevalence of divisive partisan identities in current politics, political leaders in this study embraced multiple identities. Instead of amplifying their partisan identities to maximize ingroup-outgroup distinction⁹², they used a unifying, superordinate bipartisan identity and distanced themselves from their negative shared identity as Congress members through criticism. These findings support previous research suggesting that emphasizing common cross-partisan identities can reduce partisan animosity and bolster democratic attitudes.⁹³ Further research is necessary to understand the benefits and risks of maintaining multiple identities and to identify effective ways to activate a superordinate identity without undermining positive partisan distinctions.⁹⁴ This will provide valuable insights into managing identity dynamics and fostering positive relations in the political arena.

Fourth, the study illustrates the benefits of *using the (moral) language of political opponents*. While political rhetoric frequently mirrors a party's moral values,⁹⁵ political leaders effectively bridged divides by adopting their opponents' moral language, frames, and values. Additionally, they crafted new frames that were non-political or resonated with the values of their counterparts. Examination of the actual behaviour of political adversaries in constructive real-life interactions will help us understand how to foster shared language and framing among political elites.

Fifth and finally, *scaling dialogue and deliberative interventions* is crucial for *maximizing their impact and reach*. Scholars and practitioners can synergize their efforts to achieve greater outcomes by offering comprehensive training for political elites, equipping facilitators, and sharing data and insights. Rather than solely focusing on outcomes, researchers should examine the content and dynamics of interactions by exploring cognitive, communicative, and psychological processes that facilitate political depolarization. Understanding these mechanisms can help to develop effective strategies to foster political cooperation, warm relations, and civil discourse.

In summary, the unique setting and nature of the dialogues in this study, wherein political elites constructively collaborate towards shared goals, revealed promising strategies for reducing issue-based and identity-based polarization. Recognizing the significant impact of political leaders in shaping public discourse, fostering warm relations and collaboration among them may be a crucial step towards restoring political trust and mitigating the negative impacts of elite polarization on the general public. Ultimately, this approach can bolster democratic systems, paving the way for a more cohesive, deliberative, civil, and inclusive society.

Notes

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4. Levitsky and Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die*.
5. Orhan, "Affective Polarization".
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20. Bernaerts, Blanckaert, and Caluwaerts, "Institutional Design and Polarization".
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22. Ellis, "Talking to the Enemy"; Iyengar et al., "Origins and Consequences".
23. Folger, Poole, and Stutman, *Working Through Conflict*.
24. Brummans et al., "Intractable Multiparty Conflict"; Van Eck, Mulder, and Dewulf, "Online Climate Change Polarization"; Dewulf et al., "Disentangling Approaches to Framing"; Stevens, Aarts, and Dewulf, "Using Emotions".
25. Hartman et al., "Interventions Reduce Partisan Animosity"; Skytte, "Elite Partisan Polarization".
26. Huddy and Yair, "Reducing Affective Polarization"; Lelkes, "Mass Polarization"; Skytte, "Elite Partisan Polarization".
27. Lelkes, "Mass Polarization".
28. Abramowicz, *The Disappearing Center*; Kozlowski and Murphy, "Issue Alignment"; Leven-dusky, "Benefit of Elite Polarization".
29. Pew Research Center, *As Partisan Hostility Grows*.
30. Hartman et al., "Interventions Reduce Partisan Animosity".
31. Tajfel and Turner, "Social Identity Theory"; Huddy and Yair, "Reducing Affective Polarization".
32. Tajfel and Turner, "Social Identity Theory".
33. Iyengar et al., "Origins and Consequences".
34. Mason, "Uncivil Agreement"; Wojcieszak and Warner, "Interparty Contact".
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71. Haidt, *The Righteous Mind*; Lakoff, "Why it Matters".
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