

# Discussing Politics in Ethnically Divided Societies: An Experiment in Lebanon

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## Abstract

There is growing appreciation that a lack of social interaction and discussion across ethnic divides contributes to the perpetuation of ethnic politics and conflict. This paper examines when discussion in heterogeneous ethnic environments, relative to discussion in homogeneous environments, results in less support for ethnic politics and more support for a non-ethnic or programmatic alternative. Against the backdrop of mass protests in Lebanon, we randomly assigned 720 Christians, Sunnis, and Shia to participate in 120 homogeneous or heterogeneous discussions on sectarianism. We find strong evidence for theorized mechanisms: heterogeneous discussions resulted in greater learning about shared preferences, stronger social identification with sectarian out-groups, and less social pressure to support ethnic politics than homogeneous discussions. We provide suggestive evidence that these translated into greater support for non-sectarian policies and willingness to engage with non co-sectarians on politics. These results contribute to research on ethnic politics, discussion, and intergroup contact.

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In many countries, politics is dominated by ethnic or sectarian cleavages. In countries such as Lebanon and Iraq, sectarianism is institutionalized in the political system through power-sharing arrangements. In other contexts, ethnic politics emerges from social structure and the dynamics of party competition (Chandra, 2007; Huber, 2017). Regardless, ethnic diversity and the orientation of politics around ethnic identity is associated with numerous undesirable outcomes, including the under-provision of public goods, clientelism and weak accountability, and civil conflict (Alesina, Baqir and Easterly, 1999; Habyarimana et al., 2009; Chandra, 2007; Horowitz, 2000). This raises the question: Is it possible to reduce support for an ethnic status quo in favor of a non-ethnic or programmatic alternative?

There is a growing appreciation that a lack of social interaction across ethnic divides contributes to the perpetuation of ethnic politics. In many ethnically divided societies, members of different groups are residentially segregated or have ethnically homogeneous social networks (Enos, 2017; Larson and Lewis, 2017). Such homophily can be dangerous insofar as it hinders information-sharing and contributes to prejudice and intolerance (McPherson, Smith-Lovin and Cook, 2001). Indeed, whether individuals engage in ethnically homogeneous or heterogeneous social interactions likely has a powerful effect on shaping attitudes towards an ethnic status quo.

Despite the potential for the ethnic composition of social interactions to affect support for ethnic politics, few studies empirically evaluate this.<sup>1</sup> This paper helps address this deficit by examining how ethnic social context shapes one common form of interaction: political discussion. Discussion—defined broadly as any “exchange of views between individuals or among a group of people” (Paluck, 2010, 2)—is one of the most fundamental and important forms of political and civic engagement (Carpini, Cook and Jacobs, 2004).<sup>2</sup> Moreover, discussion is widely believed to

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<sup>1</sup>Existing studies on ethnic or racial social context tend to focus on the effects of residential segregation but not on interaction per se (e.g. Enos, 2017).

<sup>2</sup>In employing this minimalist definition we focus on everyday discussion rather than deliberation or dialogue. While the distinction between discussion, deliberation, and dialogue is often blurred in the literature, it is commonly thought that the latter two must meet a number of ideal conditions (such as equitable interaction or rationally-motivated consensus) that are not always feasible nor representative of everyday political conversation (Dessel and Rogge, 2008; Barabas, 2004).

shape political opinions and behavior because it “provides an opportunity for individuals to develop and express their views, learn the positions of others, identify shared concerns and preferences, and come to understand and reach judgments about matters of public concern” (Jacobs, Cook and Carpini, 2009, 24).

A vast literature on discussion considers whether these beneficial effects depend on social context, although the issue is far from empirically settled (Myers and Mendelberg, 2013). It is commonly argued that discussion in homogeneous environments can reinforce existing beliefs, harden social identities, and deepen divisions with out-groups (Sunstein and Hastie, 2008). Recent studies have demonstrated such effects with respect to discussion in heterogeneous versus homogeneous partisan environments in the United States (Klar, 2014; Levendusky, Druckman and McLain, 2016). While researchers have also examined how racial composition affects discussion in the United States (Mendelberg and Oleske, 2000), there remains little evidence of how the ethnic discussion environment affects political attitudes in other countries. In one study conducted in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Paluck (2010) shows that discussions about conflict unintentionally *increased* ethnic tension, possibly because they took place in ethnically homogeneous groups, although this is not directly tested. Such studies underscore the importance of a closer examination of how the ethnic social environment conditions the effects of discussion on attitudes and actions related to ethnic politics.

The effect of social interaction across divides is also at the core of a large literature on intergroup contact. Building on the seminal work of Allport (1954), research in this tradition has examined the effect of positive contact in an array of settings (for reviews see Pettigrew and Tropp, 2011; Paluck, Green and Green, 2017). For instance, in a test of the contact hypothesis among Muslims and Christians in Nigeria, Scacco and Warren (2018) find that inter-group contact resulted in less out-group discrimination than intra-group contact due to greater out-group discrimination in the latter. Yet, the contact literature also offers few empirical studies of how discussion in different ethnic environments affects attitudes towards ethnic politics. For one, other than Scacco and Warren (2018), contact studies have generally not compared the effects of interaction in heterogeneous and homogeneous groups, thus providing limited insights into how social context affects outcomes. Second, the contact literature focuses primarily on the effects of *dialogue*, not everyday discussion, because of the emphasis on interaction under ideal conditions to achieve cooperation and conflict

reduction (Dessel and Rogge, 2008). Finally, there are few rigorous empirical tests of *any* form of inter-ethnic interaction: one recent review finds that to date no experimental studies have examined the effect of inter-ethnic contact among adults over the age of 25 or on outcomes other than prejudice (Paluck, Green and Green, 2017).

The main goal of this paper is to examine how discussion in homogeneous and heterogeneous ethnic environments affects support for ethnic versus non-ethnic politics.<sup>3</sup> To structure our investigation, we first lay out a simple theoretical framework in which individuals support ethnic politics over a non-ethnic alternative because it affords relatively greater material or psychological benefits and lower social costs. We argue that talking politics in heterogeneous relative to homogeneous environments can result in less support for ethnic politics when it: facilitates *learning* about shared preferences with non co-ethnics, increasing the material benefits of non-ethnic politics; shapes social *identity*, diminishing the psychological benefits of ethnic politics; or alleviates exposure to intra-group social *pressure*, lowering the social costs of supporting non-ethnic politics. In focusing on these three mechanisms, our framework highlights the challenges associated with shifting support from ethnic politics to a non-ethnic alternative while shedding light on the complex ways by which discussion can affect outcomes.

We test predictions from our framework in Lebanon. In August 2015, mass protests erupted over the government’s failure to manage trash collection. The protests were in part a criticism of the paralysis caused by sectarianism, which is deeply entrenched in Lebanese politics and society (Salloukh et al., 2015). While Lebanon’s power-sharing institutions are often credited with preserving peace in the wake of civil war, these protests raised fundamental questions about the sectarian status quo and created a window of opportunity for public discourse on the future of sectarianism in the country.<sup>4</sup> This presented an important occasion to examine how discussion in

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<sup>3</sup>By ‘support for ethnic politics’ we refer broadly to preferences for ethnic candidates or parties; ethnic policies or favoritism in resource allocations; or co-ethnic coalitions and collective action. Conversely, we conceptualize ‘non-ethnic politics’ as any mode of politics, policy-making, or coalition formation that does not follow an ethnic logic or reify the role of ethnicity in society. Programmatic politics is a common form of non-ethnic politics (Huber, 2017).

<sup>4</sup>We use the terms ‘ethnic’ and ‘sectarian’ interchangeably in this paper.

different sectarian environments affects support for reform of the sectarian status quo.

Discussion is difficult to study, however, because individuals typically select into their social interactions. We overcome this issue by conducting an experiment with 720 Sunni, Shia, and Christians in the Beirut area. Participants were recruited and randomly assigned to six-person heterogeneous or homogeneous sectarian discussion groups. We organized a total of 120 one-time discussions (60 of each type).<sup>5</sup> Using the protests as a springboard, the moderated discussions centered on participants' economic hopes and concerns as well as their attitudes towards sectarianism. While there might be concern that one-time discussion is insufficient to change attitudes on something as deeply ingrained as support for sectarian politics, to our knowledge this is one of the largest experiments of its kind to date.<sup>6</sup>

We find that heterogeneous discussions, relative to homogeneous ones, shifted all three mechanisms in a manner consistent with greater support for non-sectarian politics. Specifically, heterogeneous discussions resulted in comparatively more learning about shared preferences with non co-ethnics; greater social identification with sectarian out-groups; and less social pressure to support the sectarian status quo. In examining whether these outcomes translated into relatively less support for sectarian politics in heterogeneous groups, we focus on two dimensions. The first is support for policies that promote non-sectarian or programmatic goals, measured by a post-treatment survey. The second is willingness to engage with non co-sectarians—an important precursor to cross-sectarian coalition formation and collective action—measured using a survey, behavior in a public goods game, and willingness to sign a petition. The results reveal suggestive (but not

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<sup>5</sup>In a cross-cutting experiment (the focus of a separate paper), participants were also randomly assigned to homogeneous and heterogeneous class discussions. See Appendix C for details.

<sup>6</sup>This study is similar in design to recent experiments on the effects of discussion in heterogeneous and homogeneous partisan groups (Klar, 2014; Levendusky, Druckman and McLain, 2016). For instance, the discussion in Klar (2014) involved 349 university subjects and lasted five minutes on average. While discussion in the intergroup contact literature tends to be more extended, Broockman and Kalla (2016) show that 10-minute interactions resulted in lower levels of prejudice towards transgender individuals three months later. Overall, there is little empirical basis for anticipating how sustained discussion must be to affect outcomes.

definitive) evidence of greater support for non-ethnic politics in heterogeneous than homogeneous discussions on both dimensions.

This paper makes several contributions. First, it contributes to research on discussion by using a large-scale experiment to provide rigorous evidence for how talking politics in different ethnic environments affects public opinion and political action. Additionally, it calls attention to the importance of theorizing and testing the mechanisms that link discussion to changes in preferences and behavior. While scholars have proposed a wealth of mechanisms by which discussion affects change (Myers and Mendelberg, 2013), an extant challenge confronting the literature involves identifying the most theoretically relevant mechanisms and specifying how they relate not only to outcomes but also to one another. We show why tackling this challenge is essential to obtaining a more complete picture of when discussion in different social contexts yields positive or adverse effects.

This paper also contributes to research on ethnic politics by engaging a long-standing debate over how to reduce support for an ethnic status quo and increase demand for a non-ethnic alternative. Numerous studies suggest ways to weaken ethnic politics, for instance, by improving access to information (Adida et al., 2017; Fujiwara and Wantchekon, 2013) or by elevating national over ethnic identity (Miguel and Gugerty, 2005; Robinson, 2016). One advantage of our theoretical framework is that it clarifies the difficulties associated with getting people to switch support from ethnic politics to a non-ethnic alternative. Moreover, in finding even suggestive evidence of greater support for non-ethnic politics in heterogeneous than homogeneous discussion environments, this paper advances a growing body of research drawing attention to the importance of social context and interaction across ethnic divides to weakening the status quo and creating new opportunities for political change (Enos, 2017; Larson and Lewis, 2017; Scacco and Warren, 2018).

Finally, our findings contribute to research on intergroup contact by addressing the call for more rigorous evaluations of intergroup dialogue interventions (Dessel and Rogge, 2008). In doing so, this paper is also relevant from a policy perspective and for the growing number of civil society organizations seeking to facilitate discussion across a wide range of social divides.<sup>7</sup> In showing that even one-off discussions in heterogeneous environments can shape opinions and lay the foundations

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<sup>7</sup>For examples of organizations working in this area, see Appendix A.

for political change, the results presented here are especially encouraging for those organizations working in divided societies where social interaction is typically defined by homophily. Yet, this paper also highlights the potential adverse effects of such interventions, calling attention to important avenues for future research.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

### **Understanding support for ethnic politics**

Why do individuals prefer ethnic politics over a non-ethnic alternative, and how might discussion in homogeneous and heterogeneous ethnic environments affect those preferences? To answer this question, we begin by developing a simple theoretical framework that builds upon three central explanations for why individuals support ethnic politics: because doing so provides material benefits, provides psychological benefits, or minimizes social costs.

First, an important body of research suggests that people support ethnic politics for material reasons: they believe they will get more of the benefits they prefer when politics is oriented around ethnicity. The literature on ethnic favoritism substantiates that resources are often allocated along ethnic lines (Franck and Rainer, 2012; Kramon and Posner, 2016). This implies that individuals—especially those in ethnic majorities—support ethnic politics for distributional reasons (Huber, 2017). Another prominent material explanation is that preferences over policies or goods are more congruent within ethnic groups than between them (Alesina, Baqir and Easterly, 1999; Lieberman and McClendon, 2012). Such arguments suggest that individuals are more likely to get their preferred benefits when advancing interests with co-ethnics than with non co-ethnics. Together these accounts highlight that support for ethnic politics could arise from an individual’s belief that it serves their material interests better than a non-ethnic or programmatic alternative.

A second leading explanation is that ethnic politics gives individuals psychological benefits associated with group membership. Social identity theory shows that categorization into in-groups and out-groups is a source of psychological benefits like pride and self-esteem (Tajfel and Turner, 1979). The desire for positive social identity and favorable intergroup comparisons helps to explain phenomena like ethnic favoritism in resource allocations and greater altruism towards co-ethnics (although this is empirically contested, see Berge et al., 2015) and political support for co-ethnic

candidates (Chandra, 2007). Individuals may then support ethnic politics to maintain these psychological benefits, even when doing so contravenes their material interests (Akerlof and Kranton, 2000)

Third, individuals might support ethnic politics because they seek to avoid the social costs of *not* supporting it. Ethnic groups are widely believed to be highly effective at intra-group social sanctioning, which is one explanation for why public goods provision tends to be higher in homogeneous ethnic communities relative to heterogeneous ones (Habyarimana et al., 2009; Miguel and Gugerty, 2005). Recent research also suggests that social pressure can cause individuals to support ethnic politics publicly even when they would privately prefer an alternative (Corstange, 2013; Paler, Marshall and Atallah, 2018).

We distill this literature into a simple unified framework in which the material, psychological, and social reasons for supporting ethnic versus non-ethnic politics are expressed in cost-benefit terms. Individuals derive positive utility from the material ( $M$ ) and psychological ( $P$ ) benefits associated with a given mode of politics but may have to pay a cost ( $C$ ) if their preference is unpopular in their social environment. Support for ethnic politics occurs when  $M_e + P_e - C_e > M_a + P_a - C_a$  (where the subscript  $e$  denotes ethnic and  $a$  denotes a non-ethnic or programmatic alternative).<sup>8</sup> The literature above suggests that individuals support ethnic over non-ethnic politics because the relative material and psychological benefits are greater ( $M_e > M_a$ ,  $P_e > P_a$ ) while the social costs are lower ( $C_e < C_a$ ). Importantly, this framework highlights why shifting support from ethnic politics and towards a non-ethnic alternative is a tall order: small changes in one or more variables would be insufficient to result in a switch in support. We next consider how discussion in heterogeneous versus homogeneous environments might do this.

## The promise (and perils) of discussion

How can discussion in different ethnic environments influence the perceived material benefits, psychological benefits, or social costs associated with ethnic and non-ethnic politics? We argue that

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<sup>8</sup>While we use this simple framework because it is consistent with what we can test empirically, it is easily possible to complicate this. For instance, recent studies on motivated reasoning suggest an interaction between  $M$  and  $I$  (Klar, 2014; Adida et al., 2017).

discussion has the potential to alter  $M$  by facilitating learning about shared preferences (a *learning* mechanism);  $P$  by shaping social identification (an *identity* mechanism); and  $C$  by reinforcing the salience of social costs (a *pressure* mechanism).<sup>9</sup> One challenge with studying discussion, however, is that it can impact these mechanisms in hard-to-predict ways that could have reinforcing or offsetting effects on the ultimate outcome of interest. We therefore consider when discussion in diverse ethnic environments might result in relatively less support for ethnic politics and when it might have adverse effects (for a table summarizing the possible empirical patterns discussed in this section, see Appendix B).

***Discussion and material benefits.*** A chief function of discussion is to promote learning by enabling the sharing of new information (Myers and Mendelberg, 2013). We consider the possibility that discussion in different ethnic environments facilitates learning about shared preferences, affecting the anticipated material benefits from ethnic and non-ethnic politics.

While the literature suggests there can be differences in preferences across ethnic groups, in many ethnically divided societies—especially those with cross-cutting cleavages—it is likely that there are some common preferences across ethnic groups and divergent preferences within them (Dunning and Harrison, 2010). For instance, when ethnic and class cleavages crosscut, different ethnic groups have both poor and rich members, making the presence of intra-group differences in economic preferences and inter-group similarities among members of the same class more likely. Social structure and the nature of cross-cutting ethnic and economic cleavages can have important implications for whether individuals are materially better off by allying with co-ethnics in cross-class coalitions or with non co-ethnics in class coalitions (Huber, 2017).

Yet, even when cross-ethnic alliances might improve material well-being, it is possible that individuals lack *awareness* of similarities in preferences among non co-ethnics, creating barriers to

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<sup>9</sup>Researchers have suggested myriad mechanisms by which discussion might shape outcomes, for instance by fostering information-sharing, tolerance, introspection, perspective-taking, and empathy (Myers and Mendelberg, 2013). Such mechanisms can still have explanatory power in our framework but only insofar as they affect on the main variables theorized to determine support for ethnic politics. For instance, heterogeneous discussions could improve tolerance, reducing prejudice and  $P_e$ .

coalition formation. Additionally, it is likely that maintaining coalitions of non co-ethnics requires the glossing over of differences in preferences. Such information problems in ethnically divided societies can be acute as a result of the high salience of ethnic identity; efforts by ethnic elites to obscure intra-group (and exacerbate inter-group) differences; or a lack of social interaction and information-sharing across ethnic lines (Horowitz, 2000). Learning about shared (divergent) preferences among non co-ethnics (co-ethnics) could thus affect whether individuals think they will be materially better off with ethnic or non-ethnic, programmatic politics, resulting in a shift in beliefs about material benefits from  $M_a < M_e$  to  $M_a > M_e$ .

In sum, we expect that ethnically heterogeneous discussions are more likely to yield  $M_a > M_e$  than ethnically homogeneous discussions if the former facilitate learning about shared preferences among co-ethnics or the latter reveal new information about differences in preferences among co-ethnics. Either scenario could result in relatively more support for non-ethnic politics in heterogeneous environments. However, we acknowledge the possibility that discussion in heterogeneous ethnic environments could have adverse effects, for instance by revealing meaningful differences in preferences across ethnic groups. This is especially likely in contexts where social cleavages like ethnicity and class are reinforcing rather than cross-cutting.

***Discussion and psychological benefits.*** Discussion in different ethnic environments could also shift support for ethnic politics by shaping social identity and the psychological benefits associated with ethnic politics (Sunstein and Hastie, 2008; Klar, 2014; Levendusky, Druckman and McLain, 2016). Drawing on the discussion literature, we anticipate that homogeneous ethnic discussions will reinforce in-group social identification and the psychological benefits that derive from in-group membership. Conversely, heterogeneous ethnic discussions could result in weaker in-group identification due to the lack of a common ethnic identity or to the heightened salience of cross-cutting or superordinate (e.g. national) identities (Brewer, 2000). Either dynamic implies less in-group identification in heterogeneous relative to homogeneous discussions.

Similarly, discussion in different ethnic politics could affect how close an individual feels to an ethnic out-group or the extent to which they can identify with its members (hereafter out-group identification). The recent studies by Paluck (2010) and Scacco and Warren (2018) suggest that discussion in homogeneous environments will evoke greater out-group prejudice and less out-group identification, while the premise of intergroup contact theory is that interactions across divides

will have the opposite effect. Both imply greater out-group identification in heterogeneous than homogeneous environments.

In our framework, relatively less in-group, and more out-group, identification in heterogeneous environments indicates lower  $P_e$  than homogeneous environments, consistent with an expectation of relatively less support for ethnic politics and greater support for a non-ethnic alternative. It is possible, however, that heterogeneous discussions could have adverse effects on social identification, for instance by increasing anxiety or threat perceptions (Pettigrew and Tropp, 2011). This would result in relatively *more* in-group, and *less* out-group, identification in heterogeneous discussion environments, with the unintended effect of relatively *stronger* support for ethnic politics emerging from diverse discussions.

***Discussion and social costs.*** Finally, we consider the possibility that discussion in different ethnic environments affects the perceived social costs of supporting ethnic versus non-ethnics politics. Discussion is a social activity that requires public expressions of preferences and that invariably exposes participants to social pressure (Farrar et al., 2009; Mutz, 2006). The reality of social pressure in discussion is especially relevant in light of the evidence that intra-group social pressure plays an important role in maintaining an ethnic status quo (Miguel and Gugerty, 2005; Corstange, 2013; Paler, Marshall and Atallah, 2018).

Integrating these literatures, we expect that discussion in homogeneous ethnic environments will result in relatively greater social pressure to support ethnic politics. In other words, discussion in homogeneous ethnic groups likely reinforces that there are low social costs to supporting ethnic politics and high social costs to supporting a non-ethnic alternative ( $C_e < C_a$ ). Conversely, heterogeneous discussions likely subject individuals to less social pressure in general and to support ethnic politics in particular (implying low  $C_a$ ). Importantly, by making the social costs for criticizing ethnic politics more salient, social pressure in homogeneous discussions might not only affect what people say in discussion itself but also how they behave afterwards. For these reasons we anticipate that discussion in heterogeneous ethnic environments should result in relatively less support for ethnic politics and more support for a non-ethnic alternative even beyond the discussion itself.

We allow, however, for the possibility that discussion in heterogeneous ethnic groups could come with social pressure in the opposite direction—to reject the ethnic status quo. This draws on recent

evidence that individuals might feel pressure to *reject* ethnic politics in social contexts where it is unpopular (Carlson, 2016). If this were the case, discussion in heterogeneous groups would result in higher  $C_e$  and lower  $C_a$ , but this would still lead to more support for non-ethnic politics in heterogeneous discussions. We emphasize that the social pressure mechanism is especially relevant for understanding the effects of discussion on public forms of political action, like signing a petition or participating in a protest—both of which were relevant in our empirical context.

In sum, this section outlines three key mechanisms by which discussion in different ethnic environments could affect support for ethnic politics. While support for ethnic politics is our ultimate outcome of interest, these mechanisms are important intermediate outcomes that merit investigation in their own right. For heterogeneous discussion to result in relatively less support for ethnic politics than homogeneous discussion, it must have sufficiently large, consistent, and favorable impacts on one or more of the theorized mechanisms. In what follows, we describe our research strategy for investigating empirically whether this is the case.

## RESEARCH DESIGN

### **The context: political crisis in Lebanon**

Lebanon presents a timely and relevant context for examining how discussion in different ethnic (sectarian) environments shapes support for ethnic politics. Since its founding, Lebanon has been a consociational democracy in which political power is apportioned on the basis of sect.<sup>10</sup> By long-standing convention, the positions of President, Prime Minister, and Speaker are assigned to the Christian Maronite, Sunni, and Shia communities, respectively. Parliamentary seats are also determined by sectarian quotas. After gaining independence in 1944, Lebanon’s parliamentary seats were distributed between Christians and Muslims at a 6:5 ratio. This arrangement lasted until demographic changes and regional politics led to the outbreak of civil war in 1975, which was

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<sup>10</sup>Lebanon has 18 officially recognized sects. While the last census was conducted in 1932, recent estimates suggest that Sunnis, Shia, and Maronite Christians are the largest groups, with 27, 27, and 21 percent of the population, respectively (<http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/lebanon/religious-sects.htm>). The composition of our mixed sectarian discussion groups follows the roughly balanced composition of the population.

only resolved in 1989 by the Ta'if Agreement.

The Ta'if Agreement aimed to establish more equal power-sharing among Christian and Muslim communities (while also calling for an eventual end to sectarianism). While the new arrangements encouraged political stability, they also arguably undermined political accountability and effective governance. Lebanon's political scene is now dominated by sectarian parties that oscillate between collusion when their interests are aligned and paralysis when they diverge. Parties rely extensively on clientelism and patronage to maintain political support (Cammett, 2014). Additionally, they often tap into fear and social pressure and to mobilize support for their political and economic agendas (Corstange, 2013; Paler, Marshall and Atallah, 2018).

Yet, Lebanese are increasingly frustrated with the sectarian status quo, in part because the current system has largely failed to deliver socio-economic development that benefits ordinary citizens.<sup>11</sup> This dissatisfaction was epitomized by the 2015 garbage crisis. For months, protesters from all confessions mobilized to condemn the government's inability to provide basic services and to support the efforts of the newly formed "You Stink" and "We Want Accountability" social movements, which demanded a solution to the country's economic and social ills. Against this background, the new secular group *Beirut Madinati* (Beirut My City) challenged the sectarian political establishment in the 2016 Beirut municipal elections and garnered a surprising 35 percent of the vote.

It was in this political climate that our partner, the Lebanese Center for Policy Studies (LCPS), sought to bring citizens together to discuss their preferences regarding the future of the sectarian political system and the possibility of a non-sectarian alternative. This raised important questions about how the sectarian composition of those discussions might affect individual support for political change.

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<sup>11</sup>Lebanon regularly ranks among the worst countries in reliability of electricity supply, quality of roads, and access to water and safely managed sanitation. See, for instance, the World Economic Forum's Global Competitiveness Index (2017/18).

## Experimental design

To examine how discussion in different sectarian environments shapes support for sectarian politics in Lebanon, we organized 120 discussions in Beirut between February and April 2016. Members of the three major sectarian groups (Christian, Sunni, and Shia) were recruited from the Beirut and Mount Lebanon areas and randomly assigned to participate in either homogeneous discussions (where all six participants belonged to the same sect) or heterogeneous discussions (with two participants from each sect). Our randomization resulted in 60 homogeneous and 60 heterogeneous sectarian discussions involving a total of 720 participants, of which 713 completed the study. Details on our design and randomization are provided in Appendix C.<sup>12</sup>

The 120 discussion groups were organized in five blocks of 24 discussions, with 12 homogeneous and 12 heterogeneous sectarian discussions per block. Participants were recruited by a professional firm for one discussion block at a time with recruiters using screening surveys to identify eligible participants. Once eligibility and willingness to participate were confirmed, each recruit was randomly assigned to a discussion group type, further blocking on sect and class. Moreover, to minimize the possible interference of other identity cleavages, all discussion groups were same-sex; three blocks of discussions were conducted with only men and two with only women.

We evaluate how our participants compare to the population in the Beirut area and in the country as a whole using data from the nationally representative survey that we conducted just prior to the discussions. Our comparison, presented in Appendix E, confirms that discussion participants (by construction) were more likely to be male and were wealthier than the average Beirut resident. They were also slightly younger, better connected to sectarian elites, and more likely to have homogeneous social networks but also more open to engaging with non co-sectarians. This suggests that participants might be more predisposed to benefit from discussion in heterogeneous groups

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<sup>12</sup>This appendix details the cross-cutting class experiment (the focus of a separate paper). Moreover, it describes one aspect of our study protocol that was not implemented as anticipated, introducing potential concerns about imbalance in pre-treatment characteristics across study arms. Our subsequent investigations and balance checks in Appendix D suggest that cause for concern is negligible. We nevertheless include control variables in our main analysis to correct for any imbalances in observable pre-treatment covariates.

than the broader population. This is an important portion of the population to study, however, as this is precisely the subset that civil society organizations often aim to target with intergroup activities.

We emphasize that by opting not to have a pure control group in which no discussion takes place, we are not estimating the effects of discussion itself but rather the effects of discussion in different sectarian environments on support for sectarian politics.<sup>13</sup> This design enables us to shed light on how individuals who engage in homogeneous and/or heterogeneous discussions in their day-to-day lives are shaped by those experiences. It is also relevant from the perspective of civil society organizations like LCPS that want to organize political discussions but are unsure of how the composition of those discussions might affect the nature of the discourse and the conclusions that participants reach.

## Discussion content

The discussions took place in sessions that lasted about 90 minutes and used the recent protests as a springboard for discussing participants' hopes and concerns regarding both economic conditions and sectarianism. At the start of each discussion the moderator used the following script to make participants aware of the sectarian (and economic) composition of their discussion group:<sup>14</sup>

*We are meeting today to discuss the recent developments in the country, mainly the protests that recently began in Lebanon... We have invited you...to engage in a discussion with members from [SAME/ DIFFERENT] sectarian groups and economic classes so that you can share with each other your thoughts and feelings about your economic and political hopes and concerns. Some of what we discuss today could be sensitive and at*

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<sup>13</sup>The decision not to have a pure control group was a function of our interest in implementing cross-cutting ethnic and class discussions; it was not possible to also have pure control groups given resource constraints.

<sup>14</sup>We chose to reveal the discussion group type at the outset both to make sure that the treatments were as strong as possible and to use a public goods game (played immediately after the introductions) to measure baseline levels of cooperation in same and mixed-sect groups. Our piloting suggested that the mention of group composition appeared natural in the context of the protests.

*times people might disagree—that is ok. We just ask that you engage with one another with honesty and respect so that we can all learn more about how people who we do not know personally are thinking and feeling on the issues that we all face.*

Participants were then asked to introduce themselves and offer basic personal information (e.g. on their jobs or neighborhoods) that would have further revealed their profiles.

After introductions, participants were led in a moderated, structured discussion that followed the same format for all groups.<sup>15</sup> The discussion started off by talking about reactions to the protests and then transitioned into an exchange on economic and political hopes and concerns as well as on the advantages and disadvantages of sectarianism in Lebanese politics. The session concluded with a discussion of what changes, if any, participants would like to see to the current sectarian system participants. Sectarianism is sensitive to discuss openly in Lebanon and the format and content of the session was piloted extensively before implementation. We followed existing best practices on how to foster dialogue to encourage a constructive exchange (see, for instance, Herzig and Chasin, 2006). Nevertheless, our design intentionally did not include a deliberative or consensus-building exercise so that the experience would better resemble the realities of everyday political discussion.

## **Data and measures**

Data for this study comes from multiple surveys and two behavioral exercises, including a public goods game and an opportunity to sign a petition condemning the role of sectarianism in Lebanese politics.<sup>16</sup> The analysis was pre-registered with the Evidence in Governance and Politics (EGAP)

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<sup>15</sup>For details on the format, see Appendix F. The full discussion guide is available from the authors. All 120 sessions were lead by one of two moderators, who themselves belonged to different sectarian groups (our main analysis includes moderator fixed effects). The moderators took care not to reveal their sectarian affiliations—their names are common to all sectarian groups in Lebanon and they displayed no outward signs of religiosity in their language or dress.

<sup>16</sup>We also selected eight discussions (four from each treatment arm) for translation and transcription in order to obtain more qualitative insights. For examples of these transcripts, see Appendix P. We prefer to use the transcripts for qualitative purposes rather than to code them for quantitative

network. We abide by the notion that the purpose of a pre-analysis plan (PAP) is not to tie the hands of researchers but rather to facilitate transparency (Humphreys, de la Sierra and van der Windt, 2013). While much of the analysis follows the PAP, there are also differences, which we discuss in Appendix N. In Appendix O we implement multiple hypothesis testing corrections for both our preferred set of results and for all pre-specified tests.

Our analysis draws upon data from four separate surveys. The first was a screening survey conducted by recruiters approximately two weeks before a block of discussions and used to determine participant eligibility and to obtain information necessary for block random assignment. Second, participants completed a self-administered pre-treatment survey upon arrival at the discussion session, which provides data for balance checks, covariate controls, and heterogeneous effects analysis. Third, we conducted a self-administered post-treatment survey immediately following the discussion to obtain measures of mechanisms and outcomes along both dimensions of interest—support for non-sectarian policies and willingness to engage with non co-sectarians. Question wordings for all survey outcome measures are in Appendix G. By using self-administered surveys and reinforcing for participants that no one present for the discussions would see their responses (including the moderation team), we aimed to limit the social desirability bias that might arise from conducting the surveys so shortly after the discussions (Tourangeau and Yan, 2007). Finally, after every session the moderator completed a survey to provide additional details on the session, including on the topics discussed and dynamics observed.

To obtain a behavioral measure of cooperation among co-sectarians and non co-sectarians, we use a public goods game. While the literature suggests that we might expect individuals in homogeneous sectarian environments to cooperate more than those in heterogeneous sectarian environments at the outset (e.g. Habyarimana et al., 2009), our main goal was to assess whether cooperation increased in heterogeneous groups and how such changes in cooperation compared to those in homogeneous groups.

We therefore implemented a public goods game in two rounds. The first round was played just after the initial introductions where discussion type was revealed so as to provide baseline

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analysis because of the challenges of using discourse to code outcomes like learning and social identification.

(pre-discussion) cooperation levels in mixed- and same-sect discussions. The second round was played immediately following the discussion and allows us to evaluate the the effect of discussion in different sectarian environments on cooperation.<sup>17</sup> In both rounds of the game, participants played with 10,000 Lebanese pounds (LBP) and were allowed to contribute any amount in 1,000 LL increments to the group pot. Contributions were multiplied by 1.5 and divided equally among all six participants.<sup>18</sup> To minimize consistency bias, participants were not reminded of their contributions in the first round and results from neither round were revealed until the very end of the session when the round paid out was determined by a coin flip. The main estimate of interest is the difference-in-difference: whether the pre-post change in cooperation in heterogeneous groups was equivalent to or even greater than that in homogeneous ones.

Finally, to obtain a behavioral measure of both outcome dimensions of interest—willingness to support non-sectarian policies and engage in collective action with non co-sectarians—we look at the decision to sign a petition criticizing the role of sectarianism in Lebanese politics. The petition was sponsored by LCPS as a non-partisan, non-sectarian organization and reflected issues raised by the recent mass protests. Specifically, it denounced the sectarian status quo; called for electoral reforms to reduce the influence of sectarian parties; and demanded that policies be made on the basis of programmatic policy priorities. All participants were given the opportunity to sign at the end of the discussion session. Participants were informed that the decision to sign was purely voluntary but that this was a *public* political action.<sup>19</sup> Participants are coded as having signed the petition if they completed all requested information.

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<sup>17</sup>It was important to capture changes in cooperation rather than just levels of cooperation post-treatment. Post-treatment cooperation levels in heterogeneous groups could have been significantly lower than those in homogeneous groups but nonetheless could have improved due to discussion. For more details on the implementation of the public goods game, see Appendix H.

<sup>18</sup>The average amount earned from the game was \$7.85 USD. As a reference, hourly minimum wage in Lebanon is about \$3.78.

<sup>19</sup>To reinforce the voluntary nature of the decision, participants decided in private and sealed the petition—whether completed or not—in an envelope before submitting it. See Appendix H for the full text, invitation to participate, and discussion of ethical considerations.

Data preparation closely followed our pre-analysis plan. We implemented 10 rounds of predictive mean-matching imputation to address a small amount of item-level missingness. Where measures capture one latent trait of interest, we aggregate them into indices using inverse covariance weighting, which creates an optimal weighted average by weighting-up index components that provide more ‘new’ information (Anderson, 2008). All indices, unless noted in the main text or Appendix N, were pre-registered. Descriptive statistics for all variables are in Appendix J.

## Estimation

To estimate the effects of mixed (versus same) sectarian discussion on outcomes we use a weighted least squares regression of the following form:

$$Y_{ij} = \alpha + \beta T_i + X_i' \gamma + \epsilon_i \quad (1)$$

where  $Y_{ij}$  is the outcome for individual  $i$  in discussion session  $j$ .  $T_i$  is the treatment indicator for whether an individual is in a heterogeneous ethnic group, making  $\beta$  the key coefficient of interest.  $X_i' \gamma$  is a vector of individual-level controls included to improve efficiency and control for any imbalance, and  $\epsilon_i$  is the individual level error term.<sup>20</sup> We use weights to account for unequal treatment assignment probabilities across blocks (Gerber and Green, 2012); see Appendix C for more on how weights were constructed. In Appendix K, we show that our main results are robust to a number of different estimation strategies, including specifications that exclude controls; employ a full suite of de-meaned controls as well as treatment and (de-meaned) control interactions (Lin, 2013); use block fixed effects instead of inverse probability weights; and employ ordinal logistic regression for scale outcomes.

## DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS

We first present descriptive statistics to provide context and background. This study is motivated by the concern that individuals from different ethnic or sectarian groups are often unwilling or unable to discuss politics across social divides. This appears to be true for a notable subset of our

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<sup>20</sup>We do not cluster standard errors because treatment was assigned at the individual level (Abadie et al., 2017).

participants. When asked “*Of your circle of family, friends, and acquaintances, how many of them belong to a different confession?*” about 50 percent of participants responded ‘*some*’ ‘*almost none*’ or ‘*none*’. While Beirut is a cosmopolitan city with many integrated neighborhoods, this suggests that a sizeable proportion of individuals do not have extensive contact with sectarian out-groups. In the words of one discussion participant: “Even though a lot of residential areas are mixed between different religions, every person holds tight to his religion. There is no real unity among people. I don’t even believe that mixed residential areas are really mixed.”

Interestingly, we also see varied evidence of willingness to engage with out-group members on different dimensions of social interaction. By many indicators, individuals exhibit a high willingness to interact with non co-sectarians: fewer than 15 percent of participants said that they would not be comfortable having a member of a different sect as their doctor, neighbor, friend, or boss. However, about 32 percent of participants expressed reluctance to discuss politics with non co-sectarians. This is only slightly lower than the 39 percent who said they would not be willing to marry or have someone in their family marry someone from another sectarian group. This suggests that, even when individuals have heterogeneous social networks, there is no guarantee that they discuss politics across sectarian lines.

Our pre-treatment data also helps to shed light on the viability of the learning mechanism. As discussed earlier, whether discussion results in  $M_a > M_e$  by facilitating learning about shared (divergent) economic preferences with non co-ethnics (co-ethnics) likely depends on whether ethnic and class interests are cross-cutting. There is evidence that this is the case in Lebanon (Corstange, 2013), and our own data confirms this. Discussion participants were asked to name their top three policy priorities on the pre-treatment survey.<sup>21</sup> Figure 1 disaggregates the results for the top two economic concerns—unemployment and rising prices—by sect and class.<sup>22</sup> The top panel shows that the poor, regardless of sect, are more likely than the rich to cite rising prices as among their top three concerns, with a similar pattern for unemployment. It is plausible that participants learned about these similar (different) concerns among non co-ethnics (co-ethnics) as unemployment and prices were also the economic issues that most frequently came up in the discussions.<sup>23</sup> While agreement

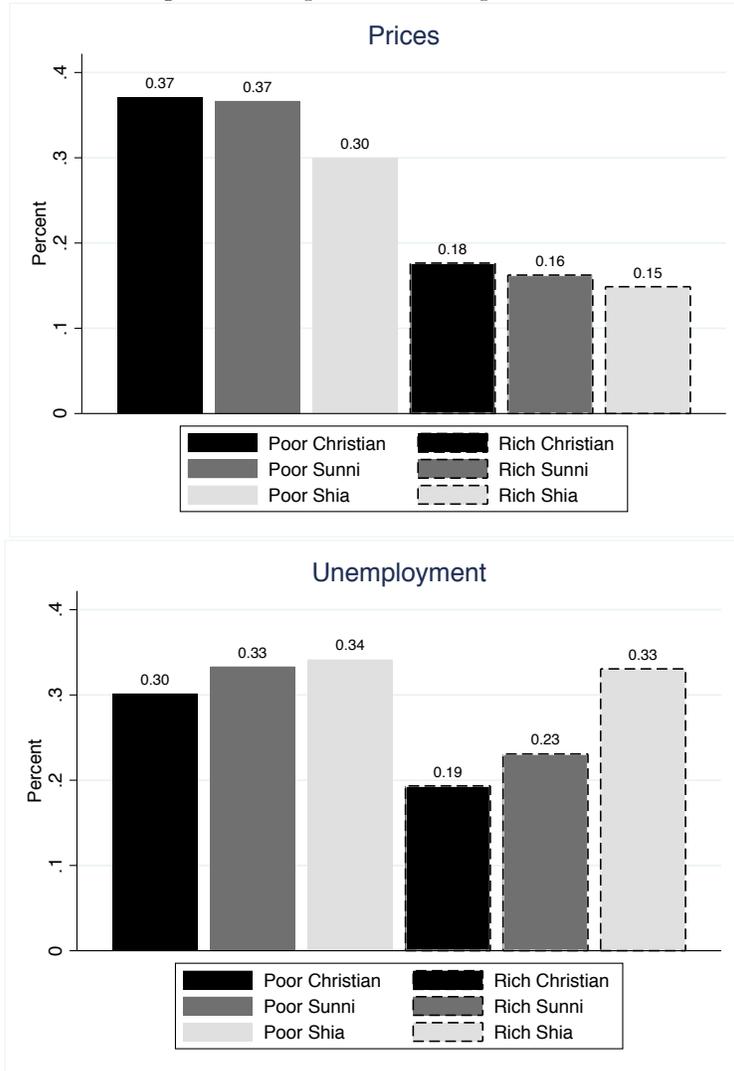
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<sup>21</sup>We follow the measures used by Lieberman and McClendon (2012).

<sup>22</sup>For more detailed results on all priorities, see Appendix J.

<sup>23</sup>According to the moderator survey, unemployment came up in 86 percent of all group discus-

Figure 1: Scope for shared preferences



on policy priorities does not necessarily translate into agreement on specific policy solutions, the data nonetheless demonstrates the potential for learning.

Finally, whether the discussions were capable of inducing learning or otherwise shifting attitudes towards sectarian politics plausibly depends on the extent to which they were well-implemented. Overall, the experience seems to have been a positive one; only two percent of all participants—regardless of discussion group type—reported on the post-treatment survey that they found the discussions to be a ‘*somewhat*’ or ‘*very*’ negative experience. Additionally 96 percent reported that

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sions while rising prices came up in 53 percent. These topics were equally likely to come up in homogeneous and heterogeneous discussions (see Appendix I).

they had opportunity to express their views while 52 percent said that they felt other discussion participants appeared willing to change their minds.

## RESULTS ON INTERMEDIATE OUTCOMES

We begin by examining how discussion in different sectarian groups affected the perceived material benefits, psychological benefits, and social costs associated with ethnic and non-ethnic politics. Strikingly, we find that discussion in mixed sectarian groups in fact caused a relative shift in all three mechanisms, resulting in relatively more learning about shared preferences, more social identification with sectarian out-groups, and less social pressure. These findings all point to the possibility of greater support for non-sectarian or programmatic politics in heterogeneous relative to homogeneous discussions.

### Material benefits

We first investigate whether discussion in mixed and same-sectarian discussion groups resulted in differential learning about shared preferences, consistent with the descriptive evidence just presented. To provide a formal test of whether discussion in heterogeneous groups resulted in relatively more learning about shared preferences (such that  $M_a > M_e$ ), we use five questions from the post-treatment survey that inquired into whether learning occurred and the extent to which there was perceived agreement in the discussions. We aggregate these measures into indices and also analyze them separately.

We measure learning using three survey questions that capture whether participants felt they learned something in general and from the discussion of economic and political issues in particular (see Appendix G for question wordings). Panel A of Table 1 reports results for the individual questions as well as for a ‘learning’ sub-index. The data shows that reported levels of learning were high: about 90 percent of participants in both homogeneous and heterogeneous groups felt that they learned something from the discussions (mean of 3.42 on a 1-4 scale). There is suggestive evidence that individuals in heterogeneous groups were relatively more likely to feel they learned something from the discussion of economic issues ( $p = .053$ ).

Moreover, those in mixed sectarian discussions were significantly more likely to perceive pref-

erences as shared. We measure shared preferences using two survey questions on the extent to which participants perceived agreement on economic issues and political reforms. Table 1 again presents results for the individual questions as well as for a pre-registered ‘agreement’ sub-index. The results show that being in a heterogeneous discussion group increased perceived agreement by .20 standard deviations on the index ( $p = .010$ ). This finding appears to be driven by greater perceived agreement on both economic and political concerns.<sup>24</sup> Finally, our pre-registered summary index of all five measures indicates that being in a mixed sectarian discussion indeed resulted in relatively more learning about shared preferences—by .19 standard deviations ( $p = .012$ ). All in all, the results are consistent with greater learning about shared preferences in heterogeneous discussion groups relative to homogeneous ones.

Table 1: Results for Intermediate Outcomes

	Same sect	Mixed sect		
	<i>mean</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>se</i>	<i>pval</i>
<b>Panel A: Learning about shared preferences</b>				
Learning about shared preferences index (measures 1-5)	-0.09	0.19	(0.08)	0.012
Learning index (measures 1-3)	-0.06	0.09	(0.08)	0.257
(1) Learned something about others’ perspectives (1-4)	3.42	0.03	(0.06)	0.671
(2) Learned from econ discussion (1-4)	2.11	0.13	(0.07)	0.053
(3) Learned from political discussion (1-4)	2.60	-0.01	(0.07)	0.838
Perceived agreement index (measures 4-5)	-0.07	0.20	(0.08)	0.010
(4) Agreement on econ concerns (1-4)	3.30	0.10	(0.05)	0.048
(5) Agreement on political concerns (1-4)	3.20	0.14	(0.06)	0.037
<b>Panel B: Social identification</b>				
(6) Identification with own sect (1-7)	4.26	0.11	(0.13)	0.395
(7) Identification with sectarian out-groups (1-7)	3.30	0.30	(0.12)	0.010
<b>Panel C: Social pressure</b>				
Social pressure index (measures 8-9)	0.12	-0.25	(0.08)	0.002
(8) Fear of creating enemies (1-4)	2.68	-0.25	(0.08)	0.003
(9) Worried about what others will think (1-4)	2.26	-0.23	(0.08)	0.006

Notes: *P-values are from a two-tailed test. Robust standard errors in parentheses. N=713.*

<sup>24</sup>For additional supporting analysis for this mechanism that takes advantage of our cross-cutting class experiment, see Appendix L.

## Psychological benefits

We next consider whether discussion in heterogeneous and homogeneous sectarian groups affected the psychological benefits associated with sectarian politics. Specifically, we examine the effects of discussion in different sectarian environments on social identification with one’s sectarian in-group as well as how close one feels to sectarian out-groups (out-group identification). We measure social identification using pictorial spatial measures of overlap between the self and ingroup or outgroup, as developed by Schubert and Otten (2002).<sup>25</sup> To measure the degree of overlap between the self and a social group—which has been validated to correlate with belonging and social identification (Schubert and Otten, 2002)—the post-treatment survey contained an image with seven pairs of circles, where one circle in each pair was small (representing the self) and one was large (representing the social group). In the first pair, the circles were arrayed horizontally at some distance from one another, indicating distance between the individual and the group. In each subsequent pair the circles moved increasingly close together until they fully over-lapped in the final pair, indicating that the individual viewed himself as wholly belonging to that group. Participants were asked to select which pair of circles best reflected how close they felt to a social group, where very close equaled seven and very far equaled one.

We use these measures to capture how close participants felt to each of six different social groups: lower and upper income Christians, Sunnis, and Shia. To create a measure of in-group identification, we average the reported closeness to rich and poor co-sectarians. Similarly, to create a measure of out-group identification, we average the reported closeness to lower and upper income members of the two sectarian out-groups. Looking at the control group means for both measures in Panel B of Table 1 helps to validate these measures: the mean for the self-ingroup measure (4.26) is clearly higher than the mean for the self-outgroup measure (3.30), as expected.

The results show that the discussion environment had little effect on in-group identification but that there was substantially greater out-group identification in heterogeneous discussions relative

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<sup>25</sup>In comparison to other commonly used survey measures, these pictorial measures have the advantage of providing a comprehensive sense of an individual’s relationship to a particular group in one measure. They also generate less unease among participants—confirmed in our piloting—than more direct questions about feelings towards out-groups.

to homogeneous ones. Specifically, out-group identification was .30 units higher in heterogeneous than in homogeneous discussions ( $p = .010$ ). While we cannot determine if this difference is driven by discussion causing a shift down in out-group identification in homogeneous sectarian settings (Scacco and Warren, 2018; Paluck, 2010) or a shift up in out-group identification in heterogeneous groups, it nevertheless suggests that the effects of discussion in different sectarian environments are significant. These results find further support using data from the moderator survey (see Appendix L). They are also consistent with the learning mechanism: greater out-group identification could have facilitated the ability to learn about shared preferences in heterogeneous groups (an antidote to motivated reasoning) or learning about similarities could have fostered increased out-group identification<sup>26</sup>

### Social costs

The evidence so far suggests that heterogeneous discussions increased  $M_a > M_e$  and decreased  $P_e$  relative to homogeneous discussions. Our final intermediate outcome aims to shed light on the extent to which fears of social sanctioning also enter into support for ethnic politics, especially public support. Specifically, we examine whether discussion in heterogeneous or homogeneous sectarian groups results in more social pressure.

We measure the effect of discussion in different sectarian environments on perceived social pressure using two post-treatment survey questions asking each participant whether they are afraid to take action because “*it creates enemies*” or because “*I worry about what people will think of me.*” As can be seen in Panel C of Table 1, individuals in heterogeneous sectarian discussions are significantly less likely than those in homogeneous discussion environments to be afraid of creating enemies and to be concerned about the opinions of others. The aggregate index indicates that social pressure was .25 standard deviations lower following discussion in heterogeneous groups relative to discussion in homogeneous groups, a result that is significant at the 99 percent confidence level ( $p = .002$ ). Results on the individual measures are similarly significant.

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<sup>26</sup>Additional analysis in Appendix L suggests that it is not driven by heightened superordinate (Lebanese) identity; perceived changes to relations at the group-level; or greater empathy and less anxiety (mechanisms commonly studied in the contact literature).

We interpret these results as evidence of relatively lower  $C_e$  and/or higher  $C_a$  in homogeneous groups. This indicates that heterogeneous discussions should result in relatively more (public) support for non-sectarian politics. Finding less social pressure in heterogeneous groups also helps to reassure that the evidence for greater learning about shared preferences in heterogeneous groups reflects genuine agreement rather than social pressure to conform. This suggests that one of the most robust ways in which discussion in heterogeneous social environments might shift support away from sectarian politics is by removing social pressures to conform in support of the sectarian status quo.

Overall, the intermediate outcomes show that discussion in mixed sectarian groups resulted in relatively more learning about shared preferences, greater out-group social identification, and less social pressure to support the sectarian status quo. These results are reassuring in light of our theoretical framework as all imply a potential for discussion in heterogeneous environments to result in comparatively less support for ethnic politics than homogeneous discussion. Investigating whether these shifts were of sufficient magnitude to bring about a switch in support from ethnic to non-ethnic politics is the focus of the next section.

## RESULTS ON SUPPORT FOR ETHNIC POLITICS

We next examine our ultimate outcomes of interest: whether heterogeneous discussion results in greater support for policies that promote non-sectarian or programmatic goals and willingness to engage and cooperate with non co-sectarians than homogeneous discussion. To preview our results, we find suggestive evidence (according to summary indices) that discussion in mixed sectarian environments resulted in relatively more support for non-sectarian politics on both dimensions.

### Support for non-sectarian policies

We investigate the effects of the discussion environment on support for non-sectarian policies using three survey measures that capture opinion on policies that were in the headlines at the time of the study. We aggregate these measures into a *policy index* and analyze them separately.<sup>27</sup> Our

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<sup>27</sup>This index was not pre-registered but was created as a complement to the pre-registered *engagement index*, described below.

expectation is that mixed-sect discussions will result in relatively more support for non-sectarian policies insofar as the effects on perceived material and psychological benefits presented above were sufficiently large. (We interpret these self-administered survey questions to capture private policy preferences, implying that  $C_a = C_e = 0$  for these measures).

The first survey question asks about support for the Orthodox Law, a policy that would make it mandatory for voters to cast ballots only for co-sectarian candidates and is largely viewed as reifying the role of sectarianism in Lebanese politics.<sup>28</sup> The second inquires into opinions on the legalization of civil marriage, which proponents argue is a bedrock for building a “civil, secular state neutral to the sectarian affiliations of its people.”<sup>29</sup> Importantly, while these measures capture views on sectarian politics in general, they do not explicitly evoke the distributional considerations that might underpin support for the status quo. We therefore use as our third measure a novel map exercise—motivated by a recent oil discovery off the coast—to examine how the discussion environment affects preferences for programmatic versus sectarian distributions of government revenue. Following the discussion, all participants were given a map of Lebanon with each district labeled by its predominant sect and level of economic development (ranging from very under-developed=1 to rich and well-developed=5). Participants were then asked to allocate a share of the future oil revenue (from 0-100) to each district. This allows us to assess whether heterogeneous discussions resulted in relatively greater allocations to non co-sectarian districts, especially those in greatest need.<sup>30</sup>

The results for the *policy index* and three component measures are presented in Panel A of Table 2. The results overall suggest more support for non-sectarian policies in heterogeneous than homogeneous discussions. The first result suggests that heterogeneous discussions led to a greater lack of support for the sectarian Orthodox Law, although this result is not statistically significant ( $p = .274$ ). Similarly, support for civil marriage was higher in heterogeneous than homogeneous discussions, a finding that is close to significant at the 90 percent confidence level ( $p = .104$ ). Finally,

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<sup>28</sup><http://english.al-akhbar.com/node/15022>.

<sup>29</sup><http://theislamicmonthly.com/civil-marriage-in-lebanon-for-better-not-worse>. At present, Lebanese must be married in accordance with religious law.

<sup>30</sup>For more information on the map exercise, see Appendix G.

the data suggests that those in heterogeneous discussions allocated two percentage points more future oil revenue to non co-sectarian districts than those in homogeneous discussions ( $p = .150$ ).<sup>31</sup> Notably, while the individual results are not significant, all coefficients are in the expected direction and some are close to significant. Moreover, the *policy index* aggregating these measures shows that heterogeneous discussions resulted in .16 standard deviations more support for non-sectarian policies than homogeneous discussions, a result that is statistically significant at the 95 percent level ( $p = .033$ ). Overall, we regard this as suggestive evidence that heterogeneous discussions resulted in relatively more support for non-ethnic policies than homogeneous discussions.

Table 2: Support for Sectarian Politics

	Same sect	Mixed sect		
	<i>mean</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>se</i>	<i>pval</i>
<b>Panel A: Support for non-sectarian policies</b>				
Policy index (measures 1-3)	-0.11	0.16	-0.08	0.033
(1) Do not support Orthodox electoral law (1-4)	2.38	0.10	(0.09)	0.274
(2) Support civil marriage law (1-4)	2.31	0.14	(0.09)	0.104
(3) Share for non co-sectarian districts (map exercise, 0-1)	0.53	0.02	(0.02)	0.150
<b>Panel B: Political engagement/cooperation with non co-sectarians</b>				
Engagement index (measures 4-5, 9)	-0.07	0.15	(0.07)	0.041
(4) Willing to talk with non co-sectarians (1-4)	2.96	0.16	(0.07)	0.017
(5) Willing to protest with non co-sectarians (1-4)	2.65	0.00	(0.09)	0.961
Cooperation (public goods game) (0-10,000)				
(6) Round 1	3646	-295	(255)	0.248
(7) Round 2	3728	-468	(265)	0.077
(8) Difference	83	-173	(149)	0.245
(9) Willing to sign cross-sectarian petition	0.31	0.05	(0.04)	0.218
<b>Panel C: Overall support for non-sectarian politics</b>				
Summary index (measures 1-5, 9)	-0.11	0.21	(0.07)	0.005

*Notes: P-values are from a two-tailed test. Robust standard errors in parentheses. N=713.*

<sup>31</sup>For more analysis of the map results, including heterogeneous effects analysis by sectarian group, see Appendix L.

## Willingness to engage with non co-sectarians

To test whether willingness to engage with non co-sectarians is greater in mixed than in same-sectarian discussions, we create a pre-registered *engagement index* using two survey questions and willingness to sign a petition condemning the role of sectarianism in Lebanese politics. Additionally, we separately analyze contributions in the public goods game. All results are presented in Panel B of Table 2.

To measure proclivity to engage with non co-sectarians, we use two survey measures that inquire into willingness to discuss issues with non co-sectarians in one’s social network or to protest with non co-sectarians. Notably, as shown in Panel B of Table 2, the desire to continue talking politics in one’s social network was higher in heterogeneous than homogeneous discussions by .16 units ( $p = .017$ ). While this result should be treated with some caution as it was self-reported on a survey, we nonetheless regard it as suggestive of an effect. Interest in talking did not extend to more costly forms of cross-sectarian political action, however, as we find no effect of the discussion environment on willingness to protest with non co-sectarians.<sup>32</sup>

Contributions in the public goods game confirm that heterogeneous discussions did little to enhance cooperation with non co-sectarians. The results presented in Table 2 and Figure 2 show that (as expected) contributions in heterogeneous groups in the first round were indeed lower than those in homogeneous groups, although this difference is not statistically significant. Contrary to expectations, we find no evidence that discussion in heterogeneous groups resulted in greater cooperation; if anything the results suggest a slight but insignificant decrease (see Appendix L for more analysis). Moreover, the coefficient on the difference-in-difference estimate is negative, implying that cooperation decreased more in heterogeneous than in homogeneous discussions, although this result is also not statistically significant.<sup>33</sup> All in all, the results suggest that discussion did little

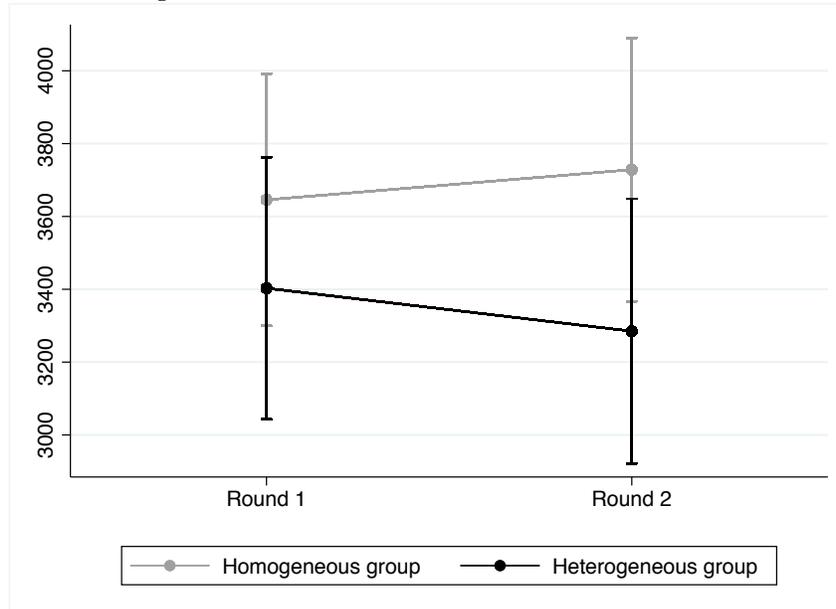
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<sup>32</sup>For completeness we also check whether discussion in mixed and same sectarian environments produced a differential willingness to engage with co-sectarians, but find no evidence of this (see Appendix L).

<sup>33</sup>The negative coefficient on the difference-in-difference estimate—and the positive slope on cooperation in homogeneous discussions—is driven by contributions in one same-sect discussion where participants coordinated to each contribute 10,000 LL despite the agreed upon rules. If we drop

to strengthen cooperation and collective action capacity among non co-sectarians, although the findings are not significantly different from what we observe in homogeneous environments.

Figure 2: Results from the Public Goods Game



The findings thus far suggest that discussion might have increased willingness to engage in some forms of political interaction (like discussion) but not necessarily in more intensive forms of collective action like protest or cooperation in public goods provision. We can shed further light on this by examining how the discussion environment affected willingness to sign the petition condemning the role of sectarianism in Lebanese politics. This measure is especially important because it highlights issues at the heart of the recent mass protests, enabling us to examine the effects of sectarian discussion environment on a real world cross-sectarian political action. While that makes petition-signing a particularly relevant measure, it also makes it a challenging one since petition-signing is a *public* political action and therefore subject to social sanctioning. Indeed, Paler, Marshall and Atallah (2018) show that perceived intra-group social costs had a significant effect on reducing willingness to sign the very same petition. Yet, our intermediate outcome results suggest that discussion in mixed sectarian groups resulted in significantly less social pressure, indicating the possibility of more signing in heterogeneous than homogeneous discussions.

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this group, the change in cooperation in homogeneous and heterogeneous discussions is almost identical.

The results in row nine of Table 2 show that 31 percent of those in same sectarian discussions opted to sign, which is a sizable minority. While the treatment coefficient suggests that discussion in mixed sectarian groups resulted in a five percentage point greater likelihood of signing, the difference is not significant at conventional levels ( $p = .218$ ). Yet, the results for the pre-registered *engagement index*—which combine the two survey measures and petition measure—provide more cause for optimism.<sup>34</sup> According to the index, willingness to engage with non co-sectarians was .15 standard deviations higher in heterogeneous than in homogeneous discussions—a finding that is significant at the 95 percent confidence level ( $p = .041$ ). The strength of this result is driven by both the ‘willingness to talk’ measure and the petition outcome.<sup>35</sup>

## Summary index

Finally, we create a *summary index* of all the measures used to create the *policy index* and *engagement index*. While this index was not pre-registered, it tests the hypothesis that discussion in different sectarian environments affects support for sectarian politics broadly defined. Moreover, it reflects that the petition in fact encapsulates both outcome dimensions of interest, capturing willingness to engage in cross-sectarian collective action *and* preferences for non-sectarian (programmatic) politics. The results presented in Panel C indicate that support for non-sectarian politics was .21 standard deviations higher in heterogeneous than in homogeneous discussions—a result that is significant at the 99 percent confidence level ( $p = .005$ ).

All in all, the evidence provided suggests that discussion in heterogeneous sectarian groups resulted in more support for non-sectarian politics than discussion in homogeneous ones. While we find positive effects of mixed sectarian discussion on our key summary indices, we observe few effects on individual outcomes, including our behavioral measures. While not definitive, we believe that even tentative results merit recognition given the difficulty of shifting support away from sectarian politics and towards a non-sectarian alternative suggested by our theoretical framework.

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<sup>34</sup>We exclude the public goods game results because we pre-registered that we would analyze these separately and because they correlate negatively.

<sup>35</sup>If we create an index that just includes the two survey measures of engagement, the coefficient = .12, standard error = .07 and p-value = .106.

## DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

The results provide strong evidence for intermediate outcomes and suggestive evidence of greater support for non-sectarian politics in heterogeneous relative to homogeneous discussions. While these findings are noteworthy, they also raise the question: Why do we not observe more than suggestive evidence of a shift in support from ethnic to non-ethnic politics in heterogeneous versus homogeneous discussions? One explanation highlighted by our theoretical framework is that switching support from ethnic to non-ethnic politics is simply hard because it requires sufficiently large shifts—possibly bigger shifts than we observe here—in one or more of the theorized mechanisms. This leads to a second question: When might discussion across divides have even deeper or more lasting effects on altering support towards ethnic politics?

One explanation for why we do not observe greater evidence of support for non-ethnic politics in heterogeneous groups is that the ‘average’ differences between heterogeneous and homogeneous discussions are masking substantial individual or group-level heterogeneity. One notable possibility—drawing on evidence that majority and minority groups experience discussion and intergroup contact differently (Myers and Mendelberg, 2013; Pettigrew and Tropp, 2011)—is that sectarian group status is moderating the effect of discussion in different sectarian environments. We explore heterogeneity of results by sectarian group in Appendix L. Interestingly, we see evidence for different mechanisms from different sectarian groups. It is possible that heterogeneous discussions moved only one or two mechanisms for each individual or group, yielding insufficient change to switch in support from sectarian to non-sectarian politics. Future research should investigate the factors that moderate the effect of discussion in different ethnic environments.<sup>36</sup>

Another reason we might not observe stronger evidence of less support for sectarian politics in heterogeneous groups is that Lebanon—as a consociational democracy—is a hard case. Like other consociational democracies such as Iraq and Bosnia-Herzegovina, sectarian politics was institutionalized to preserve peace and stability following civil war. There is a deep-seated belief that the political status quo in Lebanon is essential to sectarian group survival and protection. This, in turn, could fortify the psychological benefits of sectarianism and intra-group social pressure to support

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<sup>36</sup>For analysis of how treatment effects vary by homogeneity of social networks and strength of sectarian identity, see Appendix L.

the status quo such that there is simply limited scope for inducing movement on the mechanisms. This observation highlights the importance of replicating this empirical inquiry in sub-Saharan Africa, India, or other contexts where it may be more (or less) possible to affect greater change on the underlying factors theorized to drive support for ethnic politics.

The ability to affect support for ethnic politics likely also depends on the structure of the discussion itself (Myers and Mendelberg, 2013). In particular, the impact of heterogeneous relative to homogeneous discussions could be limited by the fact that we examine one-off discussion with strangers rather than more sustained interaction over time. Relatedly, there could be concern that the results presented here are ephemeral and will not endure once participants return to the social contexts and networks in which they are embedded. While our data does not allow us to address this concern directly, there is evidence that even brief discussions can have lasting effects (Broockman and Kalla, 2016; Pons, 2018). Moreover, we recall our suggestive finding that discussion in mixed sectarian groups caused relatively greater willingness to talk politics with non co-sectarians in one's social network. This echoes the evidence in Lazer et al. (2015) that deliberative events can have a multiplicative event as participants continue to discuss issues within their social networks afterwards. Insofar as even one-off discussions in mixed groups warm people to the idea of more such discussion, the effects observed here could possibly pave the way for more discussion, engagement, and attitudinal and behavioral change in the future (Jacobs, Cook and Carpini, 2009; McClurg, 2003). More research is needed, however, to shed light on how sustained discussion must be in order to have an effect as well as on the effects of facilitating discussion with strangers versus with members of ones existing social network.

## CONCLUSION

This paper uses a large-scale discussion experiment in Lebanon to examine how talking politics in heterogeneous or homogeneous ethnic environments affects support for ethnic politics. Using a theoretical framework that integrates literatures on ethnic politics, political discussion, and inter-group contact, we show more learning about shared preferences, greater outcome identification, and less social pressure to support sectarian politics in heterogeneous than in homogeneous discussions. We also find suggestive evidence that heterogeneous discussions have the potential to shift support

away from sectarian politics and towards a non-ethnic alternative. In doing so, this paper makes an important contribution to our understanding of how the social environment shapes attitudes towards an ethnic status quo and to how the homogeneity of social interactions in ethnically divided societies can inhibit opportunities for political change.

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