

How Talking Across Ethnic and Class Divides Shapes Support for Ethnic Politics: Evidence from an Experiment in Lebanon

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Abstract

It is widely believed that ethnic politics and conflict are less pronounced in countries with cross-cutting rather than reinforcing social cleavages. This paper argues that whether cross-cutting ethnic and class *cleavages* translate into cross-cutting social *interaction* plays an important role in determining individual support for programmatic over ethnic politics. We examine this by implementing an experiment in Lebanon in which 720 lower and upper income Christians, Sunnis, and Shia were randomly assigned to participate in discussions that varied in their sectarian and class compositions. We show that, relative to discussion in homogeneous groups, cross-ethnic within-class political discussion produced greater support for programmatic politics, driven by greater learning about shared preferences and less social pressure. We also demonstrate why discussion among co-ethnics from different classes or in fully diverse settings can fail to shift support from ethnic to programmatic politics. Overall, this study reveals how interaction in different social environments can foster inter-ethnic class-based alliances or intra-ethnic class-based antagonisms, shedding new light on the foundations of support for programmatic politics in ethnically divided societies.

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It is widely believed that ethnically diverse societies exhibit weaker economic growth, less public goods provision, worse governance, and a higher risk of civil conflict (Alesina and Ferrara, 2005; Alesina, Baqir and Easterly, 1999; Chandra, 2004; Horowitz, 2000). Such problems are thought to be less severe, however, in countries where other social cleavages cut across (rather than reinforce) the ethnic cleavage (Lipset and Rokkan, 1967; Dunning and Harrison, 2010). Cross-cutting cleavages allow for membership in different social groups, weakening the dominance of ethnic identity. As Dunning and Harrison (2010, 21) state: “When individuals who are members of the same group or social category on one dimension of interest or identity, such as ethnicity, are members of different groups on another dimension, such as social class, their competing interests on the second dimension may undercut their primary allegiance to interests arising on the first dimension.” This claim is supported by evidence that cross-cutting cleavages reduce prejudice (Deschamps and Doise, 1978), weaken ethnic politics (Dunning and Harrison, 2010), and mitigate ethnic conflict (Gubler and Selway, 2012).

While there are many possible cross-cutting cleavages, scholars have long been especially interested in societies in which the ethnic cleavage is intersected by a class cleavage such that different ethnic groups have both lower and upper income members.¹ The focus on class is particularly important because it is often the central cleavage around which issue-based, programmatic party competition is organized (Kitschelt and Wilkinson, 2007) and therefore presents a potentially important viable—and preferable—alternative to ethnic politics.²

Yet, in many countries with cross-cutting ethnic and class cleavages, the salience of economic class remains weak, undermining its potential as an alternative foundation for political competition. Moreover, its weakness stems directly from the dominance of the ethnic cleavage. As Horowitz (2000, 32) notes, ethnic conflict “impedes or obscures class conflict when ethnic groups are cross-class, as they are in unranked systems. There is, under those circumstances, a strong tendency to reject class conflict, for it would require either interethnic class-based alliances or intraethnic

¹Horowitz (2000) seminally refers to these as ‘unranked’ societies.

²Programmatic politics is often viewed as preferable insofar as it is associated with valued outcomes like greater accountability and attention to economic inequality. For a normative and empirical discussion of the advantages of class over ethnic politics, see Huber (2017, chpt. 2).

class antagonisms, either of which would detract from the ethnic solidarity that unranked ethnic conflict requires.” This presents a puzzle: Why do cross-cutting class cleavages sometimes succeed in weakening ethnic divisions and providing a foundation for programmatic politics but in other cases fail to do so?

Existing answers to this question tend to focus on how cleavage structures at the societal level shape electoral competition. For instance, [Huber \(2017\)](#) argues that the emergence of ethnic or class politics depends on how the group sizes for the ethnic majority and nonrich relate, which determines whether an ethnic or class party can offer more material benefits to voters. By this account, voters select whichever party offers the most benefits and can switch readily between them. While social structure is undeniably important, this approach downplays that other factors—such as a lack of information about material benefits ([Chandra, 2004](#); [Casey, 2015](#)), psychic attachments to ethnic parties ([Horowitz, 2000](#); [Chandra, 2004](#)), or social pressure to support ethnic politics ([Corstange, 2013](#); [Paler, Marshall and Atallah, 2018](#))—can create barriers to switching support from ethnic politics to a programmatic alternative.

This paper thus takes a different approach by focusing on how cross-cutting cleavages might in fact lower these barriers to support for programmatic politics. We argue that whether cross-cutting *cleavages* translate into cross-cutting *interaction* can have a powerful effect on shaping preferences for programmatic over ethnic politics. Critically, social interaction is the “primary mechanism linking social group membership and individual political behavior” (Horan, 1971, 650 quoted in Mutz, 2002). Thus, while cross-cutting cleavages enable membership in different social groups, it is social interaction that links those group memberships to individual behavior. In focusing on cross-cutting interaction, we build on a growing literature investigating the implications for ethnic divisions of cross-ethnic interaction in social networks, neighborhoods, or other settings ([Larson and Lewis, 2017](#); [Enos, 2017](#); [Scacco and Warren, 2018](#)). Yet, most studies to date have examined the effects of interaction across one social divide and have not yet considered how they might be conditioned by another identity. This is an important avenue for research because, while it is widely appreciated that individuals belong to multiple social categories ([Crisp and Hewstone, 2007](#)), we still know little about they relate in shaping political preferences.

The main goal of this paper is to examine how reinforcing versus cross-cutting social interaction affects support for ethnic versus programmatic politics. We define ‘reinforcing’ interaction

as interaction with those who share one’s ethnic *and* economic background. Even in societies with cross-cutting cleavages, such homogeneous interaction is perhaps the most common form of social interaction (Habyarimana et al., 2009; Brewer, 2000), and thus an important benchmark. Reinforcing interaction could bolster support for ethnic politics insofar as homophily is widely believed to hinder information-sharing across divides, harden social identities, and deepen prejudice (McPherson, Smith-Lovin and Cook, 2001). In contrast, ‘cross-cutting’ interaction—which we define as interaction with individuals from other ethnic and/or class groups—holds out the possibility of undermining support for ethnic politics. Cross-cutting interaction can take different forms, however, underscoring the need to clarify whether different *types* have different potential for shifting preferences. We consider three possibilities. First, cross-cutting interaction could involve interaction across ethnic lines but among individuals of the same class, potentially facilitating (in Horowitz’s terms) ‘interethnic class-based alliances’. Alternatively, it could involve interaction among co-ethnics of different classes, possibly revealing ‘intraethnic class-based antagonisms’. Finally, it could entail interaction with people from both ethnic and class in-groups and out-groups. Overall, this paper aims to examine how cross-cutting versus reinforcing interaction shape political preferences; to theorize and test the mechanisms (elaborated below) by which individuals will switch support; and to shed light on how different types of cross-cutting interaction vary in their ability to achieve preference change.

The challenge with studying the effects of interaction in different social environments is that individuals typically select into their networks and engagements. We address this by conducting a ‘lab-in-the-field’ discussion experiment in Beirut, Lebanon. While social interaction can take a number of different forms, we focus on discussion for two main reasons. 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). Moreover, discussion has the potential to impact political preferences through a number of relevant channels. To show this, we develop a simple theoretical framework that clarifies the mechanisms behind preference change. Drawing on the literature, we argue that individuals support ethnic over programmatic politics when the material and psychological benefits (minus the social costs) of the former exceed those of the latter. This highlights that switching support from ethnic to programmatic politics requires a relative increase in its material or psychic

benefits or decrease in the social costs of supporting it. We contend that cross-cutting discussion could increase support for programmatic relative to ethnic politics by: facilitating *learning* about the extent to which preferences are shared across ethnic and class lines, decreasing the relative perceived material benefits of ethnic politics; shaping social *identity*, diminishing the psychological benefits of ethnic politics; or alleviating exposure to intra-group social *pressure*, lowering the social costs of supporting programmatic politics. Its potential to influence all of these factors makes discussion a uniquely powerful form of social interaction to study.

Our experimental design enables us to shed light on whether and why—via these key mechanisms—different types of cross-cutting (relative to reinforcing) discussion succeed in shifting support from ethnic to programmatic politics. We implemented the experiment in Beirut in 2015-2016 in the context of the mass ‘You Stink’ protests that initially arose in response to the government’s failure to manage trash collection but evolved into criticism of sectarianism in Lebanese politics. While many Lebanese view the country’s power-sharing institutions as important to maintaining stability in the wake of civil war, others are increasingly dissatisfied with the slow economic growth, under-provision of goods and services, and political paralysis that they produce (Salloukh et al., 2015). The protests presented an important window of opportunity for public discourse on the future of sectarianism in the country.

Against this backdrop, we recruited 720 lower and upper income Christians, Sunnis, and Shia from the Beirut area to participate in 120 one-time discussions that varied in their sectarian and class compositions. Specifically, participants were randomly assigned to one of four discussion types: (1) same sect and class, (2) mixed sect/same class, (3) same sect/mixed class, or (4) mixed sect and class. The first arm represents reinforcing discussion (and serves as the control) while the other three arms reflect the different variants of cross-cutting discussion described above. Each moderated discussion lasted about 60 minutes and covered both economic and political topics. To our knowledge, this is one of the largest discussion experiments conducted to date and the only one to examine the effects of interaction involving multiple real-world social categories.

We measure the effects of cross-cutting discussion using a variety of survey and behavioral measures. Our main behavioral measure of support for ethnic versus programmatic politics is willingness to sign a public petition condemning the role of sectarianism in Lebanese politics and demanding a programmatic alternative. Additionally, to ensure that participants consider the

distributive trade-offs of switching support, we employ a novel map exercise that enables us to examine how cross-cutting discussion affected preferences for allocating future budget revenue on the basis of sectarian or programmatic considerations. We also collect rich data on mechanisms using a self-administered post-treatment survey.

Our main result is that mixed sect/same class (relative to reinforcing) discussion succeeded in shifting support from ethnic to programmatic politics. Critically, participants in mixed sect/same class discussions were 10 percentage points more likely to sign the petition. They also allocated five percentage points more revenue to poor districts in the map exercise and did so regardless of the predominant sect in the district. These results are further supported by evidence for two of our three theorized mechanisms: mixed sect/same class discussion resulted in relatively more learning about shared preferences and less social pressure to support the sectarian status quo. All in all, these results demonstrate that cross-ethnic discussion among individuals of the same economic class has the potential to lay the foundation for political change by fostering inter-ethnic class-based alliances.

Conversely, our findings highlight the limits of other forms of cross-cutting interaction. Neither same sect/mixed class nor fully mixed discussions shifted political preferences. While same sect/mixed class discussion resulted in greater learning about *divergent* preferences, social pressure to support the sectarian status quo remained high. This provides concrete evidence to support Horowitz’s concern about the difficulties of fostering intra-ethnic, class-based antagonisms. And while interaction in fully mixed groups unexpectedly increased social identification with class outgroups, this was not associated with increased support for programmatic politics, highlighting the limits to full diversity.

This paper makes several contributions. We provide new evidence as to how cross-cutting cleavages can shape the formation of individual preferences towards ethnic and programmatic politics via their impact on social interaction. To do so we bridge distinct literatures in political science and psychology that had not yet been truly integrated. While research in comparative politics has primarily been concerned with how cross-cutting cleavages at the societal-level affect outcomes like preferences, voting behavior, electoral competition, and conflict ([Corstange, 2013](#); [Dunning and Harrison, 2010](#); [Huber, 2017](#); [Gubler and Selway, 2012](#)), research in psychology has centrally focused on how cross-cutting social categories in intergroup contact situations affect prejudice and

bias (Deschamps and Doise, 1978; Gaertner et al., 1999; Brewer, 2000; Dovidio et al., 2006). In bringing these literatures together, our paper contributes not only to a deeper understanding of the relationship between cross-cutting cleavages and social interaction but also of the determinants of ethnic and class politics more broadly. This paper also has important implications for thinking about how to structure public discourse and social interaction in ethnically divided societies with a cross-cutting class cleavage. We emphasize that this study aimed to shed light on what happens when individuals discuss politics in different social environments and not necessarily to cause enduring attitude change.³ Nevertheless, the results can help to inform the work of civil society organizations, political parties, and other actors seeking to mobilize citizens across ethnic lines. We return to these contributions in the conclusion.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

We begin by addressing the question: Why do individuals prefer ethnic over programmatic politics, and how might reinforcing versus cross-cutting discussion affect those preferences? To do this, we first develop a simple theoretical framework to explain individual support for ethnic versus programmatic politics. We define ‘support for ethnic politics’ broadly to mean support for ethnic candidates, parties, policies, or a preference for coethnic coalitions. Conversely, we construe ‘support for programmatic politics’ as support for cross-ethnic parties, policies or coalitions that promote issue- or class-based politics.⁴ In our framework, individuals support ethnic over programmatic politics when the material and psychological benefits (minus the social costs) of the former

³As such, this paper has much in common with other studies that have used discussion experiments to understand effects on individual attitudes and behavior in lab-like settings (Klar, 2014; Chang and Peisakhin, 2018). However, this paper differs from Chang and Peisakhin (2018)—who also study the effects of inter-sectarian discussion in Lebanon—in that we focus on the effects of discussion across sectarian *and* class divides and on political preferences rather than on cooperation.

⁴We prefer a broad definition because, given our empirical context of Lebanon, we are studying support for sectarianism or sectarian power-sharing writ large, which encompasses these different aspects of ethnic politics. The theoretical framework is general and could be used to study any of these individual aspects.

exceed those of the latter, which the literature suggests is often the case in ethnically divided societies. We then elaborate how cross-cutting discussion can shift preferences away from ethnic politics and towards a programmatic alternative through its effects on one or more of these factors.

Understanding support for ethnic versus programmatic politics

It is widely believed that individuals choose whether to support ethnic or programmatic politics based on material self-interest and that, in ethnically-divided societies, the former yields more benefits. [Huber \(2017\)](#) locates support for ethnic or class parties in the material benefits that each one can offer and shows why—in conditions of high inequality—poor individuals in ethnic majorities support ethnic over redistributive politics precisely for material reasons. While this approach views promises by ethnic and class parties as equally credible, [Chandra \(2004\)](#) argues that people vote for ethnic parties because their material promises are more credible in weak information environments. This logic finds support in evidence of ethnic favoritism in the distribution of goods ([Franck and Rainer, 2012](#)). Another prominent material argument is that preferences over policies or goods are often more congruent within ethnic groups than across them, such that individuals feel that they are more likely to get the benefits they prefer when advancing their interests with coethnics ([Alesina, Baqir and Easterly, 1999](#); [Lieberman and McClendon, 2012](#)). Together these studies emphasize that individuals in many ethnically divided societies likely prefer ethnic politics for material reasons.

A second explanation for support for ethnic or programmatic politics focuses on psychic benefits. This is rooted in psychology research that proposes that individuals simplify their social worlds by categorizing themselves and others into in-groups and out-groups, striving for self-esteem and positive social identity through their membership in, and the relative status of, their in-group ([Tajfel and Turner, 1979](#)). Ethnic politics ensures that ethnic groups and leaders have status in the political system, which is something that can deliver psychic benefits to ordinary citizens ([Horowitz, 2000](#); [Chandra, 2004](#)). The psychic benefits associated with identity and group membership can even be so great as to motivate people to act on the basis of ethnicity even when it contravenes their material interest ([Klor and Shayo, 2010](#); [Suryanarayan, 2018](#)). While it is possible to conceive of class or issue-based identities yielding psychic benefits, such identities are likely substantially weaker than ethnic identity in many divided societies ([Chandra, 2004](#); [Gubler and Selway, 2012](#)).

Finally, support for ethnic or programmatic politics could depend on social costs. Evidence

suggests that ethnic groups are highly effective at intra-group social sanctioning, which helps to explain higher levels of public goods provision in ethnically homogeneous areas (Habyarimana et al., 2009; Miguel and Gugerty, 2005) and unwillingness to support publicly certain policies or political positions that are unpopular within one’s ethnic group (Corstange, 2013; Paler, Marshall and Atallah, 2018). Granted, social pressure could also work against ethnic politics and in favor of programmatic politics in contexts where there are strong social norms against ethnic voting (Carlson, 2016), or in favor of class-based voting, as might be the case in contexts with strong trade unions. Nevertheless, evidence of intra-ethnic social pressure to support ethnic politics suggests that the intra-group costs to supporting ethnic politics are low while those of supporting a programmatic alternative are high.

We summarize the above discussion as follows, using simple notation for ease of exposition: Individuals derive positive utility from the material (M) and psychic identity (I) 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. This implies that, in many countries dominated by ethnic cleavages, support for (e)thnic over (p)rogrammatic politics occurs when $M_e + I_e - C_e > M_p + I_p - C_p$. Importantly, this framework highlights the trade-off between these two modes of politics and crystallizes why shifting support towards a programmatic alternative is a tall order: small changes in one or more of the variables would be insufficient to reverse the inequality. It is precisely because discussion has the potential to impact all of these factors that it presents an especially important form of social interaction to examine, as we describe next.

Reinforcing versus cross-cutting discussion

How might cross-cutting (versus reinforcing) discussion shift support away from ethnic politics and towards a programmatic alternative? Importantly, a vast literature on discussion highlights its abilities to facilitate learning (Myers and Mendelberg, 2013), to shape social identity (Sunstein and Hastie, 2008; Paluck, 2011; Klar, 2014), and to expose individuals to social pressure (Mutz, 2006; Farrar et al., 2009). Drawing on this literature, we argue that cross-cutting discussion has the potential to shift support from ethnic to programmatic politics through three main mechanisms. First, it could facilitate *learning* about the extent to which material preferences are shared among coethnics and non-coethnics, increasing the relative perceived material benefits of programmatic

politics such that $M_e > M_p$ switches to $M_p > M_e$. Second, it could affect social *identity* and, specifically, how close individuals feel to ethnic and class in-groups and out-groups, thereby lowering I_e and the psychic benefits associated with ethnic politics. Third, cross-cutting discussion could alleviate the salience of social *pressure* to support ethnic politics, reducing the social costs associated with publicly supporting programmatic politics such that $C_p < C_e$. We view these mechanisms as important intermediate outcomes that merit investigation in their own right. In what follows, we focus on how mixed sect/same class and same sect/mixed class discussion might shift support towards programmatic politics via these mechanisms because these yield the clearest predictions. We conclude the section by considering what might happen in fully cross-cutting discussion.

Learning and material benefits. We first argue that cross-cutting discussion can facilitate learning about the extent to which preferences are shared among coethnics and non-coethnics, which has the potential to alter the perceived material benefits of programmatic versus ethnic politics. To see this it is important to consider the information problems in unranked societies in which different ethnic groups have both poor and rich members. While this makes intra-ethnic class-based differences and inter-ethnic class-based similarities more likely, individuals might still lack awareness of what they have in common with non-coethnics and of how they differ from co-ethnics. These information problems could arise because information flows less freely among non-coethnics (Habyarimana et al., 2009; Larson and Lewis, 2017); a strong ethnic identity obscures attention to class differences (Dawson, 1994); or ethnic elites actively obfuscate intra-group (and exacerbate inter-group) differences (Brubaker and Laitin, 1998).

Importantly, learning about shared (divergent) economic preferences among non-coethnics (co-ethnics) could thus affect whether individuals think they will be materially better off with ethnic or programmatic politics. While reinforcing discussion presents little opportunity for such learning, we expect that mixed sect/same class discussion will yield greater support for programmatic politics if it induces learning about shared economic preferences. In contrast, we expect same sect/mixed class discussion to yield greater support for programmatic politics if it reveals differences in preferences.

Social identification and psychic benefits. Second, cross-cutting discussion could shift support from ethnic to programmatic politics through its effect on social identification and the psychological benefits associated with the different modes of politics. It is widely believed that interaction in homogeneous or reinforcing groups strengthens in-group social identification (Scacco

and Warren, 2018; Sunstein and Hastie, 2008; Klar, 2014; Levendusky, Druckman and McLain, 2016; Paluck, 2010). The literatures on crossed-categorization and inter-group contact suggest possible ways by which cross-cutting discussion might counter these effects through altering social categorization and weakening prejudice. One of the leading possibilities is that cross-cutting discussion could facilitate *recategorization*—embodied by the Common Ingroup Identity Model (CIIM)—in which individuals see the out-group more favorably as everyone comes to see themselves as part of a super-ordinate group (Gaetner et al., 1993).

We expect that mixed ethnic/same class (relative to reinforcing) discussion will produce more support for programmatic politics if it results in greater closeness to non-coethnics of the same class. This follows on CIIM, which suggests that these will be contexts in which a common class identity weakens perceived differences across ethnic groups.⁵ In this way, mixed ethnic/same class interaction resembles an optimistic environment for inter-group contact because it involves interaction across a single line of division while also providing for a shared identity on a second dimension.

Same ethnic/mixed class discussion also has the potential to result in relatively less support for ethnic politics than reinforcing discussion. Interestingly, this is precisely the context in which we might be most hopeful about differences on a second dimension (class) undermining attachments to a common ethnic identity (Dunning and Harrison, 2010). Yet, this can be hard to achieve in reality insofar as those first dimension attachments are exceptionally strong (Dawson, 1994). Nevertheless, research suggests that individuals can resist the common in-group identity when subgroup identities are both important and in conflict with the common identity (Gaetner et al., 1993; Crisp, Walsh and Hewstone, 2006). In a rare political science test of this, Klar (2018) shows that having a common gender identity increased gender bias among women with competing partisan identities. This suggests that same sect/mixed class discussion could weaken support for ethnic politics if class-based differences undermine ethnic identification.

Social pressure and social costs. Finally, we consider how cross-cutting versus reinforcing discussion can shape social pressure to support ethnic and programmatic politics. Discussion re-

⁵We note that while reinforcing discussions could also heighten the salience of class identity, this would not necessarily produce greater social identification with non-coethnics if it also reinforced ethnic identity.

quires public expressions of preferences, which can expose participants to social pressure to conform to those with whom they are interacting (Farrar et al., 2009; Mutz, 2006). In light of the evidence of intragroup sanctioning discussed earlier, we might expect social interaction with coethnics to produce particularly high conformity pressure and awareness of the social costs of deviating from an ethnic status quo. This implies that discussion in homogeneous ethnic groups—likely regardless of class—will reinforce fears of intra-group social sanctioning and the high costs of ‘defecting’ to support a programmatic alternative. Conversely, discussion in heterogeneous ethnic environments, again unconditional on class, likely alleviates the social pressure to reject programmatic politics. Such interaction could also create opportunities to observe fellow coethnics engaging with non-coethnics, helping to shift social norms (Tankard and Paluck, 2016).

In sum, we expect that—relative to reinforcing discussion—mixed ethnic/same class discussion will result in more support for programmatic over ethnic politics if it: facilitates learning about shared economic preferences among non-coethnics; strengthens social identification with non-coethnics of the same class; and/or reduces social pressure. We anticipate that same ethnic/mixed class discussion will have the same effect if it: facilitates learning about divergent economic preferences; weakens social identification with one’s own ethnic group; or reduces social pressure (although this might be unlikely). We emphasize that shifting all three mechanisms is not necessary to induce preference change; movement of sufficient magnitude in one or more mechanisms could be enough.

Finally, we consider the effects of interaction that is cross-cutting on both class and ethnic dimensions, meaning that individuals interact with those from both their ethnic and class in-groups and out-groups. This is a very important form of interaction to study because, on one hand, diversity in social interactions is often viewed as a normative good (e.g. Parekh, 2000). On the other hand, research cited at the outset highlights the adverse effects of ethnic diversity, although we still know little about how much diversity is too much. We therefore also explore the effects of fully cross-cutting (relative to reinforcing) discussion. It is possible that fully cross-cutting interaction polarizes individuals along ethnic and class lines, or results in the formation of alliances on the basis of either ethnicity or class such that it resembles the other types of cross-cutting discussion already described. It is also possible that the diversity in fully mixed discussions makes both ethnicity and class less salient, leading individuals to converge on a common national identity. Our overall goal with this analysis is to shed light on whether, on average, fully cross-

cutting discussion can also increase relative support for programmatic politics via its impact on the theorized mechanisms.

THE CONTEXT: POLITICAL CRISIS IN LEBANON

We investigate the effects of reinforcing and cross-cutting discussion in Lebanon in a particularly timely historical moment. In August 2015, mass protests erupted over the government’s failure to manage trash collection. As garbage piled high in the streets—a potent visual reminder of the corruption and inefficiency of the sectarian-based political system—Lebanese mobilized across sectarian lines in a political movement (dubbed the ‘You Stink’ movement), demanding a solution to the country’s economic and social ills. These protests presented an important window of opportunity for public discourse on the future of sectarianism and the possibilities for political reform.

To understand the significance of these protests it is necessary to recognize the role of sectarianism in Lebanese politics and society. Since the French mandate period, Lebanon has been a consociational democracy in which top executive, legislative, judicial, and administrative positions are apportioned on the basis of sect (Salloukh et al., 2015).⁶ While Maronite Christians were advantaged by the power-sharing institutions put in place at the time of Lebanon’s independence in 1943, a growing Muslim population and regional instability resulted in a civil war that lasted from 1975-1990. The 1989 Ta’if agreement ending the war called in principle for the elimination of confessionalism while at the same time updating it for the post-war context. It solidified, for instance, the practice of reserving the position of president for a Maronite Christian, of prime minister for a Sunni Muslim, and of speaker of parliament for a Shia Muslim and also shifted power from the executive to the legislature, where seats were divided equally among Christians and Muslims.

The institutionalization of politics along sectarian lines also came to be reflected in the organization of Lebanon’s political parties. Today, most parties in Lebanon are dominated by one

⁶Lebanon has 18 officially recognized sects. While no census has been conducted since 1932, a recent study suggests that 27 percent of the population is Sunni, 27 percent is Shia, and 21 percent is Maronite Christian, with the rest of the population belonging to smaller groups (<http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/lebanon/religious-sects.htm>).

confessional group whose members differ substantially along other social dimensions (Corstange, 2013). One important byproduct of the sectarian orientation of political parties in Lebanon is that they rely on clientelism and the direct distribution of social or welfare goods to maintain political support, resulting in a sub-optimal allocation of resources from the perspective of balanced national development (Salti and Chaaban, 2010).

Critically, while the sectarian cleavage dominates in Lebanon, there is a cross-cutting class cleavage. In recent decades, both the Sunni and Shia populations have largely caught up economically to Maronite Christians such that now all sectarian groups have a mix of rich and poor. There is also evidence of cross-sectarian class based policy preferences (Corstange, 2013, see also the Appendix G). Yet, Lebanon's cross-cutting class cleavage has not yet provided an alternate basis for political mobilization, in part due to social pressure to support the sectarian system (Corstange, 2013; Paler, Marshall and Atallah, 2018).

While Lebanon's power-sharing institutions are often credited with preserving the peace, there are nonetheless signs of demand for an alternative owing to growing popular frustration with the deficiencies of the status quo, which is seen as contributing to poor service provision and infrastructure quality.⁷ This frustration was reflected in massive street protests demanding an end to sectarianism in the wake of the Arab Spring.⁸ Additionally, in recent years there have been promising examples of cross-sectarian programmatic political organization, as was the case for a 2013 teachers' coalition strike. In spring 2016, in the wake of the You Stink protests (and shortly after the field work for this study completed), a secular and issue-oriented group known as *Beirut Madinati* (Beirut My City) organized to compete in the Beirut municipal elections. To the surprise of many, this new party won 35 percent of the vote against established sectarian parties. All in all, these recent developments highlight that there is growing demand among Lebanese for a new brand of non-sectarian or issue-based politics and underscore the importance of examining how reinforcing and cross-cutting interaction shape preferences for political reform.

⁷For instance, according to the World Economic Forum (2017), Lebanon recently ranked 130 of 137 countries in its overall infrastructure quality.

⁸<http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/1008/what-is-political-sectarianism>.

RESEARCH DESIGN

To examine the effects of reinforcing versus cross-cutting discussion, we recruited lower and upper income Christians, Sunnis, and Shia from the Beirut area and randomly assigned them to six-person, 60-minute discussions that varied in their sectarian and class composition. Specifically, participants were assigned orthogonally following a 2x2 factorial design to same or mixed sectarian discussions (where the latter comprised two participants from each sect) and to same or mixed class discussions (where the latter consisted of three members of each class). This yielded four discussion types: (1) same sect and class, (2) mixed sect/same class, (3) same sect/mixed class, and (4) mixed sect and class, as shown in Table 1. Overall, 30 discussions with 180 participants of each type were organized, resulting in a total of 120 discussions involving 720 participants (of which 713 completed the study). The first arm captures reinforcing discussion (and serves as the control) while the other three arms are variations on cross-cutting discussion. This design enables us to examine whether and how, when discussion occurs, its effects are shaped by social conditions.⁹

		Sectarian discussion	
		Same sect	Mixed sect
Class discussion	Same class	Group 1	Group 2
		groups = 30 n = 180 Sect comp: 6 Sunni or 6 Christian or 6 Shia Class comp: All poor or all rich	groups = 30 n = 180 Sect comp: 2 Sunni, 2 Christian, and 2 Shia Class comp: All poor or all rich
	Mixed class	Group 3	Group 4
		groups = 30 n = 180 Sect comp: 6 Sunni or 6 Christian or 6 Shia Class comp: 3 poor and 3 rich	groups = 30 n = 180 Sect comp: 2 Sunni, 2 Christian, and 2 Shia Class comp: 1 poor and 1 rich of each sect

Table 1: Summary of randomization

We note that our discussion experiment is one of the largest conducted to date, which should help to increase confidence in the results. For instance, in research on the effects of discussion across partisan divides, the experiment in Klar (2014) involved 349 university subjects and lasted

⁹Precisely because we are interested in the effect of discussion in different social contexts rather than the effect of discussion versus no discussion, we do not have a pure control in which no discussion takes place. Also, given the already complex study design, obtaining the appropriate number and composition of pure control groups would have been prohibitively expensive and complex.

five minutes on average. In their experiment on cross-sectarian discussion and cooperation in Lebanon, [Chang and Peisakhin \(2018\)](#) involved 360 Sunni and Shia participants, of which 120 took part in 30-minute discussions in a total of 20 groups. Our cross-sectarian discussions alone involved 360 individuals in 60 groups, helping to allay concerns about low statistical power.

Recruitment and randomization

The 120 discussions were organized in five sets of 24 discussions with six discussions of each type per set. A set of discussions was completed every 2-3 weeks between January and April 2016. For each set of discussions, a professional focus group firm recruited 40 individuals of each of the six different ‘profile types’ (e.g. poor Sunni, rich Sunni, poor Shia, rich Shia, poor Christian, rich Christian), of which 24 would ultimately participate and 16 would serve as backups.¹⁰ Thus, for the entire study, 1200 individuals were recruited to obtain 720 participants.

Recruiters employed screening surveys to identify eligible participants. Once eligibility was confirmed, each recruit was randomly assigned to a discussion group type, blocking on set, sect, and class.¹¹ Once assigned, all individuals—including backups—were scheduled for one session in accordance with the target numbers needed for every session. Individuals received no advance information about their discussion type. Upon arrival at the session, if more recruits of each profile type arrived than were needed, participants were randomly selected to ensure that those who actually took part in the discussion were a random draw of those assigned.¹² All individuals received a show-up fee, regardless of whether they participated. [Table 2](#) provides an example of the randomization for one set of 24 discussions.

We note that recruited individuals were not a random sample of the population. The firm

¹⁰See [Appendix A](#) for details on how we determined whether participants belonged to lower or upper economic classes.

¹¹Where possible we also blocked on recruiter and neighborhood.

¹²This procedure was not implemented exactly as planned, which raises concerns about potential selection into participation. We discuss this at length in [Appendix A](#) and provide supporting information and balance tests in [Appendix B](#) that suggest this deviation from the protocol is not a major cause for concern.

Group type 1: Same sect, same class						Group type 2: Mixed sect, same class					
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
P. Sun.	P. Shi.	P. Chr.	R. Sun.	R. Shi.	R. Chr.	P. Sun.	P. Sun.	P. Sun.	R. Sun.	R. Sun.	R. Sun.
P. Sun.	P. Shi.	P. Chr.	R. Sun.	R. Shi.	R. Chr.	P. Sun.	P. Sun.	P. Sun.	R. Sun.	R. Sun.	R. Sun.
P. Sun.	P. Shi.	P. Chr.	R. Sun.	R. Shi.	R. Chr.	P. Shi.	P. Shi.	P. Shi.	R. Shi.	R. Shi.	R. Shi.
P. Sun.	P. Shi.	P. Chr.	R. Sun.	R. Shi.	R. Chr.	P. Shi.	P. Shi.	P. Shi.	R. Shi.	R. Shi.	R. Shi.
P. Sun.	P. Shi.	P. Chr.	R. Sun.	R. Shi.	R. Chr.	P. Chr.	P. Chr.	P. Chr.	R. Chr.	R. Chr.	R. Chr.
P. Sun.	P. Shi.	P. Chr.	R. Sun.	R. Shi.	R. Chr.	P. Chr.	P. Chr.	P. Chr.	R. Chr.	R. Chr.	R. Chr.
Group type 3: Same sect, mixed class						Group type 4: Mixed sect, mixed class					
13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24
P. Sun.	P. Sun.	P. Shi.	P. Shi.	P. Chr.	P. Chr.	P. Sun.	P. Sun.	P. Sun.	P. Sun.	P. Sun.	P. Sun.
P. Sun.	P. Sun.	P. Shi.	P. Shi.	P. Chr.	P. Chr.	R. Sun.	R. Sun.	R. Sun.	R. Sun.	R. Sun.	R. Sun.
P. Sun.	P. Sun.	P. Shi.	P. Shi.	P. Chr.	P. Chr.	P. Shi.	P. Shi.	P. Shi.	P. Shi.	P. Shi.	P. Shi.
R. Sun.	R. Sun.	R. Shi.	R. Shi.	R. Chr.	R. Chr.	R. Shi.	R. Shi.	R. Shi.	R. Shi.	R. Shi.	R. Shi.
R. Sun.	R. Sun.	R. Shi.	R. Shi.	R. Chr.	R. Chr.	P. Chr.	P. Chr.	P. Chr.	P. Chr.	P. Chr.	P. Chr.
R. Sun.	R. Sun.	R. Shi.	R. Shi.	R. Chr.	R. Chr.	R. Chr.	R. Chr.	R. Chr.	R. Chr.	R. Chr.	R. Chr.

Table 2: Individual profiles by group type

primarily used its networks of community members in the greater Beirut area to identify potential participants.¹³ While this recruiting approach does not affect the internal validity of our experimental results, it might raise questions about how our participants differ from the population. To shed light on this, we implemented a nationally representative survey with 2,495 respondents just prior to the experiment that allows us to compare our participants to the population of the Beirut area and to Lebanon as a whole (see Appendix C). By construction, our participants were more likely to be male and were wealthier than the average resident of Beirut. The sample is also slightly younger and better connected to sectarian elites but otherwise the characteristics of the sample are not very different from that of the population. We return to a discussion of external validity considerations associated with our sample in the ‘Discussion of Results’ section below.

¹³It would have been prohibitively difficult to obtain our required targets through random sampling; our piloting suggested that a relatively small proportion of those approached through random sampling would meet our sectarian and economic criteria and would be willing or able to participate. For examples of related studies that also do not employ random samples, see Klar (2014) and Dunning and Harrison (2010).

The discussion session

The discussions took place in sessions that lasted about 60 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 introduce the sessions:

We are meeting today to discuss the recent developments in the country, mainly the protests that recently began in Lebanon. Many persons consider that these protests may present an important moment to reflect about the future of this country regardless of their outcome. We have invited you here today to engage in a discussion with members from [SAME/DIFFERENT] sectarian groups and [SAME/DIFFERENT] 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 times people might disagree—that is ok. We just ask that you engage with one another with honesty and respect...

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 (see Appendix D for details). The discussions started by eliciting reactions to the protests and then transitioned into an exchange on economic concerns and political issues. The session concluded with a discussion of what changes, if any, should be made to the sectarian political system. We piloted the format extensively and followed existing best practices on how to encourage a constructive exchange (Herzig and Chasin, 2006). Nevertheless, we intentionally did not include a collaborative exercise so that the experience would better resemble the realities of everyday political discussion and allow for differences to emerge (e.g. in same sect/mixed class discussions).

We decided to reveal discussion type at the outset for three main reasons. First, unlike traits such as sex or race, sect and class are not necessarily visibly apparent in the Lebanese context. Thus, participants might have only inferred their group type with substantial noise, requiring a

significantly larger study for statistical power. Second, our piloting suggested that discussing the protests already made both identities salient; the introductory script makes sure that identities are salient for all discussion group types. This is important given that our interest is in understanding the effects of interaction rather than just identity primes. Third, research in psychology suggests that there are benefits to making social categories relevant in inter-group contact situations insofar as cross-cutting identities can only shape bias when both are important and relevant in a given context (Deschamps and Doise, 1978; Urban and Miller, 1998; Brewer, 2000). Additionally, making identities salient can facilitate generalization of interaction with specific individuals to their out-groups as a whole (Kite and Whitley, 2016). We underscore that, by revealing group type at the outset, we are examining not whether social interaction makes these cleavages salient but rather whether, conditional on both sect and class being salient, social context shapes preferences and behavior.

We took steps to ensure that study results are not an artifact of experimenter or moderator demand effects. All 120 sessions were lead by one of two moderators whose role was to follow the discussion guide, help participants clarify their statements if necessary, and ensure that all participants had an opportunity to talk. The moderators were highly experienced employees of a professional focus group firm. They took care not to reveal their sectarian affiliations and displayed no outward signs of religiosity in their names, language, or dress. Neither moderators (nor subjects) were informed about the hypotheses of the study in advance. Additionally, we assigned moderators to discussions in ways that allow us to control for differences in abilities. For each set of discussions, both moderators implemented all four discussion group types, allowing us to use moderator fixed effects to control for differences in abilities. Finally, to minimize the possibility that results could be driven by moderator learning or fatigue over time, within each block of 24 discussions, the order of discussion types was generally varied so that the sequence with which discussion types were implemented varied throughout the sets.

We also sought to minimize demand effects through our approach to data collection, namely, by using self-administered surveys and costly behavioral measures for all outcomes, as elaborated below. Importantly, while we took care to design the study to minimize demand effects and response bias, we did *not* seek to eliminate social desirability bias in the discussion itself. As discussed in our theory section, social forces likely had a substantial influence on what people said, reflecting

the fact that individuals often ‘perform’ differently in different social settings. Indeed, this was a possibility we sought to study rather than eliminate.

Data and measures

Data for this study comes from multiple surveys and a behavioral measure of petition-signing.¹⁴ Our analysis draws upon data from four separate surveys. The first was the screening survey conducted by recruiters approximately two weeks before a block of discussions. Second, participants completed a self-administered survey before the discussion that provides data for balance checks and controls. Third, we conducted a self-administered survey immediately following the discussion to obtain mechanism and outcome measures. Finally, after every discussion the moderator also completed a survey. Question wordings for all survey outcomes can be found in Appendix E; Appendix F presents descriptive statistics for all measures. We emphasize that all surveys completed by participants (which included the map exercise described below) were self-administered and sealed in envelopes before submission. It was also emphasized to participants that this ensured that no one involved in the study would be able to link participants to their responses.¹⁵ This choice builds upon substantial evidence that self-administered surveys alleviate social desirability bias and other demand effects (Krysan, 1998; Tourangeau and Yan, 2007).

We capture our main outcome of interest—support for ethnic versus programmatic politics—using two measures rooted in news headlines at the time of the study. Our main measure is willingness to sign a petition condemning the role of sectarianism in Lebanese politics and demanding a programmatic alternative. The petition, sponsored by the Lebanese Center for Policy Studies

¹⁴Additionally, we implemented a public goods game, described in Appendix K and discussed below in ‘Alternative Mechanisms and External Validity.’ We also transcribed eight discussions from different treatment arms in order to obtain more qualitative insights. We prefer to use the transcripts for qualitative purposes rather than to code them for quantitative analysis because of the challenges of using discourse to code outcomes like learning and social identification. For examples of these transcripts, see Appendix O.

¹⁵Adult illiteracy rates in Lebanon are relatively low (Corstange, 2013) and inability to read or write was not an obstacle for any of our participants.

or LCPS (our study partner), embodied many of the issues that emerged from the protests by denouncing the sectarian status quo; calling for electoral reforms to reduce the influence of sectarian parties; and demanding more programmatic policy-making. All participants were invited to sign at the end of the discussion session but were informed that signing was purely voluntary and that this constituted a *public* political action.¹⁶ This makes the petition a behavioral measure of costly participation since signing not only entailed some time and effort but also exposed individuals to potential social sanctioning by their sectarian communities (Paler, Marshall and Atallah, 2018). Participants are coded as having signed the petition if they completed all requested information.

One potential concern with the petition measure is that it does not explicitly capture the distributive considerations at the heart of support for ethnic politics. We address this by employing a novel map exercise embedded in the post-treatment survey. In 2010, oil and gas reserves were discovered off the coast of Lebanon, raising both hopes of future oil wealth and concerns that any revenues would be divided by confession rather than budgeted on the basis of economic need or policy priorities. To measure the effect of cross-cutting discussion on preferences over whether oil revenue be allocated on the basis of sectarian or economic considerations, all participants were given a map of Lebanon with each district labeled by its predominant sect and level of development. Participants were then asked to allocate shares of future revenue to each district.¹⁷ We create measures that enable us to examine whether cross-cutting interaction increased allocations to poorer districts and whether this was driven by giving more only to poor cosectarian districts (consistent with a sectarian distributive logic) or to all poor districts, regardless of predominant sect (consistent with a programmatic logic).

Our hypothesis tests, measures, and estimation strategy were pre-registered with the Evidence in Governance and Politics (EGAP) network. We abide by the notion that the purpose of a pre-analysis plan (PAP) is not to tie researchers' hands but rather to facilitate transparency (Humphreys, de la Sierra and van der Windt, 2013). While much of the analysis follows the PAP,

¹⁶Nevertheless, 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 E.1 for the full text, invitation to participate, and discussion of ethical considerations.

¹⁷For more information on the map exercise, see Appendix E.2.

there are some differences, which we report in Appendix M. Our data preparation also closely follows the pre-analysis plan. To account for a small amount of item-level missingness, we conducted 10 rounds of predictive mean-matching imputations. We also aggregated related measures into pre-specified indices (unless otherwise noted) using inverse covariance weighting (Anderson, 2008).

Estimation

We estimate the effect of discussion in different cross-cutting groups against a control using a weighted least squares regression of the form:

$$Y_{ij} = \alpha + \beta_1 G2_i + \beta_2 G3_i + \beta_3 G4_i + X_i' \gamma + \epsilon_i \quad (1)$$

where Y_{ij} is the outcome for individual i in discussion session j . $G2$ refers to whether an individual was randomly assigned to group 2 (mixed sect/same class); $G3$ to group type 3 (same sect/mixed class); and $G4$ to group type 4 (mixed sect/mixed class), making the β coefficients the key ones of interest. $X_i' \gamma$ is a vector of individual-level controls included to improve efficiency and control for any imbalance, and ϵ_i is the individual level error term.¹⁸ We use weights to account for unequal treatment assignment probabilities across blocks (Gerber and Green, 2012).¹⁹ We also show in Appendix J that our results are robust to a number of different estimation strategies, including specifications that exclude controls, use block fixed effects instead of inverse probability weights; and employ ordinal logistic regression for scale outcomes.

RESULTS

We now present results for the effects of cross-cutting discussion on support for ethnic versus programmatic politics as well as for the learning, social identification, and social pressure mechanisms. All results are presented as coefficient plots with a focus on the main indices. Corresponding tables can be found in Appendix I with results for both indices and index components.

¹⁸We do not cluster standard errors because treatment was assigned at the individual level (Abadie et al., 2017).

¹⁹See Appendix A for more on how weights were constructed.

Support for ethnic versus programmatic politics

We begin by examining the effects of cross-cutting discussion on support for sectarian versus programmatic politics as captured by our main measure: willingness to sign the petition condemning the role of sectarianism in Lebanese politics and demanding a programmatic alternative. Approximately 29 percent of participants in the same sect/same class discussions signed the petition denouncing sectarianism. Looking at the effects of cross-cutting discussion (relative to reinforcing discussion) in Figure 1, we observe that the coefficients are positive for same sect/mixed class and fully mixed discussion but do not reach significance at conventional levels. Notably, however, participants in mixed sect/same class discussions were 10 percentage points more likely to sign the petition ($p = .046$). This indicates that at least one type of cross-cutting discussion resulted in greater willingness to undertake a costly action to demonstrate support for programmatic politics.

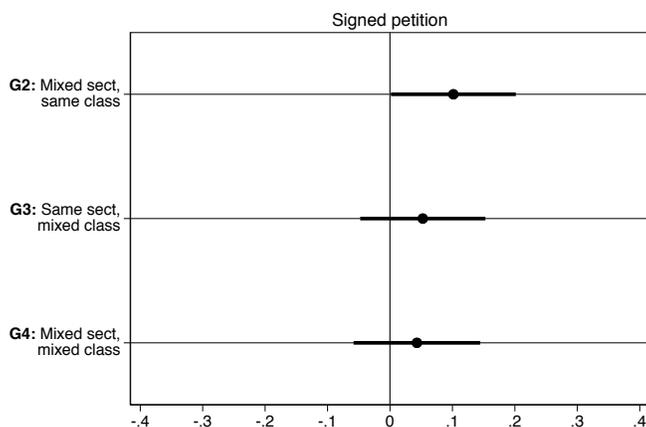


Figure 1: **Petition results.**

This evidence for greater support for programmatic politics in mixed sect/same class groups finds further support in the results from the map exercise. While the map exercise provides numerous possible measures, we focus on the effects of cross-cutting discussion on allocations to poorer districts overall (consistent with a programmatic, need-based logic). Moreover, to assess whether allocations also followed a sectarian logic, we examine whether cross-cutting discussion increased distributions to poor cosectarian districts only (consistent with a sectarian logic) or to all poor districts, regardless of sect.

Our main finding, presented in Figure 2 is that mixed sect/same class discussion resulted in a

larger share being allocated to poor districts overall. Specifically, participants in mixed sect/same class discussions gave five percentage points more revenue to poor districts overall ($p = .044$). Moreover, participants increased allocations to poor districts, *regardless of their predominant sectarian affiliation*. Participants in mixed sect/same class discussions allocated about two percentage points more to poor cosectarian districts ($p = .133$) and three percentage points more to poor non-cosectarian districts ($p = .132$). While these breakdowns are not significant at conventional levels, they nevertheless suggest that mixed sect/same class discussion increased distributions on the basis of need and did not discriminate by sect. Additional analysis in Appendix E.2 shows that these results correspond to a significant *decrease* in allocations to Beirut. In other words, mixed sect/same class discussion caused participants to redistribute resources away from the relatively wealthy capital and towards poorer districts, regardless of their sectarian affiliation. We interpret this as evidence that mixed sect/same class discussion, relative to reinforcing discussion, shifted distributive considerations towards a programmatic logic. The other types of cross-cutting discussion yield little evidence of similar effects.

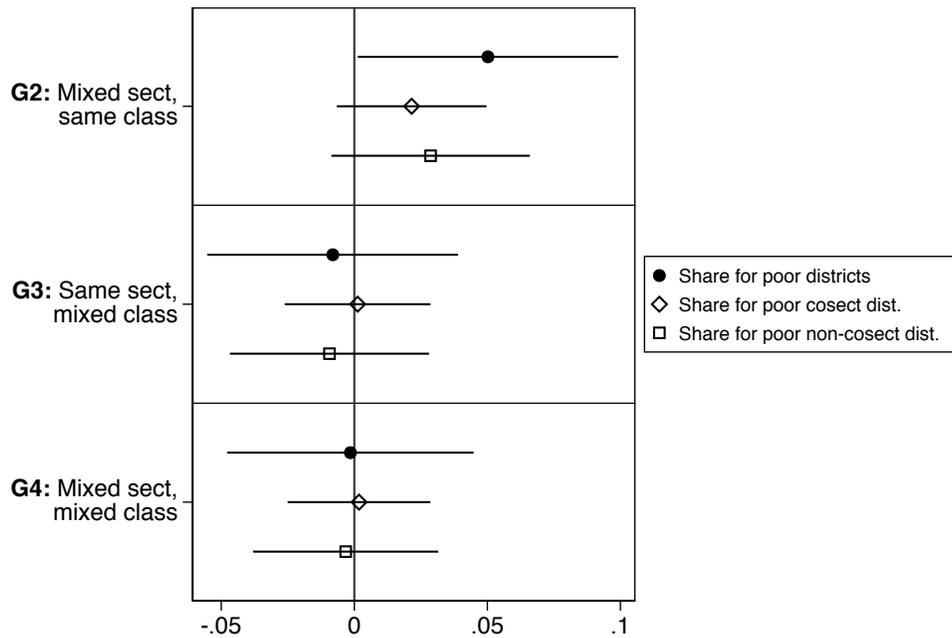


Figure 2: Map results.

One possible concern is that cross-cutting discussion might have the adverse effect of making individuals feel more cross-pressured, which occurs when belonging to different social groups

produces contradictory influences on political preferences (Lazarsfeld, Gaudet and Berelson, 1944; Mutz, 2006; Brader, Tucker and Therriault, 2014). Such cross-pressure is thought to make individuals feel more apathetic or uncertain about their political preferences, undermining political participation. To examine the effect of cross-cutting discussion on cross-pressure, we use a survey question that asked participants whether they felt they ‘rarely’ or ‘never’ know where they stand on issues. The results, reported in Panel C of Appendix Table I.1 suggest no evidence of greater uncertainty following cross-cutting discussion, helping to mitigate concerns that cross-pressure is suppressing preference change.

All in all, these results indicate that mixed sect/same class discussion can in fact help to shift preferences away from support for ethnic politics and towards support for a programmatic alternative. At the same time, the results highlight that not all types of cross-cutting discussion are equally effective at shifting support. We see little indication that same sect/mixed class or fully mixed discussion resulted in relatively less support for ethnic politics. To help unpack these results and shed more light on why cross-cutting discussion is (or is not) shaping political preferences, we turn next to examining the theorized mechanisms.

Intermediate outcomes

We investigate the effects of cross-cutting versus reinforcing discussion on learning, social identification, and social pressure. To preview our results, we find that mixed sect/same class discussion resulted in relatively greater learning about shared preferences *and* less social pressure to support sectarian politics. Both of these mechanisms are consistent with the observed shift in support from ethnic to programmatic politics. Conversely, while same sect/mixed class discussion possibly yielded greater learning about *divergent* preferences, social pressure to support sectarian politics remained high. Finally, while fully cross-cutting discussion shifted social identification and reduced social pressure, these changes might have had contradictory effects on support for programmatic politics. Overall, these results highlight why some forms of cross-cutting discussion might be more effective than others in shifting political preferences over ethnic and programmatic politics.

Learning about shared preferences. We first test the effects of cross-cutting discussion on learning about shared preferences. Importantly, whether discussion in cross-cutting groups can result in $M_p > M_e$ by facilitating learning about convergent or divergent preferences depends on

the extent to which there are in fact similar preferences among non-coethnics of the same class and dissimilar preferences among coethnics from different classes. Appendix G presents evidence of shared policy priorities across sectarian groups by economic class. While agreement on policy priorities does not necessarily translate into agreement on specific policy solutions, this finding underscores the potential for learning to occur.

We formally test whether learning about shared preferences occurred using five post-treatment survey questions. We create a ‘learning’ index using three questions that capture whether participants felt they “learned something new about the perspectives of others”; “learned anything from the discussion of economic similarities or differences”; and “learned anything from the discussion of similarities or differences on confessional issues.” To capture perceptions of shared preferences, we create an ‘agreement’ index using two questions on the extent to which participants perceived agreement on economic issues and political reforms. We also create a pre-registered ‘learning about shared preferences’ index that combines all five measures.

The main results are presented in Figure 3. We find that participants in mixed sect/same class (relative to reinforcing) discussion were significantly more likely to report learning about shared preferences. While the coefficient on the learning index is positive, it is not significant at conventional levels (although it is in alternate specifications in Appendix J). This could in part be because learning was high in all discussion groups. The mean level of learning about others’ perspectives was 3.35 (on a 1-4 scale) in reinforcing discussions, with similarly high levels in all three types of cross-cutting discussion. More notably, perceptions of shared preferences were .24 standard deviations higher in mixed sect/same class discussions relative to those in reinforcing cleavage groups.²⁰ This result is consistent with the notion that individuals in mixed sect/same class groups were more willing to sign the petition because of learning about shared preferences. Finally, we note that the coefficient on the agreement index was negative for same sect/mixed class groups and nearly significant at the 90 percent confidence level ($p = .103$). This suggests that

²⁰Interestingly, the results further indicate that this is driven by greater agreement on *political* concerns (see Appendix I). This implies that individuals in same-class discussions largely agreed on economic issues but that those in mixed sect/same class discussions were significantly more likely to agree on potential political solutions.

discussion among cosectarians from different classes can reveal differences in economic preferences, but this shift was of insufficient magnitude on its own to affect a change in preferences for sectarian politics.

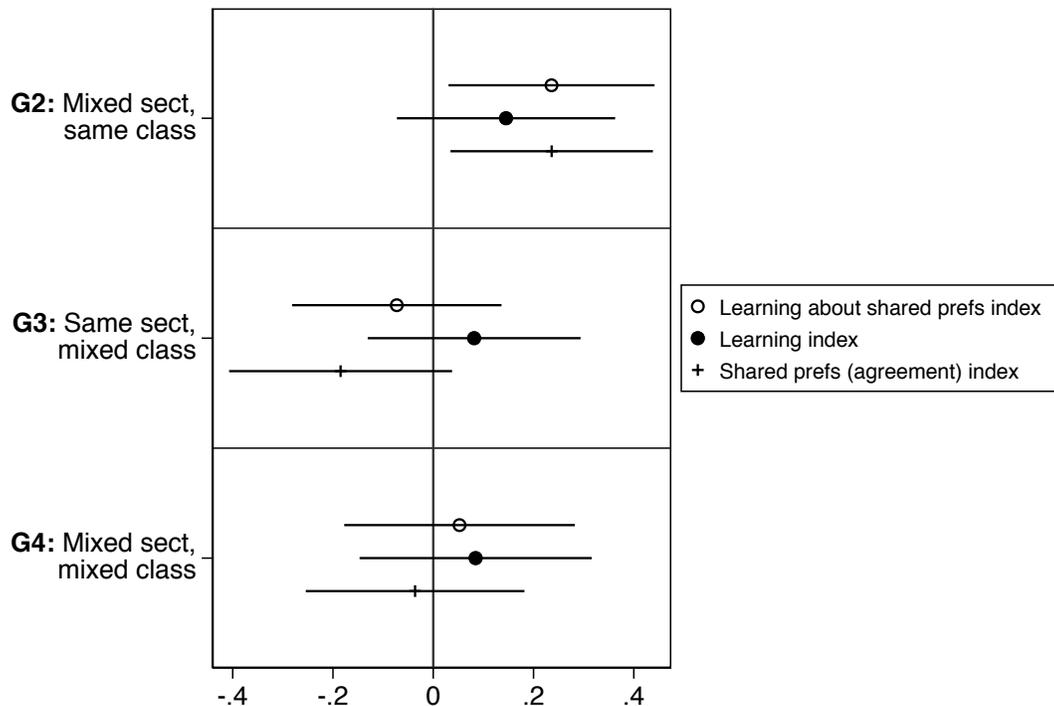


Figure 3: *Learning about shared preferences*. Figure reports the effect of cross-cutting discussion compared to discussion in reinforcing cleavage groups. Bars are 95 percent confidence intervals.

Overall, these results suggest that mixed sect/same class discussion reinforced awareness of class-based similarities across sectarian groups. This result also finds expression in the transcripts. In the words of one participant: “Every religious community is made up of people from different social classes, and I would feel closer to someone who’s in the same economic situation as me regardless of their religion.” And, as stated by another: “We as members of society come from all confessions and all regions of Lebanon, and still agree on common ideas. You don’t have to be from the same confession as me for us to agree. And many people of the same confession don’t have the same points of view as me.”

Social identification. We next examine the effect of cross-cutting discussion relative to reinforcing discussion on social identification and the psychic benefits of ethnic versus programmatic

politics. We do so using pictorial spatial measures of self-group overlap that, to our knowledge, have not yet been used in political science. The measures, developed by Schubert and Otten (2002), capture the extent to which an individual feels closer to, or identifies with, a particular social group.²¹ The measures take a value from 1 to 7 corresponding to pairs of increasingly overlapping circles where the left circle is small, representing the self, and the right circle is large, representing the group (see Appendix E). In the first pair (1 on the scale), the circles are far apart, indicating that a participant does not feel close to (identify with) the designated social group. The circles move closer together in each subsequent pair until they are fully overlapped in the seventh pair (7 on the scale), indicating that an individual wholly identifies with that group.

We asked each participant to select the circle pair that best reflects how closely they identify with lower and upper income Christians, Sunnis, and Shia. We then construct four measures that capture how closely a participant identifies with the social group comprising: cosectarians from their own class (double in-group); non-cosectarians from their own class (a partial in-group); cosectarians from the other class (a partial in-group); and non-cosectarians from the other class (double out-group). Following on the discussion in our theory section, we focus on whether discussion resulted in greater identification with non-coethnics of the same class (the second measure) or less social identification with coethnics from different classes (the third measure). We include the other measures for additional insights but do not have *a priori* expectations about their effect on support for ethnic politics.

In order to understand the effects of cross-cutting discussion on social identification, it first helps to consider how participants in reinforcing discussions evaluated their closeness to different social groups. The results in Appendix Table I.2 show that, as expected, reinforcing discussion participants reported identifying most closely with their double in-group (mean of 4.91) and least closely with their double out-group (mean of 3.10). Perhaps more notably, participants felt about equally close to each of their partial in-groups: mean closeness to cosectarians of the opposite class

²¹In 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.

was 3.69 and to non-cosectarians of the same class was 3.58. This indicates that, in homogeneous environments (where we expect both in-group sectarian and class identity to be highly salient) class does in fact condition how close people feel to their sectarian in-group and out-group. This raises the question: If reinforcing discussion participants already exhibit these patterns, can cross-cutting discussion further shift social identification?

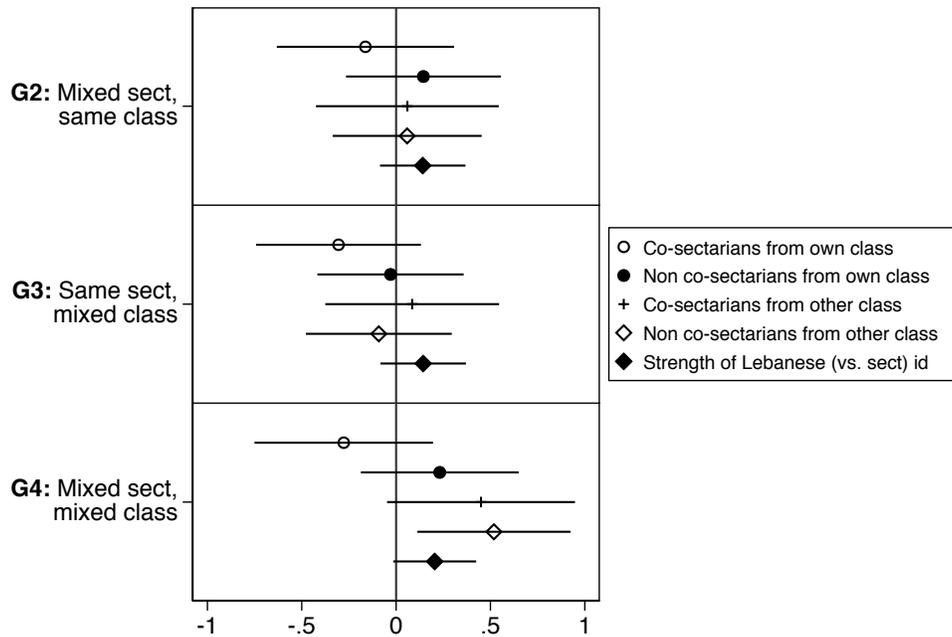


Figure 4: ***Social identification.*** Figure reports the effect of cross-cutting discussion compared to discussion in reinforcing cleavage groups. Bar shows 95 percent confidence intervals.

We next address this question of whether cross-cutting discussion caused shifts in social identification, with results presented in Figure 4. We highlight three main findings. First, there is suggestive evidence that all forms of cross-cutting discussion resulted in relatively less identification with cosectarians of the same class. While these results are not significant at conventional levels, they are consistent with the notion that homogeneous discussion reinforces social identification with one's in-group. Second, with respect to our main measures of interest, we see no evidence that mixed sect/same class or same sect/mixed class discussions had any detectable effect on making individuals feel closer to non-cosectarians of the same class or further from cosectarians of a different class. Finally, and surprisingly, discussion in fully mixed groups apparently produced *greater* closeness to cosectarians from the opposite class ($p = .076$). While we might expect this to

be driven by alliances among cosectarians from different classes in the fully mixed groups, this is contradicted by that fact that we also find greater closeness to non-cosectarians from the opposite class in these groups. In other words, relative to homogeneous discussions, mixed class and sect discussion increased social identification with members of the other class, regardless of sect.

One possible explanation is that the diversity in fully mixed discussions made both class and ethnicity less salient, leading participants to identify more on the basis of a shared super-ordinate Lebanese identity. We check this using a measure that inquired into the strength of an individual's Lebanese identity relative to their sectarian identity. The results in Figure 4 (bottom measure), suggest that fully mixed discussions did result in relatively higher 'Lebanese' identification. All in all, these findings indicate that fully diverse discussions might create rare opportunities for individuals to feel closer to their double out-group (class out-group and sect out-group). This is possibly assisted by the fact that participants in reinforcing discussions felt most distant to non-cosectarians from the opposite class, making this the social group for which there was the greatest potential for more closeness. Nevertheless, there is no reason to expect that greater social identification with one's double out-group would necessarily result in greater support for programmatic politics. On one hand, it might make individuals feel closer to non-coethnics, which could be good for multi-ethnic politics. On the other hand, it might not facilitate programmatic politics if those politics are viewed as prioritizing the needs of one class over the other. This could help to explain why we do not see greater movement on this outcome for those engaging in fully mixed discussions.

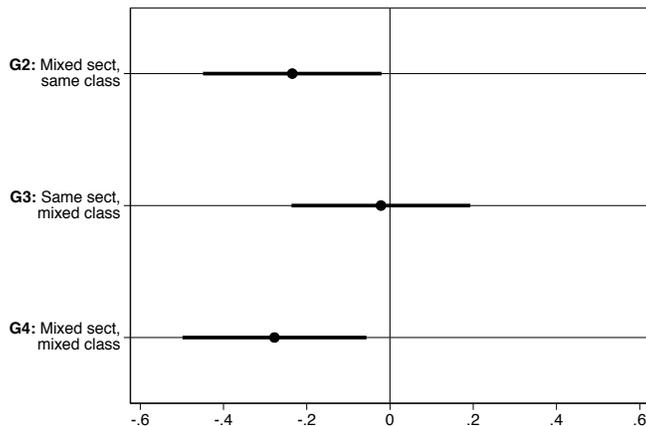


Figure 5: *Fear of social sanctioning*. Figure reports the effects of the three different types of cross-cutting discussion, with reinforcing discussion as the omitted category. Bars indicate 95 percent confidence intervals.

Social pressure. Finally, we consider whether cross-cutting discussion reduced the costs of supporting programmatic politics by making fears of social sanctioning by one’s sectarian in-group less salient. We measure fear of social sanctioning using two post-treatment survey questions that asked participants whether they were afraid of taking action because “it creates enemies” or because “I worry about what people will think of me.” We aggregate these measures into a ‘fear of sanctioning’ index and report results in Figure 5. As can be seen, the coefficients on the index are negative and significant for both mixed sect/same class and fully mixed discussions. These findings indicate that homogeneous sectarian discussions—regardless of the class composition—generate significantly more social pressure to support the sectarian status quo than heterogeneous sectarian discussions. This result is important because it provides clear empirical evidence of how social pressure within sectarian groups can undermine changes to political preferences. Thus, even while we observed that same sect/mixed class discussions facilitated learning about divergent preferences, such learning can be undone by social forces. This supports Horowitz’s observations about the challenges associated with increasing the salience of intra-ethnic class-based differences.

DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

The results presented above show that cross-cutting discussion—particularly cross-sectarian discussion among those from the same class—produced a greater willingness to support programmatic over sectarian politics, driven by more learning about shared preferences and less social pressure to support the sectarian status quo. The findings also give us insights into the limitations of other types of cross-cutting discussion. While the evidence suggests that cross-class discussion among co-sectarians produced a greater awareness of economic differences, social pressure remained high, likely reinforcing the social costs of shifting support from ethnic politics to a programmatic alternative. Finally, while fully mixed discussion resulted in stronger social identification with class out-groups and less social pressure, these shifts had little effect on overall support for programmatic politics.

The main objective of this paper is to shed light on what happens when people talk politics in social environments with cross-cutting versus reinforcing cleavages. In Beirut, as in many large urban areas, there is substantial variation in the extent to which individuals engage in cross-cutting

interaction, depending, for instance, on their social networks or degree of residential or workplace segregation (Allport, 1954; Enos, 2017). As such, our sample consists both of those who already have relatively heterogeneous social networks and of others who do not.²² This raises questions about how the effects shown here might vary across those who may or may not already engage in regular cross-cutting political discussion. Additional analysis in Appendix L indicates that mixed sect/same class discussion increased support for programmatic politics in general but did so via different mechanisms for different types of individuals. Such discussion had larger effects on petition-signing and learning about shared preferences among those with heterogeneous networks while it resulted in less social pressure and higher allocations to poor districts for those with predominantly homogeneous networks.

One potential concern with the results is that respondents from different classes or sects might have responded differently to cross-cutting discussion, resulting in heterogeneous treatment effects that are masked in the main analysis. It is widely held that upper and lower status groups can experience interactions very differently (Myers and Mendelberg, 2013; Pettigrew and Tropp, 2011). For instance, cross-cutting interaction could make traditionally higher status groups—like the wealthy or (in our context) Maronite Christians—feel more threatened and therefore more resistant to change. If this were the case, then focusing on average effects could be obscuring positive effects of cross-cutting interaction for some participants and negative effects for others. To investigate this, we examine heterogeneous effects by class and sect in Appendix L and find little evidence of adverse effects in any of the subgroups. The results show that cross-cutting discussion had the strongest positive effects on upper income individuals and on Shia, the sectarian group that was historically a lower status group (see Appendix L for more discussion of these results).

Another potential concern is that our investigation overlooks an alternative but possibly important mechanism: cooperation. It is often argued that strengthening cross-ethnic trust and cooperation is important to mitigating the adverse effects of ethnic diversity (Miguel and Gugerty, 2005; Robinson, 2017). While our focus here is on political preferences rather than cooperation *per*

²²Among our discussion participants, approximately 23 percent have networks that are heterogeneous in both class and sect, 37 percent have networks that are homogeneous on both dimensions, and the rest report networks that are mixed on one dimension but homogeneous on the other.

se, whether cross-cutting discussion affects collective action capacity could help to shed light on the potential for inter-ethnic, class-based coalitions to form or cross-class, intra-ethnic coalitions to dissolve. To consider these, we implemented a public goods game in two rounds (see Appendix K for details). The first round was played just after the initial introductions (when discussion-type was revealed) and provides baseline cooperation levels; the second round was played immediately following the discussion and enables to examine the effects on cooperation of the different discussion types.

The results presented in Appendix K yield three main findings. First, baseline levels of cooperation in same sect/mixed class groups were especially high, suggesting that it might indeed be especially difficult for discussion to foster intra-ethnic class-based divisions. Second, baseline levels of cooperation in same sect/same class and mixed sect/same class groups were similar, indicating little evidence of coethnic bias.²³ Third, no discussion of any type had a detectable effect on cooperation. This is consistent with Chang and Peisakhin (2018), who find no indication that cross-sectarian discussion (compared to a control group with no discussion) increased cooperation on average. In our study, these results suggest that mixed sect/same class discussion did *not* increase relative support for programmatic politics by removing the barrier of reluctance to cooperate across sectarian lines. Rather, our findings underscore that participants were already willing to cooperate with non-cosectarians but that supporting programmatic politics required shifting the perceived material benefits and social costs to doing so.

A final concern might pertain to the extent to which our findings generalize beyond our sample. While it is difficult to anticipate all the ways that results might vary across individuals or contexts, we note that one advantage of our theoretical approach is that it provides a framework for thinking about how the effects of cross-cutting interaction might travel. Critically, it suggests that for any individual in any particular context, it is important to consider whether there is scope for cross-cutting interaction to facilitate learning about shared preferences, to alter social identification, or to shift social costs. It could be, for instance, that individuals living in more rural areas or segregated neighborhoods are more ethnically biased (Hjort, 2014; Berge et al., 2015), making

²³The empirical evidence for coethnic bias from public goods games is in fact quite mixed, see for instance Berge et al. (2015).

these mechanisms harder to move. It could also be that the results obtained here are less likely in societies with a high degree of economic inequality across ethnic groups. This could make meaningful differences in economic preferences across ethnic groups more likely, eliminating one of the key mechanisms identified here: learning about shared preferences among non-coethnics.

Finally, the framework also helps to underscore why Lebanon might in fact be a hard case in which to observe effects of cross-cutting discussion. As in other consociational democracies such Iraq and Bosnia-Herzegovina, Lebanon's power-sharing arrangements are viewed by many as critical to preserving peace. This implies that Lebanese could obtain high psychic benefits from their sectarian identities or anticipate very high social costs for supporting programmatic politics, whereas individuals in countries such as India and Uganda with emergent social norms against ethnic politics might feel less constrained (Carlson, 2015).²⁴ In this way, cross-cutting discussion could have even bigger effects beyond the Lebanon case. All in all, while questions of external validity can only be answered through more empirical testing, we hope this study provides a foundation for more investigation into how these findings might vary in different contexts.

CONCLUSION

It has long been observed that ethnic divisions are less severe in societies in which other social cleavages cut across rather than reinforce the ethnic cleavage. This paper argues that how the structure of social *cleavages* at the societal-level translate into social *interaction* at the individual-level is critical to understanding the formation of political preferences. We present some of the first evidence as to how cross-cutting social interaction can affect support for ethnic versus programmatic politics. We show that *cross-sectarian discussion among members of the same class* in Lebanon increased support for programmatic over ethnic politics by facilitating learning about shared preferences and reducing social pressure. We also provide evidence as to the limits of other types of cross-cutting interaction, shedding light, for instance, on why cross-class discussion among members of the same ethnic group fails to exacerbate intra-group, class-based differences. All in all, the results presented here highlight both the possibilities and challenges offered by cross-cutting discussion for emergence

²⁴<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jan/03/indias-top-court-bans-religion-and-caste-from-election-campaigns>.

of inter-ethnic class-based alliances and intra-ethnic class-based antagonisms.

These findings contribute to research seeking to explain the weak association between income and electoral behavior (de la O and Rodden, 2008; Thatchil, 2014), despite the predictions of classic median voter models (Meltzer and Richard, 1981). Important recent work by Huber (2017) attributes support for ethnic over class-based parties to the fact that sometimes—depending on social structure—ethnic parties can offer more benefits to poor voters than class parties. Our paper highlights that the lack of support for programmatic parties might be due not just to material reasons but also to the psychological benefits and low social costs that come with supporting ethnic parties in ethnically divided societies. This underscores the importance of taking ethnic attachments and social norms into consideration when trying to understand when people will vote for programmatic over ethnic parties.

Moreover, this paper contributes to research on ethnic politics focused on examining how to strengthen support for performance-based or programmatic politics. Recent studies suggest that increasing the salience of a *national* identity can reduce ethnic divisions (Robinson, 2016; Sambanis and Shayo, 2013). Yet, while a strong national identity can undermine ethnic divisions, it—as a superordinate identity—does not necessarily provide a ready basis for electoral competition. By showing how belonging to a common *class* can shape political preferences, this study helps to shed light on how cross-cutting identities can potentially shape support for programmatic over ethnic party competition.

Another important line of inquiry in the ethnic politics literature focuses on whether improving access to information on candidate performance or policy platforms can reduce ethnic voting (Adida et al., 2017; Fujiwara and Wantchekon, 2013; Casey, 2015). Our findings show the potential benefits of improving awareness of shared preferences among non-coethnics. Moreover, in providing evidence of learning, our study suggests that cross-cutting discussion can perhaps help to overcome biased information processing related to strong ethnic attachments (Adida et al., 2017). Yet, our results underscore that such learning might have little impact on shifting preferences in the face of strong intra-group social pressure to support ethnic politics. Critically, the theory and test presented here highlight that multiple factors—material benefits, psychic benefits, social costs—can all shape political preferences. This points to a key takeaway: only by shifting one of these factors in a sufficiently big way, or by shifting multiple factors together, will a real change in preferences likely

be realized. Future research should do more not only to identify which factors are key to preference formation in a given context but also to uncover how they relate to one another in promoting or inhibiting a decline in demand for ethnic politics.

Finally, while the main goal of the paper was to understand the effect of social conditions rather than bring about durable change, the results presented here have important implications for thinking about how to structure public discourse, social interaction, and intergroup contact experiences that could lead to more enduring shifts in how people view politics and one another. Most importantly, we show that interactions across ethnic lines *especially among those who have another social identity in common* have the potential to strengthen interethnic class-based alliances. This finding is directly relevant to the efforts of political parties, civil society organizations, and other actors—like LCPS, our study partner—already actively engaged in facilitating discussions and other kinds of social interaction with the goal of fostering political change. While important questions remain to be answered—such as understanding the effects of one-off versus repeated interactions or of discussing politics with strangers versus with members of one’s existing social network—a central contribution of this paper is to highlight the potential benefits of cross-cutting social interaction and thus to motivate such future research.

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