Learning Goals in Attitude Conflict

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Abstract
Given the rise of affective polarization, it is critical to understand barriers to effective conversations between partisans and how such conversations can be improved. While previous work has focused on strategies to change individual-level mindsets (e.g., encouraging open-mindedness), we investigated the unique role of partisans’ beliefs about their counterparts. Across seven pre-registered studies (N=2,614), partisans consistently under-estimated how willing disagreeing counterparts were to learn about their views (compared to themselves and to agreeing others). Further, this belief strongly predicted greater derogation of attitude opponents and more negative expectations for conflictual conversations. Critically, in both American partisan politics and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, a short informational intervention that increased beliefs that counterparts were willing to learn about one’s views decreased derogation and increased willingness to engage in the future. We build on the research tradition of recognizing the power of the situation to highlight a fruitful new research focus for conflict research.

Keywords: Attitude conflict, goals, self-other difference, affective polarization, conversations
Statement of Relevance

Recent years have seen marked increases in levels of antipathy between holders of opposing views—both in US politics and globally. Opposing parties seem unable to communicate across their differences, with dialogue attempts often devolving into conflict and deteriorating relationships. This research finds that when people believe a conflict counterpart is willing to learn about their views, animus is reduced and they are more willing to engage with them. This effect persists in the context of US partisan politics and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Thus, we suggest a simple and scalable intervention to improve communication between holders of opposing views: expressing our willingness to learn about each other. This simple act is shown to reduce barriers to conflict, and open the door to conversations between holders of opposing views.
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Dislike, disrespect, and distrust toward holders of opposing ideological views, or “affective polarization,” have surpassed any previously-documented level (Doherty et al., 2019; Finkel et al., 2020; Iyengar et al., 2019). Dialogue between opposing partisans frequently devolves into conflict, igniting relational harm (Kennedy & Pronin, 2008; Schroeder et al., 2017; for review, see Minson & Dorison, 2021). Yet, communication between disagreeing parties is a necessary precondition for solving most social problems—and is core to a functioning democracy.

A large literature has sought to improve dialogue by encouraging partisans to embrace the goal of learning about their counterpart’s views by “considering the opposite,” (Lord et al., 1984), asking elaboration questions (Chen et al., 2010), taking the perspective of out-group members (Todd & Galinsky, 2014; Bruneau & Saxe, 2012), using open-minded thinking (Baron, 2019), and being receptive to opposing views (Minson et al., 2020).

Here, we suggest that a complementary focus on participants’ beliefs about their counterpart’s willingness to learn can prove useful. Specifically, we examine whether a systematic under-recognition of such willingness hinders effective dialogue—leading parties to derogate opponents and anticipate negative experiences—and thus offers potential for intervention. We test these ideas across seven pre-registered experiments (N=2,614) spanning American partisan politics and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

**Learning goals in conflictual conversations**

Goals are desired endpoints that guide behavior (Fishbach & Ferguson, 2007) in a wide range of intrapersonal domains, from health (Gollwitzer & Oettingen, 1998) to academic achievement (Dweck & Elliot, 1983). Only recently have scholars considered the interpersonal
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nature of goals (see Fitzsimons & van Dellen, 2015), and little is known about their role in conflictual conversations.

Prior work proposed two broad categories of goals in conflictual conversations. Judd (1978) suggested that parties strive to either demonstrate that their attitude is correct (“competitive orientation”) or learn more about the issue (“cooperative orientation”). Relatedly, mediation practitioners have distinguished between “advocacy” (arguing for one’s views) versus “inquiry” goals (soliciting additional input; Garvin & Roberto, 2001; Lee, 2018). Here, we refer to these two categories as persuasion and learning goals, respectively.

Research suggests that partisan beliefs about counterparts’ learning goals may powerfully shape conversations. People want be understood (Swann, 2011) and validated (Reis et al., 2011; Reis & Patrick, 1996). “Active listening”—a communication style that conveys a desire to learn from the speaker—is seen as a key therapeutic skill (Rogers & Farson, 2021). When discussing difficult topics, feeling heard increases speakers’ self-esteem and open-mindedness (Itzhakov et al., 2020; Voelkel et al., 2021). When others convey an interest in learning through engaged listening, speakers feel supported and accepted.

We argue that believing a counterpart is interested in learning about one’s view will lead to an expectation of feeling heard and understood. Because expectations powerfully shape experiences (Kirsch, 1985), we predict that believing that a counterpart holds learning goals will thus lead to more positive evaluations of, and experiences with, that counterpart.

(In-)Accuracy in goal perception

Prior work has demonstrated that partisans regularly misjudge opponents (Ahler & Sood, 2018; Moore-Berg et al., 2020). For example, counterparts systematically over-estimate how much out-group members’ views differ from their own (“false polarization”; Fernbach & Van
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Boven, 2021). These mis-perceptions also extend to how people believe opposing partisans view the in-group. Lees and Cikara (2020; Ruggeri et al., 2021) found that partisans believe out-group members hold more negative perceptions of their in-group than is actually the case. These misunderstandings are perhaps not surprising considering people’s tendency to derogate out-group members’ intelligence, motives, perspective taking, and even basic humanity (Brandt & Crawford, 20202; Minson et al., 2020; Schroeder et al., 2017; Taber & Lodge, 2006). Yet, a willingness to learn about and understand our views requires benevolent intent and sophisticated perspective-taking, the very qualities partisans in conflict deny their counterparts. Building on this work, we hypothesize that, on average, partisans believe their counterparts to be less willing to learn about their views than is actually the case.

**Intervening in conflict by re-calibrating goal perceptions**

Past work documenting conflict mispredictions has found that simple informational interventions can effectively reduce animus, at least in the short term (Dorison et al., 2019; Lees & Cikara, 2020; Moore-Berg et al., 2020; Ruggeri et al., 2021). Indeed, informing participants of the inaccuracy of their out-group meta-perceptions reduced negative out-group attributions (Lees & Cikara, 2020). Thus, correcting partisans’ mis-calibrated expectations regarding counterparts’ willingness to learn may improve dialogue.

The idea that shifting (mis-calibrated) perceptions can have benefits has also found support in applied settings (Fishkin et al., 2019). The non-profit organization Braver Angels brings together liberals and conservatives in a learning-focused environment where partisans are instructed to gain insight about each other. An overwhelming majority of participants report high levels of mutual understanding and empathy (Jacobs et al., 2019), and experimental investigations found evidence of reduced polarization (Baron et al., 2021).
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Here, we focus explicitly on altering partisans’ beliefs about their counterpart’s willingness to learn. We hypothesize that informing participants that their conflict counterpart is open to learning about their views will improve both counterpart evaluations and actual conversational experiences.

The present research

We test three inter-related hypotheses across seven pre-registered studies. First, we tested whether participants under-estimate the extent to which their counterpart is willing to learn about their perspective in disagreement (Studies 1a-1c). Second, we tested whether perceived learning goals can drive affective polarization and enjoyment of a conflictual conversation about the 2020 United States presidential election (Study 2). Finally, in the context of both American politics and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, we tested whether manipulating the extent to which someone believes a conflict counterpart holds learning goals reduces affective polarization, improves expectations about the experience of engaging with a disagreeing other, and increases willingness for future contact (Studies 3-5).

We report how we determined sample sizes, all data exclusions, all manipulations, and all measures (Simmons et al., 2012). Data, materials, pre-registrations, and code for all studies can be found here: https://researchbox.org/372&PEER_REVIEW_passcode=WVNQVT.

Study 1a

Method

In Studies 1a-c we investigated the goals people endorsed when interacting with holders of opposing views and compared these to ones that individuals believed their counterparts endorsed.


**Participants.** We recruited 600 participants through Amazon’s Mechanical Turk (MTurk) to complete a 5-minute survey in which they provided open-ended descriptions of the goals that they and their counterparts pursue in conflictual conversations. First, participants reported their interest in several topics (e.g., Broadway musicals, Trivia Game Shows) on a scale from 1: Not at all to 5: Extremely. As per our pre-registration, only participants who reported having a strong interest (reporting either 4: Very or 5: Extremely) in NBA Basketball, NFL Football, MLB Baseball, or Political News were eligible to complete the rest of the survey. In addition to political partisans, we chose to recruit sports fans because they often align themselves with a sports team in such a way that produces conflict with fans of opposing teams—similar to the division along party lines that is seen in partisan politics. This resulted in a final sample of 201 participants (39% Female, M_{age} = 33).

**Protocol.** Participants imagined having a 5-minute conversation with someone they disagreed with about the best team in a professional sports league (n = 101) or someone from the opposite side of the political spectrum (n = 100) based on their self-reported interest in each topic. Participants were assigned to imagine a conversation on the topic in which they reported having a strong interest (reporting either 4: Very or 5: Extremely), and those who indicated a strong interest in multiple topics were randomly assigned to one. Participants who considered a conversation about sports imagined talking to someone who disagreed with them on which team was the best in the league. Participants in the politics group were told to imagine having a conversation with someone from the “opposite side of the political spectrum.”

We then randomly assigned participants to report their goals (self-condition, n = 101) or their partner’s goals (other-condition, n = 100) during this conversation. Participants wrote up to five goals that they (or their partner, depending on condition) would have during the
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corresponding open-ended text boxes. Participants generated a total of 1170 goals. Finally, participants provided basic demographic information including their age and gender.

**Coding.** We coded participants’ open-ended responses according to the following pre-registered process. First, one coder examined the data and removed any responses that were nonsensical or unrelated to having a conversation with a disagreeing other (e.g., “Buy an RV”; n = 104 goals excluded). Next, this coder was joined by a second coder to read and classify each goal as belonging to one of three categories according to a pre-determined coding rubric, based on prior research (Garvin & Roberto, 2001; Judd, 1978; Lee, 2018): learning goals, persuasion goals, or miscellaneous goals. These two coders agreed on 79% (n = 844) of the goals. A third coder then read and classified the remaining 222 goals where the first two coders did not agree. For 86% (n = 191) of these goals, the third coder provided a code that agreed with one of the first two coders, which was then retained as the final categorization for these goals. The remaining 31 goals were read and classified by a fourth coder, and the most common classification produced by the four coders was considered final. All coders were blind to hypotheses.

After each goal was coded as belonging to a unique category, we calculated three dependent variables for each participant: (1) proportion of learning goals, (2) proportion of persuasion goals, and (3) proportion of miscellaneous goals generated.

**Results**

Most goals reported in both conditions (79%) fell into the categories of “learning” and “persuasion.” Figure 1 presents the proportion of different goal types generated by participants in both conditions.

In line with our theorizing, participants listed dramatically fewer learning goals when considering their counterpart’s goals (M = 0.12 SD = 0.2), rather than their own goals (M = 0.4,
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SD = 0.3), \( t(190.88) = 6.74, p < .001 \), Cohen’s \( d = -0.95 \), \( 95\% CI [-1.25, -0.66] \). Importantly, this pattern could not be attributed to a broader failure to vividly consider the goals of other people: participants listed a greater number of persuasion goals for their counterpart (M = 0.71, SD = 0.30) than for themselves (M = 0.4, SD = 0.3), \( t(198) = 7.66, p < .001 \), Cohen’s \( d = 1.08 \), \( 95\% CI [0.78, 1.38] \). A 2x2 mixed ANOVA with one between-subjects factor (other vs. self) and one within-subjects factor (proportion of goals classified as learning vs. persuasion) yielded a significant interaction, \( F(1, 396) = 103.94, p < .001 \). Participants reported a slightly greater proportion of miscellaneous goals for themselves (M = 0.2, SD = 0.2) than for their counterpart (M = 0.1, SD = 0.2), \( t(197.93) = 2.50, p = .01 \), Cohen’s \( d = -0.35 \), \( 95\% CI [-0.63, -0.07] \). Finally, all our effects remained consistent (and significant) when we separately analyzed participants who considered a conversation about sports and politics, though, interestingly, our effects appeared to be slightly stronger among participants who imagined a political conversation (see Supplementary Online Material for details). This pattern of results provided initial evidence that people may systematically under-estimate the importance of learning goals to a disagreeing other compared to themselves. We test this hypothesis further in Studies 1b-1c.
Comparison of the conversational goals reported for the self and those reported for a disagreeing other in Study 1a. Participants systematically under-estimated the learning goals reported by others, but this pattern did not generalize to (and reversed for) persuasion goals. Shaded plots display the distributions; error bars represent 95% CI around the mean; colored dots represent raw data.

Discussion

Across domains, individuals under-estimated the number of learning-related goals for conflict counterparts, but this pattern reversed for persuasion-related goals.
Study 1b

Method

Study 1b tested the same overarching hypothesis with a new sample population (Prolific Academic) and a different response format (Likert items).

Participants. We recruited 400 participants through Prolific Academic to complete a 3-minute survey. Participants again reported their interest in several topics (e.g., Broadway musicals, Trivia Game Shows) on a scale from 1: Not at all to 5: Extremely. As per our pre-registration, only participants who reported having a strong interest (reporting a 4: Very or 5: Extremely) in NBA basketball, NFL football, MLB baseball, or Political News were eligible to complete the rest of the survey. Further, 82 participants who failed our attention check were excluded. This resulted in a final sample of 160 participants (36% Female, Mage = 32).

Protocol. As in Study 1a, participants imagined having a 5-minute conversation with someone they disagreed with about sports (n = 63) or politics (n = 97) based on their self-reported interest in each topic. Participants who indicated a strong interest in multiple topics were randomly assigned to one.

Own Goals. Participants reported how important various goals were to them in this conversation on a scale from 1: Not at all important to 5: Extremely important. Participants evaluated three statements pertaining to persuasion goals: (1) Persuading your partner of your point of view; (2) Convincing your partner that you’re right; and (3) Presenting evidence for your point of view ($\alpha = .84$). They also evaluated three statements pertaining to learning goals: (1) Learning about your partner’s perspective; (2) Understanding your partner’s point of view; and (3) Hearing evidence for your partner’s beliefs ($\alpha = .73$). Order of all six items was randomized.
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Beliefs About Partner’s Goals. Participants were also asked to report “How important would each of these goals be for your partner in this conversation?” using the same items as above (α_persuade = .93; α_learn = .51). The order in which participants reported their own goals and their beliefs about their partner’s goals during the conversation was counterbalanced, such that half of the participants first answered all questions about their own goals before answering about their partner, and the other half of participants completed the same two sets of questions in the opposite order.

Results

We again theorized that participants would under-estimate their counterparts’ learning goals, but that this under-estimation would not extent to persuasion goals. This theorizing was supported: In line with Study 1a, participants evaluated learning goals as being less important to their counterparts (M = 3.2, SD = 1.2) than to themselves (M = 4.0, SD = 0.80), t(159) = 9.69, p < .001, Cohen’s d = -0.81, 95%CI[-0.99, -0.62]. We again saw that this pattern was not matched for persuasion goals: participants rated persuasion goals as being more important to counterparts (M = 3.9, SD = 0.8) than to themselves (M = 3.6, SD = 0.9), t(159) = -4.30, p < .001, Cohen’s d = 0.36, 95%CI[0.19, 0.53]. To put these results in perspective, we found that 66% of participants reported higher learning goals for themselves than a disagreeing counterpart (while only 12% reported lower learning goals for themselves and only 25% reported the same level for the self and other). Figure 2 presents these results.

To test our primary hypothesis, we tested a mixed effects model specifying a fixed effect for goal type (learning vs. persuasion) and target (self vs. other), and a random effect for participant to account for repeated measures. In line with our predictions we found a significant interaction between goal type and target, b = -1.13, SE = 0.13, p < .001. These results again
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revealed that people under-estimated the importance of learning goals to their counterparts, but did not make the same error for persuasion goals.

An alternative account of our results may be that individuals have very little insight into other’s goals and are thus responding randomly, around the midpoint of the scale. However, the fact that they reported significantly higher persuasion than learning goals for counterparts makes this explanation less credible. Finally, all our effects remained consistent (and significant) when we separately analyzed participants who considered a conversation about sports and politics, though our effects again appeared to be stronger among participants who imagined a political conversation (see SOM for details).
Figure 2.
Comparison of the conversational learning and persuasion goals reported for the self and a disagreeing other in Study 1b. Participants systematically under-estimated the learning goals reported by others, but this pattern did not generalize to (and reversed for) persuasion goals. Shaded plots display the distributions; error bars represent 95% CI around the mean; colored dots represent raw data.

Discussion

Study 1b provided converging evidence that people underestimate the importance of learning goals to their counterparts, relative to their own self-reports.
Study 1c

Method

Next, we investigated the role of disagreeing in the under-estimation of counterpart’s learning goals. Thus, we added a new condition in which participants imagined observing a conflictual conversation (rather than engaging in one) between someone who agreed with them on an issue and someone who disagreed with them. This design allowed us to assess whether the self-other difference observed in Studies 1a-b extends to (1) all other individuals (including the imagined agreeing individual) or (2) whether disagreement is required.

Participants. We recruited 700 participants through Prolific Academic to participate in a 3-minute study. As before, participants reported the extent to which they cared about several topics. As per our pre-registration, we excluded 380 participants who did not have a strong interest in NBA basketball, NFL football, MLB baseball, or Political News. This resulted in a final sample of 320 participants, all of whom passed our attention check.

Protocol. All participants were asked to imagine a conflictual conversation on one of several topics: sports (n = 181), or politics (n = 139). Participants were randomly assigned to one of three conditions, varying the target whose goals participants considered: self, disagreeing other, agreeing other. In the ‘self” and ‘disagreeing other’ conditions, participants completed the same task as in Studies 1a-b: they imagined engaging in a conversation with someone who disagreed with them on their assigned topic, and evaluated the importance of various goals either to themselves (in the ‘self” condition) or to the disagreeing other. In the ‘agreeing other’ condition, participants were instead asked to imagine that they were watching this conversation between two people who disagreed with each other on their assigned topic. Participants were told that one of the individuals in the conversation agreed with their own point of view, while the
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other individual disagreed. In this condition, participants evaluated the importance of various goals to the agreeing other in this conversation.

Using items from Study 1b, participants evaluated the importance of three items pertaining to persuasion goals ($\alpha = .58$) and three items pertaining to learning goals ($\alpha = .90$), with all items presented in randomized order.

Results

We first assessed whether we replicated the pattern of results from Studies 1a-b. This was in fact the case: In line with our prior results, participants again under-estimated the importance of learning goals to a disagreeing other ($M = 3.2$, $SD = 1.1$), relative to themselves ($M = 3.9$, $SD = 0.9$) $t(204.48) = 5.09, p < .001$, Cohen’s $d = 0.69, 95\%CI [0.41, 0.97]$. Additionally, participants over-estimated the importance of persuasion goals to a disagreeing other ($M = 3.84$, $SD = 0.80$) relative to themselves ($M = 3.6$, $SD = 1.0$), $t(198.60) = 2.34, p = .02$, Cohen’s $d = -0.32, 95\%CI [-0.59, -0.05]$. We again observed a significant interaction effect between goal type (learning vs. persuasion) and target (self vs. disagreeing other), $b = 0.97$, $SE = 0.18$, $p < .001$.

Next, we considered the relative importance of learning goals that participants attribute to the self, relative to an agreeing other. Our key question was whether agreeing counterparts would be perceived more similarly to the self (suggesting disagreement is required for the self-other difference to occur) or more similarly to disagreeing counterparts (suggesting that the self-other difference is robust across levels of disagreement). We found relatively greater support for the former hypothesis. First, we found a small and only marginally significant difference in the importance of learning goals that participants report for themselves ($M = 3.9$, $SD = 0.9$) compared to an agreeing other ($M = 3.7$, $SD = 1.0$), $t(205.02) = 1.82, p = .07$, Cohen’s $d = -0.69, 95\%CI [-0.97, -0.41]$. Thus, agreeing others were not seen as holding identical goals as the self.
However, we also found that participants reported learning goals to be much more important to an agreeing other (M = 3.7, SD = 1.0) compared to a disagreeing other (M = 3.2, SD = 1.1), t(211.42) = 3.22, p = .001, Cohen’s d = -0.44, 95%CI [-0.71, -0.17]. To put these results in perspective, agreeing others are perceived more similarly to the self (Mself = 3.9 vs. Magreeing other = 3.7, mean difference = 0.2) than to disagreeing others (Magreeing other = 3.7 vs. Mdisagreeing other = 3.2, mean difference = 0.5).

When we turned to examining persuasion goals, we found that participants reported those to be less important to themselves (M = 3.6, SD = 1.0) compared to an agreeing-other (M = 4.1, SD = 0.7), t(180.27) = 4.42, p < .001, Cohen’s d = 0.61, 95%CI [0.33, 0.89]. Surprisingly, and in contrast to the pattern of results for learning goals above, participants reported persuasion goals to be more important to an agreeing-other than to a disagreeing-other (M = 3.8, SD = 0.8), t(208.98) = 2.28, Cohen’s d = 0.31, 95%CI [0.04, 0.58]. Figure 3 presents these data.

Taken together, while participants believed disagreeing others to be less willing to learn than agreeing others, they also believed them to place less importance on persuasion. Thus, the self-other difference in learning goals revealed in Studies 1a-b appeared to be driven primarily by disagreement—disagreeing others were believed to be particularly unwilling to learn, even compared to agreeing others (though participants did believe themselves to be slightly more willing than even an agreeing other). However, the self-other difference in persuasion goals appeared to be robust across levels of agreement—agreeing others were believed to be even more focused on persuasion than disagreeing others.

Finally, we again found that our effects remained similar when we separately analyzed participants who imagined observing a conflictual conversation about sports or politics—
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effects again stronger among participants who imagined a political conversation (see SOM for details).

![Figure 3.](image)

Comparison of the conversational learning and persuasion goals reported for the self, an agreeing other, and a disagreeing other in Study 1c. Participants systematically underestimated the learning goals reported by disagreeing others compared to the self and an agreeing other, but this pattern did not generalize to persuasion goals. Shaded plots display the distributions; error bars represent 95% CI around the mean; colored dots represent raw data.

**Discussion**

Study 1c suggests that the under-recognition of disagreeing others’ willingness to learn observed in Studies 1a-b did not stem from a simple self-other difference, but rather was driven by disagreement.
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Study 2

Method

Study 2 examined whether (1) the self-other difference in learning goals persisted in a more naturalistic setting (i.e., a synchronous conversation regarding a bitterly-contested election), and (2) whether perceived learning goals predicted subsequent evaluations of the conversation and counterparts. We theorized that (1) the self-other difference would persist even after engaging in (rather than anticipating) a conflictual conversation and (2) perceived learning goals would robustly predict conflict outcomes, above and beyond other measures.

Recruitment Survey. We recruited participants through a third-party survey firm to participate in a study regarding the 2020 United States Presidential Election. The study consisted of a pre-survey (i.e., a recruitment survey) and a main survey one week later. Over a two-month period between September-October 2020, a total of 4,344 participants completed our pre-survey. Of these, 1,561 participants opened the main survey and 636 participants were successfully matched with an opposing party supporter to have a conversation. While we pre-registered to collect at least 300 conversations, because data collection took place in weekly waves, we ultimately collected 318.

Interested participants completed an initial pre-survey to determine their eligibility. Participants reported who they were most likely to vote for in the upcoming presidential election, the strength of their support for their candidate, and their opposition to the other candidate. They were deemed eligible if they met two criteria: (1) they strongly supported their candidate (≥3 on a 0: “Not at all” to 5: “Extremely” scale), and (2) they strongly opposed the other candidate (≥3 on a 0: “Not at all” to 5: “Extremely” scale). Eligible participants were asked whether they were willing to complete a 20-minute study the following day in which they would have a 10-minute
chat-based conversation with someone they disagreed with regarding the election. Eligible participants who indicated this willingness were invited to complete our main survey.

Main Survey. After reporting whether they were more likely to vote for the Republican candidate (Donald Trump) or Democratic candidate (Joe Biden), participants learned that they would spend the next 10-minutes talking to someone with opposing voting intentions. We instructed them to spend the time discussing their beliefs about who is the best candidate. Then, participants responded to three questions to test their comprehension of these instructions, asking them about the length of the conversation, who they would be talking to, and the topic. Participants who answered any of these questions incorrectly were provided with another opportunity to answer, and were removed from the survey if they answered incorrectly a second time. Finally, we told participants that they would receive a bonus payment if they remained engaged and on topic for the full 10-minutes.

After the participants received these instructions, we paired each participant with a conversation partner holding opposing voting preferences. We did so via ChatPlat, an online platform that allows for real-time, synchronous chat-based conversation (e.g., Huang et al., 2017). Each voter was paired with an opposing-candidate voter on a first-come first-serve basis. Participants used text-based communication and they received a 60 second warning when the chat was about to end. After the conversation, participants responded to several measures regarding their counterpart and the conversation they just had.

Measures. First, participants reflected on their own and their counterpart’s goals during the conversation, with the target of consideration counterbalanced. Specifically, participants reported the importance of the same persuasion (3-item; $\alpha = .83$) and learning (3-item; $\alpha = .73$) goals used in Studies 1b-c. Additionally, participants reported how enjoyable, pleasant and
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aversive the conversation was for them (1: “Not at all”; 7: “A lot”; $\alpha = .77$), and made evaluations of how moral, objective, intelligent, trustworthy and likable their partner seemed during the conversation (1: “Extremely Immoral/Unintelligent/Biased/Unlikable/Untrustworthy”; 7: “Extremely Moral/Intelligent/Objective/Likable/Trustworthy”; $\alpha = .89$). Finally, participants reported how much, if at all, their position changed during the conversation (-3: “My position is further from my partner’s”, 0: “My position did not change,” +3: “My position is closer to my partner’s”) and predicted the same for their conversation partner.

Results

After the conclusion of the conversations, 505 participants completed the entirety of our survey. As per our pre-registration, a research assistant blind to hypothesis reviewed all transcripts and identified 367 participants who remained on topic for the entire 10-minute conversation. This final sample of 367 participants served as our final dataset for analysis ($n = 184$ Republican supporters, $n = 183$ Democratic supporters; 34% male; $M_{age} = 54$). We analyzed our results using a mixed effects models specifying our key variables as fixed effects, and including a random effect for group to account for repeated measures.

**Do participants under-estimate their partner’s learning goals?** Our first key question was whether we would replicate the self-other difference in learning goals in a live, synchronous conversation around a hotly contested current event. This was in fact the case. Specifically, participants reported that learning goals were less important to their counterparts ($M = 3.3$, $SD = 1.1$) than to themselves ($M = 4.1$, $SD = 0.8$) during the conversation, $b = 0.78$, 95%CI [0.65, 0.91], $p < .001$. To put these results in perspective, we found that 66% of participants reported higher learning goals for themselves than their conversation counterpart (while only 15% reported lower learning goals for themselves and only 19% reported the same level for the self
and other). Surprisingly, and in contrast to Studies 1a-1c, participants also underestimated the importance of persuasion goals to their partner (M = 3.1, SD = 1.0) relative to themselves, (M = 3.3, SD = 1.0), $b = 0.29$, $95\% CI [0.16, 0.42]$, $p < .001$—51% of participants reported higher persuasion goals for themselves than their conversation counterpart (31% reported lower persuasion goals for themselves, 19% reported the same amount for the self and other).

Critically, despite the fact that participants under-estimated the persuasion goals held by their counterparts, we still found a significant interaction between target (other vs. self) and goal type (learning vs. persuasion), $b = 0.50$, $95\% CI [0.32, 0.67]$, $p < .001$. Thus, participants underestimated their disagreeing counterpart’s learning goals to a greater extent than their persuasion goals. Of note, this effect did not differ for Republicans versus Democrats or by participants’ strength of candidate support (see SOM for full results). Thus, even in the context of a synchronous conversation in which counterparts had already undertaken an entire interaction, they continued to under-estimate the learning goals of their partner, and did so to a greater extent than they under-estimated the persuasion goals of their partner.
Figure 4. Comparison of the post-conversation goals reported for the self and a disagreeing counterpart in Study 2. Participants systematically under-estimated the learning goals reported by disagreeing others compared to the self even after engaging in a synchronous conversation, but this pattern did not generalize to persuasion goals. Shaded plots display the distributions; error bars represent 95% CI around the mean; colored dots represent raw data.

What are the consequences of perceived learning goals? Although participants dramatically under-estimated their counterpart’s desire to learn about their perspective (relative to counterparts’ self-reports), there was also considerable variance in these perceptions—the standard deviation was 1.13 on a 5-point scale, and ratings spanned the entire length of the scale, with perceived learning goals ranging from 1 to 5.
As described in detail below, we found that these learning goal perceptions robustly predict two key conversational outcomes: partner evaluations and conversational enjoyment. To obtain a global measure of counterpart evaluations, we averaged participant ratings of their partner’s objectivity, intelligence, likability, morality and trustworthiness ($\alpha = .89$). We similarly averaged participant ratings of enjoyment, pleasantness and aversiveness, to obtain a measure of conversational enjoyment ($\alpha = .77$).

For each outcome, we took a three-step analytic approach. First, we entered self-reported and partner-perceived learning goals as predictors in the same model (these were our preregistered analyses). Second, we also included the counterpart’s reported learning goals and the counterparts’ perceptions of the participant’s learning goals (these analyses were robustness checks). Finally, we tested a fully saturated model that included both partners’ self-reported and perceived learning goals as well as both partners’ self-reported and perceived persuasion goals (these analyses were also robustness checks). Across all models, we found support for the central role of perceived partner learning goals in predicting both conversational outcomes (i.e., partner evaluations and enjoyment), above and beyond the other included predictors. We detail these results below and our analyses are presented in Table 1.

**Partner Evaluations**

**Self-Reported vs. Perceived Partner Learning Goals.** Model 1 presents our preregistered analyses. Specifically, we found that participants’ evaluations of their partners were significantly predicted by perceptions of their partner’s learning goals, $b = 0.60$, $95\% CI[0.49, 0.70]$, $p < .001$, but not significantly predicted by self-reported learning goals, $b = 0.05$, $95\% CI[-0.10, 0.19]$, $p = .54$, when entered simultaneously as fixed effects in a mixed model including a random effect for group to account for repeated measures. When we compared
LEARNING GOALS IN ATTITUDE CONFLICT

the magnitude of these coefficients, we found that perceptions of partner learning goals were significantly more predictive (and approximately 12 times in magnitude: 0.05 vs. 0.60) of partner evaluations than own learning goals, $\chi^2(1) = 26.88, p < .001$.

**Perceived Partner vs. Partner Reported Learning Goals.** In Model 2, as a robustness check, we also included the counterpart’s self-reported learning goals and the counterparts’ perceptions of the participant’s learning goals. We found that neither participants’ own self-reported learning goals ($b = 0.11, 95\% CI[-0.04, 0.26], p = .14$), nor the counterpart’s self-reported learning goals predicted counterpart evaluations ($b = 0.07, 95\% CI[-0.08, 0.22], p = .36$). However, counterpart perceptions of participant learning goals significantly predicted participant evaluations of the counterpart ($b = 0.18, 95\% CI[0.07, 0.29], p = .002$). Most importantly, controlling for all these predictors, participants’ perceptions of their counterpart’s learning goals continued to strongly predict partner evaluations ($b = 0.59, 95\% CI[0.48, 0.71], p < .001$). When we compared the magnitude of these coefficients, we found that perceptions of partner learning goals were significantly more predictive—and over three times the magnitude—of partner evaluations than the other three goals (all $p$’s < .001).

**All Goals.** Model 3 was a fully saturated model, which included both partners’ self-reported and perceived learning goals as well as both partners’ self-reported and perceived persuasion goals. Even controlling for self-reported and perceived persuasion goals, we continued to see a powerful relationship between perceptions of counterpart learning goals and counterpart evaluations ($b = 0.59, 95\% CI[0.48, 0.69], p < .001$). Of note, this relationship was not reflected in perceptions of counterpart persuasion goals or self-reported goals. See Table 1 for full results. When we compared the magnitude of these coefficients, we found that
LEARNING GOALS IN ATTITUDE CONFLICT

perceptions of partner learning goals were significantly more predictive of partner evaluations than all other goals (all \( p \)'s < .001).

**Conversational Enjoyment**

We followed the same analytical approach when examining conversational enjoyment. As in the case of partner evaluations, conversational enjoyment was positively predicted by perceived partner learning goals (\( b = 0.66, 95\% CI[0.54, 0.78], p < .001 \), but not by participants’ self-reported learning goals (\( b = 0.16, 95\% CI[-0.007, 0.32], p = .06 \)), when entered simultaneously as fixed effects in a mixed model including a random effect for group to account for repeated measures. Again, we found that the relationship between perceived partner learning goals and enjoyment was significantly larger than that between self-reported learning goals and enjoyment, \( \chi^2(1) = 17.95, p < .001 \). Models 2 and 3, presented in Table 1, followed the same analytical strategy as above and yielded largely parallel results. While the two parallel sets of analyses with the two different dependent variables largely converged, one interesting difference was that one’s self-reported learning goals did significantly predict conversational enjoyment in Models 2 and 3.

**The (lack of a key) role of ease of persuasion**

Finally, we explored whether the relationship between perceived partner learning goals and conversational outcomes reported above was driven by participants’ belief that partners who were willing to learn about their perspective were more easily persuaded. When we regressed our measures of partner evaluation and conversational enjoyment on perceptions of partner learning goals controlling for perceptions of partner persuasion, we continued to find large and significant associations between partner learning goals and conversational outcomes of interest (see Table 1 for full results). Indeed, perceived learning goals were significantly more strongly related to
partner evaluations ($\chi^2(1) = 15.20, p < .001$) and conversational enjoyment ($\chi^2(1) = 18.15, p < .001$) compared to perceived persuasion.

Table 1.

*Relationships between self-reported and perceived partner goals and conversational outcomes.*
### LEARNING GOALS IN ATTITUDE CONFLICT

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Perceptions of partner learning goals</th>
<th>MODEL 1</th>
<th>MODEL 2</th>
<th>MODEL 3</th>
<th>MODEL 4</th>
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### Enjoyment

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<td>[0.53, 0.77][*]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
LEARNING GOALS IN ATTITUDE CONFLICT

| Partner perception of participant persuasion goals | $b = -0.07$, 95% CI $[-0.21, 0.07]$ | $b = -0.08$, 95% CI $[0.53, 0.77]$ |
| Perceptions of partner persuasion | $b = 0.21$, 95% CI $[0.53, 0.77]^{*}$ |

Note: Associations between self-reported and perceived goals and conversational outcomes. Model 1 included participant reports of their own learning goals and their perceptions of their partner’s learning goals. Model 2 also included their partner’s self-reported learning goals and their partner’s perceptions of the participant’s learning goals. Model 3 added participants’ self-reported persuasion goals, their perceptions of their partner’s persuasion goals, their partner’s perception of the participant’s persuasion goals, and their partner’s self-reported persuasion goals. Model 1 represented our pre-registered analyses, while Models 2-4 represented robustness checks.

$^{*}p < .01$, $^{*}p < .05$, $^{**}p < .001$

Taken together, we found that participants consistently under-recognized their conflict counterparts’ willingness to learn about them (as shown in Studies 1a-2). Further, when engaging in a live conversation with someone who disagreed with their views, those participants who believed their partner was willing to learn about them provided more positive evaluations of their conflict counterpart and enjoyed their conversation more. These perceptions of a counterpart’s learning goals were the most important determinant of conflict outcomes—even more so than participants’ own and their partners’ self-reported willingness to learn.

Finally, on an exploratory basis, we analyzed the transcribed conversation data using natural language processing to investigate the linguistic features correlated with both participant self-reported learning goals as well as partner-perceived learning goals. Exploratory results are included in the SOM.

Discussion
Even after engaging in a synchronous conversation, participants underestimated the importance of learning goals to a disagreeing counterpart. Further, perceived learning goals predicted conversational enjoyment and partner evaluations.

**Study 3**

**Method**

Studies 1-2 provided evidence that (1) participants in conflictual conversations systematically under-estimate their counterpart’s learning goals, and (2) perceptions of counterpart’s learning goals are a key predictor of conversational outcomes. In Study 3, we *manipulated* perceptions of a disagreeing partner’s learning goals and asked participants to evaluate this partner. To examine the practical significance of this effect, we compared the effect of information about a partner’s learning goals to the effect of belonging to the same (vs. opposing) political party.

**Participants.** We recruited 902 participants through Prolific Academic to complete a 3-minute survey. As per our pre-registration, we excluded participants who failed our attention check or reported their political orientation to be neither liberal nor conservative, leaving a total of 666 participants (47% male; M_age = 34.0, SD = 12.2).

**Protocol.** We told participants that we were planning a future study in which they would be paired up with another participant to have a 10-minute discussion about their perspectives on current hot-button issues over an online chat platform. Participants first reported their political orientation on a scale from 1: Extremely liberal, 7: Extremely conservative with 4: Neither as the mid-point (American National Election Studies, 2010). They also reported how important learning and persuasion goals would be for them in the upcoming conversation using the same 6-items as in previous studies. Then, participants were presented with information about a potential
discussion partner who they were told had completed this survey in the last few days. At this point, participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions that varied in the information they received about the potential partner.

Participants in the “agreement” condition were told they would be paired with a partner who reported the same political orientation as the participant (e.g., self-reported liberals were told this potential discussion partner was also a liberal). By contrast, participants in the “disagreement” condition, were told that their potential partner had reported the opposite political orientation. In both of these conditions, the participants were given no information about the potential partner’s goals for the conversation.

In two additional “disagreement” conditions, we also showed participants a screenshot of the potential discussion partner’s self-reported learning and persuasion goals (using the same 6-items that the participants had themselves completed). Thus, in the “disagreement, high learning goals” condition, participants were told the potential discussion partner reported the opposite political orientation, but also that in the upcoming conversation they reported learning goals to be extremely important and persuasion goals to be moderately important to them. By contrast, in the “disagreement, low learning goals” condition, the potential discussion partner was presented as having the opposite political orientation, placing a minimal value on learning goals, while considering persuasion goals to be moderately important.

Our first two conditions allowed us to compare anticipated outcomes of conversations with ideologically-aligned versus -unaligned partners. An extensive prior literature led us to predict that participants would hold negative expectations regarding a conversation with an opposite-party partner (e.g., Dorison et al., 2019). Our third condition allowed us to evaluate how much of this antipathy could be overcome by signaling to participants that the opposite-party
counterpart is interested in understanding their perspective. Finally, the fourth condition enabled us to rule out the possibility that the mere mention of learning goals improves conversational expectations.

**Partner Evaluations.** Participants reported how moral, objective, intelligent, trustworthy and likable they expected their partner to be during the upcoming conversation (using the same response options as in Study 2; \( \alpha = .90 \)). We took the average of these 5-items to represent a measure of partner evaluations.

**Results**

First, we compared partner evaluations between participants who were paired with an agreeing vs. disagreeing counterpart, but did not receive any information about that counterpart’s conversational goals. As in previous work on affective polarization (Boxell et al., 2020; Iyengar et al., 2019; Minson et al., 2020), participants strongly derogated holders of opposing views (M = 4.0, SD = 1.0) relative to holders of aligned views (M = 4.4, SD = 1.0), \( t(318.43) = 3.89, p < .001 \), Cohen’s \( \delta = 0.44 \), 95% CI[0.21, 0.66].

Critically, this effect was entirely reversed when participants learned about an ideological opponent who had reported high learning goals (M = 4.8, SD = 1.1). Indeed, the disagreeing counterpart with high learning goals was evaluated significantly more positively than an agreeing counterpart with no goal-related information \( t(329.99) = 3.46, p < .001 \), Cohen’s \( \delta = 0.38 \), 95% CI[0.16, 0.60]. Thus, participants’ aversion to engaging with a disagreeing other (compared to an agreeing other) appeared to be at least partially driven by their belief that they would be unwilling to learn about their views.

Finally, and in line with our predictions, participants made more negative evaluations of disagreeing others with low learning goals (M = 2.8, SD = 0.9) than agreeing counterparts,
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$t(316.10) = 14.71, p < .001$, Cohen’s $d = 1.64, 95\% CI[1.39, 1.90]$—an effect size almost four times larger than the difference between agreeing and disagreeing others with no information about goals. Providing information about conflict counterparts’ learning goals had a significant effect on participants’ evaluations of them—and could even overcome the robust effect of shared political ideology.

**Figure 5.**
Evaluations of a conversation counterpart as moral, objective, intelligent, likable, and trustworthy across conditions in Study 3. Participants evaluated an agreeing other more positively than a disagreeing other when no goal relevant information was provided. However, evaluations of a disagreeing other with high learning goals was more positively than even an agreeing other (with no goal information). Shaded plots display the distributions; error bars represent 95% CI around the mean; colored dots represent raw data.

**Discussion**
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Believing that an ideologically-opposing conversation partner was willing to learn about one’s perspective improved expectations for a conflictual conversation, and had a greater effect than political ideology.

Study 4

Method

Study 3 provided initial evidence that correcting people’s mis-estimation of opponents’ learning goals can reduce affective polarization. Could this intervention yield dividends once counterparts actually engage with each other’s beliefs? Study 4 examines this possibility.

Participants. We recruited 506 participants through Prolific Academic to complete a 15-minute survey. As per our pre-registration, a total of 406 participants passed both of our attention check questions and completed the full survey (50% male; $M_{age} = 35.1$, $SD = 12.4$).

Protocol. We informed participants that in a future study, they would have an opportunity to discuss their views on current hot-button issues using an online chat platform with another person from today’s study. Their responses to the current survey would be used to match them with discussion partners. We showed participants screen shots from ChatPlat, a popular research tool for conducting online interactions, to increase the believability of our cover story.

Participants then reported their attitudes on two policy issues—one concerning preferential hiring for women in STEM fields and the other concerning investment by the United States in fighting international terrorist organizations. They then selected the issue that they felt most strongly about and were told that this was the topic they would discuss in the upcoming study. We then asked participants about their goals for the upcoming conversation (using the same 6-items from Studies 1b-3).
Next, we presented participants with information about two potential conversation partners who “took this survey a few days ago.” Participants saw the purported partner’s participant number and their view on the focal policy issue (which was always the opposite of that reported by the participant). Importantly, participants also saw a screenshot of the earlier questionnaire responses of their potential partner. This served as our manipulation. Specifically, the two partners were presented as having reported either high or low learning goals with respect to the upcoming conversation. Both partners were presented as having reported identical moderate levels of persuasion goals.

Participants viewed this information about one potential discussion partner and made several evaluations (described below). They then read a paragraph-long argument purportedly written by their future partner explaining the partner’s view on the focal issue. In reality, participants were randomly assigned to view one of five opinion statements collected in a previous study written by a different sample of online participants. Participants then evaluated the content and tone of the statement they believed to have been produced by the first partner they were evaluating. They then repeated the entire process for the second partner under consideration. Between participants, we counterbalanced the order of presenting the partner with the high versus low learning goals. Finally, participants chose which of the two partners they were more interested in talking to during the future study.

**Partner Evaluations.** First, participants evaluated each potential discussion partner in terms of how moral, objective, intelligent, trustworthy and likable their partner would likely to be during the conversation (using the same response options as in previous studies; $\alpha = .94$).

**Content Evaluations.** Next, participants read each individual’s opinion statement on the assigned issue and evaluated the content of their argument. Specifically, participants reported
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how persuasive, relevant, true, thoughtful, and evenhanded the statement was (1: Not at all; 7: Extremely; α = .93).

*Tone Evaluations.* Finally, participants evaluated the tone of the argument, reporting how warm, confrontational and respectful the argument was (1: Not at all to 7: Extremely; α = .51).

**Partner Choice.** After having reviewed the information about the two potential discussion partners, participants were asked to select which one they would prefer to be paired with for the upcoming study.

**Results**

We tested four hypotheses related to our perceived learning goals intervention: effects on partner evaluations, evaluation of the tone of the written argument, evaluation of the content of the written argument, and willingness to interact again in the future. We found beneficial effects of perceived learning goals on all four outcomes. First, we found that participants provided more positive evaluations (calculated as the average of morality, objectivity, intelligence, trustworthiness, and likability) when evaluating a counterpart who had reported high (M = 5.1, SD = 1.1) versus low (M = 3.2, SD = 1.3) learning goals, t(405) = 24.71, p < .001, Cohen’s d = 1.55, 95%CI [1.39, 1.71] (Figure 6, Panel A). Second, when evaluating identical counter-attitudinal arguments, participants provided more positive content evaluations (the average of persuasiveness, relevance, truthfulness, thoughtfulness, and evenhandedness) when they believed the person who wrote the argument reported high (M = 3.5, SD = 1.0) rather than low (M = 3.3, SD = 0.9) learning goals, t(404) = 6.43, p < .001, Cohen’s d = 0.23, 95%CI [0.09, 0.36] (Figure 7, Panel A). Third, participants evaluated the tone of the argument more positively (warm, confrontational (R), respectful) when they believed the statement was written by someone with high (M = 3.5, SD = 0.8) rather than low (M = 3.0, SD = 0.9) learning goals, t(405) = 10.46, p <
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.001, Cohen’s $d = 0.62$, 95%CI[0.48, 0.76] (Figure 8, Panel A). These results held for each of the individual measures and were not moderated by topic of discussion or attitude strength. Finally, participants were overwhelmingly more likely to choose to have a discussion with the disagreeing counterpart who endorsed high (77%) rather than low (23%) learning goals, $\chi^2(1) = 125$, $p < .001$.

Taken together, these results provided evidence that explicitly providing individuals with information about a conflict counterpart’s willingness to learn about them is a simple, scalable intervention that reduces affective polarization and increases people’s willingness to engage with opposing views.

Discussion

Informing participants that their counterpart was interested in learning about their perspective again enhanced their counterpart evaluations, as well as their evaluations of the counterpart’s arguments (though the arguments themselves were identical).

Study 5

Method

The earlier studies document a robust self-other difference in people’s beliefs about willingness to learn about opposing views, and tested a simple intervention to correct this misunderstanding, improving evaluations of both disagreeing others and their arguments. Next, we investigate whether such effects generalize outside of American partisan politics by testing our intervention in the context of the long-standing and bloody Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Participants. We recruited 632 Hebrew-speaking Israeli citizens. We pre-registered a sample of 600 respondents, but ongoing recruitment through snowball sampling led to a final sample of 632 responses. Participants were recruited through online platforms (Prolific, n = 398;
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Cloud Research Panel, n = 140) and 94 volunteer participants belonging to the professional and personal networks of the authors. As per our pre-registration, a total of 356 participants passed our attention check and completed the full survey (45% male; M_age = 31.4, SD = 11.4). This survey was conducted in Hebrew.

**Protocol.** As in Study 4, participants were informed that the survey would be used to pair them up with someone for a potential future study, in which they would discuss a controversial issue over an online chat platform. Specifically, participants were asked to state their agreement with the following statement in Hebrew: “To achieve a lasting peace agreement between Israel and the Palestinians, it will be necessary to address the Palestinian refugees’ claims by internationally funded compensation and by their resettlement outside Israel’s borders.” Participants then reported their opinion on the issue and their goals for the upcoming conversation (using the same 6-items from Studies 1b-4).

To reduce the burden on our participants and test methodological generalizability, we used a between-subjects design (rather than the within-subjects design used in Study 4) in which participants considered a single Palestinian discussion partner who reported either high or low learning goals. Thus, we presented participants with information about one potential conversation partner who “took this survey a few days ago.” They viewed this purported partner’s name (“Ziad El Hamid”) and their view on the issue (“Strongly Disagree”). Importantly, participants also saw a screenshot of the earlier questionnaire responses of their potential partner indicating either high or low learning goals for the upcoming conversation. All partners were again presented as having identical moderately high persuasion goals.

As in Study 4, participants evaluated their discussion partner on several dimensions. Specifically, they rated how moral, objective, intelligent, trustworthy and likable their partner
was likely to be during the conversation (using the same response options as in previous studies; \( \alpha = .87 \)). We again combined these items into a single measure of partner evaluations.

Participants then read a paragraph-long argument purportedly written by this future discussion partner explaining their view on the issue. In reality, we used opinion statements that had been collected in a previous study from Palestinian residents of the West Bank. All the statements came from Palestinian respondents who strongly disagreed with the focal statement. Across both conditions, the Israeli participants in the current study were randomly assigned to view one of five such statements. Participants then evaluated the content (persuasive, relevant, true, thoughtful, and evenhanded on a scale from 1: Not at all to 7: Extremely; \( \alpha = .88 \)) and tone (warm, confrontational, and respectful on a scale from 1: Not at all to 7: Extremely; \( \alpha = .70 \)) of the argument purportedly written by their potential future conversation partner.

Results

Although Study 5 was conducted in a different language, cultural context, and in midst of a long-standing and bloody conflict, we found results that were largely in line with those of Study 4. Participants evaluated a potential conflict counterpart as more moral, objective, intelligent, trustworthy, and likable when they reported high (M = 4.4, SD = 1.0) rather than low (M = 2.9, SD = 1.0) learning goals, \( t(350.66) = 14.77, p < .001 \), Cohen’s \( d = 1.57, 95\% CI [1.33, 1.81] \) (Figure 6, Panel B). We observed significant differences on every measure (smallest effect size for ratings of morality: Cohen’s \( d = 0.93, 95\% CI [0.71, 1.15] \)).

Further, when evaluating identical arguments about one of the most painful issues fueling the conflict, participants provided more positive evaluations of the argument tone (warm, confrontational (R), respectful) when they believed the author had high (M = 2.7, SD = 0.9)
versus low (M = 2.4, SD = 0.8) learning goals, t(335.02) = 3.01, p = 0.003, Cohen’s d = 0.32, 95% CI [0.11, 0.53] (Figure 7, Panel B).

Although differences on our measure of argument content did not reach traditional levels of significance, the difference was directionally in line with our predictions (high learning goals: M = 2.5, SD = 1.0; low learning goals: M = 2.3, SD = 1.0; t(351.38) = 1.64, p = 0.10, Cohen’s d = 0.17, 95% CI [-0.04, 0.38]; Figure 8, Panel B). Specifically, participants rated the argument as significantly more thoughtful, but not significantly more persuasive (trending), relevant, true, or evenhanded.

Figure 6.
Evaluations of a conversation counterpart as moral, objective, intelligent, likable, and trustworthy depending on perceived learning goals in (a) Study 4 and (b) Study 5. Participants
evaluated a disagreeing other more positively when they were told they had high (vs. low) learning goals. Shaded plots display the distributions; error bars represent 95% CI around the mean; colored dots represent raw data.

Figure 7.
Evaluations of a conversation counterpart’s argument as warm, confrontational, and respectful depending on perceived learning goals in (a) Study 4 and (b) Study 5. Participants evaluated the tone of a disagreeing other’s argument more positively when they were told they had high (vs. low) learning goals. Shaded plots display the distributions; error bars represent 95% CI around the mean; colored dots represent raw data.
**Figure 8.**
Evaluations of a conversation counterpart’s argument as persuasive, relevant, true, thoughtful, and evenhanded depending on perceived learning goals in (a) Study 4 and (b) Study 5. Participants did not evaluate the content of a disagreeing other’s argument differently depending on whether they had high (vs. low) learning goals. Shaded plots display the distributions; error bars represent 95% CI around the mean; colored dots represent raw data.

**Discussion**

Israeli participants evaluated a Palestinian conflict counterpart and their arguments more positively when they expressed higher learning goals, replicating Study 4 using a between-subjects design and in a new cultural setting.

**General Discussion**

Across seven pre-registered studies, we document three findings. First, we identify a robust self-other difference, wherein conflict partisans believe that counterparts are less willing to learn about their views than vice versa. Second, these beliefs about opponents’ unwillingness
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to learn predict how people evaluate counterparts and their future willingness to interact. Third, our results support a simple informational intervention: changing beliefs about the extent of one’s counterpart’s willingness to learn dramatically improves outcomes. In the case of both American partisan conflict and Israelis evaluating Palestinian perspectives, counterparts and their arguments were evaluated more positively when participants believed they were willing to learn about their views.

**Contribution**

Social psychology has a rich history of highlighting the role of situational forces in predicting human behavior. In dyadic conflict, the social situation has one overwhelmingly salient feature: the other person. We build on the tradition of recognizing the power of the situation (Ross & Nisbett, 2011) and individual construal in shaping behavior.

Complementing prior work on the importance of *individual* attributes in determining conflict outcomes—e.g., receptiveness (Minson, Chen, & Tinsley, 2020)—our results highlight the importance of individuals’ *beliefs about others*. This shift in focus provides a new lens for conflict research.

Simply believing that a disagreeing counterpart is willing to learn about us can improve conflictual conversations. Such interventions are effective in applied contexts such as Braver Angels’ “Red-Blue Workshops,” where conversational goals can be induced. Yet, in many contexts, one cannot control others’ goals. However, the results of Studies 4-5 suggest that clearly signaling learning goals (e.g., “I would be interested to learn what you think about…”) could lead to more productive dialogue.

**Limitations and Future Directions**
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Our paper has limitations that offer avenues for future research. First, research should investigate how learning goals can be communicated. Our participants self-reported higher learning goals than their partners attributed to them even after live conversation, suggesting a breakdown in communication. Are people poor at communicating learning goals? Are their partners unwilling to believe them? Future research could examine these questions.

Finally, one could imagine that learning goals could improve conversations more generally, even when no conflict is present. For example, telling our romantic partners that we want to learn about their views or experiences may improve those conversations and relationships. Future work could probe the benefits of learning goals across diverse conversational contexts.

Conclusion

We shed light on a novel misprediction—the belief that disagreeing others are unwilling to learn about our views—with important consequences for conflict outcomes. In doing so, we shift away from a focus on individual behavior and cognitions that determine conflict outcomes and towards a greater focus on person perception. Practically, these results also suggest a simple intervention to improving disagreeing conversations that calls for broader testing and potential implementation.
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References


https://electionstudies.org/resources/anes-guide/


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