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Jonathan M. Tisch
College of Citizenship
and Public Service

Tisch College Report

Evaluation: Bloggingheads TV

Authors:

Felicia M. Sullivan, Ph.D

Senior Researcher, Center for Information and
Research on Civic Learning & Engagement
(CIRCLE), Jonathan M. Tisch College of
Citizenship and Public Service, Tufts University

Joshua Littenberg-Tobias

Doctoral Student, Department of Educational
Research, Measurement, and Evaluation, Boston
University

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Executive Summary

Overview

In an increasingly partisan political climate, media can work to heighten polarized points of view, often minimizing places where agreement and common purpose might be found. With funding from the Democracy Fund, Bloggingheads TV's *The Good Fight* is a series of moderated debates in which "people who disagree about an important policy issue explore their differences and try to find common ground."

(Bloggingheads TV, 2014). Some research has suggested that acknowledging the validity of an opponent's arguments or seeing them as legitimate can improve political discourse (Mutz, 2007). CIRCLE, a research center housed at Tufts University's Jonathan M. Tisch College of Citizenship and Public Service, conducted a survey experiment exploring the effects of viewing points of agreement between ideological opponents engaged in a public issue debate as part of an evaluation of *The Good Fight* series.

A sample of adults residing in the U.S. who self-identified as liberal or conservative participated in the study. The study sought to understand if viewing concessions reduced polarization in respondents and increased subjects' awareness of alternative viewpoints.

Key Findings

The study found that in a moderated discussion between ideological opponents:

- Viewing a concession created a more positive reaction to the ideological opponent and increased openness and understanding of alternative viewpoints. It did not affect how interested the viewer

was in the issue being discussed. This effect of the concession held across the board for all models tested.

- The effect of seeing a concession varied by the topic of the discussion as well as the ideological position of the respondent. Even without seeing a concession, topic and ideology mattered. For example, the minimum wage video was less polarizing, while liberals were more likely to be interested in alternative points of views.
- Individuals who indicated that they use new information to adjust and revise their views predicted positive outcomes for all four measures. But women were less likely than men to shift or adjust.

Background

Purpose

This is an evaluation of Bloggingheads TV's Good Fight series. The purpose of the evaluation is to ascertain the extent to which a Good Fight video alters viewers' attitudes about political issues. This study used segments from two Good Fight dialogues to test the following hypothesis. When viewers with strong ideological positions see an ideological opponent find points of agreement with an ideological ally, the viewers will be more open to the antagonists' arguments, and more positively inclined towards the people making them, than if they had not been witness to those points of agreement.

Political Discourse in the Citizens United Era

Since the Citizens United ruling, political advocacy groups and SuperPACs have spent billions of dollars. This new funding reality, along with changes in the business of news (Berry & Sobieraj 2014), shifting population demographics, increasing economic inequality, and shifting of political alliances in both parties has resulted in a highly partisan media environment.

Political discourse, especially amongst political elites, has become increasingly polarized over the last decade (McCright, 2011; McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal, 2006), with increasing disparities in information that the public shares in common (Hindman, 2009). At the same time, the mainstream news media have become increasingly fragmented, speaking to ever narrower, distracted, and extreme audiences (Arceneaux, Johnson, & Murphy, 2012; McCright, 2011; Gurevitch, M., Coleman, S. & Blumler, J.G., 2009; Hindman, 2009). In this polarized environment, media and candidates speak not to the median voter, but rather to increasingly partisan audiences, often leaving moderate voters and civil discourse out in the cold (Gonzalez and Novo, 2011).

The Impact of Media on Partisan Views

Viewing partisan media has been connected to increased mistrust and hostility of the media (Arceneaux, Johnson, & Murphy, 2012). More importantly, partisan media have been shown to have mixed-effects on political participation (Dilliplane, 2011). Yet, those who care about an issue have been shown to actively seek out unbiased information moving beyond the effects of polarized media (Kim, 2007).

Research on the relationship between media effects and selective exposure is mixed (Stroud, 2010). Do we seek media that reinforces our particular partisan points of view or are partisan views created by

watching media from polarized points of view? Or, is this an interactive process between the two where selecting and watching reinforce each other? (Slater, 2007). To what extent does media content reshape our polarized points of view? This study seeks to understand how one particular aspect of a mediated issue debate, seeing an opponent agree or concede, affects the viewer's openness and receptivity to alternative points of view.

Combating Polarization: Bloggingheads TV and The Good Fight

Bloggingheads TV presents split-screen video dialogues about politics and ideas by individuals who are often coming from diverse points of view. Bloggingheads TV seeks to engage these diverse points of view in a manner that shows thoughtful disagreement in civil terms. A primary mission of Bloggingheads is to help people see things from perspectives other than their own—and, in particular, from perspectives that, for whatever reason, they aren't normally able to appreciate. Bloggingheads TV hopes that by promoting good examples of discussions between differing points of view, public discourse can become less polarized as viewers witness a more productive, less partisan political environment.

A new project of Bloggingheads TV is The Good Fight series. Funded in part by the Democracy Fund, the series looks to challenge the echo chamber effect of current polarized debates by modeling discussion on policy issues where both parties seek to find common ground. The Good Fight strives to change the way in which people listen to and consider information from multiple perspectives as a means to counter more polarizing effects of the current media environment. Booth (2004) suggests that creating shared discourse, which agreement or concession can signal, can facilitate shifts in opinion or changes of mind. It may also be that such agreement facilitates cognitive capacities for belief (Gilbert, 1991).

The Democracy Fund at the Omidyar Foundation funded Bloggingheads TV's The Good Fight series and has asked to evaluate the impact of the project on decreasing polarization through increased openness and receptivity to alternative points of view. Bloggingheads TV contracted CIRCLE, housed at Tufts University's Tisch College, to conduct an independent experiment to ascertain the extent to which media that seeks common ground and agreement between discussants increases a viewer's openness and positive reaction to those with opposing opinions, thus creating a less polarized public discourse space. The extent to which the series increased interest in public issues and understanding of alternative points of view were also of interest. Specifically, we conducted a survey experiment in which liberals and conservatives were randomly assigned to watch a video discussion on one of two topics: 1) Raising the Minimum Wage or 2) Employer Provided Health Coverage for Contraceptives. Once assigned to a video, they were further randomly assigned to watch either a segment in which their ideological opponent agreed or conceded points to the viewer's ideological ally, or a segment without such a concession.

Research Design

Research Questions and Hypotheses

Suppose you showed viewers dialogue excerpts that combined two kinds of elements: 1) civil disagreement between ideological opponents, and 2) concession or agreement by a discussant with whom the viewer is in ideological misalignment. In other words, suppose you showed a clip where the two discussants generally disagreed, but acknowledged agreement on at least one aspect of the debate. Would this have a more

positive effect on the attitude of viewers than merely showing them the portion featuring disagreement? In other words:

- Does seeing an ideological opponent reach agreement with an ideological ally render that opponent more credible, less suspect?
- And, if it does render them more credible and less suspect, would this perception survive, in some measure, the viewing of a segment featuring disagreement-such that the viewer was more open to the opposing view, and more favorably inclined toward the opposing discussant, than he/she would have been if exposed only to a segment featuring no agreement?
- Additionally, if you are more open to the opposing view and become more favorably inclined to the opposing discussant, does seeing agreement of an ideological opponent increase your interest in the issue being discussed and understanding of the alternative view point?

If the answer is yes to the first of these questions especially, this would point the way toward presenting debates in a form that had a more constructive effect than debates typically do. Yes to all three would stress an even more important imperative to do so.

This study explored how people who viewed a Bloggingheads TV's The Good Fight debate with an ideological opponent conceding or agreeing with the viewer's ideological ally differed from those who view the same video minus the concession point. Differences in their reaction to the speakers, openness to the opinions of those with opposing ideological positions, increased interest in the issue being discussed, and understanding of alternative views on public issues were measured.

We hypothesized that participants who see an ideological opponent concede a discussion point of an ideological ally would:

1. Be **more positively inclined toward the ideological opponent** than those who did not see the ideological opponent concede.
2. Be **more open and receptive to the ideological opponent's point of view** than those who did not see the ideological opponent concede.
3. Show **increased interest in the topic being discussed** more than those who did not see the ideological opponent concede.
4. **Understand the opposing or alternative point of view** more than those who did not see the ideological opponent concede.

The effect of ideological position (liberal or conservative) and topic of video discussion were also explored. Differences in key influencing factors such as gender, race, general willingness to be open and consider new information, level of education, religious engagement, overall political knowledge, interest in civic action, and interest in discussing news and politics were also considered.

Methods

CIRCLE conducted a survey experiment, in which 886 self-identified liberals and 741 self-identified conservatives were recruited through Amazon Mechanical Turk and compensated for participating in the study. All respondents were 18 years or older and residing in the United States. Both groups—liberals and conservatives—were randomly assigned to watch a moderated video discussion on one of two topics: 1) Raising the Minimum Wage or 2) Employer Provided Health Coverage

for Contraceptives. Once assigned to a video, both groups were then randomly assigned to watch a segment of a discussion where there was an agreement or concession by their ideological opponent (treatment group) or a video segment without such a concession (control group). Table 1 shows the distribution of respondents by video, condition, and ideology. Random assignment controlled for selection bias.

TABLE 1: Sample Size for Each Factor - Video, Condition, Ideology

Video	Condition	Political Ideology		Total
		Liberal	Conservative	
Video 1 - Raising the Minimum Wage	No Concession (control)	199	164	363
	Concession (treatment)	196	176	372
Video 2 - Employer Provided Health Coverage for Contraception	No Concession (control)	242	196	438
	Concession (treatment)	249	205	454
Total		886	741	1627

Two video topics were chosen for the experiment to examine whether the effect of viewing a concession was robust regardless of factors. At the time the experiment was being implemented, five of the twelve video discussions in The Good Fight series were complete. Using selection

criteria that looked at three areas -- discussion quality, concession quality, and production values -- the two videos were selected that best met the selection criteria. The control segment for each video was identical for both liberals and conservatives. The treatment segment for each video was identical to the control except at the end of each segment a concession was smoothly edited in. Liberals in each treatment group saw a concession by a conservative, and conservatives in each treatment group saw a concession by a liberal.

Data was collected from July 30, 2014, through September 26, 2014, using the Amazon Mechanical Turk service. Respondents were compensated for their participation. We conducted a factorial analysis using a statistical technique called Univariate Analysis of Variance (UNIANOVA) to explore our research questions which allowed us to look at three key factors—ideological position of respondent, video topic viewed, and whether a concessions was viewed or not. This analytical technique is common in studies where multiple factors are being examined at the same time. The analysis also allowed us to control for demographic factors that are likely to correlate to the outcomes, such as gender, race, importance of religion in the viewer's life, educational attainment, willingness to adjust one's views when presented with new information, level of political knowledge, engagement in civic action, and interest in discussing politics. We were also able to analyze how the three key factors interacted with one another through this technique. Including controls increases the power of the analysis and provides more nuanced detail, while interactions ensure that the model is accurate.

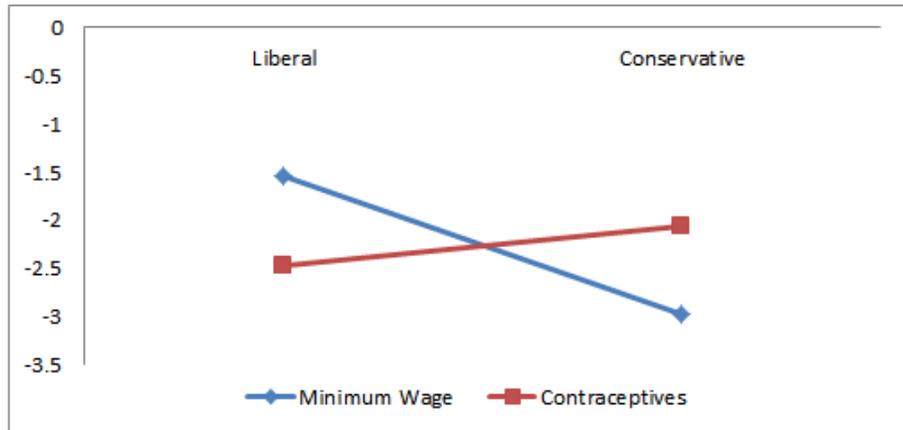
Findings

Reaction to Speaker

We found that those who saw an ideological opponent concede (treatment) were more positively inclined toward the ideological opponent than those who did not see a concession (control). The largest effect on respondents who saw a concession is an increase in the credibility or favorability of the opposing speaker. However, respondents were no more likely to change their position to agree with their ideological opponent. Liberals were more likely than conservatives to have a favorable attitude toward the speaker representing the opposing position regardless of seeing a concession or not. We saw no significant difference associated with increased positive reactions to speakers related to the video topic viewed.

However, when we look at the interaction of the topic viewed and the ideology of the viewer, liberals had a more positive reaction to the opposing speaker during the minimum wage video than during the contraception video, while conservatives had a more favorable reaction to the opposing speaker during the contraception video. Fig. 1 depicts this difference. The y-axis shows viewers' average opinion of the speaker who held opposite views from their own, with zero meaning a neutral view.

FIGURE 1: Reaction to Ideological opponent: Interaction of Video and Ideology



Openness to Ideological Opponent's Opinions

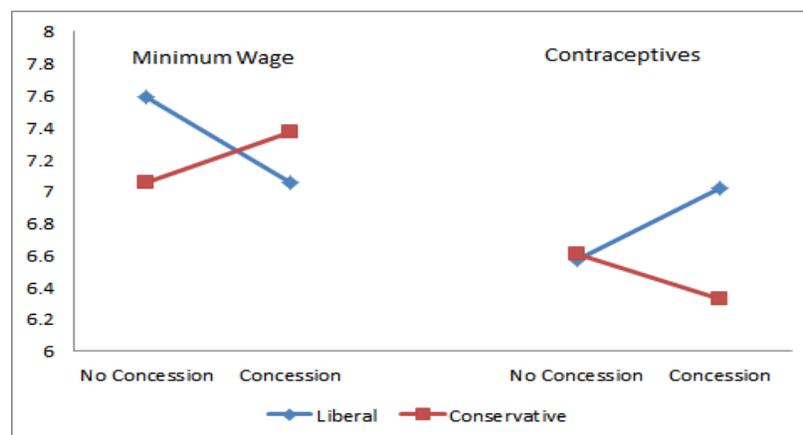
In addition to having a more positive reaction to the ideological opponent, **those who saw a concession were significantly more open and receptive to the ideological opponent's point of view than those who did not see the ideological opponent concede.** Here there was no difference between liberals and conservatives in their openness, regardless of seeing a concession or not. However, those who viewed the video on minimum wage were significantly more likely to be open to the views of the opposing speaker than those who viewed the video on employer-provided health coverage of contraceptives. It should be noted that the topic viewed, ideological position of the viewer, and whether or not a concession was viewed, created two-way interactions that shaped the viewer's openness to the ideological opponent's opinions. Of these interactions, those who were the most open to their ideological opponent were conservatives who viewed a concession on the minimum wage video and those who saw a concession related to employer-provided health coverage for contraceptives.

Interest in Topic

Viewing a concession didn't only have an impact on respondents' positive reaction and openness to their ideological opponent. **We found that those who saw a video with their ideological opponent conceding were also more interested in the topic being discussed than those who did not see the ideological opponent concede.**

Liberals were more likely to express increased interest in the issue being discussed than their conservative counterparts regardless of video topic or viewing a concession or not. Also, those who viewed the video on raising the minimum wage were more likely to express an increased interest in that topic than those who watched the video on employer-provided health coverage for contraceptives. We also found a three-way interaction between video being viewed, ideological position of the respondent and whether or not they viewed a concession. Seeing a concession made liberals more interested in employer provided contraceptives, but slightly less interested in the minimum wage. For conservatives, seeing a concession made them more interested in the minimum wage, but less so on employer supported contraceptives (Fig. 2).

FIGURE 2: Increased Interest in Topic: Interaction of Video, Ideology and Condition



Understanding Alternative Points of View

In addition to increased interest in the issue being discussed, **we found that those viewed a video with their ideological opponent conceding also reported a significant increase in their understanding of the opposing or alternative point of view more than those who do not see the ideological opponent concede.** Liberals were more likely to indicate increased understanding of the opposing point of view than their conservative counterparts. Those who viewed the video on raising the minimum wage, likewise, were more likely to say they understood the alternative point of view over those who watched the video on employer provided health coverage for contraceptives. We found no significant two-way or three-way interactions between ideology, video, or viewing a concession. Thus, the strongest effect of a concession is likely to be on liberals who were watching the minimum wage video.

Key Demographic Factors Affecting Outcomes

Predictably, those who said they used new information to adjust and revise their position were more likely to be open and receptive to ideological opponents and their views than those who used new information to bolster an existing position. Political knowledge, higher education levels, and involvement in political discussion predicted a stronger effect for at least one of the outcomes, whereas being white or religiously engaged predicted weaker effects. A key demographic factor that had a surprising impact on the outcomes measured was gender. Women were less likely than men to respond favorably to their ideological opponent, were less open to that person's opinions and expressed smaller changes in their understanding of the opposing view. Upon further exploration, there appears to be a wealth of empirical confirmation of this finding in the research literature (Golebiowska, 1999).

Implications

The findings of this study confirm strongly that providing and promoting opportunities for both discussants to find and recognize points of agreement is positive. Those who view their ideological opponent agreeing are more likely to view that opponent as credible or favorable, and are more likely to be open to what that person has to say. Seeing a concession also improves understanding of alternative viewpoints while increasing interest in the topic being discussed. This effect was seen regardless of issue or topic being discussed, or the ideological position of the viewer. Bloggingheads TV should continue its The Good Fight strategy of having discussions find common ground and look for opportunities for both sides to verbalize agreement.

However, topic and ideological position of the viewer at times do matter as to how large the effect is for some outcomes, and at times create strong interactions with one another. This suggests that Bloggingheads TV should continue to produce discussions on a range of topics that address a wide spectrum of social and economic issues with the understanding that liberal and conservatives may have varied responses. Also, consistent with previous research, female viewers may prove to present particular challenges in responding favorably to their ideological opponent, being open to that person's opinions, and expanding their understanding of opposing views. Bloggingheads TV may want to explore strategies to specifically target this demographic.

Appendix A: Sample Demographics

The table below compares the respondent pool with the overall U.S. demographics, which were drawn from several sources. It also provides information on the two main groups recruited—liberals and conservatives. In terms of gender and geographic location, the sample is consistent with the overall U.S. population. The sample is whiter than the U.S. population with about the same percentage of individuals being foreign born. The study sample has many more individuals under the age of 40 compared to the general population. This group is more highly educated as well, with more individuals having a Bachelor's degree or higher. Yet the sample has lower income levels, likely as a result of their younger overall age. Age may influence the fact that the sample has a higher percentage of individuals who identify as being religiously unaffiliated and are also a bit less likely to be married.

In terms of political affiliation, the sample is slightly more democratic, most likely linked to the greater number of liberals in the pool than conservatives. The resulting sample is less libertarian as well. The sample also has a much higher rate of voter registration, which is probably a result of enrolling individuals with a strong ideological position into the study. The entire sample has a very high level of political knowledge that likely outstrips the average person residing in the U.S; again this is likely a result of respondents have strong ideological positions.

Liberals and conservatives differed in a few key ways.

Conservatives in the sample tend to be male, whiter, older, less educated, more religiously affiliated, and more likely to be living in the southern region of the U.S. These differences are likely a

combination of the differing ideological stance and some may be related to the difference in age.

	Liberal	Conservative	Sample	U.S.
Gender[1]				
Male	46.8%	56.8%	51.4%	49.2%
Female	53.2%	43.2%	48.6%	50.8%
Race / Ethnicity [1]				
White/Caucasian	79.9%	86.0%	82.7%	74.2%
Black/African-American	7.2%	4.4%	5.9%	12.6%
Hispanic/Latino*	4.4%	3.9%	4.2%	16.4%
Asian American/Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	5.2%	3.3%	4.3%	5.8%
Other Race	3.3%	2.4%	2.9%	7.5%
Foreign Born [1]	11.3%	11.3%	11.3%	12.9%
Age [1]				
18-24	16.1%	10.4%	13.5%	13.1%
25-29	25.3%	19.7%	22.8%	8.9%
30-39	34.3%	30.5%	32.6%	17.0%
40-49	11.3%	20.2%	15.3%	18.5%
50-64	11.0%	17.1%	13.8%	25.0%
65+	1.9%	2.0%	2.0%	17.4%
Educational Attainment [1]				
High School Graduate or Less	9.8%	10.2%	10.0%	42.4%
Some College	38.1%	41.5%	39.6%	29.0%
College Graduate	39.6%	36.2%	38.0%	17.9%
Postgraduate Degree	12.5%	12.2%	12.4%	10.6%
Married [1]	37.5%	54.4%	45.1%	49.2%
Party Affiliation[2]				
Democrat	85.9%	6.0%	49.3%	49.9%
Republican	1.3%	74.4%	34.8%	34.7%
Other	12.8%	19.6%	15.9%	15.4%
Identifies as Libertarian[3]	2.1%	9.3%	5.4%	7.0%
Religious Affiliation[4]				
Protestant	10.7%	39.8%	23.9%	51.3%
Roman Catholic	8.0%	18.1%	12.6%	23.9%
Mormon	0.9%	4.1%	2.4%	1.7%

Eastern or Greek Orthodox		0.3%	0.1%	0.6%
Jewish	0.9%	1.0%	0.9%	1.7%
Muslim	0.3%	0.3%	0.3%	0.6%
Buddhist	2.5%	0.1%	1.4%	0.7%
Hindu	0.2%	0.1%	0.2%	0.4%
None / Unaffiliated	3.0%	0.5%	1.9%	16.1%
Something else	6.6%	10.7%	8.5%	3.0%
Income [1]				
Less than \$10,000	7.7%	3.3%	5.7%	7.2%
10,000 - 49,999	55.0%	42.2%	49.2%	40.2%
50,000 - 99,999	29.7%	40.0%	34.3%	30.4%
100,000 - 149,999	5.9%	10.0%	7.8%	12.8%
\$150,000 - \$199,999	0.8%	2.8%	1.7%	4.8%
\$200,000+	0.9%	1.7%	1.3%	4.6%
Geographical Region[5]				
Northeast	21.8%	14.6%	18.5%	17.9%
South	36.0%	41.9%	38.7%	37.1%
Midwest	19.2%	21.1%	20.1%	21.7%
West	23.0%	22.4%	22.7%	23.3%

[1] U.S. Census American Community Survey 5 year Estimates 2008-2012 - http://factfinder2.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?pid=ACS_12_5YR_DP05&prodType=table

[2] Gallup - <http://www.gallup.com/poll/15370/party-affiliation.aspx>

[3] Pew Research - <http://religions.pewforum.org/affiliations>

[4] 2013 American Values Survey - <http://publicreligion.org/research/2013/10/2013-american-values-survey/>

[5] 2010 U.S Census - <http://www.census.gov/prod/cen2010/briefs/c2010br-01.pdf>

Appendix B: Demographics of Excluded Subgroup

Of the 2,230 individual recruited into the study, we dropped 603 (27%) respondents because they could not correctly identify the ideological position of the speakers in their video. Given that this is a large portion of those recruited, they are likely to represent some portion of the Bloggingheads TV viewing public. We thought it would be useful to state how this subgroup differed from those who remained in the study. These differences may provide some insights for future programming.

Those who did not correctly identify the ideological position of the speakers were less politically knowledgeable and noted less civic actions. There appeared to be a linear relationship between these two variables and whether someone correctly identified the ideological position of the speakers. Those who watched the video on raising the minimum wage were also more likely to incorrectly identify where the speakers stood on the ideological spectrum. In part, respondents may have been confounded by the fact that the person holding the conservative position was African American. It could also be that the ideological lines were a bit more blurry in this presentation. Given that this video also tended to create more positive outcomes, it may be that these blurry lines helped those who could correctly identify the ideologies achieve these outcomes. It also appears that some fraction of those who identified the ideological position incorrectly may have spent little time viewing the video segments by having completed the survey in a time shorter than the video segment itself.

Appendix C: Some Notes on Amazon Mechanical Turk

Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk - www.mturk.com) is an online marketplace for work that requires human intelligence. Through Human Intelligence Tasks, or HITs, workers from diverse places can complete tasks requested of individuals and business also from diverse places. While still relatively new to use in social science research, data collected via MTurk has been shown to be as reliable as those obtained from standard methods (Buhrmester, Kwang, and Gosling, 2011). However, the population of U.S. workers on MTurk is not representative of the general U.S. population. In a survey of 1,000 MTurk workers, Ipeirotis (2010) found that nearly half were from the United States. These U.S. based workers were predominantly female (65%). The majority were under 40 years of age and most had some college experience with the majority having a bachelor's degree or higher. More than 50% made less than \$50,000 a year and used MTurk as a source of secondary income. The overwhelming majority were single with no children. The age, income and educational attainment demographics are consistent with our sample. However, we were able to recruit more males into the study and a higher percentage of married individuals.

Appendix D: Selection Criteria

Discussion Quality

- Each participant given roughly equal time
- Discussion points are clearly articulated
- Each discussion point builds from previous points and stays on topic
- Discussion points are supported by evidence or logical reasoning

- Anecdotes are used to provide detail or as concrete examples—they are not overused
- There is evidence of active listening (e.g. Opponents points are appropriately responded to by elaborating on point or requesting additional information)
- Moderator appears fair and balanced; does not favor one discussant or view over another

Concession Quality

- Opponent clearly states agreement
- Agreement is supported with reasoning or evidence for basis of agreement
- Concession opens up new lines of discussion or possibilities for discussion
- Opponent offers concession with either a neutral or positive emotional tone

Production Quality

- Video demonstrates no loss
- Each discussant is well lit
- Visual composition/framing does not bias one discussant over another
- Audio is clear and without noise/distraction for all participants
- Post production processes and elements (e.g. editing, graphics) are seamless and do not bias one discussant over another

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