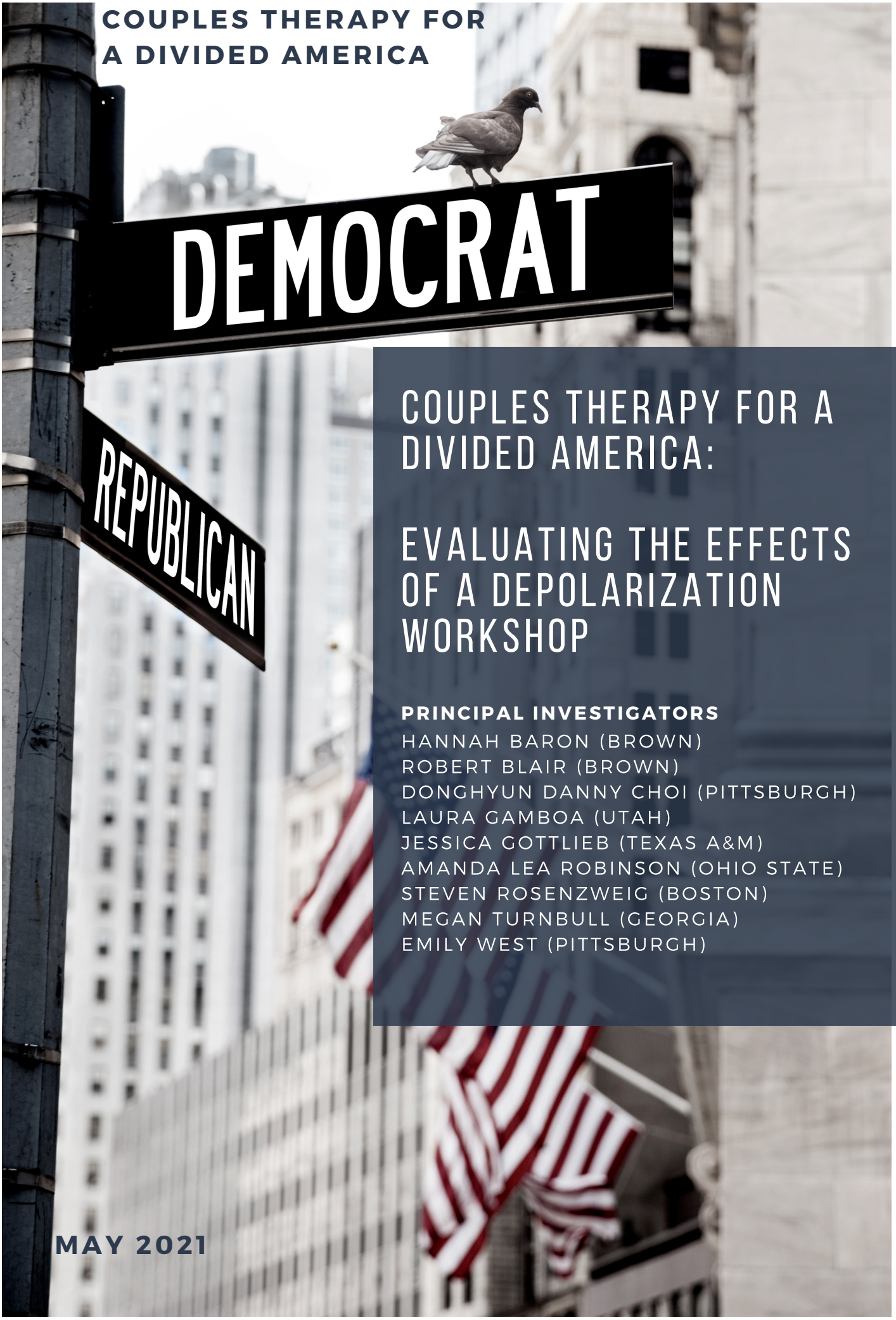

COUPLES THERAPY FOR A DIVIDED AMERICA:

EVALUATING THE EFFECTS OF A DEPOLARIZATION WORKSHOP

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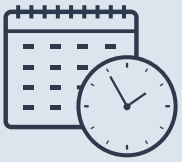
THE MOTIVATION

The American public is deeply polarized along partisan lines. Yet despite increasingly intense polarization and the threat it poses to American civic life, we know very little about ways to reduce it. In this brief, we report results from an experimental evaluation of a unique depolarization initiative that draws on principles of couples therapy to mitigate hostility between Democrats and Republicans. In collaboration with Braver Angels (BA), a non-governmental organization, we rigorously evaluated the impact of "Red/Blue" workshops, one of many BA initiatives focused on partisan depolarization, on four college campuses. The workshops are designed to build empathy, dispel stereotypes, and promote mutual understanding across partisan lines.

We find that the workshops successfully reduced polarization as measured through surveys and implicit association tests (IATs). The workshops also increased participants' willingness to donate to programs aimed at depolarizing political conversations among American youths—a behavioral measure of support for depolarization. These outcomes dissipate somewhat over time, but the effect on the behavioral measure persists after more than half a year. This finding is especially striking given that the period between the workshops and our last wave of data collection was characterized by a global pandemic, nationwide protests for racial justice, and a highly divisive presidential election. The effects also appear to hold across partisan groups.

PROJECT TIMELINE



2020
Jan: Baseline Survey
Feb: Workshops & Midline Survey
Oct: Endline Survey

Notes from the stereotype exercise at a Red/Blue Workshop

RESEARCH DESIGN

Red/Blue workshops engage equal numbers of Republican (**Red**) and Democratic (**Blue**) leaning participants in a full day of structured, moderated exercises. While the two groups observe each other during the workshops, participants mainly interact with members of their own party, reflecting on the attitudes, beliefs, and characteristics of co-partisans. Crucially, and unlike many other inter-party interventions, when the two groups enter into direct dialogue with one another, they are explicitly instructed not to attempt to persuade or reach compromise on particular issues. Instead, the workshops focus on generating an understanding of out-partisans and the motivations and experiences underlying their beliefs. We call this model of depolarization reciprocal group reflection.

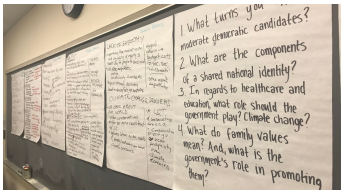
With the help of student organizers, we conducted workshops on four college campuses in the Northeast, Midwest, South, and Mid-Atlantic: **Brown University**, **Ohio State University**, **Texas A&M University**, and the **University of Pittsburgh**.

We recruited approximately 40 students at each university to participate in the study, for a total of 165 participants, including 116 Blues and 49 Reds. Of these 165 recruits, we randomly assigned 59 to attend a workshop. The remainder were assigned to a control group. All workshops were held in February 2020.

We measured polarization with three surveys tracking the same students over time. The surveys were administered approximately two weeks before the workshops (baseline), 7-10 days after the workshops (midline), and again 7 months later (endline). We supplement our survey data with qualitative observations gleaned from systematically coded transcripts of the workshops and open-ended questions included in the midline survey.

STRUCTURE OF THE RED/BLUE WORKSHOP

10:00 AM	**Introduction and ground rules**
10:30 AM	**Stereotypes Exercise.** Red and Blue groups separate and reflect on stereotypes of their group, and then reconvene to share why these stereotypes are largely false, as well as the kernel of truth behind them.
12:00 PM	**Lunch break.** Unstructured mealtime
1:00 PM	**Fishbowl Exercise.** One group sits in an inner circle and the other group sits around them to listen and learn; groups switch and then debrief
2:00 PM	**Break**
2:30 PM	**Questions Exercise.** Groups generate questions of curiosity and genuine interest to then ask the other side in smaller Red/Blue mixed groups.
4:00 PM	**Break**
4:10 PM	**How Can We Contribute Exercise.** Individuals fill out an action-oriented worksheet; individuals share one action-item with whole group
4:45 PM	**Conclusion**



RESULTS

We find that the workshops **reduced both explicit and implicit measures of polarization** and **increased behavioral support for depolarization** at midline. The explicit measure combines a variety of questions gauging respondents' trust and affinity for their own party and the opposing party; the implicit measure is derived from an IAT. The effects on our explicit and implicit measures diminish somewhat over time: while they remain negative, they are no longer statistically distinguishable from zero. **The effects on the behavioral measure persist for more than six months**.

We find that **the effects are equally strong for Blues and Reds**, and that they appear to be **driven by reduced hostility towards the other party** rather than decreased affinity for their own. If effects of this magnitude were extrapolated to the US adult population, they would be large enough to reverse more than half of the increase in polarization observed over the past three decades.

Our qualitative data suggests that the workshops depolarized participants through a combination of informational and emotional mechanisms. The workshops **helped participants empathize with members of the opposing party** (an emotional mechanism) and also **recognize areas of ideological common ground** (an informational mechanism). Our qualitative data indicates that these two mechanisms were equally important. Information that helps participants find common ground with out-partisans is key for reducing polarization. But information is more likely to be effective if it is delivered in an environment that enables empathy and mutual understanding.

REDUCED PARTISAN POLARIZATION

GENERATED EMPATHY FOR THE OPPOSING PARTY

IDENTIFIED IDEOLOGICAL COMMON GROUND

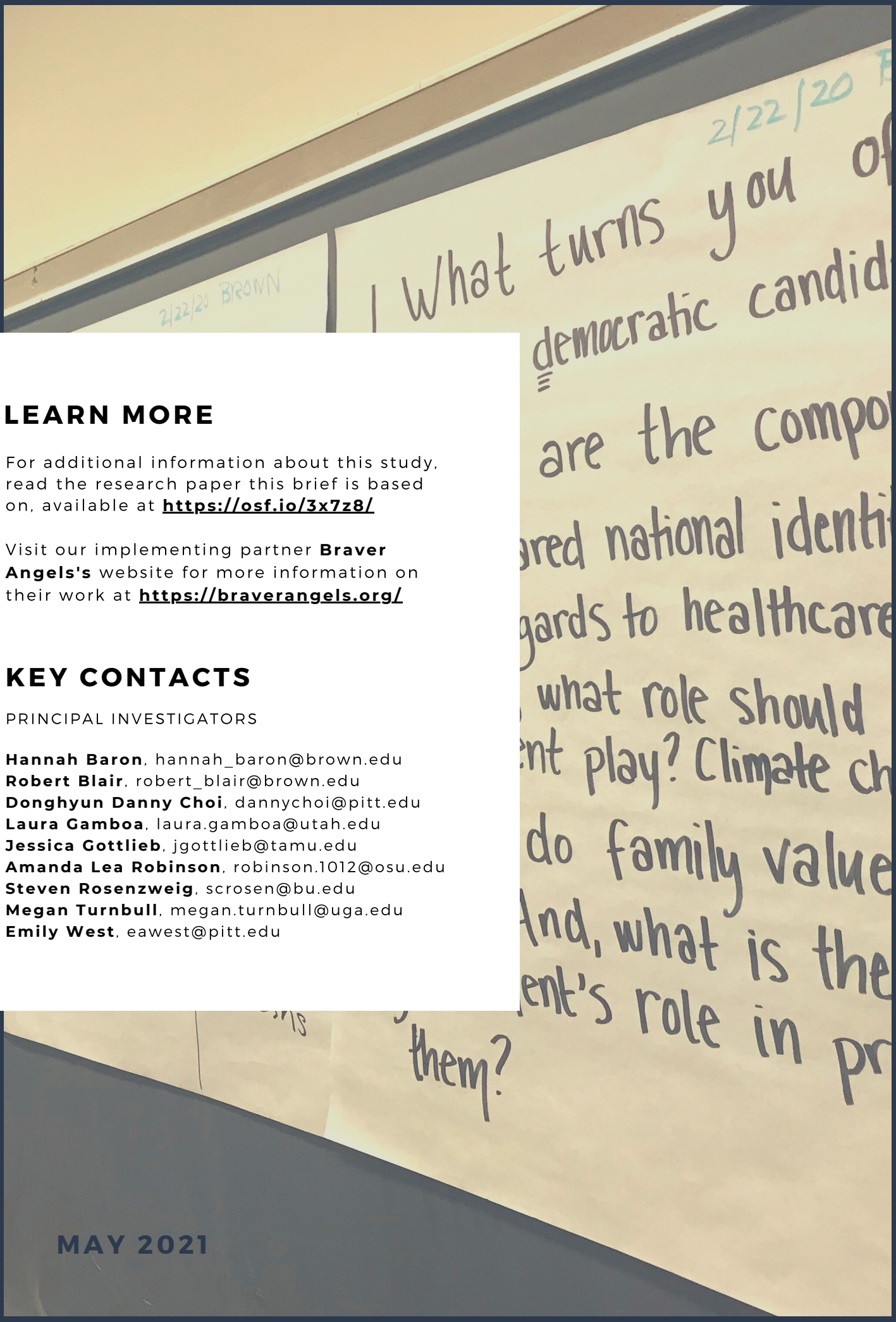
LESSONS + IMPACT

Our study suggests that the Braver Angels Red/Blue workshop model is effective at reducing polarization, at least in the short term. As Braver Angels and other organizations scale up programming of this sort, we encourage them to develop new strategies for reaching both Democrats and Republicans. Consistent with the experiences of Braver Angels organizers nationwide, we found that Republicans were harder to recruit than Democrats for our study. Future depolarization programmers should find ways to address this discrepancy, which could potentially diminish the overall impact of these exercises.

We also encourage Braver Angels and similar organizations to consider the potential unintended consequences of depolarization programming. Braver Angels moderators emphasize tolerance and even-handedness, and do not attempt to correct misinformation or regulate participants' speech except in the most egregious cases. This raises the possibility that Red/Blue workshops might make participants more susceptible to misinformation or extreme views, especially if they go unchecked by perceived authority figures. Achieving harmony and reconciliation may also require deprioritizing other important normative goals, such as racial justice. While our study was not designed to test for these potentially adverse effects, we urge Braver Angels to keep them in mind in the future.

> *They have personal and ideological reasons for feeling the way they do... The ones I interacted with were also open to compromise and willing to listen.*
>
> - "Blue" participant, on what they came to understand about "Reds"

> *I felt that we were all coming from the same place and had similar ideas, we just differed on how we wanted things done.*
>
> - "Red" participant, on what they came to understand about "Blues"



LEARN MORE

For additional information about this study, read the research paper this brief is based on, available at **https://osf.io/3x7z8/**

Visit our implementing partner **Braver Angels's** website for more information on their work at **https://braverangels.org/**

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