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End of Summer Report

FURSCA Summer 2021 Experience

Throughout this summer I have been researching whether there are any correlations between civic engagement and empathy in college students with the help of Dr. Andrea Francis. Though there has not been much research on these two topics together I was able to find a few studies to help guide my research. The studies in my literature review defined two types of empathy: cognitive and emotional, that have relationships with political polarization, as well as three categories of civic engagement activities: standard political, community service, and social movement adolescents may participate in. Interestingly, in my literature review, we found that increased informal helping and attitudes towards social justice, while simultaneously, increased empathy was also associated with an increased desire to censor outgroup political beliefs (Siman, Clifford, and Kirkland, 2020).

Therefore, the goal of this project was to help me answer two questions as best as possible. First, is cognitive empathy associated with acceptance of individuals with alternate political beliefs whereas emotional empathy is associated with increased polarization of beliefs? Second, why is there a paradoxical situation, where increased empathy for others is associated with increased informal helping and attitudes towards social justice, while simultaneously, increased empathy was also associated with an increased desire to censor outgroup political beliefs?

To answer these questions, I first created vignettes about individuals who were involved in social movement civic engagement who were arrested as part of their participation. For example, one vignette was about a protestor who was arrested for inciting violence. I modified the political belief of the individual in the vignette. Then, I used modified surveys from studies that assessed civic judgements and activities, found a pre-assessed empathy assessment, and wrote questions that asked the participant about the individual in the vignette (eg. the individual should be punished). I also used a measure of mood, and asked about participants’ political leanings. I entered all the items into SurveyMonkey and the survey was administered through Amazon Mechanical Turk. After collecting the data, there were 59 usable participants to analyze for possible correlations.

My results proved interesting. First, while it was not significant, there seemed to be a pattern that indicated that the more politically polarized the participant was the less emotional empathy they had for others compared to moderate believers. This relationship was not found with cognitive empathy. The more participants indicated why they participated in political civic engagement, the less emotional empathy they reported. This relationship did not exist for other forms of civic engagement.

Further, in the case of the protester, individuals who had congruent beliefs (both the protester and participant were liberal or both the protester and participant were conservative) were less likely to say the protester should be punished and that the charges were not justified than those with incongruent beliefs. Further, even after controlling for whether the individual had a similar political leaning to the protester, the more emotional empathy an individual indicated, the less likely participants believed the protester should be punished and the less likely the charges were justified. On the other hand, the more cognitive empathy an individual had, the more likely participants believed the protester should be punished, regardless of political leaning. Thus both political belief similarity and general empathy seemed to play a role in whether individuals should be punished and whether charges were justified. Contrary to what was originally thought, emotional empathy played a bigger role in decisions about reduced punishment, whereas cognitive empathy seemed to be more related to empathy for the punishers and the legal system.

Also interesting, is that the data showed that those who identified themselves as having a more liberal leaning were more likely to indicate the protester should be punished if the protester did not match their political ideology, but this was not the case for conservatives, suggesting that, in this group of participants, liberals displayed greater ingroup bias than conservatives.

Initial research into this area of academia has allowed me to follow my interests in more depth for my senior honors thesis. I have decided to focus on political polarization and trust moving forward for my thesis. However, I will also have the great opportunity to present my research findings at Albion College’s Elkin Isaac Research Symposium. This research, which was generously supported by the Lawrence B., ‘72 and Frances Schook Research Fund in FURSCA, has helped me explore my future plans after I graduate. I have gotten the chance to spend time researching political psychology to find that it greatly interests me. I am considering attending graduate school in a political psychology program and or working with this knowledge in a non profit organization, political campaign, or other institution.