

Democratic Deliberation at Marquette: An experimental study

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BACKGROUND

Existing research shows that there are two types of polarization: ideological and social (Mason 2015, 2016). The former describes differences between people's beliefs while the latter is the differences between people's apparent beliefs. To clarify this distinction, social polarization is spurred by people's opinions of ideological differences. Current research indicates that social polarization is greater than political polarization because people are under the impression that their political beliefs are further apart than they actually are.

Party identification also furthers this type of polarization, since people categorize and judge others for their political identity and the assumptions they therefore hold. For example, a person who identifies as a Democrat might think that a person who identifies as a Republican has political views vastly different from them, yet their views are not actually as far apart as they appear. This is part of why support for the "Affordable Care Act" is more bipartisan than when it is called "Obamacare" in opinion polls. Unfortunately, political identity has led to divides in this country. We see these divides in the media, too. In fact, there is a correlation between increased polarization in the media and lack of trust in government (Prior 2007).

We are at a time where true discussion is often sacrificed in favor of maintaining aloofness in one's own view, which is especially problematic given the underlying and urgent issues that have been revealed over the past year. We need to improve our communication skills, as well as our openness to deliberate, and this study aimed to better understand discussion dynamics in order to enact change at Marquette.

METHODS

Students first answered a pre-deliberation survey, and their responses were used to block randomize to treatment conditions (politically heterogeneous/politically homogeneous).

Once sorted, they engaged in hour-long facilitated, small-group discussions about economic inequality and answered a post-treatment survey.

The surveys were then analyzed for pre/post change, as well as questions about discussion experience in the post-survey.

The discussions themselves, which were conducted over Teams, were recorded, transcribed, and coded for several discussion topics, including:

- Redistributive justice
- Taxpayer burden
- Help the less fortunate
- Livable wage
- Pay gap -- justified/too large

Participants were assigned a value of 0 or 1 to reflect whether they engaged with an issue, and this binary coding was converted into an affiliation matrix to represent communication networks in each discussion.

DATA

Surveys:

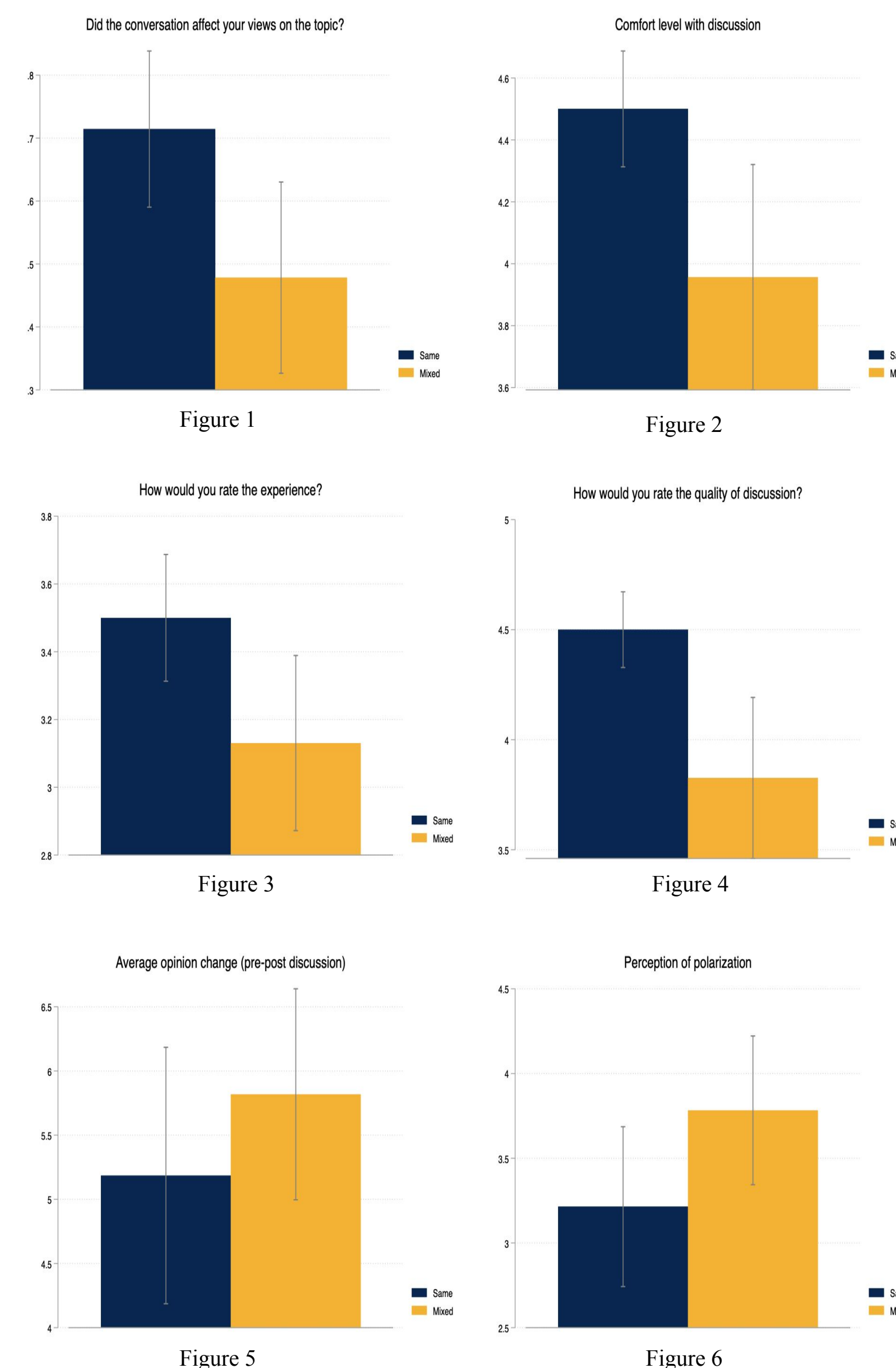
- 51 undergraduate Marquette students
- Paired results of pre- and post-deliberation surveys

Transcripts:

- Recordings of nine of the discussions were transcribed and coded by the topics above to create affiliation matrices for bipartite networks

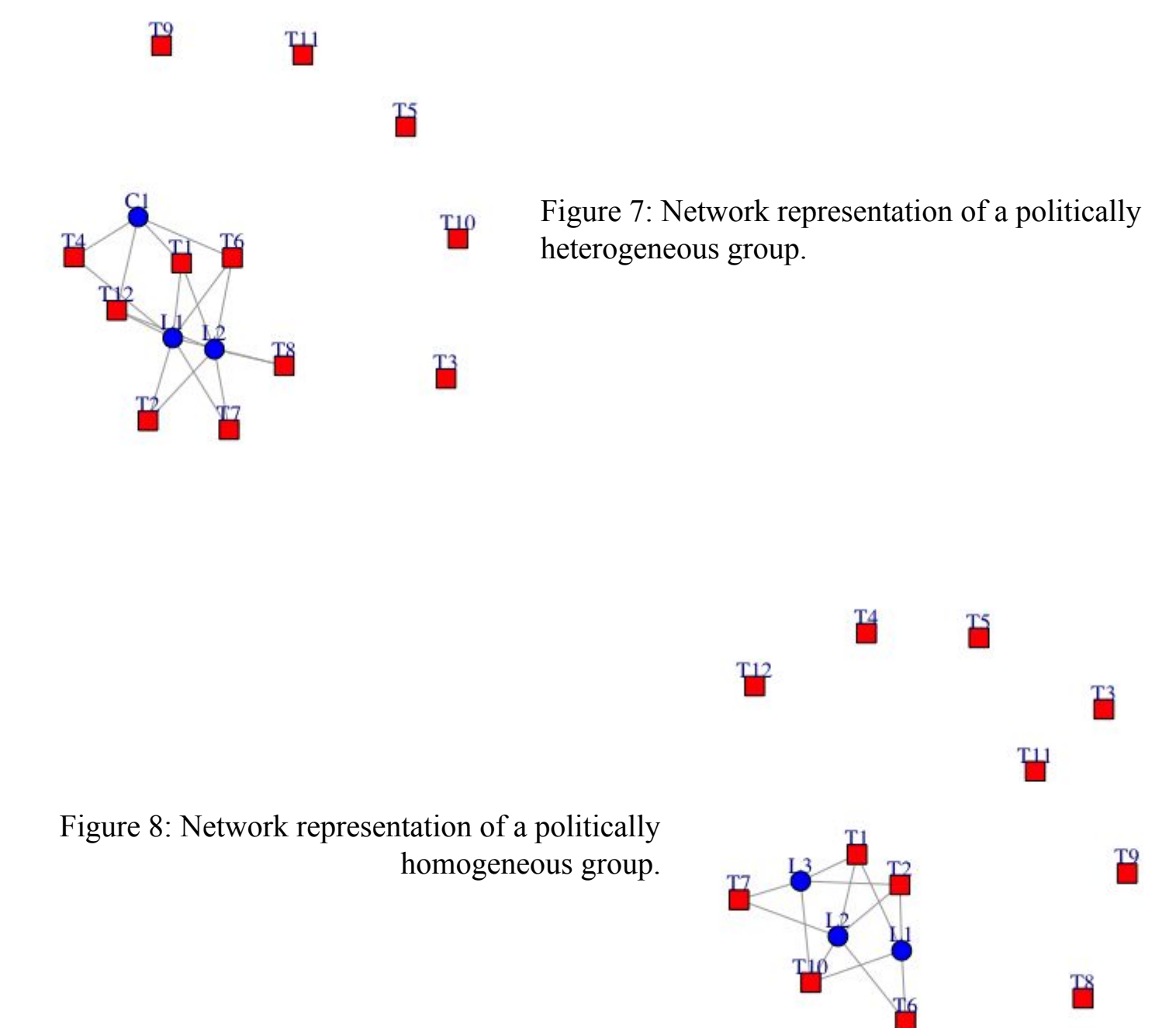
STUDENT PERCEPTIONS

Overall, students in the politically heterogeneous groups rated the discussion and their comfort more negatively (Figures 1-4). However, Figure 5 suggests greater opinion change in the ideologically mixed groups than in the homogeneous ones despite the negative self-reports about the discussions. Despite greater opinion changes, students in the mixed groups perceived greater polarization between Democrats and Republicans (Figure 6).



BIPARTITE NETWORKS

The figures below are modal network representations of two discussions, one of each treatment type. The red squares represent discussion topics while the blue circles represent participants. Students are connected to topics if they interacted with a topic (i.e. were assigned a value of '1' for that topic).



In the mixed groups, the epistemic networks were more complex, perhaps shedding some light on the disconnect between student perceptions of discussion quality (Figures 1-4) and average opinion change (Figure 5). Students in these groups were introduced to topic nodes they might have excluded in discussions with solely like-minded peers.