

Britain Connects: reducing polarisation using intergroup contact

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Executive Summary

Affective polarisation - which manifests as prejudice and stereotypes between people who disagree politically - has risen in the UK since the Brexit referendum and is now at the highest level since the start of the millennium. To address this growing problem we designed Britain Connects, in which we matched people with different political opinions for a one-off conversation.

We wanted to know whether the meeting alone would have an impact on people's levels of polarisation. We also wanted to know whether we could improve the quality and impact of the encounter using behavioural insights, such as revealing more personal information about the participants' match and providing an evidence-based conversational menu for the meetings.

We found **promising evidence that the meetings increased the reported warmth towards the outgroup but we didn't find significant evidence that it reduced other measures of affective polarisation** (social trust, willingness to make friends and willingness to consult alternative sources).

We also found **promising evidence that the behavioural insights interventions increased the quality of the encounter, with people more willing to share their contact details with their opposite match, but we didn't find significant evidence that it reduced attitudinal measures of affective polarisation relative to the meeting alone.**

One of the key limitations of the programme was the fact that a substantial amount of people didn't show up to the meetings. This indicates that future work should focus on encouraging people to follow through with their initial interest in engaging with different people.

Background





Affective polarisation is a growing problem in the UK

The UK is facing a growing problem of political polarisation. Our political differences have given rise to conflict, a breakdown in dialogue, and social segregation between opposing groups. Only around half of Leave and Remain voters are happy to talk politics with the other side; fewer still would be happy for their children to marry someone of a different political persuasion. Our political identities lead us to segregate ourselves socially, and to distrust and dislike people with different political identities - often irrespective of whether we disagree on issues of policy.

Affective polarisation in the UK has risen in the wake of the 2016 Brexit referendum and is now at its highest level since the start of the millennium.

Affective polarisation is harmful to individuals and society. A recent laboratory study found that people disregarded the opinions of people they disagreed with politically - even when this led them to make worse decisions and lose money. A reluctance to talk about politics with people with whom one disagrees impairs dialogue and compromise. Additionally, there is evidence that cohesive societies perform better on a number of measures, including happiness and GDP growth. Social cohesion is also likely to be particularly important for countering extremism: there is good theoretical reason to believe that the more people feel they are integrated into a society, the less motivation they will have to seek out extreme ideologies.

Issue-based polarisation



Convergence towards extreme views on an issue



Little or no middle ground between opposing views



Not necessarily prejudice or animosity between people who disagree

Affective polarisation



Formation of identities around an important political issue



Prejudice, negative stereotypes and distancing



Not necessarily political disagreement across multiple issues



Intergroup contact could help to reduce affective polarisation

To address the problem of affective polarisation, we leveraged Intergroup Contact Theory - which proposes that an effective way to reduce prejudice between groups is to foster interactions under conditions of equal status and cooperation. This approach has proven effective in many contexts, including between refugees and natives in Australia, richer and poorer students in India, and Christians and Muslims in Iraq.

However, contact by itself is not sufficient and can even backfire if the conditions aren't right. For example, when members of opposite groups are in competition, rather than cooperation with one another, contact can exacerbate, rather than alleviate, prejudice. Similarly, these interactions need to be meaningful for the participants, as cursory engagement can backfire; for example, a brief exposure to Twitter feeds of opposing sides of US politics has been shown to result in increased polarisation.

In practice, it can be difficult to encourage positive interactions between people who hold prejudice against one another: there is the risk that interactions become unpleasant, or that people are unwilling to meet in the first place. Encouraging positive interactions between people with a strong predisposition to dislike one another represents a significant challenge for policymakers and academics seeking to apply Intergroup Contact Theory in practice.

We wanted to see if we could create an opportunity for politically-opposed people to meet in a way that would reduce polarisation, negative stereotypes and conflict.

How intergroup contact works



Person meets someone they are prejudiced against (e.g. a Brexit voter)

If the interaction is a positive one



Person feels more positively about the person they were prejudiced against

If group identities are noticeable and obvious



Positive feelings generalise from the individual to the group (e.g. all Brexit voters)

The image features a close-up, blue-tinted photograph of a mechanical watch movement. The intricate gears, jewels, and metal components are visible, creating a complex, textured background. In the lower right quadrant, there is a graphic element consisting of a grid of hexagons, with one hexagon highlighted in a lighter shade of blue. The text "Britain Connects" is overlaid on the left side of the image, underlined.

Britain Connects

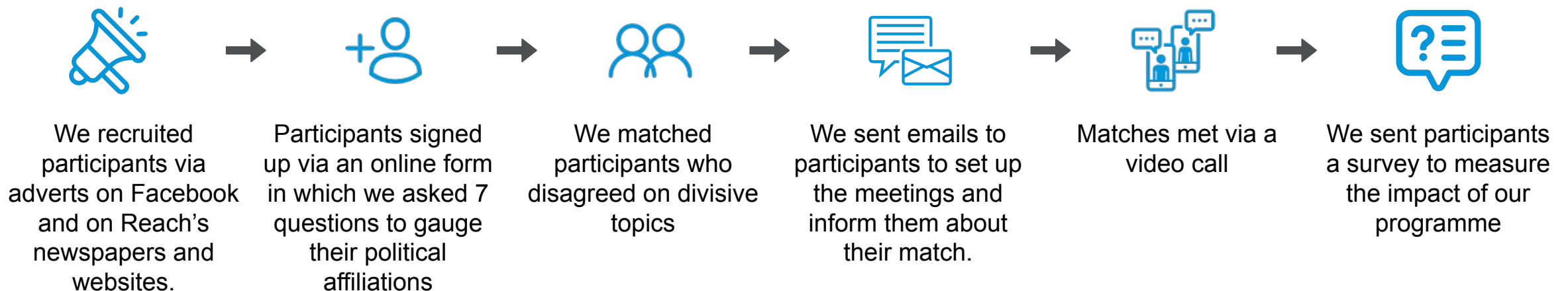
Using online meetings to promote positive intergroup contact during a national lockdown



To test whether intergroup contact works to reduce prejudice between political opposites, we partnered with Reach, a UK-based publishing company who were involved in running the Britain Talks programme. First launched in 2018, Britain Talks involved pairing readers of the Mirror, Daily Express and various local newspapers with opposing political views for face-to-face meetings. 4000 such meetings were arranged in 2018, but little is known about their impact: whether they successfully reduced polarisation, backfired, or had no impact.

We partnered with Reach to co-design Britain Connects to use insights from social psychology to improve people's encounters and secondly to test the effects of Britain Connects on people's affective polarisation. The onset of Covid-19, and the fact that the meetings were due to take place during the height of lockdown, meant we ran the whole programme online - including the meetings.

To match participants with polarised views, we asked them their opinions on three divisive issues covering Brexit, political affiliation and social conservatism: i) their stance on Brexit; ii) whether they supported Labour or the Conservatives; and iii) whether they supported the feminist movement.





Behavioural Insights can improve the quality of the interaction

The effectiveness of intergroup contact relies on the interaction being a positive one. We wanted to maximise the chance that our participants would have a pleasant conversation and end up liking one another (rather than bringing disagreements and negative stereotypes to the fore). To do this, we introduced additional interventions based on research to foster trust and reduce conflict between different people.

Before the meeting, as we were introducing people to their match, we included people's answers to three free-text questions that they had answered as part of the signing up process.



Get the conversation started

Here's a little more information about Hazel to help you connect:

What have you found most difficult about lockdown? Is there anything about lockdown that you have enjoyed? **Most difficult- not being able to connect with my friends when my mental health gets particularly bad, as normally they are the ones who I would go to just to feel a little better and feel comfort. I guess I've enjoyed that I am seeing my mum and little b**

What is one thing you would like to find out about your Britain Connects partner? **Nothing in particular! Just anything they find they want to tell me or their interests or how they're feeling; really anything :)**

1. Humanising the outgroup

One facet of intergroup prejudice is a tendency to ascribe fewer human characteristics (warmth, intelligence, self control, emotionality). By highlighting the human characteristics of the political outgroup, we hypothesised we might be able to improve people's perceptions of one another before the meeting had begun.

2. Curiosity and asking questions

We tend to like people more when they show an interest and ask us questions. We hypothesised that, by giving participants an opportunity to say what they wanted to know about their partner (effectively asking a question about them) we would be able to make people like one another a little more - and give them something to talk about in the meeting.



Behavioural Insights can improve the quality of the interaction

As well as providing participants with some extra information about one another, we also developed some conversation starters to use **in the meeting**. Like the extra information, these conversation starters were designed with a view to encouraging participants to have a positive interaction.

3. Humour

Humour is one way to foster good relationships between strangers. We included this question as a light-hearted conversation starter designed to elicit funny responses.



Connect with Steven

We'd love it if people could connect over their shared experience of lockdown, so we're sharing some questions to get the conversation started. Take turns in asking and answering them. We've sent Steven some questions too.

1. If you could have a Zoom call with anyone in the world, living or dead, who would you choose?
2. How has the current crisis affected your political beliefs?
3. Once this is all over, do you think there's anything you'll miss about lockdown?
4. Is there anything that particularly worries you in your life right now?

At the end of your conversation make sure you tell Steven if there's anything you particularly enjoyed about connecting with them.

4. Self-disclosure

These questions were designed to prompt people to share about themselves in a way that they may not readily do (known as self disclosure). Self disclosure - particularly if reciprocated by the other person in an interaction - is a powerful way to encourage people to like one another.

5. Discussing shared experiences

with people makes us like them more. The coronavirus crisis - which was still in its early stages when we ran Britain Connects - offered a significant point of shared experience and we designed the questions around this.

6. Acknowledgement

We encouraged participants to acknowledge one another at the end of the interaction - a technique used in conflict resolution to build connection.

We set out to answer three questions about the effects of Britain Connects



The effects of the meeting alone



Question 1: Do Britain Connects meetings reduce people's polarisation?

We wanted to see whether the Britain Connects encounter could reduce prejudice between people who are politically opposed on polarising issues (such as Brexit).



Question 2: Do Britain Connects meetings increase people's social trust?

One consequence of political polarisation, noted by academics, is a decrease social cohesion - for example, a feeling that people in general can't be trusted. We set out to investigate whether Britain Connects meetings could impact on people's feelings of trust and cohesion.

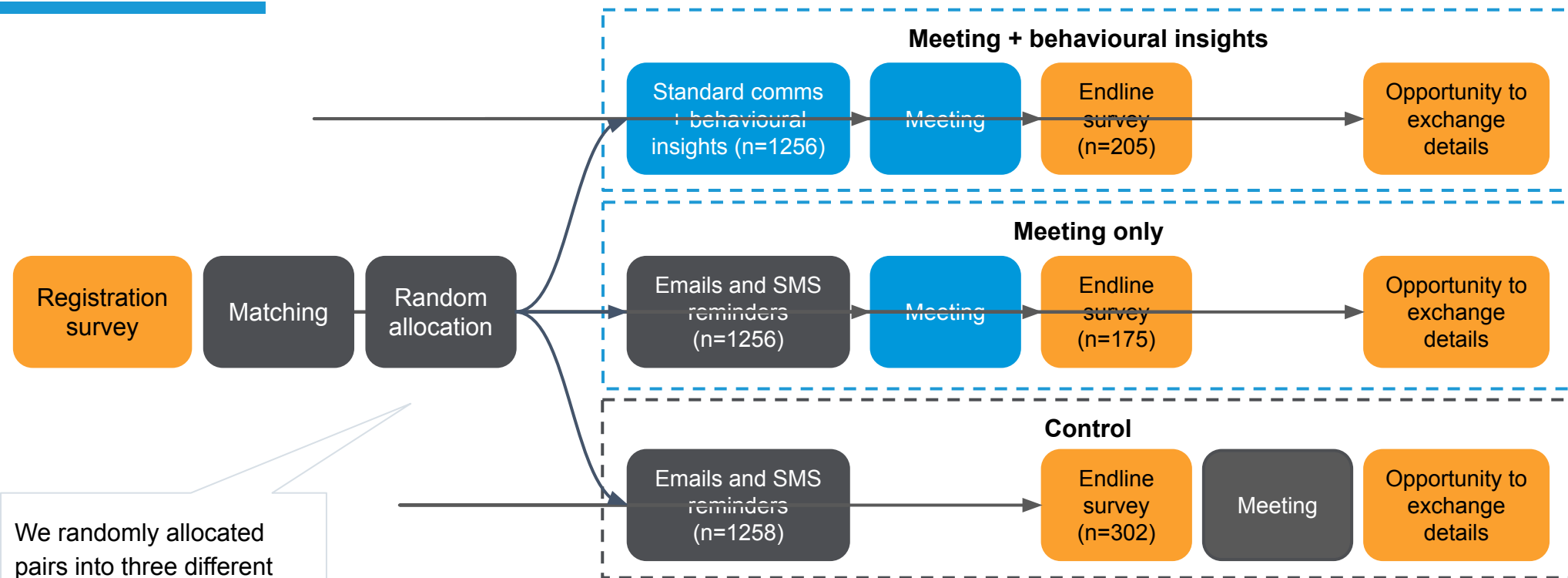
The effects of the meeting + behavioural insights



Question 3: Can we use behavioural insights to make the interaction more positive?

One risk of Britain Connects is that people with a pre-existing disposition to dislike one another have an unpleasant meeting - argue, offend and leave feeling worse. We wanted to see whether our contributions before and during the meeting could make people like each other more - and consequently improve the impact of the meeting on affective polarisation.

We tested the effects of Britain Connects using a three-arm randomised control trial



We randomly allocated pairs into three different groups. Random allocation minimises the risk that there are any systematic differences between people in the three groups.

At the time of the endline survey, some of our participants had met and some were yet to meet. Of those who met, some had received our intervention and others hadn't. By comparing different groups, we can understand the effects of a meeting alone and a meeting plus behavioural insights.

At the end of the programme, after all the meetings had taken place, we compared those who received our intervention with those who didn't to understand whether our intervention had any effect on the desire to stay in contact.

We measured attitudes and behaviours related to affective polarisation



The effects of the meeting alone



Question 1: Do Britain Connects meetings reduce people's polarisation?

Warmth towards the political outgroup. We asked people to rate how warm they felt about people who disagreed with them on the three political issues of interest.

Social distance. We asked people to rate how willing they would be to make friends with someone who disagrees with them on three political issues of interest.

Willingness to read sources they disagree with. We offered people a chance to sign up to a newsletter which summarises news from opposite sides of the political spectrum.



Question 2: Do Britain Connects meetings increase people's social trust?

Social trust. We asked people to rate how much they agree that "people in the UK can generally be trusted".

The effects of the meeting + behavioural insights



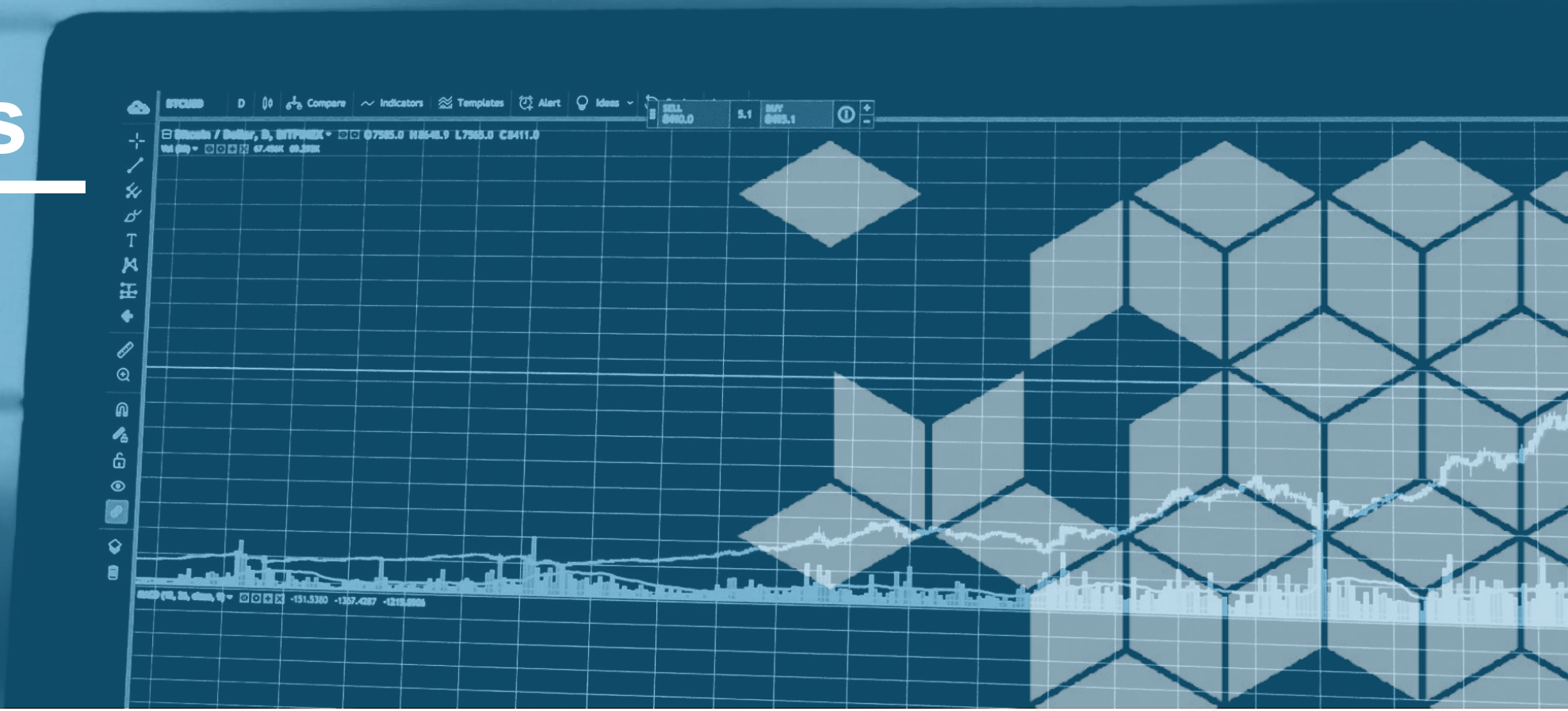
Question 3: Can we use behavioural insights to make the interaction more positive?

Willingness to stay in contact with their Britain Connects partner. We offered participants a chance to exchange contact details as a means of staying in contact with their Britain Connects partner.

Attitudinal measures ask people to report their own thoughts or feelings.

Behavioural measures are about what people *actually do* in practice.

Results



We set out to answer three questions about the effects of Britain Connects



The effects of the meeting alone



Question 1: Do Britain Connects meetings reduce people's polarisation?

- We found promising evidence that Britain Connects meetings increased people's warmth towards the political outgroup.
- We didn't find evidence of an improvement in other measures of affective polarisation as a result of the meeting.



Question 2: Do Britain Connects meetings increase people's social trust?

- We didn't find evidence that the Britain Connects meetings increased people's feelings of social trust

The effects of the meeting + behavioural insights



Question 3: Can we use behavioural insights to make the interaction more positive?

- We found promising evidence that people who received our intervention were more likely to exchange contact details afterwards.
- We didn't find evidence of our intervention had an impact on other measures of affective polarisation or social trust, relative to the meeting alone

Additional considerations

- A large number of people who signed up didn't end up meeting or completing the final survey. The high rate of dropout means we have to interpret our results with some caution. We discuss this further on slide 20.
- Our results include people who *did* and *did not* meet. This allows us to test for backfires - for example, people who were disappointed that their partner didn't show up. The findings remain similar when we repeat the analysis only for people who confirmed they met.

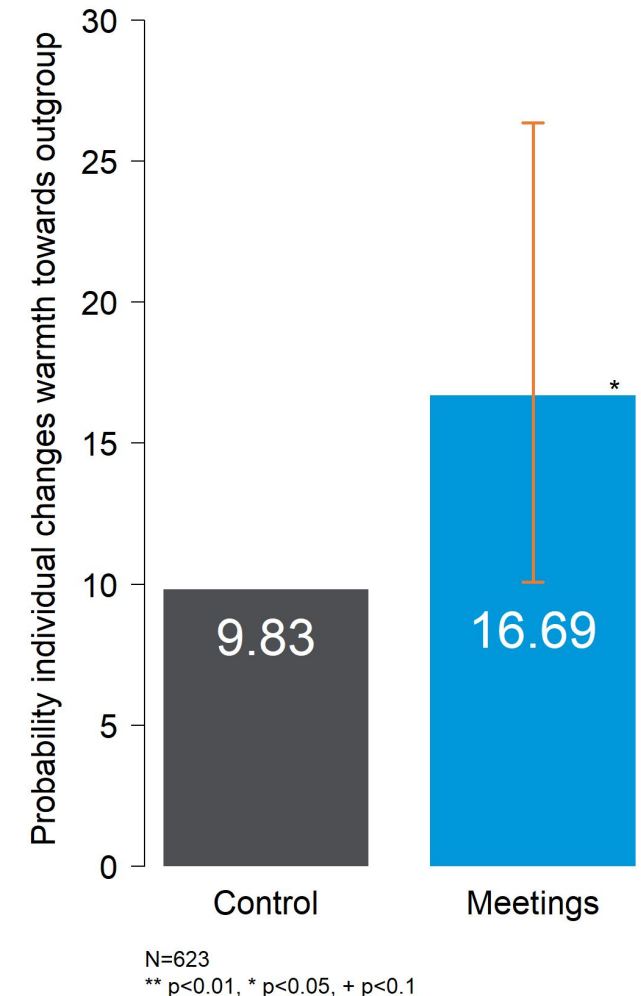
Promising evidence that Britain Connects increases warmth towards people with different political views



We found promising evidence that Britain Connects* increases feelings of warmth towards the political outgroup. We measured whether people's ratings of warmth towards people they disagree with increased between registration and the endline survey. We found that people who met were 7 percentage points more likely to have increased their warmth than those who were yet to meet

These results show promising evidence of a positive impact of Britain Connects on one measure of affective polarisation. However, there are a number of reasons why we interpret them with some caution. Firstly, our sample size is small, which means that individual variation plays a greater role in the result - this can be seen in the size of the error bar on the graph. Secondly, fewer people dropped out of the *control* group than the *meeting + behavioural insights* or *meeting alone* groups. It's possible that this differential dropout could have skewed our results. We discuss this in further detail on page 20.

* the pooled treatment effect of i) meeting and ii) meeting with BI interventions



No evidence that Britain Connects reduces other aspects of affective polarisation



We found no evidence that participating in Britain Connects makes people more willing to form friendships with the political outgroup. We asked people to rate how willing they would be to become friends with someone with whom they disagree on each of our three axes of polarisation (Brexit, left/right and feminism). Despite an increase in feelings of warmth (discussed on the previous slide) we found no evidence that people's willingness to make friends across political divides increased as a result of taking part in Britain Connects.

We found no evidence that participating in Britain Connects makes people more willing to engage with information they disagree with. In our endline survey, we offered people the opportunity to sign up to a newsletter which summarises news from both sides of political debates. We found no statistically significant differences in signup rates between people who had already met (those in the *meeting only* and *meeting + behavioural insights* groups) and those who were yet to meet (in the *control* group). However, because our sample size was small, we can't rule out the possibility that Britain Connects had an impact on this - it is simply not one we can observe with the given data.

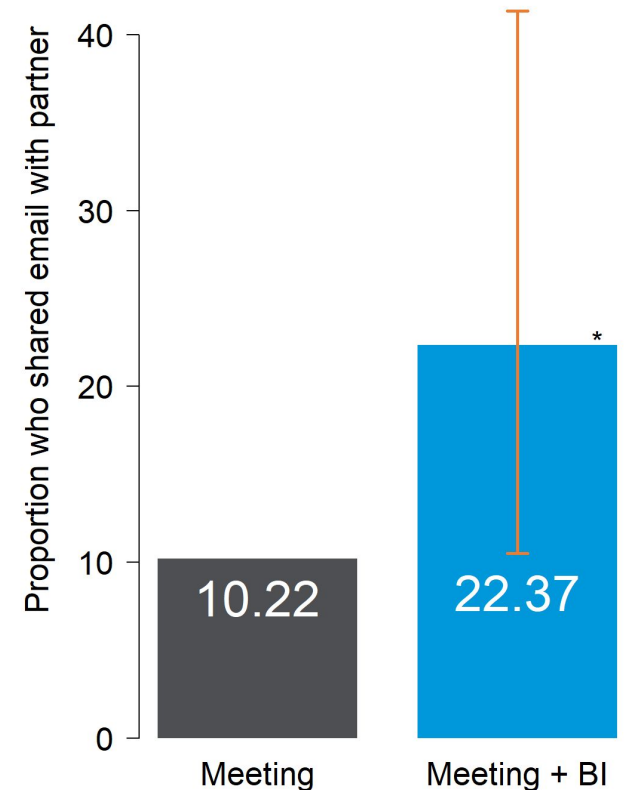
We found no evidence that Britain Connects increases social trust. We asked people whether they generally trusted other people and we found no statistically significant difference between the levels of trust of those who had already met and those who were due.

People in meetings with behavioural insights were more likely to share their contact details



We find promising evidence that we successfully used behavioural insights to improve the quality of the encounter. After their Britain Connects conversations, we offered all participants an opportunity to share their contact details with one another (we had instructed them not to do so in the meeting). We found that participants in meetings with the behavioural insights interventions were more willing to share their contact details than those in the normal meetings. Our analysis includes everyone who was scheduled to meet - regardless of whether the meeting actually took place. When we narrow our focus to just those who actually ended up meeting, the effect persists. However, due to the small sample size available this findings is indicative only.

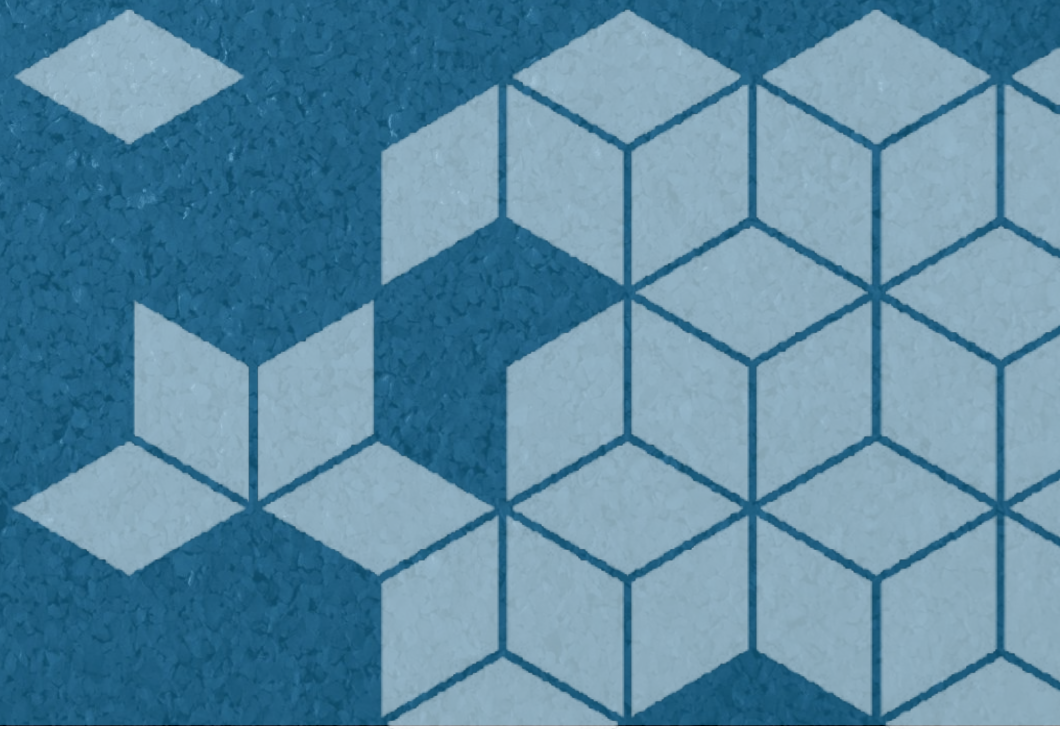
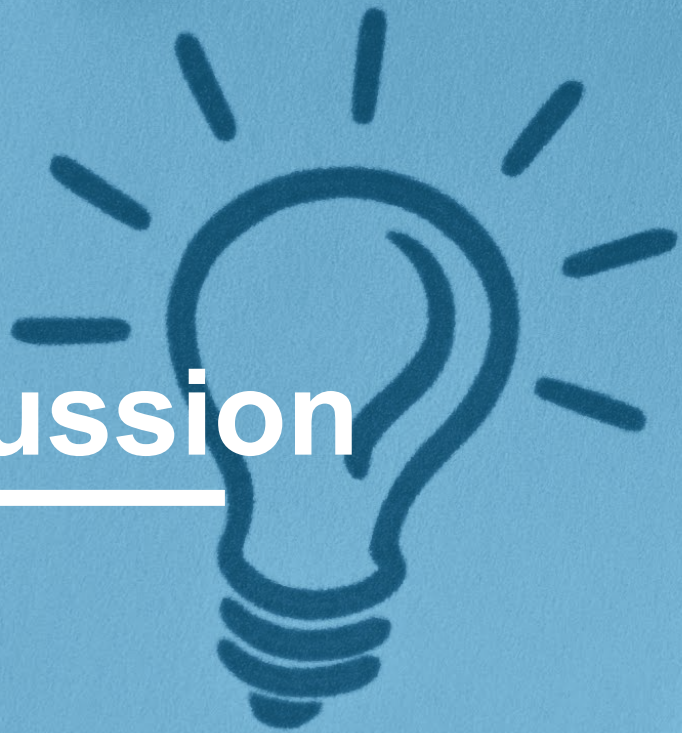
We didn't find evidence that the behavioural insights interventions improved attitudinal measures of polarisation. When we compared people who had received the behavioural insights intervention with those who had not, we found no difference in their self-reported warmth or willingness to form friendships with people who disagree with them.



N=158

** p<0.01, * p<0.05, + p<0.1

Discussion





About half of participants dropped out during the process - and this could have affected our results

The process of signing up and taking part in a Britain Connects meeting, followed by the endline survey, involved multiple steps and we lost participants at each stage. The main reasons we identified for this include:

- Not opening emails with instructions on how to connect
- Not being available at the allocated time
- Partner dropping out at short notice
- Not wanting to meet their political opposite

In addition we also encountered differential survey dropout, meaning that more people didn't complete the final survey in the meeting groups than in the control group. This may be a consequence of the our trial design, in which people in the *control* group completed the survey before the meeting took place, whereas the *meeting only* and *meeting + behavioural insights* groups completed it after the meeting. About 50% of people didn't show up for their meetings, and it's possible these people were also less likely to complete the survey. Their partners - who were unexpectedly left without a match - may also have been less willing to complete the survey.

The differential dropout between the *control* and *meeting only/meeting + behavioural insights* groups complicates the conclusions we can draw from the trial, because participants that complete the endline survey in the control group may differ on average compared to the meeting groups. We attempt to mitigate this risk by matching participants in the *meeting* and *meeting + behavioural insights* groups to participants that gave similar responses in the *control* group at the baseline stage, but it's still possible that these groups differ on something we didn't measure.

Some participants were resistant to the idea of meeting someone they disagree with politically



Although we had explicitly marketed Britain Connects as an opportunity to meet someone with different opinions, we received a number of emails from participants complaining that they couldn't condone their match's political views, or that they were simply too different.

This resistance towards meeting people we dislike is one of the greatest challenges to implementing intergroup contact in practice. The more prejudice people hold, the greater the barrier to engaging in intergroup contact.

Academics and policymakers seeking to apply intergroup contact in practice should ensure they break down people's barriers to engagement - particularly for those who have the highest levels of prejudice to begin with, for example by:

1. **Giving people another reason to take part.** Our participants' primary rationale for taking part in Britain Connects was to meet a stranger with different political views to them. This meant that, if they decided they didn't like their match, they had little other incentive for taking part. If intergroup contact is integrated into another activity - for example team sports or school activities - then more-prejudiced people may still wish to take part.
2. **Introducing interventions further upstream to encourage prejudiced people to take part.** Academic research can offer us tools to make people more willing to meet people they hold prejudice against. For example, some studies suggest that imagining positive encounters with the outgroup can make people more willing to engage in actual contact.

"I'm so sorry but I really don't think this is going to work. I feel extremely passionately against brexit and feminism. I think we would fall out"

"I put in no conservative voters and no feminists please find another partner thanks."

Emails from participants



Conclusion

We found promising evidence that bringing together people from political opposites can help to reduce polarisation. We also found that using behavioural insights from social psychology and conflict resolution can improve the quality of the interaction and encourage future contact.

It is interesting that people in the meeting with behavioural insights were more likely to share their contact details than people in the meeting alone, but that we don't find any difference between the groups on the attitudinal measures. This attitude-behaviour gap, which has also been identified in other interventions promoting inter-group contact, suggests these interventions can increase liking towards individuals, but may not generalise to other members of the outgroup.

These findings provide a promising indication of the techniques policymakers and academics can use to scaffold an intergroup contact environment to make encounters more positive. Some follow-up questions, to be addressed in further research are:

1. Does this effect generalise to other people who are their political opposites?
2. Which component of the BI intervention was more effective at improving the quality of the encounter?
3. How can we persuade more people to be interested in engaging with their political opposites?

For more information about Britain Connects and the findings from this study, please get in touch with antonio.silva@bi.team