



Silent Divides

Zero-Sum Beliefs and Avoidance of Political Conversations

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SUMMARY

Although exposure to diverse views can be associated with reduced political polarization, people often avoid talking politics with ideologically opposed others. We investigate **the avoidance of political conversations surrounding highly contested elections in Israel and the U.S.** Specifically, we examine the correlation between people's belief that politics is a zero-sum game and their tendency to avoid talking about politics with ideologically opposed others.

In two studies (N=883) conducted in the days leading up to their countries' elections, we find that Israeli and American voters who view politics as zero-sum **avoided political discussions with ideologically opposed others.** Furthermore, zero-sum beliefs about politics predict the avoidance of political conversations through two distinct mechanisms: **perceived conflict and a lack of receptiveness to opposing views.** Finally, we find that zero-sum beliefs about politics were predictive of the avoidance of political conversation one week later.

The results suggest that the more participants saw politics as zero-sum, the more likely they were to believe that talking about it creates conflict and the less receptive they were to counter-attitudinal information. **Seeing political discourse as an antagonistic battle and being unreceptive to others' views factored into the avoidance of political conversations.** In the same way that people avoid negotiations that they see as zero-sum, viewing politics as such was correlated with whether people avoid talking about it with ideologically opposed others.

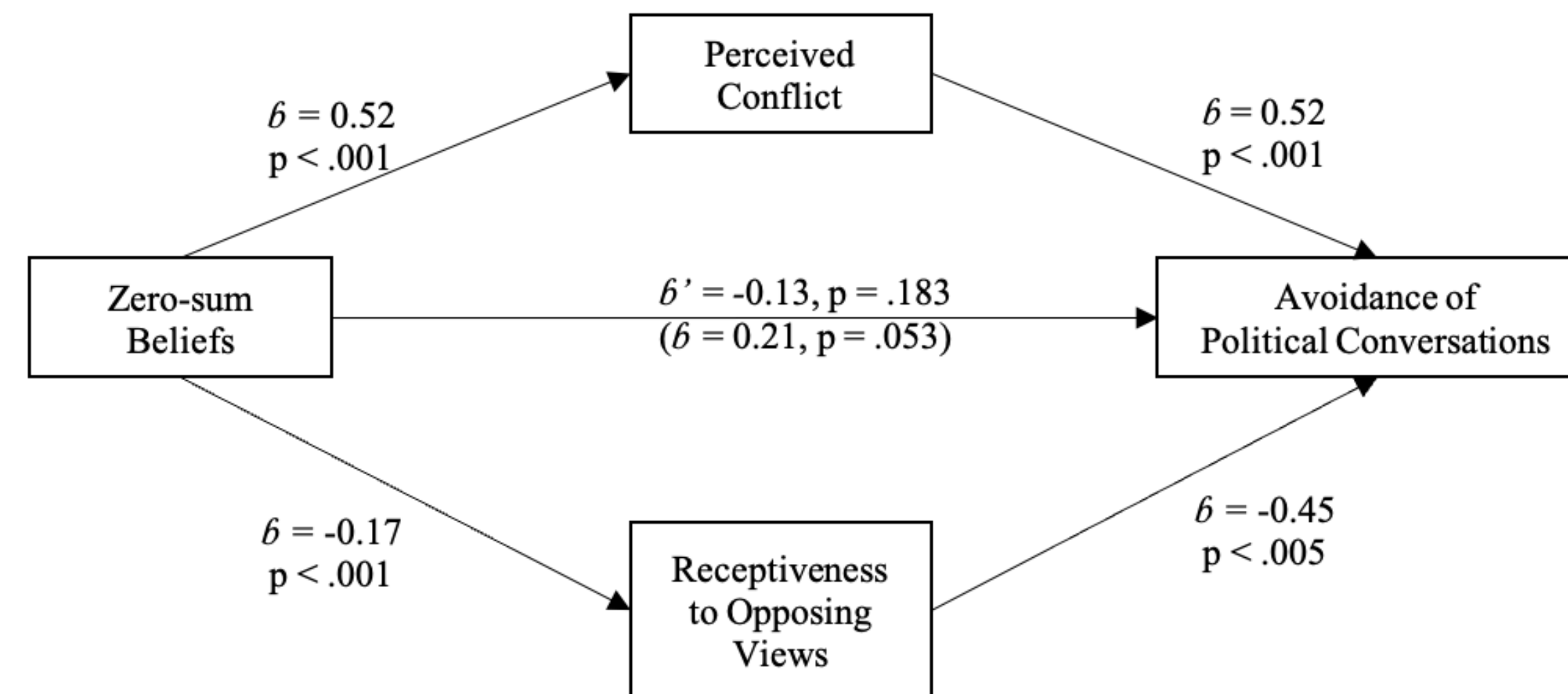
METHODS

For all studies, sample sizes were determined in advance, analyses were conducted after data collection was complete, and all measures and conditions are reported.

STUDY	SUBJECT LOCATION	SUBJECT POOL	TOTAL SAMPLE	Measures					
				Political Affiliation	Political Leanings	Zero-Sum Beliefs	Receptiveness to Opposing Views	Perceived Conflict	Political Conversation Avoidance
1	Israel	Midgam Project Web Panel	403	•		•	•	•	•
2A	U.S.	Prolific Academic	589	•	•	•	•	•	•
2B	U.S.	Prolific Academic	480			•			•

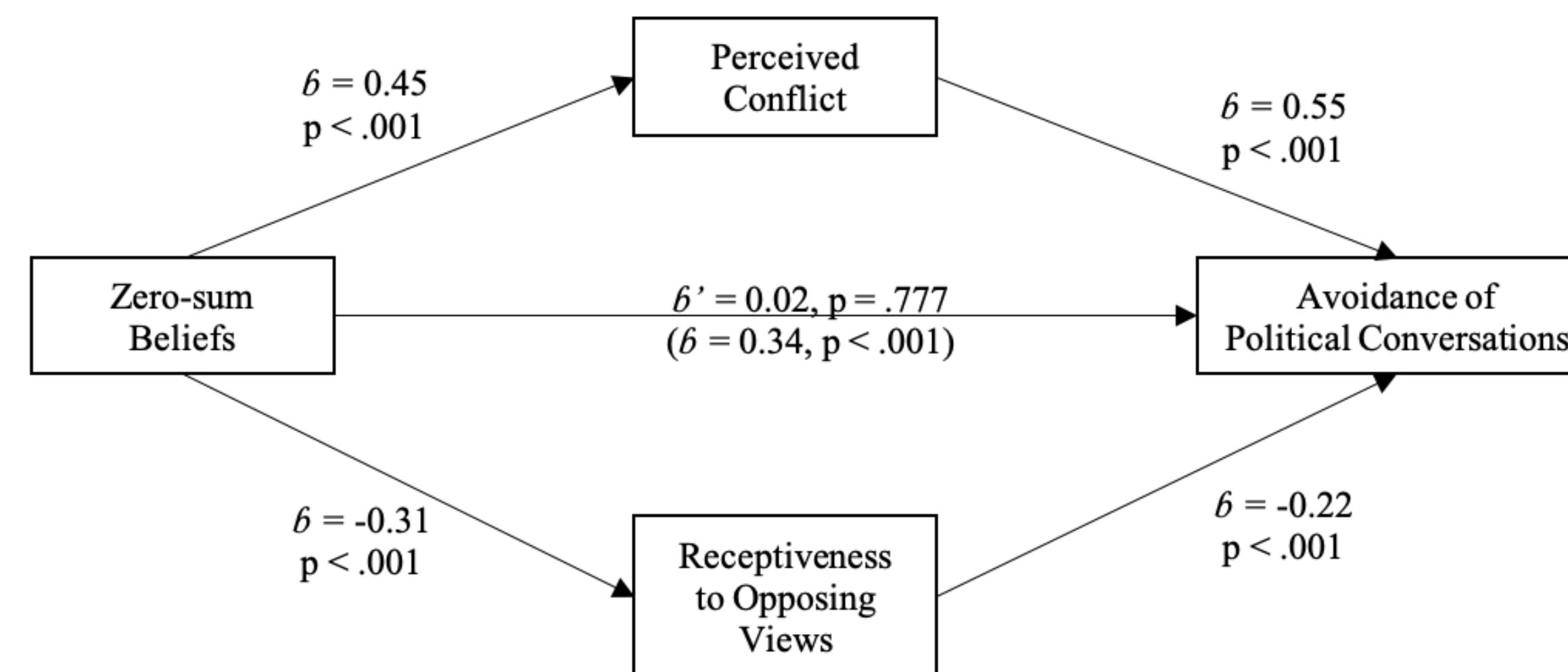
*Israeli participants also reported their age, gender, religion, income, and voting intentions for the coming elections.
**U.S. participants reported their age, gender, race, income, political orientation, and voting intentions for the coming elections.

RESULTS (STUDY 1)



Multiple Mediation Analysis: The role of perceived conflict and receptiveness to opposing views in the **relationship between zero-sum beliefs and the avoidance of political conversation among Israeli voters.**

RESULTS (STUDY 2)



Multiple Mediation Analysis: The role of perceived conflict and receptiveness to opposing views in the **relationship between zero-sum beliefs and the avoidance of political conversation among U.S. voters.**

DISCUSSION

Why do people avoid talking about politics with ideologically opposed others?

Two studies conducted on the days and weeks leading up to two highly consequential elections found that both Israeli and American voters tended to avoid political conversations **when they saw politics as zero-sum.** Such zero-sum beliefs about politics were associated with the avoidance of political conversations through two distinct psychological processes: **perceived conflict and a lack of receptiveness to opposing views.**

Our findings are important for understanding people's avoidance of political conversations. By depicting politics as zero-sum, politicians and political pundits may encourage people to actively avoid opposing views. Similarly, the rise of dominance-prone leaders (who typically foster zero-sum beliefs among their followers) may cultivate a view of politics as zero-sum. Consequently, such zero-sum beliefs may inhibit political discussions among ideologically opposed individuals, creating echo chambers and exacerbating political divisions. Thus, examining how zero-sum beliefs affect the avoidance of political conversations may be critical for understanding political polarization.

By focusing on how such beliefs may tend to foster avoidance of political conversations, we hope to make a first step toward **encouraging conversations across the political divide.**

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