

Political time perspective: effects of timing of consequences and group source on policy support

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Introduction

“What is government itself but the greatest of all reflections on human nature?” James Madison’s probing question into the nature of democracy defines what today is called political psychology. Our participation in government is the most social activity we can engage in, and it is guided by the myriad representations we create of our complicated world. Membership in social groups can account for a great deal of the different ways that we represent our world, from our attitudes toward compelling social problems (Guber 2013), to our cognition of time (Zimbardo & Boyd, 1999). The present project investigates how attitudes toward social policy problems are influenced by when the consequences happen, social group membership, and individual differences in time cognition.

We conducted an experiment in which undergraduate students, $N = 131$ (109 women), responded to a questionnaire measuring their support for a policy that proposed to reduce state-subsidized student loans by 50% in 2014 in order to accommodate growing enrollment in the University of Wisconsin System. We manipulated the year by which the current financial aid system would no longer be sustainable, as well as the group that proposed the policy.

We hypothesized that policy support would be higher when the policy was proposed by an *ingroup* source (UW-Eau Claire) as compared to an *outgroup* source (UW-La Crosse). We also predicted higher support when consequences were immediate as compared to when the consequences were in the distant future.

Methods

Participants

$N = 131$ UWEC students (109 women)

Procedure

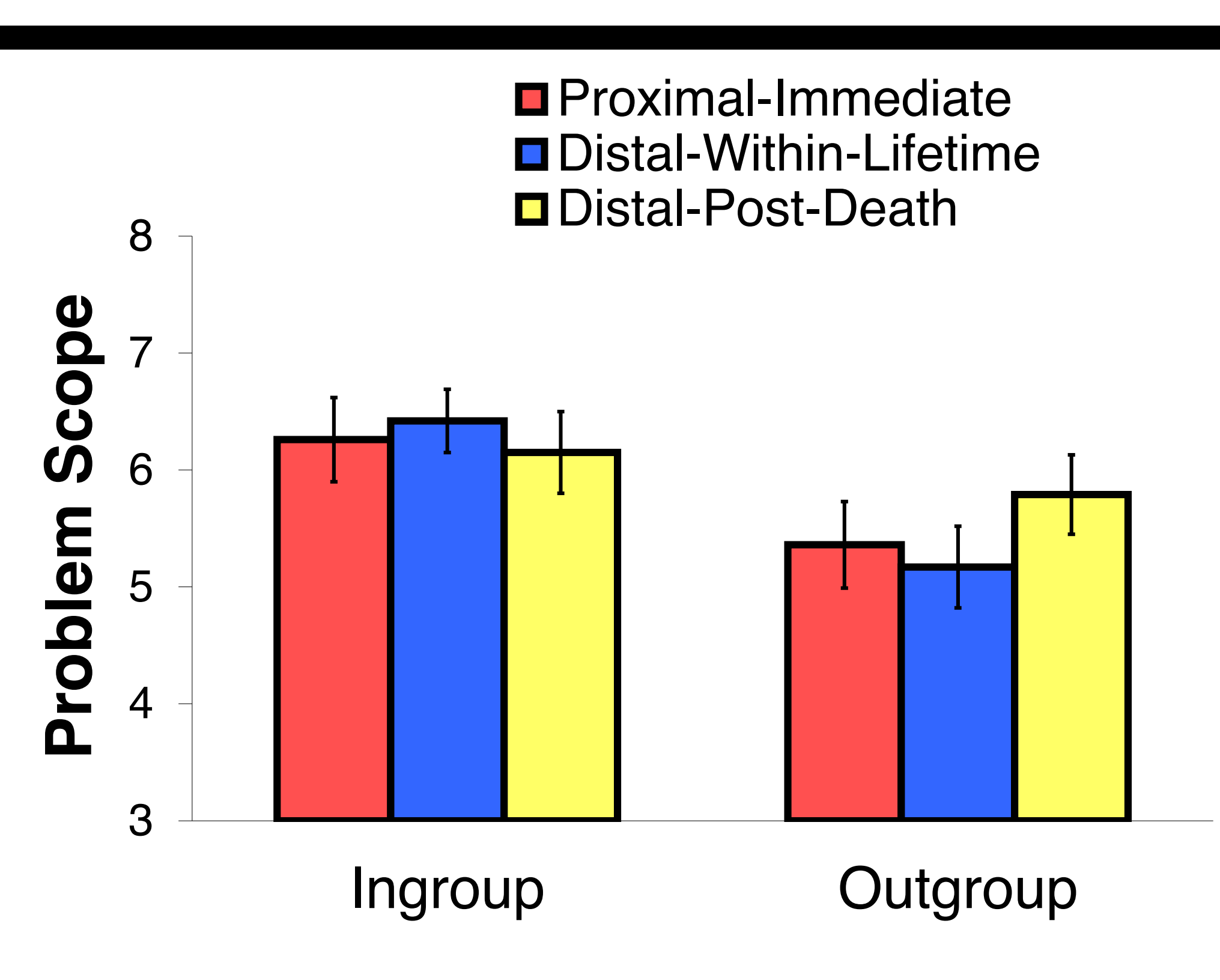
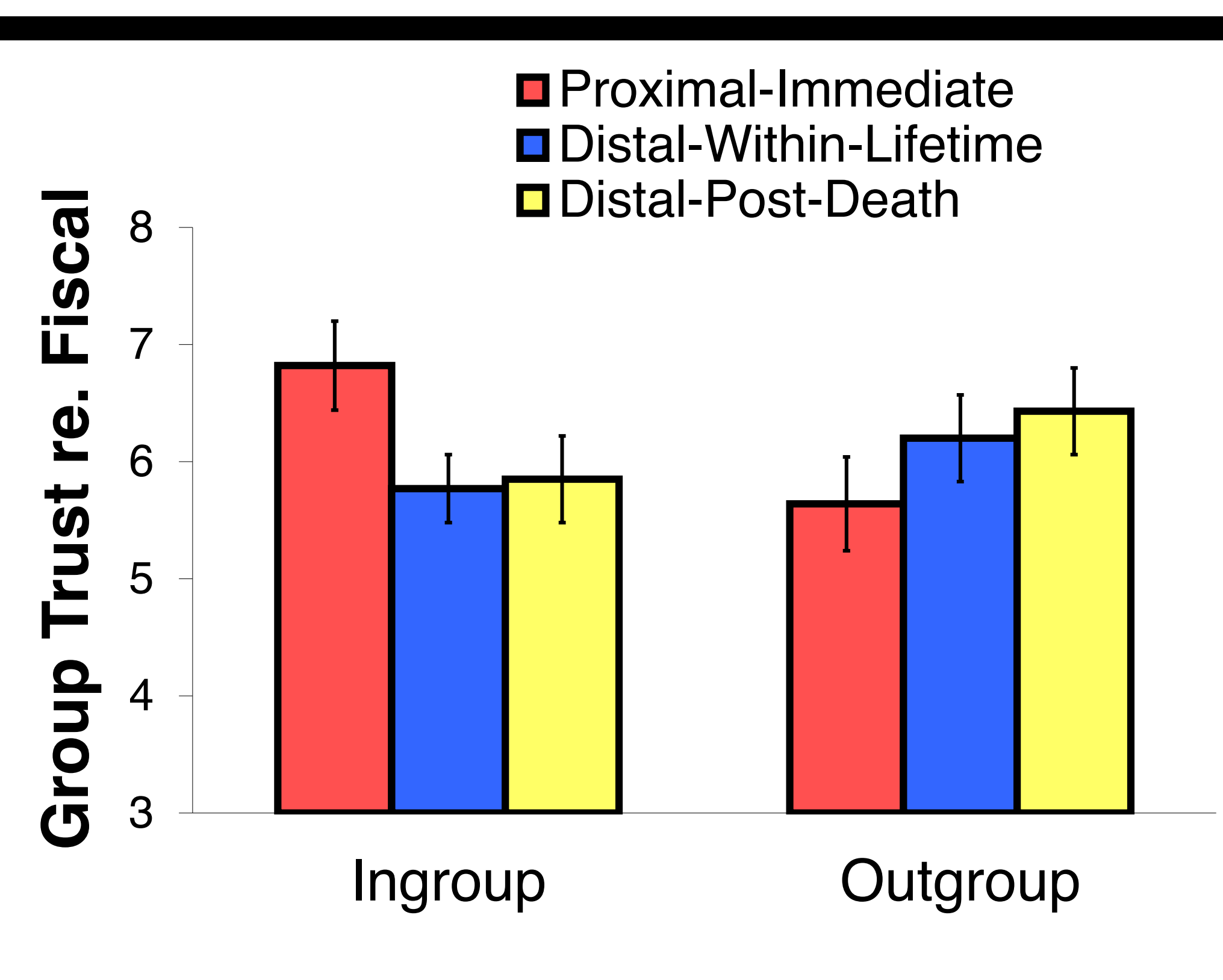
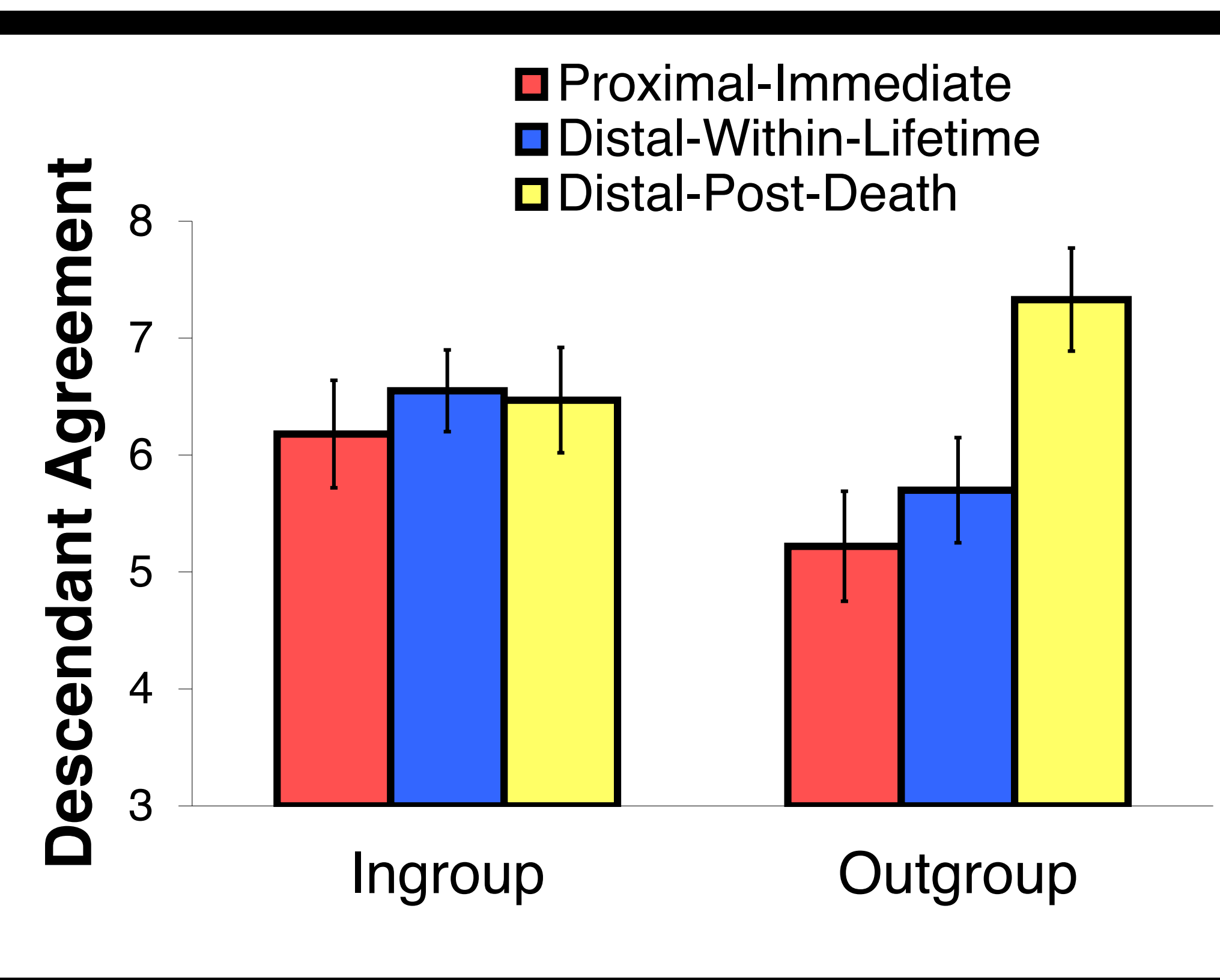
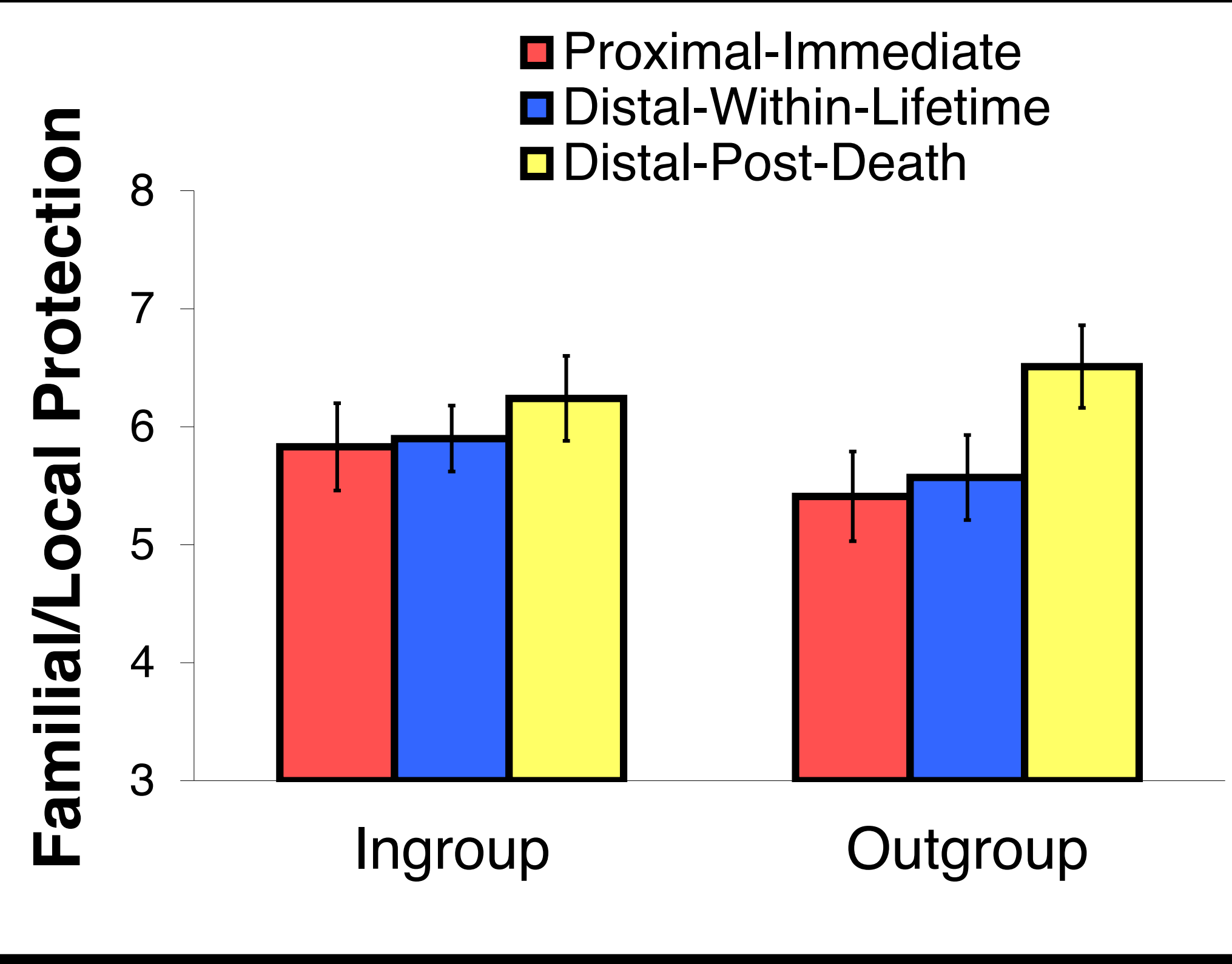
Participants completed a Qualtrics questionnaire which included a 42 item policy support scale, and measured their Consideration of Future Consequences (Strathman et al., 1994), Transcendental Future Time Perspective (Boyd & Zimbardo, 1997), as well as emotional responses to the policy group source, the policy solution, and the consequences of diminishing financial aid. Participants then provided demographic information, and upon completion were debriefed and provided with evidence of participation.

Independent Variables

- **Timing of Consequences:** State-subsidized student loans would no longer be sustainable in the proximal-immediate future (PI), the distal-within-lifetime future (DWL), or the distal-post-death future (DPD), in the years 2014, 2040, and 2090, respectively.
- **Group Source:** The policy solution was proposed by an ingroup source (UW-Eau Claire) or an outgroup source (UW-La Crosse).

Dependent Variables

- **Familial and Local Protection** (8 items, $\alpha = .92$, e.g., *I think that this policy will harm my grandchildren*)
- **Descendant Agreement** (2 items, $\alpha = .97$, e.g., *I think that my children would agree with my actions toward this policy*)
- **Group Trust re. Fiscal Policy** (2 items, $\alpha = .78$, e.g., *The group that developed this policy is ill-suited to make fiscal decisions*)
- **Problem Scope** (2 items, $\alpha = .53$, e.g., *The financial aid problem can be solved by practical means*)
- **Status Quo Bias** (6 items, $\alpha = .87$, e.g., *I think that this policy is too drastic*)
- **Self-Preservation** (3 items, $\alpha = .70$, e.g., *I do not want the cost of my education to be affected by this policy*)
- **Social Responsibility** (2 items, $\alpha = .70$, e.g., *I think that it is our responsibility as students to ensure that future generations can receive an education*)



Results and Discussion

Correlations

- Consideration of Future Consequences (CFC) was positively associated with Status Quo Bias, $r(129) = .18, p < .04$.
- CFC was positively associated with Descendant Agreement, $r(129) = .34, p < .001$.
- CFC was positively associated with Self-Preservation, $r(129) = .39, p < .001$.
- CFC was positively associated with Social Responsibility, $r(129) = .37, p < .001$.
- CFC was positively associated with Problem Scope, $r(129) = .29, p < .001$.

Interactions and Main Effects

- **Familial and Local Protection:** There was a marginal main effect of timing on familial and local protection, $F(2,131) = 2.55, p < .08$. Participants predicted less harm and more benefit from the policy when the consequences were DPD than when consequences were DWL ($p < .065$), or PI ($p < .043$). This is contrary to our hypothesis that policy support would be higher when consequences were immediate as compared to in the distant future.
- **Descendant Agreement:** There was a main effect of timing on descendant agreement, $F(2,131) = 3.63, p < .03$, qualified by a marginal Group by Year interaction, $F(2,131) = 2.65, p < .08$. For outgroup policy, there was a significant effect of timing, $F(2,125) = 6.04, p < .003$. Participants evaluating outgroup policy anticipated higher descendant agreement when consequences were DPD than when consequences were DWL ($p < .03$) or PI ($p < .004$). Timing was not significant for ingroup policy, $F(2,125) = .201, p > .8$. This is contrary to our hypothesis that support would be higher when consequences were immediate as compared to in the distant future.
- **Group Trust re. Fiscal Policy:** There was a Group by Year interaction on group trust regarding fiscal policy, $F(2,131) = 3.28, p < .04$. When consequences were PI, participants evaluating policy from an ingroup source indicated higher group trust than when evaluating policy from an outgroup source, $F(2,125) = 4.54, p < .04$. Group source had no effect when consequences were DWL ($p > .3$) or DPD ($p > .27$).
- **Problem Scope:** There was a main effect of group source on problem scope, $F(2,131) = 9.06, p < .003$. Participants considered the problem to be more solvable by practical means when evaluating ingroup policy than when evaluating outgroup policy. This is consistent with our hypothesis that support would be higher for ingroup policy as compared to outgroup policy.

Discussion

- The effect of timing on familial and local protection suggests that the welfare of kin and neighbors may be more effective motivators for long-term thinking than the welfare of a foreign population. When considered with the effect of group source on evaluations of problem scope, a possible explanation is that because one’s ingroup tends to be composed of family and community, social policy proposed by members of that population would elicit higher support than policy proposed by an outgroup.
- Differential influence of group source between levels of timing of consequences suggest the existence of multiple heuristics for evaluating social problems of different time frames, or policies proposed by different groups. The hyperpolarized political climate in the United States, particularly in Wisconsin, could account for the cognitive gulf between the evaluation of long-term and short-term social problems, or ingroup and outgroup policy solutions.
- CFC correlations can inform future avenues of research.

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