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Listening Across Divides: Contextual Moderation in Political Talk and Participation

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Abstract

An established body of research demonstrates that political talk shapes political participation. However, less is known about how an individual's ease of listening interacts with conversational contexts to influence participation. This study hypothesizes that this listening disposition amplifies the effect of political talk on political participation. Using data from a 2024 US national survey (N = 800), we test this using OLS regression on a composite index of political participation. The model assesses how the frequency of political talk across four contexts (strong/weak ties network, and like-minded/different-minded people) is moderated by self-reported ease of listening (to like- and different-minded people). Results show that while talking and listening to like-minded people is positively associated with participation, the main effect for talking and listening to different-minded people is not significant. However, a significant interaction emerges: The positive effect of talking with different-minded people on participation is amplified by the ease of listening to those same views. This effect is confined to cross-cutting conversations; no comparable interactions were found in strong-tie, weak-tie, or like-minded contexts. These findings indicate that the civic benefit of listening is highly contextual, with the ease of listening to differing views unlocking the participatory potential of talk during cross-cutting discussion.

Keywords

deliberative democracy; listening; political discussion; political participation; strong ties; weak ties

1. Introduction

Democratic participation depends not only on political talk but also on how people listen. Although prior studies show that frequent discussion within social networks can promote democratic outcomes (Eveland

& Hively, 2009; Valenzuela et al., 2018), the assumption that more talk leads to more participation has come under scrutiny. In polarized contexts, it is unclear whether political discussion alone mobilizes action or merely reinforces ideological boundaries (Iyengar et al., 2019; Mutz, 2006; Walsh, 2004).

Deliberative theorists argued that listening across political differences is essential for democracy (Bickford, 1996; Habermas, 1989; Morrell, 2018). Yet Walsh (2004) questions whether such ideals hold up in everyday contexts where political talk is shaped by identity, emotion, and group belonging. Listening, in this view, is not a neutral capacity but a socially embedded act. Still, empirical work rarely examines how listening operates across conversational contexts or interacts with different types of political talk. As Fontana et al. (2015) and Scudder (2022) note, listening varies by setting, audience, and affective stance, especially in today's digital environments (Santoro & Markus, 2023; Shah et al., 2017), where exposure to disagreement is more frequent but also more diffuse. Recent empirical work by Eveland et al. (2025) shows that a form of listening that aligns with democratic ideals varies across contexts and depends more on relationships and partisan or social similarity than on individual demographic characteristics.

To address this gap, we use national survey data to test whether ease of listening enhances the participatory effects of political talk. This article makes three contributions. Theoretically, we advance a relational view of political listening, demonstrating that it is not a universal civic virtue but a context-sensitive disposition shaped by social identities and interactional settings. By extending Walsh's (2004) critique of idealized deliberation, we argue that listening, like political talk, is a socially embedded act reflecting broader struggles over recognition and belonging. Empirically, we distinguish between political talk based on tie strength and ideological similarity, and we examine how political talk and the ease of listening disposition predict political participation. We reveal that the ease of listening to people with opposing views plays a distinct role in cross-cutting networks of political talk but has little or no impact in homogeneous networks. Methodologically, we contribute to research in the field of political communication by examining distinct types of political talk (strong/weak ties networks and like-minded/different-minded people) and listening dispositions.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Political Talk and Participation

We adopt the term political talk to denote the informal, peer-to-peer discussion of public affairs that occurs in everyday settings among friends, family, colleagues, or acquaintances, distinct from purposive civic engagement or formal deliberation (Klofstad, 2011; Walsh, 2004). Such discussions emerge incidentally around the dinner table, during work breaks, or at social gatherings, yet they have a demonstrable causal impact on democratic participation (Klofstad, 2009). Although less formal than structured deliberations, political talk is both pervasive and frequent among Americans, and it influences civic attitudes and behaviors (Klofstad, 2011). When political discussion functions effectively, it consistently boosts political participation, including involvement in voluntary organizations and increased voter turnout (Klofstad, 2009). However, its effects on more intense political activities, such as protests, are less consistent, particularly among individuals who are less predisposed to participating politically (Klofstad, 2009). We employ the term political talk to highlight its role in shaping social identities and us versus them dynamics, a characteristic intertwined with identity as conceptualized by Walsh (2004).

Political talk breakdowns in polarized contexts harm democracy and social integration (Jiang et al., 2023; Wells et al., 2017). This leads to fragmented discourse, thereby reducing meaningful exchanges and civic problem-solving (Jiang et al., 2023). Eroding cross-cutting communication undermines social cohesion, which increases out-group antipathy and group conflicts (Jiang et al., 2023). When people retreat into homogeneous groups or avoid political discussions to maintain relationships, profound civic and social alienation ensues (Walsh, 2004; Wells et al., 2017).

Empirical research shows that listening oriented towards understanding diverse perspectives can bridge divides (Duchovnay et al., 2020). Such listening fosters deliberative ideals by facilitating effective cross-group communication, tolerance, and social integration, thereby strengthening democratic practice (Eveland & Hively, 2009; Huckfeldt et al., 2004; Jiang et al., 2023; Kwak et al., 2005; Wells et al., 2017). Social network structure and tie strength significantly impact conversation and participation. Strong ties, marked by emotional closeness and obligation, reinforce existing attitudes (Coleman, 1988; Granovetter, 1973). In contrast, weak ties, like acquaintances or online contacts, promote novel information flow and diverse perspectives, enhancing cognitive elaboration and broader political participation (Burt, 1992; Park & Gil De Zúñiga, 2019). Additionally, other ties may involve like-minded individuals or those with diverse worldviews; even in trusted networks, exposure to opposing views can create ambivalence and decrease engagement (Mutz, 2006).

Early diffusion work shows that trusted ties accelerate adoption when uncertainty is low (Rogers, 2003). In family contexts, informational use of news correlates with civic action (Shah et al., 2005). Political communication research highlights these effects. Strong ties mobilize participation through normative pressure (Bond et al., 2012) but risk entrenching homophily, which limits exposure to diverse viewpoints (McPherson et al., 2001). Weak ties, conversely, can promote broader civic action through exposure to heterogeneous perspectives; however, findings are mixed, with some studies suggesting these ties mostly benefit online engagement (Kahne & Bowyer, 2018; Matthes et al., 2021; You & Hon, 2019). The empirical debate continues over which tie type more effectively moves information or behavior (Bello & Rolfe, 2014; Huckfeldt et al., 2004). Recent scholarship emphasizes the complexity of these relationships, noting outcomes vary by context, political environment, and platform design (Hsiao, 2021; Scherman et al., 2022; Valenzuela et al., 2018).

These findings underscore that political talk's effects vary by engagement type. While some discussions may spark overt political and government-directed action, others may encourage more community-oriented forms of involvement. To resolve conceptual ambiguity about "civic" versus "political" engagement, we ground our approach in the work of Ekman and Amnå (2012) who differentiate between manifest political participation (actions intentionally aimed at influencing governmental decisions) and latent forms of engagement that occur within the civil sphere (activities like community work or discussing societal issues constitute a "pre-political" reservoir of engagement). This aligns with the framework from Gil de Zúñiga et al. (2012), who also separate civic participation, defined as behavior aimed at resolving community problems, from political participation, which explicitly seeks to influence government action and policymaking. While Gil de Zúñiga et al. (2012) further segment political action into online and offline domains, the primary theoretical division in both frameworks is between community-focused civic acts and state-focused political ones.

2.2. The Importance of Listening in Political Talk

Public opinion, as conceptualized by Habermas (1987), is deeply rooted in the "lifeworld," where individuals' predispositions and social contexts shape both what they express and how they listen to political claims (Cramer & Toff, 2017). Within this framework, the public sphere emerges as a mediator between civil society and political institutions, with civil society, organized into groups, forming the foundation for public opinion through shared conversations (Calhoun, 1992). The media plays a dual role by amplifying these voices, thereby enabling personalized political engagement (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013) and activating emotional responses tied to partisan identity (Huddy et al., 2015).

While some scholars focus on "understanding-oriented" conversation (Rojas, 2008), in which listening is an important part of political talk, our study examines the self-reported ease of listening, a distinct dispositional trait that reflects a person's comfort level when faced with views on social and political issues that are similar or dissimilar to their own. In today's information-saturated environment, citizens rely on cognitive heuristics shaped by cultural worldviews to navigate political content and decide which voices to attend to or ignore (Cramer, 2016; Wagner et al., 2014; Walsh, 2012). The quality of listening significantly affects the effectiveness of political discourse, deliberation, and participation, which makes it a crucial element for democratic support (Bickford, 1996; Dobson, 2014; Eveland et al., 2023; Morrell, 2018). Conversations about public issues act as bridges linking personal relationships with political participation, where the engagement of both speakers and listeners is vital (Lim, 2008; You & Hon, 2019). Media consumption further influences this dynamic: Exposure to ideologically aligned outlets tends to reinforce partisan views (Stroud, 2011), whereas engagement with diverse sources encourages a more understanding-oriented listening approach (Eveland et al., 2023; Rojas, 2008; Wojcieszak & Rojas, 2011).

Listening is thus a fundamental component of connection and engagement (Rinke et al., 2023), yet its quality varies systematically across socio-demographic lines, partisanship, race, and situational context (Busby et al., 2025; Eveland et al., 2025). While much of this work highlights how citizens process political information, the frequency of political talk itself is a powerful predictor of participatory behavior (Klofstad, 2011). Political discussion can expose individuals to mobilizing information, foster civic identity, and create pathways for recruitment into action, especially when discussion occurs across different types of ties and levels of ideological agreement (Granovetter, 1973; Mutz, 2006). These mechanisms suggest a general expectation:

H1: The frequency of political talk will be positively associated with political participation.

However, we expect the strength of this association to vary depending on conversational context (i.e., tie strength and ideological similarity).

Effective political listening, which involves attentiveness to and integration of new information, enhances political engagement and participation (Kwak et al., 2005). "Discussion attention," defined as the effort to process political information during conversations, positively correlates with political knowledge and behavior, enhancing the mobilizing effects of network size, discussion frequency, and network heterogeneity (Kwak et al., 2005). Likewise, "integrative discussion," which actively incorporates media-derived information into political talk, improves comprehension and fosters greater engagement (Kwak et al., 2005).

The civic benefits of diverse and large discussion networks are strongest when combined with attentive listening; without it, frequent or varied conversations may fail to mobilize engagement and can even produce confusion or inaction (Kwak et al., 2005). This need for effective listening is heightened in polarized environments, where ideological and affective divides erode willingness to engage across differences and intensify emotional defensiveness (Fang et al., 2025; Iyengar et al., 2019; Mutz, 2006). While exchanges among like-minded individuals risk deepening entrenchment (Sunstein, 2009), listening across divides can foster empathy and understanding, even without consensus (Muradova & Arceneaux, 2021).

Listening is not a uniform practice; individuals may approach political talk strategically, defensively, or with an aim to understand, shaped by personal and contextual factors (Gärtner et al., 2021; Hendriks et al., 2019). An understanding-oriented listening approach, marked by genuine openness, moderates the effects of political talk in ideologically diverse and weak-tie networks (Fang et al., 2025; Gärtner et al., 2021). The social context also matters: Whether conversation occurs within strong-tie or weak-tie networks, and whether it involves like-minded or cross-cutting partners, shapes the consequences for democratic life (Fang et al., 2025; Gärtner et al., 2021).

Based on deliberative theory, an orientation toward understanding opposing viewpoints is considered a core civic virtue. Individuals who report greater ease in listening to others, whether they agree or disagree, may be more likely to engage politically, as attentive listening fosters reflexivity, civic awareness, and a sense of democratic responsibility (Eveland et al., 2020; Rojas, 2008). This orientation should therefore contribute to political participation, regardless of how frequently one talks about politics. We therefore hypothesize:

> H2: Greater self-reported ease of listening to others (like- and different-minded people) will be positively associated with political participation.

Moving beyond the independent effects of political talk (H1) and listening (H2), our central theoretical argument posits their synergy. We propose that the true power of political talk is unlocked by an individual's listening orientation, leading to our primary moderation hypothesis:

> H3: The positive relationship between political talk frequency and participation is moderated by the ease of listening to like-minded and different-minded people.

We further expect this interaction to be strongest in conversational contexts characterized by greater viewpoint diversity.

Deliberative theory and empirical research show that frequent political talk does not ensure civic mobilization; its participatory potential relies on engagement quality, particularly in diverse contexts (Eveland et al., 2023; Habermas, 1989). Weak ties and cross-cutting contexts expose individuals to challenging perspectives (Granovetter, 1973; Valenzuela et al., 2018). However, such encounters can lead to defensiveness if individuals are not open to listening to differences (Mutz, 2006). In contrast, an understanding-oriented listening style, characterized by curiosity and constructive engagement, helps individuals process opposing viewpoints, fostering motivation for action and collective problem-solving (Itzchakov et al., 2020; Rojas, 2008). Thus, openness to dissent catalyzes the transformation of mere exposure to diversity into genuine engagement and meaningful participation.

Without this orientation, exposure to novel or conflicting perspectives may lead to attitudinal polarization, discomfort, or civic withdrawal. With it, individuals can channel these challenging encounters into the perspective-taking and cognitive elaboration that drive collective forms of participation, especially in digitally-networked or group-based participatory acts.

The preceding hypotheses (H1–H3) articulate a model centered on a unified concept of manifest political participation, a construct our empirical analysis confirms is best measured as a single, reliable index. However, a question remains about the boundaries and context of this phenomenon. While our primary hypotheses specify that the synergy between political talk and listening fosters political participation, this effect is unlikely to be uniform across all conversational settings. Deliberative theory suggests that the civic value of an understanding-oriented listening style is most critical when individuals encounter novel or challenging perspectives. These encounters are more common in conversations with weak ties, who connect disparate social circles, and in ideologically cross-cutting exchanges, where disagreement is more likely. Such settings can either stimulate democratic engagement or provoke civic withdrawal, depending on how individuals respond. We argue that one's ease of listening is the pivotal factor that transforms disagreement into deliberation and mere exposure into mobilization. This leads to our research question:

> RQ: In which conversational contexts is the amplifying role of listening to different views most prominent for political participation?

3. Methods

The data are from a US national survey (N = 800) conducted by the Center for Communication and Democracy at the University of Wisconsin – Madison via Qualtrics online panels between March 12 and April 3, 2024. A non-probability quota sampling method was used to achieve a sample balanced on age, gender, and education. The final sample was broadly representative of the US adult population in terms of gender and race/ethnicity when compared to US Census Bureau data. However, it over-represented adults aged 65 and older (26% of the sample vs. 18% census) and, as is common with online panels, was more educated than the general population (e.g., 43% of respondents held a college degree vs. 36% census).

3.1. Political Participation

Political participation was assessed with six binary items (0 = *non-participation*, 1 = *participation*) covering a range of activities respondents reported engaging in during the past few months: attending rallies (14.6% participates), participating in offline protests/marches (15.1%), signing petitions (40.9%), boycotting products (34.9%), joining online groups with social/political purposes (22.6%), and participating in online protests (21.9%).

An exploratory factor analysis (principal-axis extraction with varimax rotation, N = 800) confirmed that these six items, which reflect actions aimed at influencing governmental decisions, loaded strongly onto a single factor. This distinguished them from two other measured items (volunteering and solving local problems) that capture more community-focused civic engagement. The resulting six-item scale demonstrated good internal consistency (Cronbach's α = .76).

3.2. Political Talk Contexts

Respondents were asked how frequently they discussed politics across two distinct context dimensions, measured on a 6-point scale (1 = *never* to 6 = *very often*). These were treated as four separate continuous predictors. The first dimension, tie strength, included discussion with strong ties (i.e., close friends and family; $M = 3.84$, $SD = 1.66$) and weak ties (i.e., acquaintances; $M = 3.10$, $SD = 1.61$). The second dimension, ideological congruence, included discussion with like-minded others ($M = 3.49$, $SD = 1.65$) and with different-minded others ($M = 2.88$, $SD = 1.61$).

3.3. Ease of Listening to Similar- and Different-Minded People

The study's key moderators were two items measuring ease of listening. Respondents rated how easy it was for them to listen to (a) people with similar political views and (b) people with different political views, using a 6-point scale (1 = *very difficult* to 6 = *very easy*). As expected, respondents reported greater ease listening to similar-minded people ($M = 4.20$, $SD = 1.40$) than to different-minded people ($M = 3.60$, $SD = 1.47$). These two items served as the moderators in the interaction analyses.

3.4. Control Variables

The regression models included several control variables. Demographic controls consisted of gender, age, education, household income, and race/ethnicity (coded as Non-Hispanic White vs. other). Political controls included ideology (on a scale from 0 = *very liberal* to 10 = *very conservative*) and political interest (0 = *not at all interested* to 5 = *very interested*). Finally, the models accounted for media use, including the frequency of consuming newspapers, television, and social media news, as well as partisan news from liberal and conservative sources.

All analyses were conducted using regression models suited to each outcome variable. The reported results of individual acts of participation (binary outcomes) were analyzed using logistic regression.

The key moderation tests included interaction terms between discussion frequency (in each context) and the ease of listening to similar or different views. All predictors were mean-centered. Results focus on the odds ratios for main and interaction effects. Model diagnostics, assumption checks, and Akaike Information Criterion (AIC) were conducted throughout to ensure robustness. A comparison of nested models confirmed our analytical approach. The full interaction model demonstrated the best fit, showing the lowest AIC (AIC = −100.2) and the highest adjusted R-squared (.331) compared to the controls-only model (AIC = −77.8, adj. $R^2 = .280$) and the main-effects model (AIC = −96.0, adj. $R^2 = .315$).

By structuring the analysis around these two listening orientations, we test whether listening behaviors are uniquely important for translating political talk into political participation.

Our theoretical framework posits that political talk is not a monolithic construct; therefore, we model it using four separate predictor variables rather than a single index. This approach allows us to test for distinct effects across different network contexts. We specified a series of OLS regression models predicting the political participation index.

To address our hypotheses, we adopted a specific testing procedure. We conducted a sequential OLS regression analysis. The first step of the model included only control variables. In the second step, we added the main effect terms for the four political talk contexts and the two ease of listening dispositions. Within this second step, H1 was tested using a joint significance test (F-test) on the block of four talk variables, and H2 was tested by examining the coefficients for the two listening variables. In the final step, the eight interaction terms were added to the model to test H3.

4. Results

Among the demographic and political control variables, the final regression model revealed several significant predictors of participation. Political interest showed a strong, positive association with participation ($\beta = .03$, $p < .001$), as did age ($\beta = .00$, $p < .001$). Race was marginally significant, with non-Hispanic White respondents showing slightly lower participation than other groups ($\beta = -.04$, $p = .057$). In the final model, political ideology, gender, education, and income were not statistically significant predictors.

Media consumption patterns also matter. Media consumption patterns also predicted participation. The use of liberal news ($\beta = .02$, $p = .002$), conservative news ($\beta = .02$, $p = .002$), and newspapers ($\beta = .01$, $p = .032$) were all positively associated with participation. In contrast, television news use was negatively associated with participation ($\beta = -.02$, $p < .001$). Social media news use was not a significant predictor in the model. These main effects establish the resource, motivation, and information baseline against which the conditional impact of cross-cutting talk and ease of listening to different-minded people must be interpreted.

The findings in Table 1 reveal that the effects of political talk and listening orientation vary depending on the type of individuals with whom it occurs. Discussing politics with like-minded individuals is associated positively with greater political participation. However, the effects of discussing politics with people who hold diverse views are insignificant (as main effects) as discussions and listening in strong ties or weak ties networks.

Table 1. Main effects of political talk on political participation.

Characteristic	β	95% CI	p-value
Political talk in strong ties networks	−.01	[−.02, .01]	.3
Political talk in weak ties networks	.01	[−.01, .02]	.3
Political talk with like-minded people	.02	[.01, .04]	.005
Political talk with different-minded people	.00	[−.01, .02]	.6

Note: A joint F-test on talk predictors was significant ($F(4,781) = 4.16$, $p = .002$), supporting H1.

In testing H1, we first examined the overall effect of political talk on participation. A joint significance test of the four talk variables was statistically significant ($F(4, 781) = 4.16$, $p = .002$), lending support to H1. An examination of the individual predictors, however, revealed this effect was driven by a single context: discussion with like-minded people was positively associated with the participation index ($\beta = .02$, 95% CI [.01, .04], $p = .005$). In contrast, political talk within strong-tie networks, weak-tie networks, or with different-minded people showed no significant independent association. In short, the overall level of political conversation matters for engagement, but its mobilizing effect in this sample is driven primarily by discussions that occur in ideologically congruent settings.

We find partial support for H2 (see Table 2). Ease of listening to like-minded others is positively related to political participation ($\beta = .02$, 95% CI [0.01, 0.03], $p = .008$). In contrast, ease of listening to different-minded people is unrelated to participation ($\beta = .00$, 95% CI [−0.01, 0.02], $p = .50$). Thus, the predicted main effect of listening ease holds only within ideologically congruent conversations; ease of listening to opposing views, by itself, does not translate into higher participation. We therefore treat H2 as partially supported and turn next to the interaction tests to assess whether listening to different perspectives matters more when combined with frequent political talk in diverse settings.

Table 2. Main effects of listening on participation.

Characteristic	β	95% CI	p-value
Ease of listening to different-minded people	.00	[−.01, .02]	.5
Ease of listening to like-minded people	.02	[.01, .03]	.008

To test for interaction effects (H3), we estimated an OLS regression model predicting participation. This model included: (a) the frequency of political talk in four contexts (strong ties, weak ties, like-minded partners, and different-minded partners); (b) two listening variables, which are ease of listening to like-minded people and ease of listening to different-minded people; and (c) their respective interaction terms. All continuous predictors were mean-centered, and the full model is reported in Table 3.

Table 3. Interaction effects on participation.

Predictor	β	95% CI	p-value
Political talk (main effects)			
Political talk in strong ties networks	−.01	[−.02, .01]	.430
Political talk in weak ties networks	.00	[−.01, .02]	.659
Political talk with like-minded people	.02	[.00, .04]	.014
Political talk with different-minded people	.00	[−.01, .02]	.855
Listening disposition (main effects)			
Ease of listening to different-minded people	.00	[−.01, .02]	.506
Ease of listening to like-minded people	.03	[.01, .04]	.001
Interaction effects: Listening to similar views			
Strong ties × Listening to like-minded people	−.00	[−.01, .01]	.596
Weak ties × Listening to like-minded people	.01	[−.01, .02]	.314
Similar views × Listening to like-minded people	−.00	[−.01, .01]	.582
Different views × Listening to like-minded people	−.00	[−.01, .01]	.402
Interaction effects: Listening to different views			
Strong ties × Listening to different-minded people	.00	[−.01, .01]	.827
Weak ties × Listening to different-minded people	.01	[−.00, .02]	.235
Similar views × Listening to different-minded people	−.00	[−.01, .01]	.976
Different views × Listening to different-minded people	.01	[.00, .02]	.005

As shown in Table 3, only one of the eight interaction terms was statistically significant. Specifically, a greater ease of listening to different-minded people moderated the effect of cross-cutting talk and turned an otherwise null relationship into a positive and significant one ($\beta = .01$, 95% CI [.00, .02], $p = .005$). None

of the other seven interaction terms approached statistical significance (all $p \geq .20$). Thus, H3 received only specific support: The moderating effect of listening was confined to the context where cross-cutting discussion coincided with a dispositional openness to those very views. We probed the significant interaction using simple-slope analysis and the Johnson-Neyman technique to better understand the conditional effect.

Only one interaction term reaches conventional significance: Talking politics with different-minded people is more strongly associated with participation as the ease of listening to those people increases. Johnson–Neyman output shows that the slope of cross-cutting talk turns positive and significant once listening ease is at least .31 *SD* above the mean; below −1.71 *SD* the slope is negative ($p < .05$). The simple-slope analysis reveals this interaction is a double-edged sword: For those comfortable with disagreement (+1 *SD* on listening ease), more cross-cutting talk significantly increases participation ($t = 2.08$, $p = .04$). Conversely, for those who find listening to difference difficult (−1 *SD*), more cross-cutting talk is associated with a decrease in participation that borders on statistical significance ($t = -1.80$, $p = .07$). A Wald test comparing the magnitude of the cross-cutting and weak-tie interactions found no statistically significant difference between them ($F = 0.77$, $p = .38$). This suggests that while we cannot claim the cross-cutting interaction is significantly stronger, it was the only one of the two to be statistically different from zero.

Reinforcing this specific finding, none of the other seven interaction terms were statistically significant, including all combinations involving ease of listening to like-minded people. Thus, the data offer only targeted support for H3. The amplifying effect of listening on political talk was present only when citizens both encountered and were dispositionally open to hearing opposing views; in homogeneous or strong-tie contexts, ease of listening did not provide additional mobilizing power.

The analysis of the interaction terms reveals two distinct patterns. First, we found no significant interaction effect for conversations within weak-tie networks; the relationship between this type of talk and participation was not conditional on an individual's listening style. In contrast, a significant interaction emerged for cross-cutting talk, as visualized in Figure 1. The plot shows that the effect of this discussion depends heavily on listening disposition. For individuals who find it easy to listen to different-minded people, the slope is positive, linking frequent disagreement to greater participation. Conversely, when the ease of listening to different-minded people is low, the slope reverses and becomes negative. Johnson-Neyman estimates indicate the pivot point: The effect of cross-cutting talk turns significantly positive once ease of listening rises about one-third of a standard deviation above the mean and turns negative more than 1.7 *SD* below it. Shaded ribbons (95% CIs) confirm that only the high-listening lines diverge significantly from zero.

These patterns corroborate the regression results in Table 3. Being able to listen to opposing views unlocks the mobilizing value of cross-cutting discussion, but it adds no leverage in weak-tie or like-minded settings. The figures, therefore, illustrate the heart of the study's argument: Political talk converts to political participation only when exposure to difference is paired with a disposition to listen. An open ear toward opposing views unlocks the civic value of cross-cutting discussion, whereas no comparable boost appears for weak-tie or like-minded talk. Talking more is not enough; it is a talk with an ease of listening in ideologically diverse settings that mobilizes citizens.

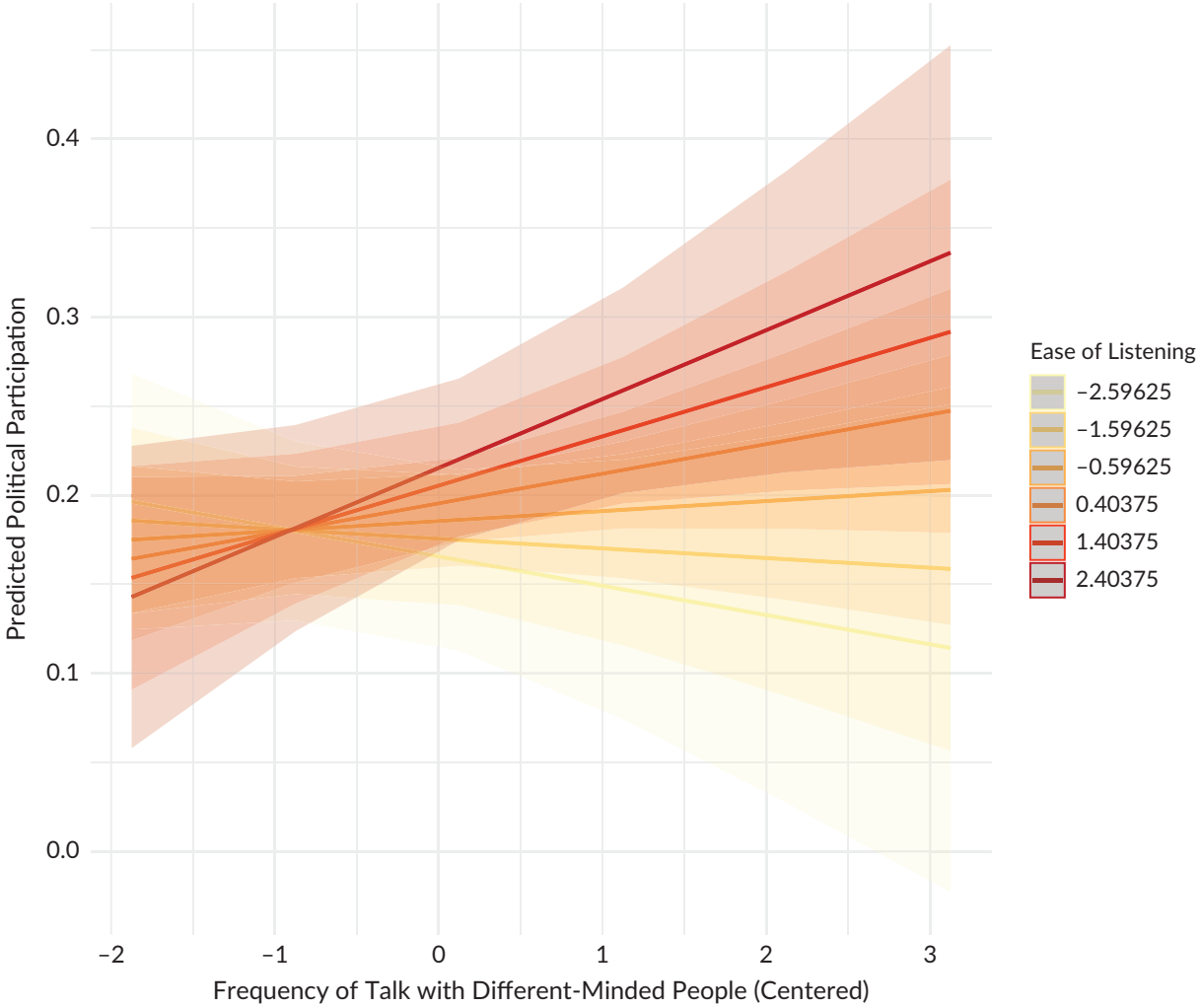

Figure 1. Predicted political participation as a function of discussion context and ease of listening.

5. Discussion

Listening can bridge divides, including political polarization, by encouraging challenging conversations fostering democratic engagement (Eveland et al., 2020, 2023; Rinke et al., 2023; Rojas, 2006; Santoro & Markus, 2023). Our results show that both political talk and listening dispositions shape participation, although not always as deliberative theory might predict. We confirm a main-effect boost only for political talk with like-minded people and for ease of listening to like-minded people. For our RQ, the results show that the amplifying role of ease of listening to different-minded people is evident only in cross-cutting conversations, that is, when citizens talk about politics with partners who hold opposing views.

In this setting, frequent political talk is associated with higher political-participation scores, but only for respondents who report above-average ease of listening to different-minded people; when listening ease is average, the slope is null, and when it is very low, the slope turns negative. No comparable moderation appears in conversations with weak ties, strong ties, or like-minded partners. Thus, the disposition of ease of listening to different-minded people mobilizes citizens precisely where disagreement is encountered, and it confers no additional benefit in more homogeneous or casual networks.

The ease of listening to different-minded people is not uniformly relevant across all domains of political talk. Its moderating force appears in cross-cutting conversations, the setting that inherently confronts citizens with contrary viewpoints. Here, respondents who find it easy to listen to different-minded people convert frequent political talk into higher participation, whereas those who struggle to listen either gain no benefit or become slightly less active, an asymmetry consistent with work on the psychological burden of disagreement (Mutz, 2006) and the mixed consequences of cross-cutting exposure (Matthes et al., 2021). By contrast, the absence of this interaction during political talk with strong ties or with like-minded people suggests that discussion in those settings likely fosters engagement through other mechanisms, such as identity reinforcement, rather than through listening-based deliberation (Walsh, 2004).

Our findings offer cautious support for deliberative democratic theory (Bickford, 1996; Habermas, 1989; Morrell, 2018), particularly the idea that listening across political differences can foster participation. However, consistent with Walsh's (2004) critique, our results suggest that practices like political listening are not stable civic virtues but relational dispositions shaped by social context and identity. Just as political identity influences who listens to whom (Huddy et al., 2015; Walsh, 2004), ease of listening appears to operate as a context-sensitive orientation, not an abstract capacity.

Our findings further underscore the limitations of idealized models of deliberation. We found that only political talk with like-minded people had a direct positive association with participation, while political talk with different-minded people did not on its own. This aligns with scholarly warnings that without a shared community identity, discussion across lines of difference can reinforce identity boundaries rather than bridge them (Walsh, 2004). Our results show that neither political talk alone nor ease of listening to different-minded people on their own serves as a universal catalyst for participation. Instead, their synergy appears most influential, supporting calls to treat listening as both a dispositional and situational practice (Eveland et al., 2020; Rojas, 2008).

These findings also problematize the liberal-individualist assumption that individuals can bracket their identities or preferences to engage in reasoned deliberation (Mutz, 2006; Walsh, 2004). Willingness to listen to different-minded people is likely shaped by social context, past experiences, and affective orientations. Rather than seeing listening as a neutral or uniformly desirable capacity, our results suggest it may be deeply entangled with people's political and social positioning.

It is important to clarify that we treat ease of listening as a dispositional orientation, not as a behavioral tally of listening time. The items ask respondents how easy it is for them to "truly listen" when speakers hold views similar to, or different from, their own, capturing a self-assessed comfort with hearing political opinions. As an attitudinal trait, this orientation exists independently of any particular conversation and can therefore show a direct association with political participation that is separate from, and not contingent on, the sheer frequency of political talk.

Rather than reinforcing each other, ease of listening and political talk seem to exert independent, context-dependent effects. However, these effects are modest and not universal; for instance, neither ease of listening to different-minded people nor political talk with different-minded people consistently predicted participation on its own. This aligns with recent work that has highlighted the civic potential of listening in contextual settings, such as strengthening local ties (Rinke et al., 2023), and our results suggest that these

benefits depend heavily on context and relational dynamics. In polarized environments, as Iyengar et al. (2019) argue, listening may just as often lead to withdrawal, confusion, or fatigue.

Taken together, our findings provide a bottom-up refinement of deliberative theory by highlighting the relational and contextual nature of listening. While previous research has emphasized the structure or heterogeneity of discussion networks (Eveland & Hively, 2009; Valenzuela et al., 2018), our results suggest that democratic engagement depends not only on who individuals talk to but also on how they are dispositionally oriented to listen, particularly when confronted with disagreement. Although the interaction effects between discussion frequency and listening are modest in size, they emerge when listening to different-minded people, not similar ones. Rather than offering a generalized effect, listening to different-minded people enhances the participatory impact of political talk, but only under certain social conditions, and aligns with Walsh's (2004) critique that interaction across difference can either deepen engagement or reinforce identity boundaries, depending on the context in which it unfolds.

In this light, listening is not a neutral democratic virtue but a situated act, shaped by one's position in the social field. Our evidence shows that its civic payoff emerges specifically in cross-cutting conversations, where disagreement is explicit; in more homogeneous or emotionally close networks, it adds no mobilizing power. Future research should explore these relational dynamics further, using behavioral measures and in-depth qualitative approaches to capture the situational nature of political listening. As our findings show, neither exposure to diverse views nor the disposition to listen guarantees participation; what matters is how individuals combine these elements in the contexts where they actually engage in political talk.

We therefore propose a rethinking of the public sphere not as a neutral forum for reason-giving, but as a site of identity negotiation and social boundary-setting. Extending Walsh's (2004) framework, we argue that the ease of listening disposition is, like political identity itself, a socially embedded practice. As such, it may reflect broader social struggles over recognition, voice, and inclusion.

This study sheds light on the role of listening in political participation, but it has several limitations. Its cross-sectional design precludes causal inference and key variables are self-reported, which introduces potential bias and recall error. Tie strength and ideological similarity are measured using single items, which overlooks the depth of relational and attitudinal nuance, while the validated listening scale may not capture all situational aspects. The political participation index also aggregates diverse behaviors with distinct antecedents. The sample size (N = 800), while adequate for main effects, may limit power for detecting interactions or subgroup differences. Reliance on an online US sample may limit generalizability, particularly for populations with limited internet access. Future research should employ longitudinal and experimental designs, richer behavioral measures, and more diverse samples to clarify causality and better capture the complexity of listening, discussion, and participation. Qualitative and network studies, as well as intervention research on listening skills, could further illuminate these dynamics.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Data Availability

The data for this study were collected by the Center for Communication and Democracy at the University of Wisconsin – Madison. Researchers may request the data from the corresponding author; distribution is contingent upon acknowledgement and approval from the Center for Communication and Democracy.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the author.

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