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Democracy, Deliberation, and Media: The Role of Incidental Exposure and News Consumption

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Abstract

This study examines the relation between news consumption and fostering public deliberation within democratic systems. Drawing on Jürgen Habermas's concepts of understanding orientation (consensus-oriented, communicative rationality) and strategic orientation (goal-oriented, instrumental rationality), it explores how news media can either facilitate rational communication in public debates or, alternatively, encourage strategic interventions. To investigate these relationships, this study utilizes a survey in Chile ($N = 903$) conducted under the supervision of the Millennium Nucleus for the Study of Politics, Public Opinion, and Media (Nucleo MEPOP) between August and September 2022. The findings reveal that traditional media and social media are significantly and positively associated with a strategic orientation, whereas exposure to digital media is negatively associated with such an orientation. Additionally, incidental exposure emerges as a key factor in shaping the relationship between media consumption and deliberative predispositions. This article contributes to the understanding of classical approaches to the study of deliberation in the digital contemporary context, where homophily, polarization, and confrontation have emerged as significant challenges for both developing and established democracies.

Keywords

Chile; incidental exposure; news consumption; news media; public deliberation; strategic orientation; understanding orientation

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1. Introduction

Public deliberation is considered an essential part of democracy (Page, 1996) and the formation of public opinion (Carpini et al., 2004; Habermas, 1992). In a democratic system, processing citizens' opinions should precede the definition of electoral preferences (Carpini et al., 2004). This action reconciles dialogue with democratic values, political equity, and opposition to the tyranny of the majority (Fishkin & Luskin, 2005). The possibility of deliberation in the public sphere is tied to the orientations of individuals participating in it. According to Habermas's (1984) framework, people can adopt either an orientation toward understanding or a strategic orientation. In the former, individuals seek to reach a consensus with others through reason and in a context of equality among participants, whereas in the latter, actions aim for success, with other individuals serving as instrumental means to achieve that end.

Studies on deliberation have examined the relationship between this process and the media. Early research focused on the impact of traditional media, but recent attention has shifted to the potential influence of social media on public debate (Esau et al., 2017). In the context of Chilean constitutional protest in 2019, we study the possibility of creating a space for dialogue and deliberation, and the relationship between news media and the willingness of citizens to understand each other.

Previous literature shows that the intensity of news consumption on social media is important, but so is the manner in which it occurs. Social media allow individuals to access a variety of content they did not necessarily seek out intentionally, a phenomenon known as "incidental exposure" (Ahmed & Gil-Lopez, 2022; Valeriani & Vaccari, 2016). The effects of incidental exposure can be dual: In some cases, it may increase polarization as individuals reinforce their views when confronted with opposing perspectives, but in other instances, it may reduce polarization by providing deeper access to diverse ideas and viewpoints (Chen et al., 2022).

In this context, this study aims to: (a) examine the relationship between information consumption across different media types—traditional, digital, and social media—and the potential for public deliberation that seeks consensus-building; and (b) evaluate whether incidental exposure to the development of a rational public sphere or acts as a factor that undermine its presence.

To address these theoretical expectations, our research used a survey conducted in Chile under the supervision of the Millennium Nucleus for the Study of Politics, Public Opinion, and Media in Chile (Nucleo MEPOP) between August and September 2022.

Our results show that traditional media and social media are positively associated with strategic orientation, while digital media—excluding social media—are negatively linked to this type of orientation. Additionally, incidental exposure emerges as a key factor in connecting information consumption across all media types with an orientation toward understanding.

2. Literature Review

2.1. On Deliberation and Democracy

In recent decades, the concept of deliberative democracy has increasingly appeared in theoretical discussions (Carpini et al., 2004; Habermas, 1992) and empirical studies on the formation of public opinion (Fishkin & Luskin, 2005). As Page (1996, p. 1) stated, "public deliberation is essential to democracy." The expansion of the deliberative democracy concept broadens the idea of political participation, which for decades was restricted to electoral participation. The vote-centric view of politics considers the political system a mere aggregator of individual preferences, assuming that citizens form opinions in isolation and express them periodically in elections to determine majority positions (Carpini et al., 2004). In contrast, deliberative democracy processes opinions before voting occurs in democratic systems (Carpini et al., 2004).

Regarding the characteristics of deliberation, Moy and Gastil (2006) assert that for deliberation to occur, certain conditions must be met: openness to political conflict, absence of conventional forms of domination, clear and responsible arguments, and mutual understanding.

The key difference between democratic deliberation and other forms of conversation lies in its conflictual nature, the use of rational arguments, and the goal of reaching a consensus (Moy & Gastil, 2006). Since the mid-20th century, research has demonstrated the relationship between democratic deliberation and interpersonal conversations. Interpersonal conversation is a privileged space for dialogue, where several characteristics converge to facilitate reaching agreements, such as: (a) participants being in the same spatiotemporal context, (b) use of multiple symbolic signals, (c) specific orientation toward others, and (d) the possibility of feedback (Thompson, 1995).

Alongside interpersonal conversation, the relationship between deliberation and the media has also been intensely studied (Habermas, 1992; Moy & Gastil, 2006; Page, 1996). Habermas (1992) gave a central role to the media—particularly the press—in constructing the public sphere, stating that the media fuels rational debate among private individuals, constituting a public sphere for discussing issues of common interest. This debate, now including digital media and social media, continues to evolve (Habermas, 2022). Moy and Gastil (2006) argue that consuming news through the media opens up political conflicts that are part of deliberation.

But other authors have a more critical vision about the relation between media and democracy. Fenton (2024) questions the role that the media has played in the current crisis and says they have privileged the presence of corporate logic in the media, excluding the most progressive positions. In the same way, Papacharissi (2021) argued that platforms allow voices to be raised, but strong voices do not always lead to democracy.

Digitalization, especially the emergence of social media, has renewed interest in political deliberation studies, raising questions about differences between the effects of traditional media and new digital platforms. Social media have significant potential to boost political participation by reducing organization time, lowering economic costs of participation, helping build collective identities (Dalton et al., 2009), reaching critical masses, forming groups with common interests, accessing vast amounts of information, and increasing social capital (Ellison et al., 2014; Valenzuela et al., 2009). These characteristics make social media

a space of constant interaction, though these interactions do not necessarily lead to political deliberation and may also foster other forms of personal interaction.

Since 2016, doubts have increased about the beneficial effects of social media on public deliberation. The proliferation of fake news, echo chambers, election campaigns using micro-targeting techniques to understand voters, and opaque algorithms has heightened skepticism about these platforms' contribution to democracy (Chambers, 2023).

2.2. Public Sphere and Understanding and Strategic Orientations

One of the most important authors on the relationship between public opinion, deliberation, and democracy is Jürgen Habermas. In 1992, he published *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, a seminal text in the debate on this topic. In his most recent writings, Habermas (2022, p. 157) further explores the media's role, stating that one of their tasks is to generate "competing public opinions" to meet the standards of public deliberation.

Consistent with his description of the public sphere, Habermas (1984) proposed two orientations for social interactions: (a) strategic (goal-oriented) and (b) communicative (understanding-oriented). The first seeks to manipulate others to achieve predefined objectives, while the second seeks to establish relationships through language and reason, aiming to reach consensus, which all actors in the situation deem legitimate.

Habermas suggests that face-to-face interactions can involve reason and achieve significant levels of understanding. Achieving agreements, according to Habermas (1984), is essential for societies' symbolic and normative interactions. His proposal underscores the importance of rationally established decision-making processes, as adherence to norms shaped by collective participation leads to final decisions being considered legitimate by all affected parties.

The theoretical discussion on the role of listening in deliberation processes is strongly linked to Habermas's concept of understanding orientation. It is considered particularly important in contexts where there are significant differences between the parties (Eveland et al., 2020). The effectiveness of democratic deliberation hinges not only on free expressions and voices, but also on the willingness to listen (Bickford, 1996; Dobson, 2014; Eveland et al., 2020; Zúñiga et al., 2012). Advancing democratic deliberation requires forms of dialogue that take seriously the exchange of both listening and speaking, such as "active listening" defined by Bickford (1996), "engaged listening" of Zúñiga et al. (2012), and Dobson's (2014) notion of "apophatic listening." The growing attention given to listening is a response to the importance that has been given to oral expression in conversations in the study of political communication (Barber, 1984/2003; Eveland et al., 2020).

Habermas's proposal has undergone limited empirical testing. One example is the work of Rojas (2008), who examined how conversational orientations influence key variables within democratic systems, focusing specifically on strategic orientation and understanding orientation. His model was later adopted by Eveland et al. (2023) to measure political listening at the individual level.

2.3. Modes of Media, Media Consumption, and Deliberation

The nature of the relationship between media use and public deliberation has been a longstanding subject of study. Today, this debate has shifted, particularly to the digital world and social media, where contested positions exist regarding how these platforms influence citizen debates. Various authors have presented an optimistic view of social media, especially in fostering political participation. Social media reduces the economic costs of organizing, enables messages to reach a large audience, contributes to the formation of social and individual identity (Dalton et al., 2009), builds trust among individuals pursuing similar political goals, and allows other affordances. On the other hand, some studies have found a negative impact of social media on political participation (Kubin & von Sikorski, 2021), particularly associating it with high levels of polarization due to the creation of echo chambers. In these spaces, users interact only with those who share similar political views, reinforcing their beliefs in a comfort zone devoid of challenges to their ideas (Vaccari & Valeriani, 2021). Similarly, social media can foster incivility, marked by offensive language, ridicule of dissenting opinions, and heightened polarization (Kabat-Farr et al., 2018). Using representative panel data from the US, Goyanes et al. (2023) demonstrated that consuming news on social media correlates with various measures of political incivility.

Different research has shown the relation between media news use with deliberation, interpersonal discussion, and political participation (McLeod et al., 1999; Moy & Gastil, 2006). In this line, the media (as newspapers or television) don't always have direct effects on deliberation. Subsequently, online news media and social media were gradually incorporated into these types of studies (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2017; Halpern & Gibbs, 2013). But traditional media and post-internet media (digital media and social media) have different characteristics. Traditional media managed to reach mass audiences thanks to the possibility of communication being transmitted and received in distinct spatiotemporal contexts. In contrast, digital media and social media have managed to maintain their mass appeal while simultaneously including possibilities for specific communications and constant feedback. To contrast with traditional media, Ellison and Boyd's (2013, p. 158) define social media as platforms:

> In which participants (1) have uniquely identifiable profiles that consist of user-supplied content, content provided by other users, and system-level data; (2) can publicly articulate connections that can be viewed and traversed by others; and (3) can consume, produce, and interact with streams of user-generated content.

Empirical analyses have shown that the ways of obtaining information in Chile can be grouped into three dimensions: traditional media, digital media, and use of social networks (Saldaña et al., 2024).

Beyond positive or negative effects, research has shown that different platforms have distinct impacts on deliberation. Studies indicate that comments on news websites contain more deliberative elements than discussions about the same events on social media (Esau et al., 2017). In traditional media, differences are also observed.

The previous theoretical discussion allows us to link our variables of interest: understanding orientation and strategic orientation with news consumption in the media, especially in social media. Although the orientations proposed by Habermas have rarely been studied directly, studies on deliberation show us the

positive impact of news consumption on social media on greater deliberation (Halpern & Gibbs, 2013). On the other hand, incidental exposure to news has become a variable to understand the role of the media in political processes where our research problem is located. In this area, the findings are also inconclusive. For some authors, incidental exposure to news allows people to access a greater diversity of opinions, escape echo chambers, and access better deliberative processes (Vaccari & Valeriani, 2021), while other researchers assert that there is no evidence that incidental exposure allows this.

Considering Jürgen Habermas's conceptualization, Rojas (2008) operationalization of understanding and strategic orientations, as well as the ongoing debate about the relationship between media use and public discussion, our first research question (RQ) asks that:

> RQ1: What is the relationship between news consumption on social media, traditional media, digital media, and understanding (a) and strategic orientations (b)?

Selective exposure is the action to select media outlets that match our opinions and worldviews (Hart et al., 2020; Iyengar & Hahn, 2009). Selective exposure exists as a testament to the plethora of media content available in the media environment (Van Aelst et al., 2017). Yet the abundance of media also allows for a reactive mode of consuming news: Individuals may end up consuming news content even if they initially engaged with media for entertainment or leisure. This form is referred to as "incidental or accidental exposure" (Ahmed et al., 2024; Valeriani & Vaccari, 2016).

The relationship between incidental exposure and political behaviors and attitudes has been a topic of interest for researchers in recent years. The evidence is inconclusive. Some studies show that there is no significant relationship between incidental exposure (e.g., Heiss & Matthes, 2019) and political participation, while other studies have found such a link (Kim et al., 2013; Vaccari & Valeriani, 2021). In an intermediate zone, there are studies such as that of Shahin et al. (2021), who found that incidental exposure is a determinant of online political participation, but not of offline political participation.

Incidental exposure is characterized by accidental access to news, which allows (unlike selective exposure) access to points of view that challenge one's own positions, or, as Vaccari and Valeriani (2021) suggest, which allows one to go "outside the bubble."

Given the relevance acquired by incidental exposure, as an independent variable to explain the occurrence of phenomena that occur in the political field, our second RQ is:

> RQ2: Is there a relationship between incidental exposure and strategic orientation and/or understanding orientation?

Individual characteristics, media affordances, and contextual factors influence the incidental consumption of news. Personalized feeds driven by algorithms curate content based on users' past behaviors and preferences, increasing the likelihood of incidental news encounters (Thorson & Wells, 2016). Younger users are generally more prone to experience incidental exposure, although findings on other demographic factors, such as gender and education, remain inconclusive (Tewksbury et al., 2001). Political interest also plays a key role, with those more engaged in politics being more likely to encounter news incidentally (Serrano-Puche, 2018). Frequent

social media users, especially those relying on personal networks for information, similarly report higher rates of incidental exposure (Ahmadi & Wohn, 2018; Lee & Kim, 2017).

Contextual factors further shape incidental news exposure. Platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok differ in how frequently and prominently they display news content, which directly affects exposure rates (Lee & Xenos, 2020). Additionally, users with more diverse social networks are more likely to encounter unexpected news (Ahmadi & Wohn, 2018). The purpose of online activity also matters, as users going online for entertainment or social interactions are more likely to experience incidental news encounters than those explicitly seeking news (Matthes et al., 2025). The consequences of incidental exposure can extend beyond news consumption. For example, Vaccari and Valeriani (2021) found a positive relationship between incidental exposure and political participation, such as persuading others about political ideas, signing petitions, and engaging in protests or meetings across nine countries.

Finally, we are interested in studying the relationship between incidental exposure and different platforms in order to know if incidental exposure has an impact on deliberation according to the platform used or if the link may vary depending on the communication support. Thus, we pose the following RQ:

RQ3: Is there an interaction between incidental exposure and news consumption in social media, traditional media, and digital media with respect to understanding and strategic orientations?

2.4. Chilean Political Context

In October 2019, Chilean democracy faced a wave of mobilizations. The protests began due to a fare increase on the Santiago subway, the capital city, amounting to just $0.031 USD. These demonstrations quickly spread across the country, becoming the largest citizen protests in Chile since the return to democracy in 1990. The mobilizations took place in a country that, over the past 30 years, had stood out in Latin America for its political stability and economic growth (Gonzalez & Morán, 2020).

The mobilizations had political causes. In the preceding years, the political system increasingly struggled to address voters' demands. As a result, party identification sharply declined (Bargsted & Maldonado, 2018), trust in political parties fell significantly (Segovia, 2017), electoral participation progressively decreased since 1990 (Morales, 2020), and the ties between political parties and social movements weakened to the point of becoming almost non-existent (Disi, 2018).

On November 25, 2019, following over a month of protests, nearly all of the country's political parties, excluding those on the far right and far left, signed the Agreement for Social Peace and a New Constitution. This pact established a timeline to overcome the crisis and called for the creation of an assembly to draft—and later submit to a referendum—a new political constitution to replace the 1980 Constitution, which had been written during Augusto Pinochet's dictatorship. The proposal outlined three key milestones: (a) a plebiscite to let citizens decide whether they wanted a new constitution or to maintain the 1980's one; (b) if the new constitution option won, an assembly of 155 members would be elected to draft the new charter; (c) the text created by the assembly would be subjected to a referendum for approval or rejection.

The first referendum was held on October 20, 2020. In that vote, the option for a new constitution won by a wide margin, but due to the health crisis, the 155 members of the assembly tasked with drafting the text were only elected in May 2021. The constitutional assembly operated for one year (from July 4, 2021, to July 4, 2022). Its proposed constitution was ultimately rejected in a referendum by a substantial margin. However, during that year, there were constant discussions and debates among political parties, civic society organizations, and citizens, regarding the constitutional norms being considered. These conversations were accompanied by disinformation (Saldaña et al., 2024), polarization (Bellolio, 2022), and low participation from conservative political parties and residents living in politically marginalized cities (Fierro et al., 2024; Larraín et al., 2023).

3. Methodology

3.1. Data

The data for this study were obtained from a national survey conducted in Chile under the supervision of the Nucleo MEPOP. The sample was recruited by Netquest, an international polling company that maintains an online panel of survey participants in Chile. The sample comprised individuals aged 18 and above, including both men and women, from diverse regions, cities, and socioeconomic backgrounds. The full survey consisted of three waves; however, the present study draws on data from the first (n = 2,117) and third (n = 902) waves only. The first wave was conducted between 25 August and 3 September 2022, and the third wave between 21 October and 4 November 2022. The final analytical sample, consisting of respondents who participated in both wave 1 and wave 3, comprised 903 individuals. The survey design incorporated quotas based on gender, age, and socioeconomic status to ensure alignment with national distributions. Although the data used in this study were collected across two waves, the questions of interest were not replicated in both. Accordingly, a cross-sectional approach was adopted. This approach is considered appropriate given the short interval between the two waves and the limited variability in the variables of interest, a condition that was empirically verified. Data and codes used in this study are publicly available.

3.2. Variables

The first variable is understanding orientation. Following the previously mentioned literature (Rojas, 2008), understanding orientation was measured by asking respondents to indicate how much they agree or disagree with the following statements:

[under1] In political conversations, it is essential to listen carefully to what others have to say.

[under2] When I talk about politics, learning is more important to me than convincing.

[under3] Through my conversations, I promote solidarity with others.

[under4] At its core, politics aims to reach agreements through conversation.

[under5] When I talk about politics, I feel connected to the people I talk with.

[under6] Through conversation, political interests can be directed toward the common good.

[under7] Talking about politics allows me to understand why others see things differently.

[under8] Political conversations are important for protecting people's rights.

All responses were measured on a 5-point Likert scale, where 1 indicated *strong disagreement* and 5 indicated *strong agreement*. A factor was constructed using the eight responses ($\alpha = 0.86$).

The second variable is strategic orientation. Similarly, to measure strategic orientations, all respondents were asked to indicate how much they agree or disagree with the following statements:

[strate1] Saying one thing while thinking another is fundamental when talking about politics.

[strate2] I talk about politics if I gain something from it.

[strate3] In political conversations, form is more important than content.

[strate4] When talking about politics, it is sometimes better not to express what you truly think.

[strate5] People are tired of being asked to talk in order to reach political agreements.

[strate6] The head of the household decides and does not need to reach an agreement with other family members.

[strate7] Instead of so much discussion, it's better for someone to just say how things are.

[strate8] Trying to reach agreements through conversation is a waste of time; it's better if someone decides what to do and gets it done.

All responses were measured on a 5-point Likert scale, where 1 indicated *strong disagreement* and 5 indicated *strong agreement*. A factor was constructed using the eight responses ($\alpha = 0.75$).

The third variable is interpersonal trust. To measure interpersonal trust, respondents were asked: "Generally speaking, do you think most people can be trusted, or do you think you need to be careful when dealing with others?" Those who answered that most people can be trusted were coded as 1, and all others were coded as 0 (mean = 0.13).

The fourth variable is political efficacy. In line with the literature, political efficacy was divided into three distinct dimensions. First, external efficacy—i.e., beliefs about system responsiveness—was measured using the following statements:

[extef1] Politicians don't really care about what voters think.

[extef2] Politicians waste a lot of taxpayers' money.

[extef3] People like me have no influence over what is decided in parliament or government.

Similarly, internal efficacy—self-competence beliefs—was measured with the following statements:

[intef1] In general, I don't find it difficult to take a stance on political issues.

[intef2] People like me are qualified to participate in political discussions.

[intef3]"People like me have political opinions that are worth listening to.

Finally, following recent literature, an additional set of questions was used to measure online political efficacy, i.e., the belief that, because of the internet, it is possible to have more influence on politics and public issues:

[ope1] Using the internet, people like me have more political power.

[ope2] Using the internet, I can have more say over what the government does.

[ope3] Using the internet, it is easier for me to understand politics.

[ope4] Using the internet, public officials care more about what I think.

All responses were measured on a 5-point Likert scale, where 1 indicated *strong disagreement* and 5 indicated *strong agreement*. A factor was created for each of the dimensions (external efficacy: $\alpha = 0.74$; internal efficacy: $\alpha = 0.74$; online political efficacy: $\alpha = 0.84$).

The fifth variable is political interest. To measure this, respondents were asked to indicate their level of interest in the following areas:

[polint] Politics.

[procint] The constituent process.

[plebint] The exit plebiscite.

All responses were measured on a 5-point Likert scale, where 1 indicated *low interest* and 5 indicated *high interest* ($\alpha = 0.88$).

The sixth variable is news consumption. To measure this, respondents were asked to indicate how frequently they consume information using different channels. Specifically, we used three sets of questions: one related to traditional media, i.e., broadcast TV, cable TV, print media, and radio ($\alpha = 0.74$); another focused on digital media, i.e., online versions of traditional media, digital-only outlets, news podcasts, and social media platforms of traditional media ($\alpha = 0.76$); and a third set focused solely on social media, i.e., Facebook, X (formerly

Twitter), Instagram, WhatsApp, YouTube, and TikTok ($\alpha = 0.84$). All questions were measured on a 5-point Likert scale, where 1 indicated *low frequency* and 5 indicated *high frequency*.

The seventh variable is incidental exposure on social media. To measure this, respondents were asked to answer a set of questions, indicating how frequently they encounter the following:

[plebiscite] Do you come across political news or news about the plebiscite purely by accident?

[elections] Do you come across posts and information about the elections simply because other people in your network shared the news?

Each of these questions was measured using a 5-point Likert scale, where 1 represents *never* and 5 represents *very often*. A scale was created using these questions ($\alpha = 0.67$) through confirmatory factor analysis. Incidental exposure was measured for all sample members.

Lastly, we controlled the models by incorporating various sociodemographic variables. These included sex (45% men), socioeconomic status (range: 1 to 5, mean = 3.2), and age (range: 18 to 84, mean = 44.91).

In general, all measures were constructed using data from the first wave of the survey, with the exception of understanding orientation, strategic orientation, and incidental exposure, which were derived from data collected in the third wave.

3.3. Analysis

To test our RQs, the analysis was divided into two parts. First, as mentioned in Section 3.2, different factors were created for the variables using confirmatory factor analysis. We chose this technique because the selection of variables was theoretically grounded and supported by previous literature. Figures 1, 2, 3, and 4 present the measurement models for the nine factors we developed.
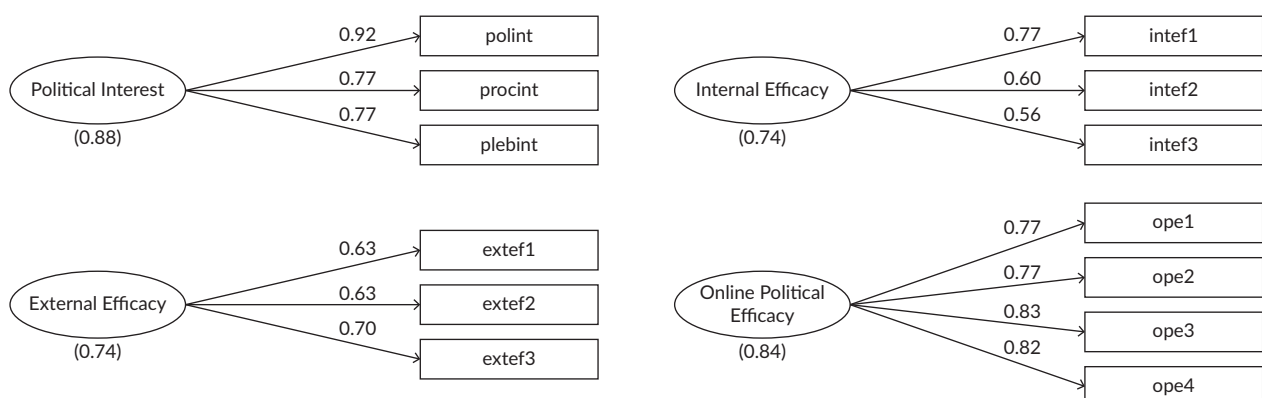

Figure 1. Measurement model for political efficacies and political interest. Notes: Ovals are factors and boxes are variables from the survey; the figure shows the reliability if an item is dropped and the general standard alpha in parentheses.
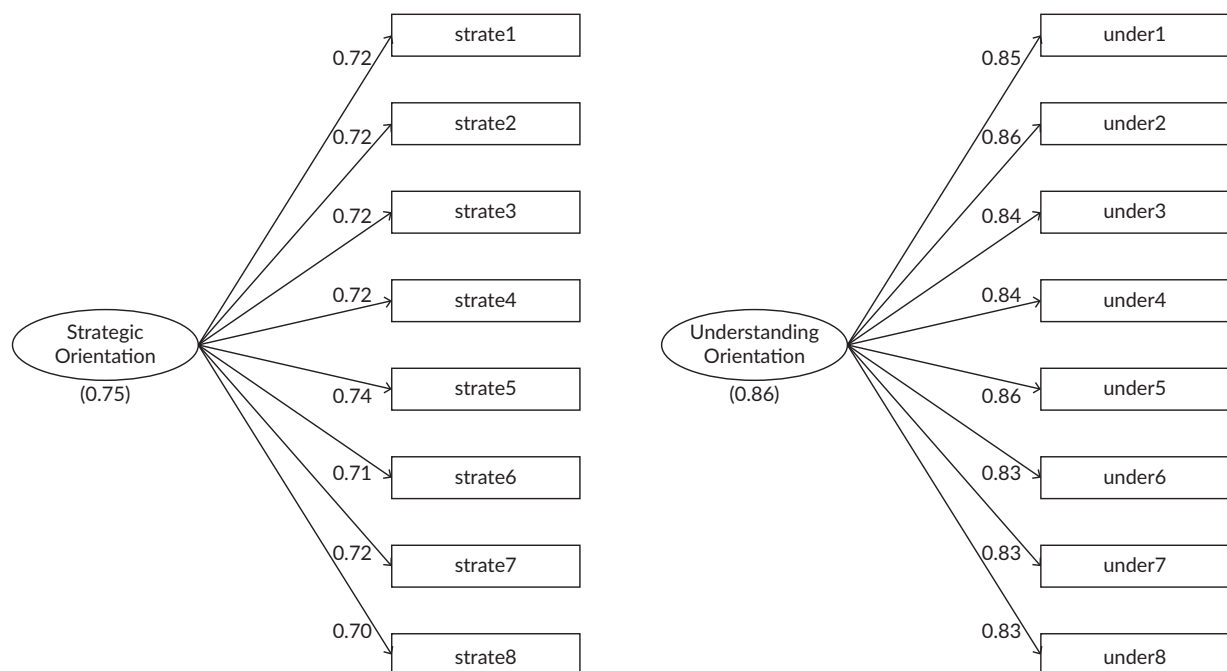
Figure 2. Measurement model for understanding and strategic orientations. Notes: Ovals are factors and boxes are variables from the survey; the figure shows the reliability if an item is dropped and the general standard alpha in parentheses.
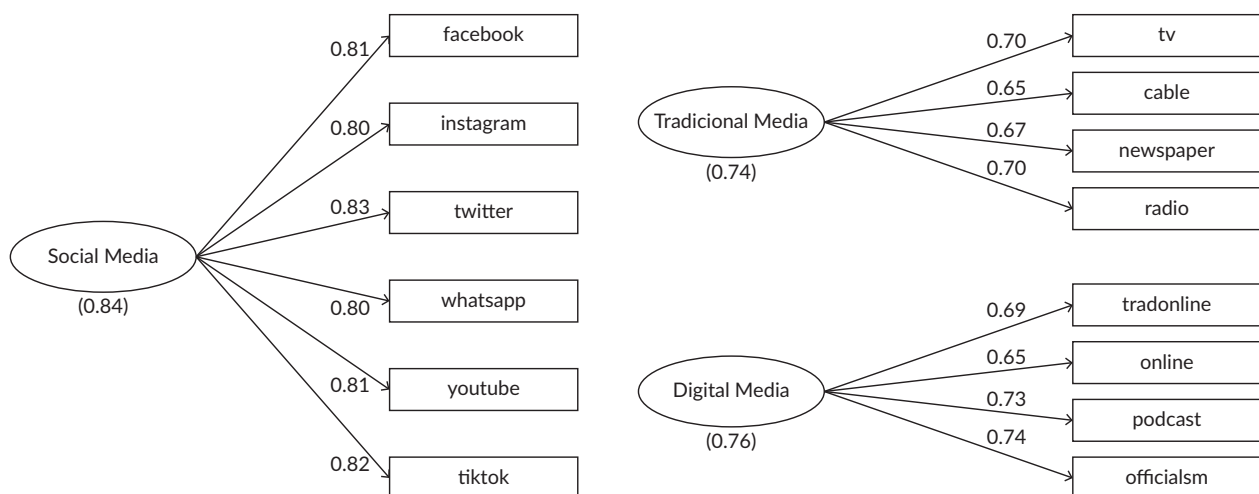

Figure 3. Measurement model for news consumption. Notes: Ovals are factors and boxes are variables from the survey; the figure shows the reliability if an item is dropped and the general standard alpha in parentheses.
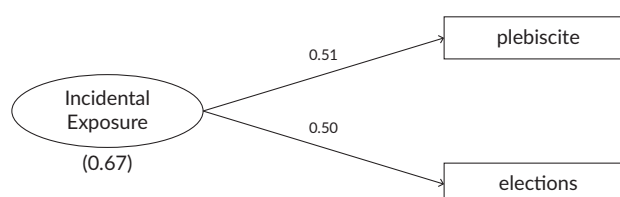

Figure 4. Measurement model for incidental exposure. Notes: Ovals are factors and boxes are variables from the survey; the figure shows the reliability if an item is dropped and the general standard alpha in parentheses.

The second part of the analysis explored which variables might be related to the propensity for having an understanding or strategic orientation toward political discussion using traditional OLS estimations. We recognize that, given the nature of our data and the design of the analysis, structural equation modeling could also be an appropriate method to test these interactions. The advantage of structural equation modeling is that it allows us to create latent factors from observable variables, as we did, and simultaneously test the interactions between variables in the model. Thus, to ensure the robustness of our results, we also applied structural equation modeling for the two orientations. These results, which are presented in the Supplementary File (Appendix 1), are consistent with the findings described in Section 4.

4. Results

Regarding the first RQ, as shown in Figure 5 (and Appendix 2, in the Supplementary File), our initial models suggest that exposure to different types of media may indeed be differently associated with understanding and strategic orientations. While the consumption of traditional media and social media is significantly and positively associated with a strategic orientation, the consumption of digital media (e.g., online versions of traditional media, digital-only outlets, news podcasts, and social media platforms of traditional media) is negatively associated with such orientation. However, our models do not show any significant association between the variables of interest (i.e., social media, traditional media, or digital media exposure) and an understanding orientation. Nonetheless, incidental exposure is positively and significantly associated with
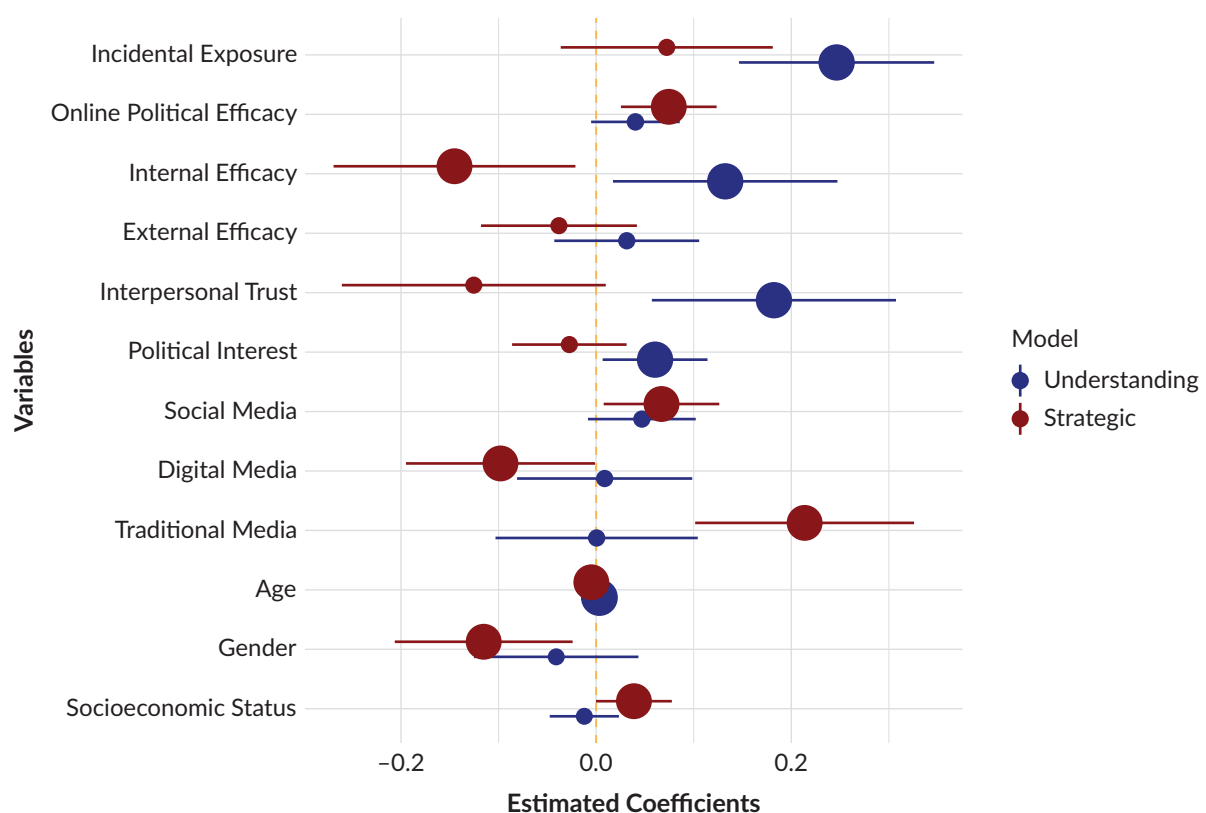

Figure 5. OLS estimates for understanding orientation and strategic orientation. Notes: Larger circles indicate statistically significant results (p-value < 0.05); the specific coefficients and standard errors are provided in the Supplementary File (Appendix 2).

an understanding orientation, indicating that individuals exposed to content they were not actively seeking—whether news they agree or disagree with—are more likely to adopt an understanding orientation (RQ2).

Beyond our RQs, these results provide valuable insights into the factors that may explain predispositions toward deliberation. For instance, older individuals appear more likely to adopt an understanding approach, while younger individuals tend to lean toward a more strategic approach. Similarly, men and individuals from lower socioeconomic groups are more likely to exhibit a strategic orientation in political conversations. Furthermore, greater interpersonal trust increases the likelihood of understanding orientation, although very few people in the sample had a high level of trust in others.

To address RQ3, additional models were estimated to examine interactions between incidental exposure and news consumption (see Table 1). These interactions were explored under the assumption that they might influence the propensity for understanding or strategic orientations. While no specific hypotheses were proposed regarding this issue, the results suggest that such interactions may indeed be relevant, particularly in explaining the understanding orientation. Our findings indicate that in all interactions—namely, with news consumption through traditional media, digital media, and social media—the interaction is positively and significantly associated with a greater likelihood of adopting a deliberative approach to political discussions.

Table 1. OLS estimates, with interactions between media use and incidental exposure.

	Understanding			Strategic		
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Sociodemographic						
Socioeconomic Status	−0.015 (0.018)	−0.012 (0.018)	−0.01 (0.018)	0.039* (0.019)	0.039* (0.019)	0.04* (0.019)
Sex	−0.019 (0.043)	−0.021 (0.043)	−0.019 (0.043)	−0.112* (0.046)	−0.112* (0.046)	−0.109* (0.046)
Age	0.004** (0.002)	0.004** (0.002)	0.004** (0.002)	−0.004* (0.002)	−0.004* (0.002)	−0.004* (0.002)
Media Exposure						
Traditional Media	−0.001 (0.053)	−0.001 (0.053)	0.01 (0.053)	0.211*** (0.057)	0.211*** (0.057)	0.214*** (0.057)
Digital Media	−0.014 (0.046)	−0.007 (0.046)	0.004 (0.046)	−0.103* (0.05)	−0.102* (0.05)	−0.101* (0.049)
Social Media	0.063* (0.028)	0.06* (0.028)	0.051 (0.028)	0.07* (0.03)	0.069* (0.03)	0.066* (0.03)
Incidental Exposure	0.094** (0.029)	0.094** (0.029)	0.09** (0.029)	0.046 (0.031)	0.046 (0.031)	0.045 (0.031)

Table 1. (Cont.) OLS estimates, with interactions between media use and incidental exposure.

	Understanding			Strategic		
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Political Attitudes						
External Efficacy	0.013 (0.037)	0.015 (0.038)	0.01 (0.038)	−0.041 (0.04)	−0.04 (0.04)	−0.044 (0.04)
Internal Efficacy	0.129* (0.059)	0.136* (0.059)	0.123* (0.059)	−0.148* (0.063)	−0.146* (0.063)	−0.151* (0.063)
Online Political Efficacy	0.051* (0.023)	0.048* (0.023)	0.048* (0.023)	0.077** (0.025)	0.076** (0.025)	0.075** (0.025)
Political Interest	0.078** (0.027)	0.076** (0.028)	0.071** (0.028)	−0.022 (0.03)	−0.022 (0.03)	−0.022 (0.029)
Interpersonal Trust	0.197** (0.064)	0.191** (0.064)	0.199** (0.064)	−0.122 (0.069)	−0.123 (0.069)	−0.116 (0.069)
Interactions						
Incidental Exposure*Traditional Media	0.146*** (0.041)			0.03 (0.044)		
Incidental Exposure*Digital Media		0.091** (0.032)			0.02 (0.034)	
Incidental Exposure*Social Media			0.066* (0.028)			0.051 (0.03)
Adjusted R^2	0.19	0.18	0.18	0.1	0.1	0.11

Notes: Coefficients are shown; standard errors are in parentheses; * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$; in order to include the interactions, variables are centered.

Figure 6 provides a graphical representation of these interactions to facilitate their interpretation. It is important to note that the incidental exposure variable was categorized into two levels, low and high, solely for the purpose of the plot. The figure reveals that the relationship between understanding orientation and media consumption, particularly traditional media and digital media consumption, appears to depend on the level of incidental exposure. For individuals with high incidental exposure, the relationship is positive, whereas for those with low incidental exposure, the relationship is negative.

In the specific case of social media, both low and high incidental exposure groups show a positive relationship between social media news consumption and understanding orientations, but the magnitude of this relationship differs between the two groups. These findings suggest that, as anticipated, incidental exposure is a key variable in understanding the relationship between media consumption and deliberative predispositions.
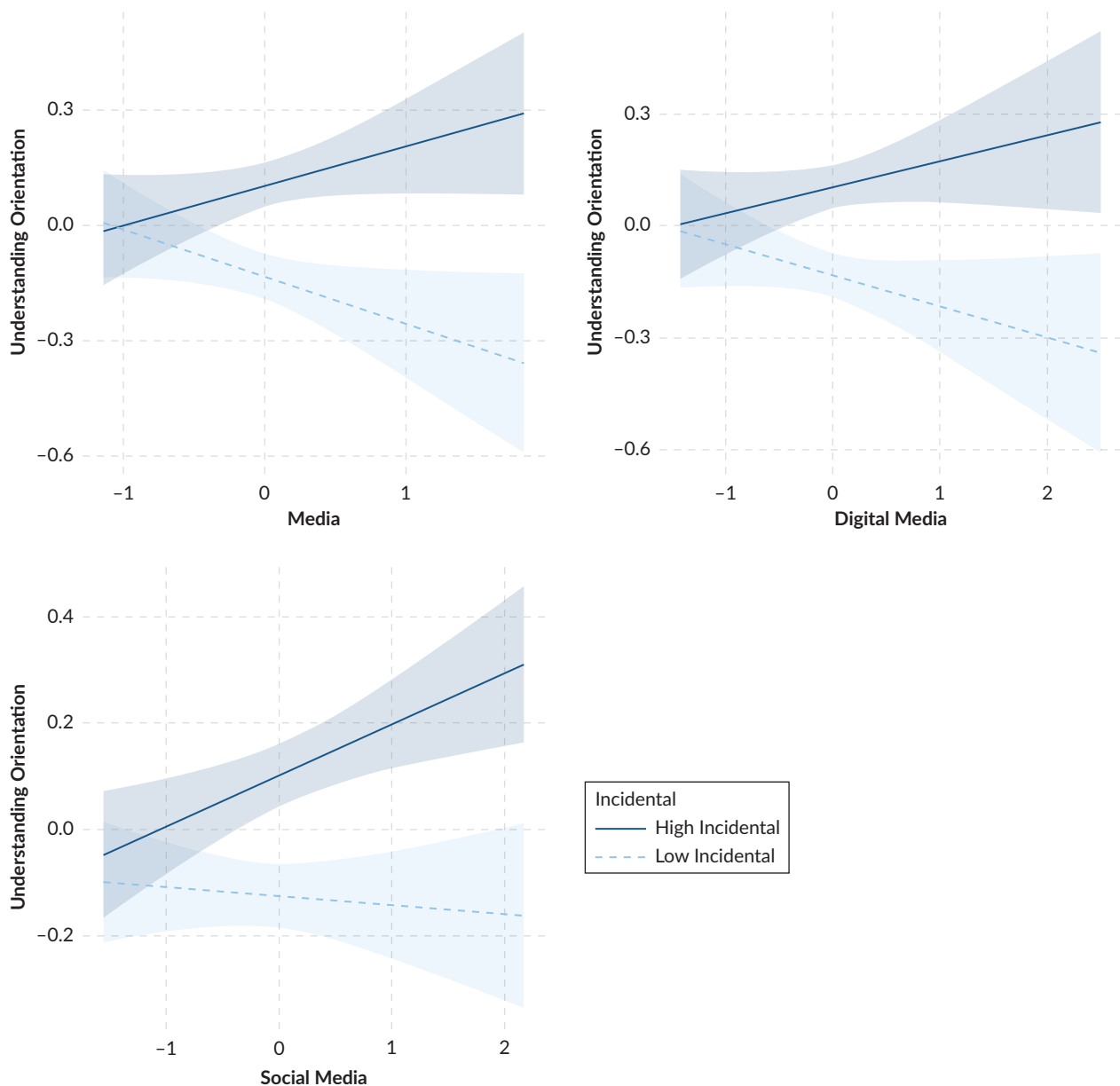
Figure 6. Graphical representation of significant interactions. Note: The figure shows predicted values at specific low and high incidental exposures using the models derived from continuous predictors.

5. Discussion

This study has analyzed the relationship between deliberative democracy and news consumption across different types of media. Deliberation, or the presence of an instrumental logic in communication, was measured using the concepts of understanding orientation and strategic orientation (Habermas, 1984). The research was conducted in Chile during the 2022 constitutional process.

Our results show that the two orientations—understanding and strategic—toward deliberation display different patterns of news consumption. News consumption across the various types of media analyzed—traditional, digital, and social media—is not related to understanding orientation, while exposure to news in

traditional and social media is positively associated with strategic orientation. These findings suggest that news consumption, regardless of media type, is not linked to citizens' political deliberation processes.

On the other hand, the research shows that incidental exposure has a positive and significant relationship with understanding orientation, indicating that unintentional encounters with information are associated with a greater orientation toward deliberation. In other words, the results show that the way individuals access news is related to their willingness to engage in mutual understanding, something that does not occur with the sheer amount of news exposure.

Moreover, the results highlight significant interactions between incidental exposure and media use modes for understanding orientation, but not for strategic orientation. Incidental exposure interacts significantly with traditional, digital, and social media use in shaping understanding orientation. Heavy users of all three forms of media who also have higher incidental exposure show greater understanding orientation compared to those with low incidental exposure.

Various studies have established a relationship between the media and processes of political deliberation (Habermas, 1992; Moy & Gastil, 2006; Page, 1996). According to these authors, the media use plays a central role in shaping a public sphere where citizens can meet to debate matters of common interest. However, the results of this study do not support the idea that mere access to information promotes rational deliberation on public affairs. It is noteworthy that this lack of connection between the intensity of information consumption and the willingness for rational debate with others is observed only very weakly in the case of social media. Our results contrast with previous studies that have shown the relationship between news consumption on social media and greater deliberation (Halpern & Gibbs, 2013).

But the very low relationship between intensity of news consumption and deliberation does not mean that the media are not connected to public deliberation. The findings show that the main determining factor for understanding orientation is incidental exposure. This result aligns with claims by some authors about the positive impact that incidental exposure can have on the relationship between media consumption and political conduct, such as political participation (Kim et al., 2013; Valeriani & Vaccari, 2016). Vaccari and Valeriani (2021) argue that incidental exposure allows access to diverse opinions, avoids highly polarized spaces, and increases political participation.

Our results may imply that the relationship between incidental exposure and understanding orientation is explained by the greater diversity of content, both thematic and ideological, received by individuals who consume news accidentally. This greater diversity of viewpoints may contribute to a pursuit of mutual understanding in their conversations with others and avoid participation in echo chambers where participants share the same political positions and are at greater risk of polarization.

The absence of a relationship between news exposure and understanding orientation contrasts with the findings of Rojas (2008), who identified a positive and significant relationship between attention to news—broadcast only by traditional media—and understanding orientation. In our research, the relationship between high levels of information consumption and understanding orientation only occurs when individuals also report a high level of incidental exposure. This situation may be explained by the sharp increase in informational content due to the widespread use of social media compared to 2008 (Rony et al., 2018), as well as the greater polarization of the media system.

Chile's 2022 constitutional plebiscite took place in a climate of polarization (Bellolio, 2022), misinformation (Saldaña et al., 2024), and a high degree of conflict among the political parties and movements represented in the Constitutional Convention. In short, it was an environment poorly suited for deliberation. In line with what was previously discussed, our findings show that within this context there was a strong relationship between incidental exposure and understanding orientation, but that mere access to informational content did not foster citizen deliberation.

A key limitation of this study lies in its reliance on cross-sectional data, which constrains our ability to establish causal relationships between deliberative orientations and media exposure. While the observed associations between understanding and strategic orientations and various media types are compelling, the directionality of these relationships remains unclear.

Future studies employing panel data or experimental designs could better address the issue of causality by tracking changes in orientations over time or manipulating media exposure to assess its direct effects on deliberative tendencies. Recognizing this limitation, we think that our study highlights important links between incidental exposure and deliberative orientations. Further research is needed to confirm the mechanisms underlying these relationships and to explore their implications for democratic engagement and public discourse.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Supplementary Material

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

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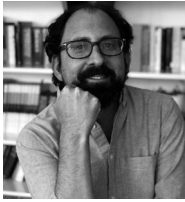
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