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Why Do You Feel That Way? Elaboration Questions and Feeling Heard in Political Talk

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Abstract

Across two studies, the current work sought to understand the impact of elaboration questions in political discussion on perceptions of feeling heard and future discussion intentions. Participants were presented with a recorded video of a political conversation where we manipulated the presence and absence of elaboration questions in political conversations surrounding homelessness (Study 1) and abortion (Study 2). Results indicate the presence of elaboration questions increased perceptions of being heard and intentions to engage in discussion in the future. We also found significant indirect results where the relationship between elaboration questions and intentions to engage in future discussions was mediated by feeling heard. These findings were never moderated by whether participants agreed with the political stance taken in the conversation.

Keywords

1. Introduction

While interpersonal political communication remains a prominent source of information for many (Hutchens et al., 2019), recent trends indicate that political deliberation is steadily declining among the American public

(Jurkowitz & Mitchell, 2020). These findings underscore the importance of continued scholarship surrounding political deliberation and conversations. Fundamentally, an extensive line of inquiry has asserted that deliberation is essential to a flourishing democracy (Fishkin, 2018). Scholars in this area posit that the open exchange of ideas exposes people to multiple viewpoints and eventually spurs the discovery of universal truths (Strandberg et al., 2019). Today, research abounds on the variables associated with political deliberation, including vast examinations of the precedents and antecedents of political discussion. Despite this wealth of scholarship, researchers have asserted that a gap remains in examining political discussion experimentally as scholars have overly relied on observational data (Eveland et al., 2011).

One gap that exists in the political discussion literature is the role of elaboration questions—those that solicit more information—in conversation. Elaboration questions refer to inquiries designed to encourage a conversation partner to provide more detail or expand on their thoughts (Chen et al., 2010). Research indicates that questions are essential in any conversation and are used to gather information, progress the conversation forward, or test whether the conversation partner shares one's logic (Chen et al., 2010; Clark, 1996). Generally, scholarship suggests that there are multiple kinds of questions that one may use in a conversation. For instance, scholars have examined the impact of tag questions (e.g., assuming a partner agrees; Blankenship & Craig, 2007) and rhetorical questions (e.g., questions not intended to be answered; Petty et al., 1981) on persuasion in political discussions. However, less research has examined the role of elaboration questions, asking a conversation partner the reasoning behind their beliefs or expounding upon the ideas they have expressed (Chen et al., 2010). Elaboration questions may be an invaluable component of productive political conversations, as scholars have found that asking follow-up questions during deliberation increases people's warmth toward their conversation partner.

A second gap in the political discussion literature is the notion of feeling heard in deliberation. While there is ample research on the impact of listening in political discussions (e.g., Eveland et al., 2020), a gap remains in studies examining tactics that can make people feel more heard in conversation. Studies examining how heard people feel exist primarily outside of political communication, with scholars in health communication seeking to understand how heard patients feel from their doctors (Edelen et al., 2022). As such, the phenomenon remains understudied in political communication contacts with rare examinations (see Roos et al., 2023, for an exception). Further, another understudied area of interpersonal political communication scholarship is the examination of variables that could impact people's future discussion intentions. Previous research in this area has found that exposure to civil disagreement spurred enthusiasm, which is associated with greater intentions to engage in future political discussions (Hutchens et al., 2019). Although extensive research exists on variables that impact people's information-seeking behavior in the form of news exposure (e.g., Strömbäck et al., 2020), a gap remains in investigating variables that could impact information-seeking in the form of discussion.

The current work seeks to fill the above-outlined gaps in the literature by manipulating the presence and absence of elaboration questions in political discussions through two experiments. In each experiment, we seek to understand whether the presence of elaboration questions impacts how heard people feel in a discussion and their intentions for future discussions. Next, we examine whether feeling heard in a political discussion could explain how the presence of elaboration questions could influence people's future political discussion intentions. In other words, we examine the mediating role of feeling heard between elaboration questions and intentions to engage in future discussions. Finally, we assess whether political agreement serves as a moderating variable in our model. That is, we test if the impact of elaboration questions on our

outcomes of interest varies depending on whether people agree with the political stances taken in the conversation. To ensure that our findings are not linked to a specific political issue, we test our hypotheses through two experiments on two political issues: homelessness and abortion. Our findings contribute to a growing body of work that seeks to improve democratic discourse through experimentally tested interventions (Argyle et al., 2023), including recent advances in using AI to foster more constructive political engagement.

2. Deliberative Democracy

We ground the current research in the work surrounding deliberative democracy. Researchers in this area assert that democracy thrives when the public freely engages in discussions with political salience (Strandberg et al., 2019). Essentially, the logic underlying deliberative democracy is that deliberation allows people to reflect during a political conversation and embrace alternative viewpoints (Curato et al., 2017; Fishkin, 2018). As Dobson (2014) argues, listening is not merely a communicative courtesy, but a democratic necessity—critical to recognition, representation, and reconciliation in pluralistic societies. However, Mutz (2006) highlights the tension between deliberative ideals and participatory outcomes, showing that exposure to disagreement can sometimes decrease political engagement, hence underscoring the importance of fostering political conversations that feel respectful and constructive. A summative review of the literature surrounding this line of inquiry noted that deliberative democracy is an essential, attainable norm to maintain a healthy democracy, as it is linked to higher levels of political engagement and lower levels of political polarization (Curato et al., 2017). To this end, extensive scholarship has examined certain facets of deliberation that may impact people's feelings toward the out-party, such as political listening (Eveland et al., 2023; Morrell, 2018), perspective taking (Muradova, 2021; Todd & Galinsky, 2014), and reflection (Muradova & Arceneaux, 2021). For example, experimental investigations into deliberative democracy have found that when people are placed into heterogenous political conversations, they are more willing to listen to the opposition and may revise their issue position (Fishkin & Luskin, 2005). In other words, research has found that civil political deliberation, defined as respectful, non-hostile engagement, is associated with increased tolerance toward the political opposition (Levendusky & Stecula, 2021), even though many citizens now avoid cross-cutting conversations due to perceived incivility or interpersonal risk. While our study is grounded in deliberative theory, the conversational model we test aligns more closely with what Mansbridge (1999) refers to as "everyday talk"—the informal, interpersonal conversations that occur outside of institutional settings. Unlike structured deliberative formats such as citizen juries or deliberative polls, everyday talk features less rigid norms and more variable expectations of reciprocity. Yet, scholars argue that these informal exchanges are equally critical to sustaining a deliberative democracy, particularly when they model openness, responsiveness, and the willingness to hear opposing views.

3. Questions and Future Discussion Intentions

While extensive extant scholarship has generally examined the impact of political deliberation on feelings toward one's out-party (Levendusky & Stecula, 2021), less research has investigated specific facets of deliberation on outcomes. Research has broadly indicated that questions are a fundamental component of any conversation, as they progress the conversation forward, test whether the conversation partner shares one's logic, and encourage interaction (Chen et al., 2010; Clark, 1996). Generally, interpersonal scholars contend that several types of questions may be used in conversation. For instance, scholars have examined

the impact of tag questions (Blankenship & Craig, 2007) and rhetorical questions (Petty et al., 1981) on persuasion in political discussions. In their work, Blankenship and Craig (2007) found that tag questions, or questions such as "don't you agree?" to gauge agreeableness from partners, impacted message processing depending on the credibility of the source. In other words, the presence of questions influenced how critically participants processed the information in the conversation if it came from a reliable source. These findings echo previous research, which found that using rhetorical questions in conversation was associated with increased cognitive elaboration (Petty et al., 1981). Moreover, interpersonal scholars have found that asking questions is important in understanding how people process messages in conversation (Chen et al., 2010).

Expanding extant research, the current work seeks to understand the impact of elaboration questions in political conversations on future discussion intentions. We posit that intentions for future political discussions hinge on how participants depart a conversation. If participants leave an interaction enthusiastically, they are more likely to engage in future political conversations (Hutchens et al., 2019). To this end, previous research has found that specific questions impact one's perceptions of their conversation partner (Collins et al., 2022; Huang et al., 2017; Itzchakov & DeMarree, 2022). For example, researchers have found that when participants asked questions in a conversation, they reported liking their conversation partner more (Huang et al., 2017). More specifically, Itzchakov and DeMarree (2022) found that both conversationalists left the interaction positively when the listener showed genuine interest in the speaker by probing them for more information. Specifically, they found that conveyed interest was associated with psychological safety, retrospective introspection, and decreased defensive processing (Itzchakov & DeMarree, 2022). Probing a conversation partner for more information may manifest as elaboration questions, defined by Chen et al. (2010) as questions geared toward soliciting additional information from a conversation partner. These may include questions such as, "Why do you think that?," "could you tell me more about that?" and "can you tell me what's going on?" (Chen et al., 2010, p. 851). Scholars contend that elaboration questions generally originate from a place of compassion whereby one tries to understand the other's perspective (Itzchakov & DeMarree, 2022). Testing the impact of elaboration questions, Chen et al. (2010) found that participants who received an elaboration question were more likely to rate their conversation partner positively and were more willing to engage in future conversations with their partner. These findings were expanded by Collins et al.'s (2022) examination into factors that influence people's willingness for future discussions, finding that learning about the other's perspective, understanding their point of view, and hearing evidence of their beliefs were central considerations. Moreover, previous research suggests that expressing genuine interest in a conversation partner through elaboration questions should be associated with intentions for future political discussion. As such, we pose our first hypothesis:

> H1: The use of elaboration questions will be positively associated with a willingness to discuss politics in the future.

4. Elaboration Questions and Feeling Heard

We are also interested in whether the presence of elaboration questions influences how people feel in a conversation. Importantly, we distinguish between listening—a multidimensional process involving cognitive, behavioral, and affective engagement (Kluger & Itzchakov, 2022)—and feeling heard—a speaker's subjective sense of being acknowledged and understood (Roos et al., 2023). While related, the two are not synonymous: People can feel unheard despite attentive listening, or feel heard even without it (Borut et al.,

2025). Democratic listening requires more than attention—it demands openness to understanding, a standard central to deliberative legitimacy. In political communication, feeling heard remains under-theorized, despite its importance in fostering democratic engagement (Morrell, 2018).

Existing research suggests that active listening—often demonstrated through question-asking, paraphrasing, and nonverbal responsiveness—can foster interpersonal trust and future engagement (Collins et al., 2022; Itzchakov et al., 2017). However, questions alone do not guarantee a sense of being heard; if not followed by responsive listening, they can even backfire (Van Quaquebeke & Felps, 2018). This distinction is especially relevant in therapeutic and health contexts, where open-ended questions are most effective when paired with validation and empathic attention (Myers, 2000; Robinson & Heritage, 2006). Similarly, political interventions that aim to reduce polarization through listening show that the quality of attention given to a speaker can shape both relational outcomes and persuasive potential (Moin et al., 2024; Santoro et al., 2025). In one of the few conversational studies to measure this directly, Ward (2008) found that receiving genuine, elaborative questions made participants feel acknowledged and respected.

Our study uses observers to assess the perception of feeling heard, which introduces important limitations. Observers are not addressees in the conversation and do not co-construct mutual understanding, as outlined in Clark's (1996) model. Bavelas et al. (2000) similarly show that listener feedback directly influences speaker delivery—something observers cannot replicate. Nonetheless, trained observers can reliably assess key listening behaviors (Itzchakov et al., 2017), and research on imagined and simulated interactions (Eveland et al., 2023) supports the use of indirect perspectives to model conversational dynamics. While we recognize that observers cannot directly access a speaker's internal experience, we argue that perceptions of being heard can still be meaningfully modeled through this design. We therefore hypothesize that the presence of elaboration questions will be associated with a greater perceived feeling heard in political conversations:

> H2: The use of elaboration questions in a political discussion will be positively associated with feeling heard in the conversation.

5. Feeling Heard and Intention for Future Political Discussion

The above-outlined work suggests that when people feel warm toward a conversation partner, they are more likely to participate in future discussions. Although conducted in a non-political setting, Huang et al. (2017) found that individuals were more likely to seek future interactions when their conversation partner asked questions, which in turn increased feelings of warmth and connection. While the context differs from political communication, this finding supports broader interpersonal theories suggesting that question-asking can foster relational trust and engagement—both of which are also central to productive political dialogue. When engaging in a heavy (e.g., emotionally taxing) conversation, feeling heard increases self-esteem and feelings of acceptance, open-mindedness, and support (Itzchakov & DeMarree, 2022). These feelings, fostered by the psychological safety of feeling heard, increase willingness to let one's guard down and be honest (Eveland et al., 2023)—all essential factors in having a productive conversation amidst conflict. Extant research posits that active listening, defined as attentive and nonjudgmental engagement with a speaker's message through both verbal and nonverbal cues (Kluger & Mizrahi, 2023), does not aim to end the conversation but to connect opposing views and enhance the likelihood of a future exchange (Bickford, 1996). These findings are supplemented by recent research, which found that when participants

leave an interaction enthusiastically, they are more likely to engage in future political discussions (Hutchens et al., 2019). The results of extant research inform our next hypothesis:

> H3: Feeling heard in a political discussion will be positively associated with an intention to discuss politics in the future.

Considering the research outlined above, we believe there could be an indirect relationship between elaboration questions and future discussion intentions through feeling heard. While previous research has not shown an instance of feeling heard as a mediating variable, scholars have asserted that mediational studies are pertinent to understanding interpersonal communication processes (Eveland et al., 2011). The above-outlined research suggests that conveying genuine interest and active listening in conversations by asking elaboration questions should increase how heard conversation partners feel (Collins et al., 2022; Itzchakov & DeMarree, 2022; Myers, 2000). Further, extant research suggests that when people feel understood in conversation, they are more likely to engage in future discussions and interactions (Chen et al., 2010; Huang et al., 2017). In our article, correlations between elaboration questions and future discussion intentions could flow through feeling heard. As hypothesized above, if people are exposed to elaboration questions, they could feel more heard in a conversation. Further, feeling heard in a conversation should be associated with higher intentions to engage in future discussions. Therefore, we pose a hypothesis that considers each relationship in tandem:

> H4: There will be a positive indirect relationship between the use of elaboration questions and intentions to discuss politics in the future through feeling heard in a political discussion.

6. Moderating Role of Political Agreeance

Extensive research on intergroup relations has indicated that people perceive the world in terms of groups, typically viewing in-groups more favorably than out-groups (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Within the framework of social identity theory, a specific line of research has examined partisan reassurance—how people respond to congenial (e.g., agreeable) political messages (Huddy et al., 2015). For instance, Huddy et al. (2015) found that exposure to politically reassuring content produced enthusiasm among in-group partisans. Relatedly, partisans often exhibit confirmation bias, selectively consuming information that aligns with their political identity (Knobloch-Westerwick & Kleinmann, 2012). Taken together, these findings suggest that people are more receptive to political messages that align with their partisan identity.

That said, the question of whether listening effects are moderated by political agreeance remains open. For example, Itzchakov et al. (2017) did not find evidence that the effect of high-quality listening was moderated by political congruence between speaker and listener. Nevertheless, given the emotionally and morally charged nature of political identity, and the broader literature on selective exposure and in-group preference, we test whether political agreeance may shape how elaboration questions are perceived in political discussion. Therefore, we hypothesize:

> H5: The use of elaboration questions will be positively associated with feeling heard in a political discussion when viewing a message they agree with, in comparison to viewing a message they disagree with.

7. Conditional Indirect Effects

Generally, the literature up until this point highlights a communication process whereby elaboration questions will be associated with future political discussion intentions through feeling heard in the conversation. As hypothesized above, we believe that the use of elaboration questions will be associated with higher levels of feeling heard in a political conversation and that higher levels of feeling heard will be associated with stronger intentions to engage in future political discussions. Previous research has shown that partisans perceive reassuring political messages positively (Huddy et al., 2015), leading us to hypothesize that the correlation between the use of elaboration questions and feeling heard will be conditional on people's agreeance with the message. Hence, we believe there should be a positive indirect relationship between congenial political discussions and future political discussion intentions through feeling heard. We pose our final hypothesis:

> H6: The use of elaboration questions will positively influence future political discussion intent, mediated by feeling heard among those who agree with the message, in comparison to viewing a message they disagree with.

8. Study 1

8.1. Method

The above-outlined hypotheses culminate into our proposed model (see Figure 1) and were tested by manipulating question-asking, political view, and political agreement experimentally in November 2023. Participants included a census-matched sample of US adults, a population matched by political affiliation, biological sex, and age, recruited through Prolific.co. Prolific is an online research tool in which researchers can post their studies and recruit participants who sign up voluntarily to participate in the study in return for a specified payment. An apriori power analysis run in G*Power (alpha = 0.05, power = 0.95) indicated that a

H4: Indirect effect
H6: Conditional indirect effect
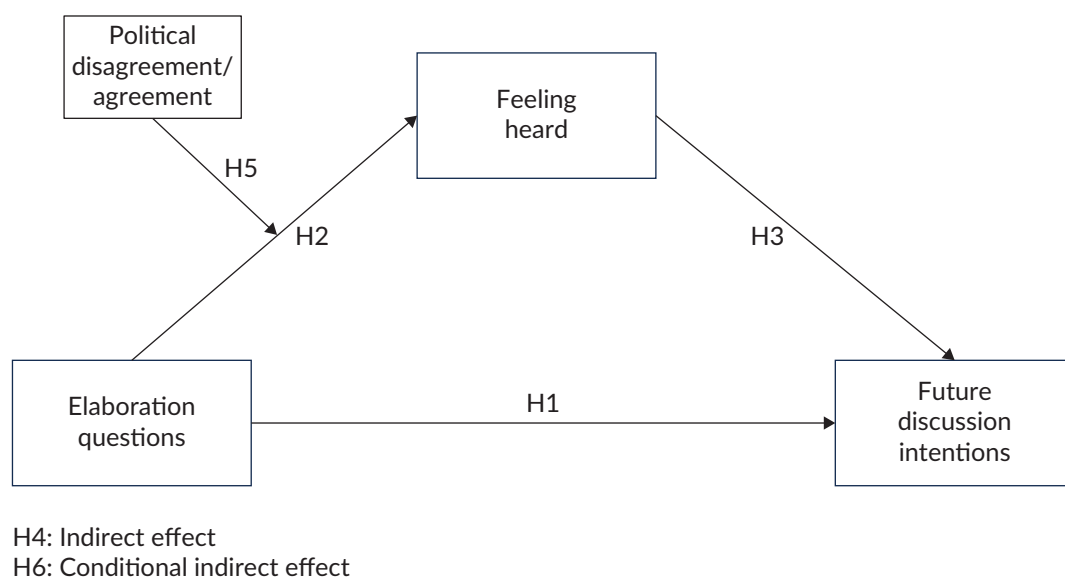
Figure 1. Proposed conceptual model.

final sample size of 400 was needed to detect a small-to-medium effect ($f = 0.20$). We aimed to over-recruit and obtained 600 responses to ensure that this targeted number ($N = 400$) was reached after exclusions for inattentive participants and after removing pure political independents who did not specify that they leaned toward either the Republican or Democratic party. As such, 507 participants remained for the final analysis.

8.2. Procedure and Sample

Qualified (based on the outlined demographic census-matching) prolific participants were shown a short description of the study. If they were interested in participating, they were redirected to our Qualtrics questionnaire, where they were first prompted to grant consent. Participants were then placed into one of four experimental conditions (outlined below) consisting of an approximately two-minute-long video of a political discussion. Post-exposure, participants completed a manipulation check question and then answered an index on whether they would feel heard within the conversation and their intentions for future political discussion. The survey concluded with a demographic slate of questions.

While not included in our models, we also measured standard demographic and political items in our survey. These included age ($M = 46.08$, $SD = 15.78$), biological sex (52.3% female), gender (51.3% female, 47.5% male, 1.2% other), race (81.7% non-Hispanic White), education (measured on a 9-point scale ranging from 0 *none* to 8 *post-graduate training or school*, with 6 being *technical, trade, or vocational school after high school*; $M = 6.97$, $SD = 1.65$), income (measured on a 10-point scale ranging from 0 *less than $10,000* to 9 *$150,000 or more*, with 4 being *40 to under $50,000*; $M = 4.91$, $SD = 2.64$), and political ideology (measured using a single item ranging from 0 *very conservative* to 6 *very liberal*; $M = 3.31$, $SD = 1.95$).

8.3. Manipulations

Before recording the videos, we pretested two scripts (one left-leaning and one right-leaning) to ensure they were perceived as distinctly favoring the political left or right. After pretesting the scripts, we interviewed undergraduate students to play each role. We pretested their headshots to ensure they were rated similarly on perceived attractiveness, trustworthiness, friendliness, and assertiveness. To the best of our ability, this pretest ensured minimal confounding variables based on the appearance of the actors. Once the actors were selected, they were presented with the scripts and recorded the videos, and were compensated with gift cards for their efforts.

In regards to the stimuli, the video scripts depicted a political discussion between two individuals: Person A, who held firm beliefs, and Person B, who played a more passive role. Each condition featured a conversation about Maine legislation allocating over $100 million to address homelessness, including funding for affordable housing. While abortion—used in Study 2—is a clearly partisan and morally polarized issue, homelessness presents a more ideologically ambiguous context. Public attitudes on homelessness can cut across traditional party lines, with support or opposition often shaped by beliefs about personal responsibility, structural inequality, or the role of government (Williams, 2017). In the left-leaning condition, Person A argued that public funding for housing and services helps reduce long-term costs, such as police responses to encampments. In the right-leaning condition, Person A contended that taxpayer money should not be used to support individuals who, in their view, should be able to secure housing "like the rest of us."

Person B, while subtly signaling disagreement, never explicitly stated her position. Despite being the one with stronger opinions, Person A asked all of the elaboration questions.

After pretesting the scripts, we created the final video scripts for the stimuli by placing elaboration questions based on previous research (Chen et al., 2010) into each. The first elaboration question was placed in the middle of the conversation—"But I'm curious about your thoughts. What do you think?"). The second was placed at the end of the conversation—"At the end of the day, this is a conversation, and I want to hear from you. Could you tell me more about why you think the way that you do?" In the video, the actors sit across from each other at a table to discuss. The researchers ensured that the actors stuck to the script. In the end, each video was around two minutes long.

Ultimately, there were four conditions created by two factors by which participants were randomly assigned: a left-leaning condition with elaboration questions ($n = 145$), a right-leaning condition with elaboration questions ($n = 149$), a left-leaning condition without elaboration questions ($n = 148$), and a right-leaning condition without elaboration questions ($n = 141$). The conditions were collapsed into two groups: those who viewed a video with elaboration questions ($n = 255$) and those who viewed a video without elaboration questions ($n = 252$).

Post-exposure, participants answered a manipulation check that asked what political issue their video surrounded. Ten participants were removed in total for incorrectly answering this question. We acknowledge that this manipulation check may not have been ideal as the independent variable did not surround issues, and we could have asked about elaboration questions instead.

We created a new variable from our condition assignments to create our moderating variable of whether participants agreed with the political message. If participants identified themselves as Republicans or considered themselves independents who leaned toward the Republican party, they were considered Republicans ($n = 224$). If participants identified as Democrats or considered themselves independents who leaned toward the Democratic party, they were considered Democrats ($n = 283$). We removed pure independents. If Republicans viewed the right-leaning message, they were coded as viewing a political message they agreed with; if they viewed the left-leaning message, they were coded as viewing a political message they disagreed with. The inverse was true for Democrats. In the end, 249 (49.1%) participants viewed a video that they politically disagreed with, and 258 (50.9%) participants viewed a video that they politically agreed with.

8.4. Measures and Analysis Plan

Our mediating variable of interest was how heard participants felt. To measure this, we asked participants to answer questions as though they were Person B, who was pictured, on a scale ranging from 0 *strongly disagree* to 6 *strongly agree*. While this is not a perfect measure of whether the participants would feel heard themselves, the video format of the stimuli did not allow the participants to engage in conversation. As such, participants (on behalf of Person B) were asked "in this conversation" and were presented with the following 8 items from previous research (Roos et al., 2023), including: "I felt heard by the other person," "I could say what I really wanted to say," "the other person was more concerned with herself than with what I said" (reverse coded), among others. These items were averaged together to create our measure of feeling heard ($M = 2.94$, $SD = 1.27$, $\alpha = 0.91$).

Our dependent variable of interest was the participants' intentions for future political discussion. To measure this, we utilized a three-item index (Hutchens et al., 2019) which asked participants how likely they were to do the following in the future: "post on a political discussion board," "comment on a political news story," and "discuss politics with a stranger online." Responses were measured on a seven-point scale ranging from 0 *very unlikely* to 6 *very likely* and were averaged together to create our measure ($M = 2.31$, $SD = 1.82$, $\alpha = 0.89$).

All the analyses were run using SPSS v. 29. For H1 and H2, we utilized one-way ANOVA tests. For H3–H6, we utilized the PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2022). For the relationships predicted by H3 and H4, we utilized the PROCESS macro model 4, reporting unstandardized betas and 95% confidence intervals. For the interaction effect predicted by H5 and the conditional indirect effects predicted by H6, we utilized the PROCESS macro model 7. No imputation for missing data was utilized, and all tests included 5,000 bootstrapped estimates.

8.5. Results

We begin with H1, which predicted that the use of elaboration questions would be positively associated with intentions to discuss politics in the future. The results of a one-way ANOVA indicated that there was a significant difference between conditions on whether participants would be willing to discuss politics in the future ($F(1, 505) = 42.47$, $p < 0.001$). Specifically, those who viewed the video with elaboration questions had higher intentions to discuss politics in the future ($M = 2.47$, $SD = 1.79$) than those who viewed the video without elaboration questions ($M = 2.16$, $SD = 1.84$). These results support H1.

We turn next to H2, which predicted that using elaboration questions in a political discussion would be positively associated with feeling heard in the conversation. The results of a one-way ANOVA indicated significant differences between the conditions ($F(1, 505) = 3.86$, $p = 0.05$). Indeed, those who viewed a video with elaboration questions were more likely to feel heard on behalf of Person B ($M = 3.29$, $SD = 1.17$) than those who viewed a video without elaboration questions ($M = 2.59$, $SD = 1.27$). These results support H2.

H3 predicted that feeling heard in a political discussion would be positively associated with an intention to discuss politics in the future. The results of PROCESS macro model 4 indicated that this was the case. Those who felt heard on behalf of Person B had higher intentions to discuss politics in the future ($B = 0.25$, $SE = 0.07$, $p = 0.002$). In other words, feeling heard in a political discussion is associated with intentions to discuss politics in the future, supporting H3.

H4 predicted that there would be a positive indirect relationship between the use of elaboration questions and intentions to discuss politics in the future through feeling heard in a political discussion. To test the hypotheses, we utilized PROCESS macro model 4. The results of this path model revealed a significant indirect relationship ($B = 0.18$ [95% CI 0.07–0.30]). In other words, those who viewed the video with elaboration questions felt more heard on behalf of Person B, which was then associated with higher future discussion intentions. These results support H4.

We turn next to H5, which predicted that elaboration questions would be associated with feeling heard in a political discussion among those who politically agreed with the message. We tested this hypothesis using the PROCESS macro model 7. The results of this analysis did not indicate a significant interaction effect ($B = -0.13$,

$SE = 0.21$, $p = 0.535$). In other words, participants did not feel more heard on behalf of Person B if they politically agreed (or disagreed) with the message. These results fail to find support for H5.

Lastly, we turn to H6, which predicted positive conditional indirect effects. As noted with H5, there was not a significant interaction, and thus, the indirect effect was also not moderated (Index = −0.03, $SE = 0.06$, [95% CI −0.16–0.07]). Thus, H6 was not supported.

While the results of Study 1 support our hypotheses statistically, we also consider the substantive significance of these effects. The difference in future discussion intentions between the elaboration and no elaboration conditions (H1) was 0.32 on a 6-point scale—approximately 5% of the total scale range. Although statistically significant, this suggests a modest shift in perceived feeling heard. By contrast, the difference in discussion intentions (H1) was larger, at 0.71 (roughly 12% of the scale), with participants in the elaboration condition reporting intentions to engage that exceeded the midpoint of the scale, while those in the control condition fell below it. This indicates a more meaningful behavioral outcome. Similarly, the mediation effects (H3 and H4) were statistically significant but reflected moderate effect sizes (e.g., $B = 0.25$; indirect effect $B = 0.18$). Together, these findings suggest that elaboration questions may have a small but consistent impact on how observers perceive the dynamics of political conversations, particularly around future willingness to engage.

8.6. Discussion

Study 1 attempted to understand whether elaboration questions influence people's intentions to engage in future political discussions through feeling heard. The results of Study 1 make it clear that the mere presence of genuine interest by way of elaboration questions is enough to influence how heard people felt on behalf of an actor and their personal intentions to engage in future political discussions. These findings confirm previous research on the utility of questions in conversations (e.g., Chen et al., 2010; Collins et al., 2022; Robinson & Heritage, 2006), echoing that genuine interest has favorable outcomes. Moreover, it appears that the use of elaboration questions and a perception of feeling heard are relevant variables in understanding people's future discussion intentions, pertinent to research on deliberative democracy (Fishkin & Luskin, 2005) and dialogic democracy (Morrell, 2018). However, we did not find a significant conditional relationship between elaboration questions and feeling heard among those who agreed with the political stance of the conversation they viewed. These findings are at odds with research on partisan reassurance (Huddy et al., 2015), suggesting that it may not be the content of the conversation that is most relevant to satisfaction and future intentions but rather specific conversational tactics. While this study revealed an interesting pattern of results, we wanted to examine whether these findings would hold across political issues—specifically, an issue that people hold in high moral regard.

9. Study 2

Study 2 sought to replicate the findings of Study 1 across political issues by examining abortion, a topic that is not only associated with moral stances but also strongly polarized along ideological lines. Research has shown that abortion attitudes are shaped by deeply held moral beliefs, often rooted in religious identity rather than partisan cues alone (Jędryczka et al., 2023), and that moral convictions are typically more deeply entrenched than ideological beliefs (Crimston et al., 2022). Moreover, abortion consistently ranks among the most divisive political issues, with clear partisan splits in both public opinion and policy debates (Pew Research Center, 2023).

Given its ideological salience and moral intensity, abortion presents a particularly stringent test for examining how conversational dynamics—such as elaboration questions—affect perceived feeling heard. As such, our hypotheses for Study 2 remain the same as in Study 1.

9.1. Method and Procedure

We tested our hypotheses in Study 2 by conducting another survey-embedded experiment on Prolific.co in November 2023. We recruited 600 participants using the same population-matched sampling procedure. After removing inattentive participants ($n = 3$ who failed the manipulation check) and pure political independents who did not specify that they leaned toward the Republican and Democratic parties ($n = 99$), the final sample consisted of 498 participants.

The procedure for Study 2 remained identical to Study 1, except for the political issue.

9.2. Sample

Again, we measured standard demographic and political items in our survey. These included age ($M = 46.39$, $SD = 15.47$), biological sex (50.8% male), gender (49.6% female, 50% male, 0.4% nonbinary), race (81.9% non-Hispanic White), religion (measured on a 12-point scale including common religions in the US; 37.6% Christian, 15.3% agnostic), education (measured on a 9-point scale ranging from 0 *none* to 8 *post-graduate training or school*, with 6 being *technical, trade, or vocational school after high school*; $M = 6.99$, $SD = 1.64$), income (measured on a 10-point scale ranging from 0 *less than $10,000* to 9 *$150,000 or more*, with 5 *50 to under $60,000*; $M = 5.16$, $SD = 2.71$), and political ideology (measured using a single item ranging from 0 *very conservative* to 6 *very liberal*; $M = 3.37$, $SD = 1.92$).

9.3. Manipulations

Replicating Study 1, we also pretested two scripts (one left-leaning and one right-leaning) before recording the videos with the same actors. The pretest results ($N = 200$) indicated that on a scale from 0 *very liberal* to 6 *very conservative*, the left-leaning script was rated as distinctly favoring the political left ($M = 2.09$, $SD = 1.38$) and the right-leaning script was rated as distinctly favoring the political right ($M = 5.67$, $SD = 1.05$).

In regards to the stimuli, the scripts followed the same format as Study 1 and were written as a political discussion between two individuals: Person A, with firm beliefs, and Person B, who played a more passive role. The conditions surrounded abortion. Across discussions, the conversationalists discussed the Supreme Court's 2022 overturning of *Roe v. Wade*. In the left-leaning conditions, Person A (with firmer beliefs) states that she disagrees with the Supreme Court and that women should be allowed bodily autonomy. In the right-leaning conditions, Person A states that she agrees with the Supreme Court and supports limiting access to abortions. While Person B subtly suggests she may disagree with Person A, she never states her view on the topic. Again, elaboration questions were placed in the middle of the conversation and at the end to create the elaboration question factor. The script recordings occurred the same day as Study 1 in the same setting. In the end, the videos were around 2 minutes and 15 seconds.

Ultimately, participants were placed into one of four conditions: a left-leaning condition with elaboration questions ($n = 124$), a right-leaning condition with elaboration questions ($n = 129$), a left-leaning condition without elaboration questions ($n = 120$), and a right-leaning condition without elaboration questions ($n = 125$). The conditions were collapsed into two groups: those who viewed a video with elaboration questions ($n = 244$) and those who viewed a video without elaboration questions ($n = 254$).

Post-exposure, participants answered a manipulation check that asked what political issue their video surrounded. In total, three participants were removed for incorrectly answering this question.

We followed the same procedure as Study 1 to create our moderating variable of whether participants agreed with the political message. To do so, we again recorded self-identified Republicans and Independents who leaned toward the Republican party as Republicans ($n = 202$) and self-identified Democrats and Independents who leaned toward the Democratic party as Democrats ($n = 296$). Recoded Republicans who viewed the right-leaning messages were coded as viewing a political message which they agreed with; Republicans who viewed the left-leaning messages were coded as viewing a political message which they disagreed with. The inverse was true for Democrats. In the end, 249 (50%) participants viewed a video that they politically disagreed with, and 249 (50%) participants viewed a video that they politically agreed with.

9.4. Measures and Analysis Plan

All the measured variables remained identical to Study 1. This included our mediating variable of "feeling heard" ($M = 2.62$, $SD = 1.25$, $\alpha = 0.90$) and our dependent variable of "future discussion intentions" ($M = 2.23$, $SD = 1.85$, $\alpha = 0.90$).

The analysis plan remained identical to Study 1.

9.5. Results

We begin with H1, which predicted that the use of elaboration questions would be positively associated with intentions to discuss politics in the future. The results of a one-way ANOVA indicated that there was not a significant difference between conditions on whether participants would be willing to discuss politics in the future ($F(1, 493) = 0.24$, $p = 0.62$). Specifically, those who viewed videos with elaboration questions were just as likely to discuss politics in the future ($M = 2.19$, $SD = 1.98$) as those who viewed videos without elaboration questions ($M = 2.27$, $SD = 1.71$). These results do not support H1.

We turn next to H2, which predicted that the use of elaboration questions would be positively associated with feeling heard in the political discussion. The results of a one-way ANOVA indicated that there was a significant difference between conditions on whether participants felt heard on behalf of Person B ($F(1, 496) = 22.99$, $p < 0.001$). Specifically, those who viewed videos with elaboration questions felt more heard on behalf of Person B ($M = 2.89$, $SD = 1.22$) than those who viewed videos without elaboration questions ($M = 2.37$, $SD = 1.22$). These results lend support for H2.

H3 predicted that feeling heard in a political discussion would be positively associated with an intention to discuss politics in the future. The PROCESS macro model 4 results indicated that this was the case ($B = 0.21$,

SE = 0.07, *p* = 0.002). In other words, the more that participants felt that Person B was heard in the political discussion, the higher their intentions to discuss politics in the future. These results support H3.

Next, H4 predicted that there would be a positive indirect relationship between the use of elaboration questions and intentions to discuss politics in the future through feeling heard in a political discussion. Results of the PROCESS macro model 4 indicated a significant, positive indirect relationship (*B* = 0.12, *SE* = 0.05, [95% CI 0.03–0.21]). In other words, if a person viewed a video with elaboration questions, they were more likely to feel heard on behalf of Person B, which was then associated with higher future discussion intentions. These results support H4.

H5 predicted our interaction effect, where the use of elaboration questions would be positively associated with feeling heard in a political discussion among those who politically agreed with the message. The results of PROCESS macro model 7 did not indicate a significant interaction effect (*B* = −0.21, *SE* = 0.21, *p* = 0.31). In other words, participants did not feel more heard on behalf of Person B if they politically agreed (or disagreed) with the message, regardless of whether it was a moral political issue. These results fail to find support for H5.

Finally, H6 predicted a positive conditional indirect effect. The results of the PROCESS macro model 7 indicated there was not a significant conditional indirect effect, and thus H6 was not supported (Index = −0.04, *SE* = 0.05, [95% CI −0.15–0.04]).

Study 2 produced similar, though more limited, effects. Although elaboration questions did not significantly increase intentions to discuss politics (H1), they did influence perceptions of feeling heard (H2), with a mean difference of 0.52—approximately 8.7% of the 6-point scale. While this effect remains modest, it is slightly stronger than in Study 1. However, both means were still below the midpoint, suggesting that while elaboration questions improved perceived listening behavior, they may not have been sufficient to fully shift observers' perceptions into the clearly positive range. The mediation effects (H3 and H4) were again statistically significant but moderate in size (*B* = 0.21, indirect effect *B* = 0.12). These results reinforce that elaboration questions can move perceptions of being heard in a desirable direction, though the effects are incremental rather than large.

9.6. Discussion

Generally, the results of Study 2 were identical to those in Study 1, with one notable exception. In Study 2, there was no direct effect between the presence of elaboration questions and intentions for future political discussion. This may have been due to abortion being a moral issue for many (Jędryczka et al., 2023), whose positions are shaped by their moral convictions and their religious identity rather than political party identification. As outlined above, scholars posit that people's moral convictions may be held more closely to one's self-identity than one's political identity (Crimston et al., 2022), contributing to our lack of significant findings.

10. General Discussion

The current work sought to understand the impact of elaboration questions in political discussions across two studies. Generally, we found support for our proposed hypotheses. In both studies, participants who viewed

conversations featuring elaboration questions were more likely to perceive Person B as having been heard. These perceptions, in turn, were associated with greater willingness to engage in future political discussions, suggesting that exposure to a more deliberative conversational model may help reduce reticence to participate. Further, we found significant indirect relationships across both studies. It is noteworthy that it did not matter whether one agreed with the political stance taken in the political discussion, as it did not moderate the relationship between the presence of elaboration questions and feeling heard nor the indirect relationships. Finally, we failed to find a significant relationship between the presence of elaboration questions and future discussion questions when the discussion surrounded the political issue of abortion.

We believe that our research contributes to extant research in three notable ways. First, we contribute to research on experimental methods for analyzing political discussions. While researchers have called for more experimental work in this area (Eveland et al., 2011), previous research has primarily surrounded weekend retreats to conduct deliberative polling (e.g., Fishkin & Luskin, 2005) and had participants participate in a fictional online debate (Chen et al., 2010). To our knowledge, participants have rarely been presented with a video of a political deliberation (see Shen & Yu, 2021, for a rare exception). While laborious, we believe that exposing participants to video manipulation may be the next-best way to conduct political discussion experimental research, second to sending participants to a deliberative polling weekend. By showing participants a video, the researcher has full control over the conversation and specific manipulated factors that may be more difficult in a conversation with artificial intelligence, as you cannot control what the participant responds with. In the current work, we controlled each line of the conversation and ensured that the elaboration question manipulation was identical across participants and conditions. This method could benefit future scholars conducting experimental political discussion research as it takes fewer resources than deliberative polling weekends and controls more variables than artificial intelligence manipulations.

Second, we believe that our research contributes to extant work on the use of elaboration questions in political discussion. Work manipulating the use of elaboration questions is rare (e.g., Chen et al., 2010; Itzchakov & DeMarree, 2022), so their impact is largely unknown. The results of our studies largely align with previous research, which found that the use of elaboration questions is a beneficial component in political discussions (Chen et al., 2010). Consistent with research on the use of questions in conversation more generally (Clark, 1996; Petty et al., 1981), we find that questions serve as a touchstone in a political discussion that allows even passive conversationalists the ability to feel heard and express intentions to discuss politics in the future.

Third, our research contributes to research on political deliberation by examining how heard people feel as the result of a conversation. Previous work on political deliberation has called on researchers to examine the impact of listening (Eveland et al., 2023), but there has been no work in political communication on feeling heard. Our work is an extension of research out of health communication, which found that open-ended questions were associated with higher evaluations of doctors from patients (e.g., Myers, 2000). Further, previous research found that expressing a genuine interest in the conversation partner was associated with warmth toward a conversation partner (Itzchakov & DeMarree, 2022). Taking our findings into account with previous research, it appears that one's perception of feeling heard may also be a relevant variable worth examination in political discussion research. Indeed, if people feel ignored in a discussion, they may not be open to future discussions.

As with any research, this project suffered from limitations which future research can address. First, while we attempted to replicate our findings across political issues, we were limited to the issues of homelessness and abortion. While abortion is a political issue that people have strong moral attachments to (Jędryczka et al., 2023), there may be differential effects that are dependent on issues surrounding the political conversation. If one holds a political issue stance for personal reasons, elaboration questions may not impact how heard they feel and their intentions for future political discussion. Second, our methods in the current work limited our immersive capabilities of the political discussion as participants viewed a video and could not participate in the conversation themselves. Therefore, they had to respond to how heard they felt in the conversation on behalf of the actor, which may not have matched their lived experience had they participated in the conversation themselves. While labor intensive, it would be fruitful for future research to test the hypotheses with in-person political conversations, similar to the research that has been done on deliberative polling (Fishkin & Luskin, 2005). Third, we assumed agreeance with the political stance taken based on political party identification—not participants' actual positions on homelessness and abortion. Ideally, we would have asked their distinct positions on these issues rather than relying on political party identification. Despite these limitations, we believe the current work remains relevant to the political deliberation literature.

11. Conclusion

Overall, our findings suggest that the presence of elaboration questions can shape how heard people perceive others to be in a political conversation, and in some cases, modestly increase intentions for future discussion. While the effects observed were statistically reliable, they were moderate in size, highlighting that elaboration questions may offer incremental, rather than transformative, improvements in how political conversations are experienced—at least from an observer's perspective. This aligns with the growing concern that while political discussions remain a common source of political information (Hutchens et al., 2019), Americans are increasingly reluctant to engage in them (Jurkowitz & Mitchell, 2020). This reluctance is troubling in light of deliberative democratic theory, which emphasizes that the open exchange of ideas—grounded in mutual respect and listening—is critical for a healthy democratic process (Curato et al., 2017; Fishkin, 2018). Even small improvements in how conversations are conducted and perceived may accumulate over time or compound in real-world contexts. Therefore, future work should continue developing and testing practical deliberative strategies, such as question-asking, to explore how subtle shifts in communication can foster more constructive engagement in a politically divided society.

Conflict of Interests
The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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