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EDITORIAL

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Editorial: When All Speak but Few Listen—Asymmetries in Political Conversation

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Abstract

This thematic issue looks at political conversation with a focus on political listening and seeks to advance an empirical approach to listening. Listening here means not just media exposure or co-presence in conversation, but as Benjamin Barber (2003, p. 175) argues in his book *Strong Democracy*, it means "I will put myself in his place, I will try to understand, I will strain to hear what makes us alike, I will listen for a common rhetoric evocative of a common purpose or a common good."

Keywords

being heard; communicative rationality; deliberation; listening; political conversation; political listening

1. Introduction

The political communication literature has been concerned with political conversations for decades (Lazarsfeld et al., 1948). This regard has highlighted the importance of conversation as a source of news consumption (Levy, 1983), political knowledge (Eveland, 2004), political participation (Kim et al., 1999), and a proto-public sphere that allows for identity formation, argument elaboration, and uncertainty reduction (Gastil & Dillard, 1999). Conversation has been heralded as a cure for intolerance (Mutz, 2002), a fundamental part of deliberative processes (Fishkin, 1997), a prejudice reductor (Amsalem et al., 2021; Pettigrew et al., 2011), and a predictor of more equitable distribution of resources (Sulkin & Simon, 2001).

However, simultaneously, political conversations have been associated with communication breakdown (Wells et al., 2017), the reinforcement of political priors, and the creation of echo chambers (Sunstein,

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2007) that result in increased extremity and polarization (Hutchens et al., 2019; Mansbridge, 1983; Suk et al., 2022).

The digital environment was heralded as an era of public speaking. Armed with low-cost tools, "anyone" had a public they could connect with, making a networked public sphere possible. Trusting that the marketplace of ideas metaphor would hold and that good ideas would rise to the top, Jimi Hendrix's famous quote, "knowledge speaks but wisdom listens" would finally be possible at a global scale. With the rise of this new communication ecology, the flourishing of deliberative democracy was anticipated by many worldwide. Instead, and only a few years later, democracy has begun to backslide in new and stable democracies alike. Affective polarization and populism are on the rise in many parts of the globe, and the compromises needed to confront global challenges seem more complex and more demanding to reach.

Most of our scholarly attention has been captured by the possibilities of speech that digital communication technologies afford. This point is nicely illustrated by the emergence of a sender effects logic that it is not what receiving information does to us, but instead what happens to us because we express ourselves in the public domain (Pingree, 2007). However, as we focus on expression, we overlook the dialogic nature of communication.

Byung-Chul Han (2022) has argued, and we agree, that today's democratic crisis is a crisis of listening. A crisis in which society disintegrates into identities that, by not listening to others, cannot democratically engage with them:

> Listening is a political act insofar as it is what brings people together as a community in the first place and makes discourse possible. It founds a we. A democracy is a community of listeners. Digital communication—that is, communication without community—destroys the politics of listening. (Han, 2022, p. 20).

Deliberative theorists, including Susan Bickford (1996), Andrew Dobson (2014), and Mary Scudder (2020), have highlighted listening as one potential avenue for enhanced deliberation. However, how do we scale up deliberation to a societal level? How do we infuse everyday political conversations with a listening disposition that helps us solve collective problems?

In this thematic issue we hope to contribute to answering these questions through the advancement of academic reflections on political listening with a set of articles that: (a) highlight the importance of being heard for future political conversations; (b) stress the importance of contextual mediating factors for the benefits of listening to materialize; and (c) propose methods to assess listening occurring in natural settings and also help evaluate the ability of AI tools that seek to extend deliberation to mass society.

2. On the Importance of Being Heard

Itzchakov et al. (2025) engage experimentally with the issues of reduced interaction and increased polarization that may come from having political conversations with those who do not share our political leanings. Employing different techniques, including priming a high-quality listening conversation from our past, imagining a high-quality listening conversation, or watching a conversation modeling high-quality

listening, participants under high-quality listening report higher levels of openness to opposing views and a mostly indirect effect on willingness to engage in future interactions with those who hold opposing views.

Shaughnessy et al. (2025) experimentally manipulate being heard using elaboration questions as part of a modeled conversation. These questions probed the more passive actor in the conversational dyad to provide their thoughts about the issues of homelessness and abortion being discussed. The presence of elaboration questions increased both the feeling of being heard and subsequently the likelihood of engaging in future discussions, regardless of the participants' position on the issue.

3. On Moderating and Contextual Factors

Scherman et al. (2025), examining Habermas' distinction between strategic and understanding orientations towards communication, find that traditional and social media use are more related to a strategic orientation towards conversation than to an understanding orientation. However, among those with higher levels of exposure to news, an understanding orientation is fostered, particularly when they are also incidentally exposed to news. This pattern may be related to Suh et al.'s (2025) exploration of partisan media consumption.

Suh et al. (2025) employ panel designs across two elections in the United States to show how the use of partisan media leads to a preference for uncompromising politicians, particularly among right-leaning media users. A closedness mediates this preference for differing perspectives, that is, an unwillingness to listen. Their results suggest a causal flow from partisan media use, which reduces exposure to differing perspectives, thereby bolstering the fortunes of uncompromising politicians and potentially jeopardizing the functioning of democratic systems.

Mazorra-Correa and Monard (2025) demonstrate that engaging in political talk and listening with like-minded individuals leads to increased political participation. Furthermore, under conditions of enhanced listening, cross-cutting conversations also result in increased political participation. These results suggest that without a listening component, conversations across lines of difference might not unleash their civic potential. It would be through enhanced listening that conversations become the soul of democracy.

4. On New Methods to Assess Listening

Choucair (2025) embraces the complexity of understanding listening across a hybrid media system in which individuals have diverse platforms where they can listen or be listened to. Building on the dimensions of attentiveness, openness, and responsiveness, the author proposes how to assess listening in a multi-channel, multi-platform conversation ecosystem.

Grancea and Ţuţui (2025) develop an assessment tool they named "listening incentive score" to help evaluate the ability of AI tools that seek to extend deliberation processes to mass audiences. The underlying problem being tackled is how to ensure that effective listening practices scale up as deliberation transitions from small groups to a mass society, leveraging AI. Going beyond responsive listening, that is, the system's capacity to answer questions "honestly," the authors argue for apophatic listening or a joint search for common ground

and common meaning. Models evaluated do not perform very well on listening capabilities, yet the authors propose a series of recommendations to improve listening in such systems.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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ARTICLE

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Harmony in Political Discourse? The Impact of High-Quality Listening on Speakers' Perceptions Following Political Conversations

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Abstract

Conversations with people who hold opposite partisan attitudes can elicit defensiveness, reinforce extreme attitudes, and undermine relationships with those with opposing views. However, this might not be the case when speakers experience high-quality (attentive, understanding, and non-judgmental) listening from their conversation partners. We hypothesized that high-quality listening would increase speakers' positive views toward, and their willingness to further interact with, others who hold politically opposed attitudes, and that these effects would be mediated by greater state openness. We conducted three experiments using different modalities to manipulate listening. In Study 1 (N = 379), participants recalled a conversation with an opposing political party member, with listening quality described as high-quality, low-quality, or control. Study 2 (N = 269) used imagined interactions, with participants reading vignettes describing either high-quality listening or a control condition. In Study 3 (preregistered; N = 741), participants watched a video of a listener modeling high-quality or moderate-quality listening and imagined themselves engaging in a similar interaction. Across studies, we found that high-quality listening consistently increased speakers' state openness to politically opposed others but did not change political attitudes. We found inconsistent evidence for speakers' increased willingness to engage in future interactions (meta-analytic effect: $\overline{d}$ = 0.20, p = 0.015). However, we observed a consistent indirect effect of listening on positive attitudes and willingness for future interactions through increased openness.

Keywords

defensiveness; disagreements; high-quality listening; openness; polarization; political conversations

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1. Introduction

For democracies to thrive, diverse groups need to constructively engage with each other to find common ground. However, in many countries, polarization is rampant (Boxell et al., 2024), with people not only disagreeing with political outgroups but also holding often negative beliefs and emotions about those groups and their members (Matsumoto et al., 2015). These beliefs lead people to a reduced willingness to engage with those they disagree with (Teeny & Petty, 2022). The poor quality of interpersonal contact that results can exacerbate division (Paolini et al., 2024) and lead to avoidance of future contact (Meleady & Forder, 2018).

Although these negative outcomes reflect the consequences of polarization, the nature of this polarization has deepened into affective polarization, where partisan divides are more emotionally charged. In recent years, polarization in democratic societies has moved beyond mere ideological disagreement and evolved into affective polarization—a deep-seated hostility between partisan groups. Unlike ideological polarization, which concerns policy preferences, affective polarization is rooted in identity and emotions, leading individuals to view political opponents as fundamentally different (Iyengar et al., 2012). Affective polarization has negative consequences on social relationships, hiring decisions, and even willingness to engage with opposing viewpoints (Iyengar & Westwood, 2015).

Social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) provides a framework for understanding how individuals' political identities influence their interactions with members of opposing groups. According to this theory, people categorize themselves and others into social groups, such as political parties, which become central to their self-concept. This categorization fosters in-group favoritism, where individuals favor members of their own group, and out-group discrimination, where they develop negative perceptions of those outside their group. Political identity, deeply tied to these group affiliations, becomes a powerful driver of affective polarization. When individuals see their political opponents not just as people with different opinions but as threats to their group's values and identity, hostility and mistrust increase (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

Simply exposing individuals to opposing viewpoints may not be sufficient to reduce polarization. Increasing exposure to opposing viewpoints might seem like an intuitive solution, as exposure mainly to like-minded opinions leads individuals to seek social approval and make initial attitudes more extreme (Moscovici & Zavalloni, 1969). Exposure to opposing viewpoints has been argued to reduce participation, as individuals exposed to widespread disagreement in their networks may experience social discomfort in political discussions (Mutz, 2006). However, later research shows that these effects apply mainly to cases of complete network-wide disagreement, a rare occurrence (Bello & Rolfe, 2014). Partial exposure to differing views tends to maintain or even enhance participation (Bello & Rolfe, 2014). Additionally, disagreement within political discussion networks can stabilize democratic orientations and foster continued engagement instead of withdrawal (Nir, 2011).

The relationship between cross-cutting exposure and polarization is curvilinear, with moderate exposure reducing polarization but extreme exposure often backfiring (Lin et al., 2025). Brief, structured exposure to opposing views reduces affective polarization when interactions are non-confrontational (Levendusky, 2023), while unmoderated exposure, particularly on social media, may reinforce biases and deepen divides (Bail, 2022). These findings highlight that simply increasing exposure is insufficient; the manner and context of exposure are critical for mitigating polarization.

Against this backdrop, we suggest that listening-based interventions could serve as a promising approach to reducing polarization. Unlike debates, which often encourage confrontation, listening-based interventions prioritize understanding over persuasion. By fostering empathetic engagement without the pressure to respond or defend a position, these methods can help reduce partisan animosity and identity-driven resistance. In the present research, we suggest that cross-partisan conversations can be improved through high-quality listening. Specifically, we test the hypothesis that receiving *high-quality listening* from a political outgroup member will increase willingness to engage with the other side and reduce partisan animosity.

To further understand why high-quality listening may be effective in mitigating conflict during political conversations, it is important to situate them within the broader framework of reciprocity in democratic discourse. Reciprocity involves not only sharing one's own perspectives but also genuinely considering and responding to others' views, creating a foundation of mutual respect and understanding (Gutmann & Thompson, 1996). In deliberative settings, reciprocity enhances the quality of engagement by encouraging participants to approach discussions with openness and a readiness to adjust their views (Cohen, 1997). By fostering an environment where individuals feel heard and respected, high-quality listening aligns with the principle of reciprocity, helping to bridge affective divides and promote constructive dialogue (Mansbridge, 2003). High-quality listening embodies this form of reciprocity by signaling respect and openness (Kluger et al., 2021), which should create a democratic practice that underpins constructive political dialogue (Eveland et al., 2023).

1.1. The Impacts of Listening When Discussing Disagreements

Dyadic conversations are mutually shaped by the quality of speaking and listening that takes place (T. Moin et al., 2024). If one partner is in the speaking role, the very nature of their contributions to the conversation is shaped by their listener (Bavelas et al., 2000). Within political conversations, the level of agreement between conversing partners deeply influences the nature of the conversation, and disagreeing partners may struggle to connect when discussing their attitudes (McLaughlin et al., 2013). However, the quality of conversants' listening may also be important and may mitigate the relational costs of disagreeing.

Our conceptualization of high-quality listening and its effects follows from the foundational work of Carl Rogers (e.g., Rogers & Roethlisberger, 1952/1991). According to this view, a person is engaging in high-quality listening if they are attending carefully to their partner, attempting to clearly and accurately understand them, and holding positive intentions toward them. Perceptions of high-quality listening are generally holistic in nature (Kluger & Itzchakov, 2022) and can vary in their accuracy (Collins et al., 2024). Regardless of accuracy, it appears to be the perception of high-quality listening that is most critical to conversational outcomes (Kluger et al., 2024).

People who perceive high-quality listening from an interaction partner experience psychological safety (Castro et al., 2016)—the sense that they can express themselves freely without fear of rejection or other negative consequences (Edmondson & Bransby, 2023). Feeling psychologically safe in a conversation facilitates further self-disclosure (Weinstein et al., 2021), self-reflection (Itzchakov et al., 2018), and consideration of conflicting views (Itzchakov et al., 2016). In short, it encourages greater open-mindedness about their own and others' views (Itzchakov & DeMarree, 2022; see also Itzchakov et al., 2020; Minson & Chen, 2022). Ultimately, receiving high-quality listening leads people to hold less extreme views

(Itzchakov et al., 2016) and increases people's willingness to interact with those they disagree with (Itzchakov et al., 2024).

1.2. Listening During Politically Charged Conversations

Although high-quality listening has demonstrated broad benefits in interpersonal contexts, its application to politically charged conversations, where the stakes are higher and emotions more intense, requires further exploration. Political identities are among the most central identities in modern society, making disagreements in political conversations particularly challenging (Gutmann & Thompson, 1996). When individuals engage with members of an out-party, these interactions can threaten multiple aspects of their psychological well-being, including acceptance, self-integrity, and autonomy. Self-integrity, or the sense of being a competent and morally adequate person, can be challenged when one's deeply held political beliefs are questioned (Sherman & Cohen, 2006). Such threats often trigger defensive responses, where individuals dismiss opposing views or double down on pre-existing beliefs to preserve their self-concept (Kruglanski et al., 2006). Additionally, threats to autonomy—where individuals perceive pressure to change their beliefs—can provoke reactance, leading to resistance against persuasion (Worchel & Brehm, 1970). These threats create a socially, psychologically, and emotionally charged environment that fosters defensiveness and hinders open dialogue (Itzchakov & DeMarree, 2022).

High-quality listening to politically charged interactions has the potential to foster understanding and reduce polarization (Eveland et al., 2023). Beyond simple exposure to differing perspectives, effective listening requires genuine engagement with a non-judgmental approach toward alternative viewpoints (Itzchakov et al., 2022), which is essential for addressing deeply rooted ideological divides. This process can help alleviate the psychological and emotional threats inherent in conversations with political outgroup members and improve democracy by creating an environment of respect and understanding (Eveland et al., 2023).

Despite the importance of the context, there are no guarantees that the positive impacts of high-quality listening can extend to conversations with political outgroup members. The closest available evidence comes from research examining listening quality in the context of disagreements (Itzchakov et al., 2024; F. K. T. Moin et al., 2025). This research finds that when people perceive that a person who disagrees with them is listening to them well (versus moderately or poorly), they report less polarized attitudes toward the topic of disagreement and a greater willingness to have another conversation with their conversation partner. Critical to the present article, these effects are mediated in part by the impact the conversation has on self-insight—participants' curious and open reflection on their own attitude. Although the listener in Itzchakov et al. (2024) was not an outgroup member and only briefly expressed disagreement, this article provides initial evidence that the effects of listening might extend to more threatening contexts. However, it is important to keep in mind that deep-seated ideological divides cannot be easily bridged. In some cases, exposure to opposing viewpoints, even in a respectful context, can reinforce pre-existing attitudes rather than promote openness (Nyhan & Reifler, 2010).

For listening to facilitate willingness to interact with a member of the opposite political party and improve outgroup attitudes, it has to improve open-mindedness. Because conversations with members of opposing partisan groups often elicit defensiveness, they challenge core aspects of identity and belief systems (Argyle & Freeze, 2024). This defensiveness can manifest as resistance to new information, reinforcement of

preexisting attitudes, or avoidance of engagement altogether (Kunda, 1990). Thus, listening-induced openness is key because it allows individuals to engage with differing perspectives without immediately dismissing or rejecting them (Itzchakov et al., 2016, 2022). State openness refers to a temporary state in which individuals exhibit a heightened willingness to consider alternative perspectives, adjust their viewpoints, and engage in intellectual exploration (DeYoung, 2015). This openness should enable participants to reinterpret the conversation as an opportunity for learning and understanding rather than a threat, ultimately reducing avoidance from future interactions and fostering more positive attitudes toward outgroup members (Kalla & Broockman, 2020). Although social networks and political ecosystems significantly influence political discourse (Yarchi et al., 2021), this research specifically focuses on listening within a dyadic conversation, as this area of listening is the most well-established in existing literature.

In the present research, we tested the following hypotheses:

> H1: As compared to lower-quality listening, experiencing high-quality listening will predict greater speakers' state openness toward the other partisan group.

> H2a: As compared to lower-quality listening, experiencing high-quality listening will predict greater speakers' willingness to engage in future interaction with members of the other partisan group.

> H2b: The effect of the listening manipulation on speakers' willingness to engage in future interaction with members of the other partisan group will be mediated by greater state openness.

> H3a: As compared to lower-quality listening, experiencing high-quality listening will predict more positive speaker attitudes toward the opposite partisan group.

> H3b: The effect of the listening manipulation on speakers' attitudes toward members of the other partisan group will be mediated by greater state openness.

2. Overview of Studies

We tested these predictions across three studies using recalled (Study 1, *N* = 379) or imagined (Studies 2 and 3, *Ns* = 269, 742) conversations with a political outgroup member. Listening quality was manipulated via instructions. Study 1 examined real past conversations, providing ecological validity but risking memory biases. Study 2 used vignettes for greater internal validity but lower realism. Study 3, a preregistered study, combined video-based listening manipulations with imagined scenarios, balancing realism and control. In line with open science, all data, materials, and code are available at: https://osf.io/zu6s2/?view_only=ead9434d2984428c823f94ea8ffcf15d

3. Study 1

3.1. Method

3.1.1. Participants

We recruited 450 participants (M_{age} = 28.93, *SD* = 6.98) residing in the US through Prolific Academic, an online research platform with a participant pool of over 250,000 individuals. Of these participants, 42.7% were female, 56.4% male, and 0.9% non-binary. We instructed the system to select only participants living in the US and participants were invited to take part in the study through Prolific's system, which ensures ethical recruitment practices. As compensation for their time, each participant received £0.80, in line with the platform's fair pay guidelines. We did not exclude any participants. Sensitivity analysis indicated that the smallest effect size that this sample size can detect with a power of 80% and $\alpha = 0.05$ in a design that includes three independent groups is Cohen's $f = 0.15$, which is considered a small effect size.

3.1.2. Procedure

After completing the consent form, participants were randomly assigned to one of three experimental conditions: high-quality listening, low-quality listening, and control (no information about listening). Participants in the high-quality listening condition ($n = 130$) received the following instructions:

> Please recall a conversation you had with a listener on an **opposite** political party than yours that is **as close as possible** to the following description: When you shared your beliefs about social, economic, or political issues, the listener maintained constant eye contact when you spoke and was attentive to you and what you had to say. During the conversation, the listener asked questions and reflected on what you said to ensure that they understood your position, even if they didn't agree. The listener was non-judgmental towards you or what you had to say.

Participants in the low-quality ($n = 163$) listening condition received the following instructions:

> Please recall a conversation you had with a listener who is from an **opposite** political party than yours that is **as close as possible** to the following description: When you shared your beliefs about social, economic, or political issues, the listener did not maintain constant eye contact when you spoke and was inattentive to you and what you had to say. During the conversation, the listener did not ask questions and did not reflect on what you said to ensure understanding. The listener was judgmental towards you and what you had to say.

Participants in the control group ($n = 163$) received the following instructions:

> Please recall a conversation you had with a listener who is from an opposite political party than yours.

After reading the instructions, participants wrote a brief essay describing the conversations. Afterward, participants completed the dependent variables and demographics and were compensated.

3.1.3. Measures

Before the listening manipulation, we asked participants about their political preferences on a scale of 1 (*strong Democrat*) to 7 (*strong Republican*).

Recall difficulty was assessed by asking participants how difficult or easy it was for them to recall the conversation with the person of the opposite party. The responses were anchored on a Likert-type scale from 1 (*extremely difficult*) to 5 (*extremely easy*).

To check the manipulation, we used five items from the constructive listening scale (Kluger & Bouskila-Yam, 2018), items ranged on a 9-point scale (1—*not at all* to 9—*very much*). Example items were: "The listener in the conversation tried hard to understand what I was saying" and "the listener in the conversation paid close attention to what I said" ($\alpha = 0.93$).

To test state openness, following Hotchin and West (2021), we asked participants to rate how they felt in the conversation with nine adjectives representing open-mindedness (e.g., "intellectual," "curious," and "creative"; $\alpha = 0.86$).

Willingness for future interactions was measured with seven items from Fuertes et al. (2000) and adapted to fit the context of political attitudes. For example: "I would be interested in participating in activities involving people with opposite partisan attitudes than mine" and "I am interested in knowing people who have opposite partisan attitudes than mine." ($\alpha = 0.88$).

To test outgroup attitude favorability, we asked participants: "How do you feel about people who hold an opposite partisan belief than yours (if you are a Democrat how do you feel about Republicans, if you are a Republican, how do you feel about Democrats)?," with a scale that ranged from 1 (*extremely negative*) to 7 (*extremely positive*).

3.2. Preliminary Results

The distribution of political attitudes was somewhat skewed toward the left, as 9.8% identified as strong Democrats, 27.1% as Democrats, 18.7% as lean Democrats, 31.6% as neither Democrats nor Republicans, 6.9% as lean Republicans, 4.1% as Republicans, and 1.1% as strong Republicans. We decided not to exclude participants who identified as neither Democrat nor Republican because they wrote about conversations involving politically related attitudes that differed from their listeners, consistent with the instructions. Similar results were obtained when excluding these participants (see the supplementary materials for these analyses across all studies). Additionally, individuals who do not generally identify as Democrats or Republicans may still have politically related beliefs that lean toward a specific side.

We did not find differences between conditions on recall difficulty: $F(2,247) = 1.32$, $p = 0.267$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.06$, Cohen's $f = 0.25$; thus, this potential confound was not a concern.

3.2.1. Main Effects

Table 1 presents the means and standard deviations by group. Table 2 presents the overall descriptive statistics and correlations between the variables.

The listening manipulation had a strong and significant main effect on participants' listening perception: $F(2,247) = 119.65$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.35$, Cohen's $f = 0.73$. Post-hoc LSD test indicated significant differences between the groups. Specifically, participants in the high-quality listening condition recalled receiving greater listening than participants in the control condition ($p < 0.001$, 95% CI [2.16, 3.05]) and in the low-quality listening condition ($p < 0.001$, 95% CI [2.88, 3.75]). Participants in the control condition recall receiving greater listening than participants in the low-quality listening condition ($p < 0.001$, 95% CI [0.29, 1.23]). These results suggest that the listening manipulation was effective.

The listening manipulation had a significant main effect on state openness: $F(2,247) = 40.16$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.15$, Cohen's $f = 0.42$. Specifically, participants in the high-quality listening condition reported greater state openness than participants in the control condition ($p < 0.001$, 95% CI difference [1.02, 1.68]09 and in the low-quality listening condition ($p < 0.001$, 95% CI [0.96, 1.61]). Participants in the control condition did not differ in state openness from participants in the low-quality listening condition ($p = 0.678$, 95% CI [−0.38, 0.25]).

The listening manipulation did not have an effect on willingness for future interactions with a partisan outgroup member: $F(2,247) = 1.80$, $p = 0.167$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.08$, Cohen's $f = 0.30$.

The listening manipulation did not have an effect on participants' attitudes toward their partisan outgroup: $F(2,247) = 0.46$, $p = 0.632$, $\eta|_p^2 = 0.02$, $f = 0.14$. There were no differences in pairwise comparisons between the groups ($p \geq 0.352$).

Table 1. Means and *SD*s by experimental groups of Study 1.

	High-quality listening		Control		Low-quality listening	
	Mean	*SD*	Mean	*SD*	Mean	*SD*
Recall difficulty	3.04	1.12	2.93	1.21	3.15	1.23
Listening perception	6.38	2.25	3.77	1.75	3.06	1.68
State openness	5.77	1.40	4.41	1.44	4.48	1.41
Outgroup attitude favorability	3.62	1.14	3.50	1.08	3.53	1.04
Willingness for future interactions	5.31	1.63	4.95	1.62	5.06	1.69

Note: Different letters in a given row indicate significant differences between means based on an LSD post-hoc test.

Table 2. Study 1: Descriptive statistics and correlations between study variables.

	Mean	*SD*	Range	1	2	3	4	5
1. Recall difficulty	3.04	1.19	1–5					
2. Listening perception	4.27	2.33	1–9	−0.01				
3. State openness	4.83	1.54	1–9	0.08	0.53**			
4. Outgroup attitude favorability	3.54	1.08	1–9	−0.06	0.17**	0.15**		
5. Future Interactions	5.09	1.65	1–9	0.06	0.10*	0.27**	0.40**	
6. Political attitude[a]	3.18	1.35	1–7	−0.04	0.08	0	0.26**	0.07

Notes: ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$; [a] = higher values indicate a more conservative attitude.

3.2.2. Mediation Analyses

Although we did not obtain significant main effects on the dependent variables, significant indirect effects are still possible (Rucker et al., 2011). We therefore conducted a simple mediation analysis treating the independent variable as multicategorical (Hayes, 2017). We did not assume linearity between the experimental groups (poor quality, control, high quality) and created two dummy-coded variables: one comparing the high-quality listening condition to the control condition, and the other comparing the low-quality listening condition to the control condition.

When predicting outgroup attitude favorability, the indirect effect comparing high-quality listening to the control condition through state-openness was significant (indirect = 0.14, *SE* = 0.06, 95% CI [0.04, 0.26]), though the direct effect was not significant (direct = −0.02, *SE* = 0.14, 95% CI [−0.29, 0.24]). In contrast, the indirect effect comparing the control condition to the low-quality listening condition was not significant (indirect = 0.007, *SE* = 0.02, 95% CI [−0.04, 0.03]). The direct effect also failed to reach significance (*direct* = −0.02, *SE* = 0.12, 95% CI [−0.26, 0.21]).

When predicting willingness for future interactions, the indirect effect comparing high-quality listening to the control condition through state-openness was significant (indirect = 0.41, *SE* = 0.09, 95% CI [0.24, 0.61]), while the direct effect was not significant (direct = −0.04, *SE* = 0.20, 95% CI [−0.44, 0.35]). Neither the indirect nor direct effects comparing the control condition to the low-quality listening condition were significant (indirect = −0.02, *SE* = 0.05, 95% CI [−0.12, 0.08]; direct = −0.09, *SE* = 0.18, 95% CI [−0.44, 0.26].

3.2.3. Auxiliary analysis

Because of the large proportion of independents in our sample (31.4%)—individuals who marked the mid-point of the scale (4—*neither Democrat nor Republican*), we created a new dummy variable named partisanship from the political preference measure. Participants who marked 4 were labeled as independents and coded 0. Participants who marked 3 or 5 (*lean Democrat*, *lean Republican*, respectively) were labeled as leaners and coded 1. Participants who marked 1, 2, 6, or 7 (*strong Democrat*, *Democrat*, *Republican*, *Strong Republican*, respectively) were labeled as partisans and coded 2 (see Eveland & Gee, 2024).

We conducted ANOVA with the experimental group and partisanship as fixed factors predicting outgroup attitude favorability. We did not find a main effect for the experimental group (F(2,441) = 0.273, p = 0.761) nor a Group X Partisanship interaction (F(2,441) = 0.143, p = 0.966). We did find a main effect for partisanship (F(2,441) = 23.191, $p < 0.001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.095$, f = 0.32). Post-hoc LSD analysis indicated that partisans had less favorable outgroup attitudes than leaners ($M_{\text{difference}} = -0.39$, SE = 0.12, p = 0.002), and when compared to independents ($M_{\text{difference}} = -0.790$, SE = 0.12, p = 0.001). Leaners had less favorable outgroup attitudes than independents ($M_{\text{difference}} = -0.401$, SE = 0.13, p = 0.002).

ANOVA with willingness for future interactions as the dependent variable showed a similar pattern with only partisanship as a significant predictor (F(2,441) = 4.62, p = 0.010, $\eta_p^2 = 0.02$, f = 0.15). Post-hoc analysis indicated that partisans had significantly less interest in interacting with the outgroup than leaners ($\text{M}_{\text{difference}} = -0.59$, SE = 0.20, p = 0.003) but not independents ($M_{\text{difference}} = -0.30$, SE = 0.12, p = 0.11). Leaners and independents did not differ ($M_{\text{difference}} = 0.29$, SE = 0.21, p = 0.158).

3.3. Discussion

Study 1 provided mixed support for the conceptual model, supporting H1 but not H2a or H3a. H2b and H3b were supported in the high-quality listening compared with the control condition. No interaction emerged between initial political attitudes and outgroup attitude favorability or willingness for future interactions. Using a recall-based manipulation, participants described a past conversation with a political outgroup member where listening was good, poor, or unspecified. While this method enhanced external validity, it risked systematic differences (e.g., recalling closer relationships or less morally charged topics in high-quality listening). To improve internal validity, Study 2 used a more carefully controlled manipulation.

4. Study 2

The goal of Study 2 was to test the hypotheses using a complementary method to Study 1: namely, vignettes. Participants were asked to imagine, rather than recall, a conversation. The instructions for the imagination task can isolate listening from other aspects of the imagined conversation, offering greater internal validity (Kluger & Itzchakov, 2022). In Study 2, we compared high-quality listening to a description that did not include information about listening quality ("you are sharing your beliefs about social, economic, or political issues with a listener who holds an opposite partisan attitude than yours"), assuming this would offer a reasonable comparison to the control condition in Study 1, and would offer meaningful information about whether receiving high-quality listening would produce improvement beyond participants' default expectations about conversations like these.

4.1. Method

4.1.1. Participants

We recruited 269 participants from the US through Prolific Academic ($M_{\text{age}} = 27.38$, SD = 9.95; 75.8% female, 20.8% male, 3.3% non-binary or other gender). As in Study 1, we did not exclude participants, and each participant was paid the same amount as in Study 1. Participants from Study 1 were not allowed to take part in Study 2. This sample size has a power of above 95% to detect the average effect size on the two

dependent variables obtained in Study 1, Cohen's d = 0.56 (converted from Cohen's f = 0.23) in a between-subject design with two groups with an α of 5%.

4.1.2. Procedure and Measures

After completing the consent form, participants were randomly assigned to high-quality listening or control conditions. Participants in the high-quality listening condition (n = 130) received the following instructions:

> **Please read the following description twice.**
>
> **Imagine you are involved in the following conversation:**
>
> You are sharing your beliefs about social, economic, or political issues with a listener who holds an opposite partisan attitude than yours. The listener maintained constant eye contact during the conversation when you spoke and expressed non-verbal behaviors that conveyed interest and curiosity. The listener was attentive to you and what you had to say. During the conversation, the listener asked questions and reflected on what you said to ensure a genuine understanding of your experience. The listener was non-judgmental towards you or what you had to say and created a positive atmosphere to share your perspective freely.

Participants in the control condition received the following instructions:

> **Please read the following description twice.**
>
> **Imagine you are involved in the following conversation:**
>
> You are sharing your beliefs about social, economic, or political issues with a listener who holds an opposite partisan attitude than yours.

The rationale for instructing participants to read the vignettes twice was to ensure thorough understanding and engagement with the scenario, as the information provided could be challenging to absorb in a single read.

Participants in both conditions were then instructed to write how they would feel expressing their attitude in such a conversation. Subsequently, participants completed the measure and were compensated.

The measures were identical to Study 1. We measured political attitudes (before manipulation), listening perception (α = 0.96), state openness (α = 0.89), willingness for future interactions (α = 0.88), and outgroup attitude favorability.

4.2. Results

4.2.1. Preliminary Results

The distribution of political attitudes was skewed toward the left: 24.9% identified as strong Democrats, 25.3% as Democrats, 17.5% as lean Democrats, 18.2% as neither Democrats nor Republicans, 9.7% as lean Republicans, 3.3% identified as Republicans, and 1.1% as strong Republicans.

4.2.2. Main Effects

Table 3 presents the means and standard deviations by group. Table 4 presents the overall descriptive statistics and correlations between the variables.

The listening manipulation had a strong main effect on participants' listening perception ($t(267) = 21.94$, $p < 0.001$, Cohen's $d = 2.68$). Participants in the high-quality listening condition recalled receiving greater listening than those in the control condition, suggesting that the listening manipulation was effective.

Participants in the high-quality listening condition reported higher state openness than those in the control condition ($t(267) = 8.66$, $p < 0.001$, Cohen's $d = 1.06$). The same participants also reported greater willingness for future interactions with outgroup partisan members than participants in the control condition ($t(267) = 2.32$, $p = 0.021$, Cohen's $d = 0.28$). No difference emerged between participants in the two groups ($t(267) = 0.63$, $p = 0.528$, Cohen's $d = 0.08$).

Table 3. Means and SDs by experimental groups of Study 2.

	High-quality listening		Control	
	Mean	*SD*	Mean	*SD*
Listening perception	8.25	0.90	4.31	1.35
State openness	6.46	1.27	5.01	1.48
Willingness for future interactions	4.91	1.94	4.40	1.66
Outgroup attitude favorability	3.13	1.14	3.04	1.28

Table 4. Study 2's descriptive statistics and correlations between study variables.

	Mean	*SD*	Range	1	2	3	4
1. Listening perception	6.21	2.46	1–9				
2. State openness	5.71	1.56	1–9	0.59**			
3. Outgroup attitude favorability	3.08	1.13	1–9	0.20**	0.17**		
4. Future Interactions	4.65	1.82	1–9	0.29**	0.40**	0.52**	
5. Political attitude[a]	2.77	1.50	1–7	0.07	−0.05	0.47*	0.15*

Notes: ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$; [a] = higher values indicate a more conservative attitude.

4.2.3. Mediation Analyses

We conducted mediation analyses using Model 4 in PROCESS (Hayes, 2017) with 5000 bootstrapped samples.

The indirect effect from the listening manipulation to outgroup attitude favorability through state-openness was significant (indirect = 0.21, *SE* = 0.08, 95% CI [0.05, 0.38]), while the direct effect was not significant (direct = –0.12, *SE* = 0.15, 95% CI [–0.43, 0.18]).

The indirect effect of the listening manipulation on willingness for future interactions through state-openness was significant (indirect = 0.78, *SE* = 0.13, 95% CI [0.49, 0.99]). The direct effect was not significant (direct = –0.22, *SE* = 0.23, 95% CI [–0.67, 0.23]).

4.2.4. Auxiliary Analysis

We used the same approach as in Study 1 to test the effect of partisanship and computed the partisanship variable in the same way. ANOVA with an experimental group and partisanship as fixed factors predicting outgroup attitude favorability revealed no main effect of the experimental group ($F(1, 263) = 0.503$, $p = 0.479$), and there was no group × partisanship interaction ($F(2, 263) = 0.259$, $p = 0.772$). As in Study 1, there was a significant main effect of partisanship ($F(2, 263) = 36.62$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.218$, $f = 0.53$). Post-hoc LSD comparisons showed that partisans reported significantly less favorable outgroup attitudes than both leaners ($M_{\text{difference}} = 1.02$, $SE = 0.15$, $p < 0.001$) and independents ($M_{\text{difference}} = 1.11$, $SE = 0.17$, $p < 0.001$). Independents and leaners did not differ significantly ($M_{\text{difference}} = 0.09$, $SE = 0.19$, $p = 0.635$).

Regarding willingness for future interactions, only partisanship was a significant predictor ($F(2, 263) = 3.92$, $p = 0.021$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.030$, $f = 0.17$). Post-hoc LSD comparisons showed that partisans reported significantly lower willingness for future interactions than leaners ($M_{\text{difference}} = 0.70$, $SE = 0.25$, $p = 0.008$), while the comparisons between partisans and independents ($p = 0.463$) and between leaners and independents were not significant ($p = 0.132$).

4.3. Discussion

Study 2 supported H1 and the mediation hypotheses (H2b and H3b). Notably, unlike Study 1, it also supported H2a, indicating that high-quality listening increased speakers' willingness for future interactions. However, the findings did not support H3a concerning speakers' outgroup attitudes or political attitudes. The scenario-based design improved control but reduced external validity. Auxiliary analyses showed that partisans sometimes reported less favorable outgroup attitudes than leaners, though partisanship did not interact with the manipulation for either outcome, suggesting that listening quality effects held across partisan groups. Additionally, imagined conversation partners may have varied by listening condition (e.g., picturing a woman in high-quality listening), which is notable given that 75% of participants were women.

5. Study 3

Study 3 relied on a new listening manipulation that incorporates the methodological strengths of both prior studies. Specifically, we sought to combine the ecological validity of Study 1 with the internal validity of

Study 2, while overcoming their respective limitations—namely, the memory bias inherent in Study 1 and the lack of ecological validity in Study 2. The Study 3 scenario method used a standardized video of a listener from the perspective of the speaker to allow participants to more easily imagine receiving the assigned level of listening. A second goal of Study 3 was to conduct a highly powered, preregistered experiment as a confirmatory test of our hypotheses (https://aspredicted.org/xmqg-5x8x.pdf).

Because this study focuses on intergroup attitudes (i.e., attitudes toward the outgroup political party), we have used an openness measure commonly employed in the intergroup literature (Hotchin & West, 2021). However, this measure has not been widely used in research on listening. In listening studies, high-quality listening has consistently been shown to foster a general open-minded self-reflection (Itzchakov et al., 2020). Although we believe that openness and self-insight share similarities and may overlap in intergroup contexts like this, they are conceptually distinct. Specifically, the openness measure captures receptiveness to perspectives and ideas originating outside the self (Hotchin & West, 2021; Saucier, 1994), whereas self-insight reflects an openness to new understandings of one's internal experiences (Itzchakov et al., 2020).

5.1. Method

5.1.1. Participants

We used the average effect of condition on the dependent variables tested in Study 2 (Cohen's $d = 0.18$) as a benchmark for calculating the target sample size. Because we had a priori hypotheses, we pre-registered that we would base conclusions on one-tailed significance tests. A power analysis indicated that a sample size of 688 participants was necessary to achieve 80% power with an $\alpha = 0.05$ for one-tailed tests (Faul et al., 2007). We added 10% for potential exclusions, resulting in a target sample size of $N = 763$. All participants were from the US. Following pre-registered plans, we excluded 21 participants who failed to answer the multiple-choice awareness question correctly, which asked: "What did the speaker describe in the video?" Therefore, the final sample size was $N = 742$ ($M_{age} = 40.60$, $SD = 12.87$; 61.3% female, 37% male, 1.2% non-binary or other gender, 0.5% prefer not to say).

5.1.2. Procedure

After completing the consent form, participants were randomly assigned to watch a video depicting either a high or moderate-quality listening interaction. In all videos, the same female speaker shared an identical uncomfortable experience (similar in tone to an uncomfortable political conversation) with the listener. The speaker's story did not involve politics directly, to avoid participants disagreeing with the content of the manipulation or viewing it as irrelevant to their own political views. To increase generalizability, two actors (one male, one female) played the listener role, each appearing in both the high- and moderate-quality conditions. Participants were randomly assigned to watch one of the videos. Unlike Study 2, where participants imagined their conversation, Study 3 controlled for gender by showing either a male or female speaker. All videos were about five minutes long and conveyed the same story. To make it easier for participants to imagine themselves as speakers in the next phase of the study, only the listener was visible in the video, while the speaker was audible but not seen.

The listener engaged in either high-quality or moderate-quality listening. In the high-quality listening video, the listener exhibited good listening behaviors (Itzchakov & Weinstein, 2021) such as constant eye contact, facial expressions that convey interest and curiosity, asking good questions, and reflecting on the speakers' content. In the moderate-quality listening video, the listener was mostly silent and did not interrupt the speaker. The listener maintained non-verbal behavior that was neither too engaged nor destructive. To validate the manipulation, we asked 42 listening experts to watch the videos, blind to condition, and asked them to rate the quality of the listening displayed from 1 (*poor*) to 9 (*high*).

After watching the video, the participants received the following instructions:

> Imagine you were having a conversation about politics with someone you disagree with on politics. In this conversation, the other person acted much like the listener in the video you just watched. In the space below, briefly describe how you think that conversation would go.

We excluded political content in the videos of Study 3 to isolate the effects of listening quality without political bias. A non-political story captured relevant emotional dynamics, ensuring participants could relate to the speaker while focusing on how listening influenced openness and future engagement.

Afterward, participants completed the study's measures and were compensated.

5.1.3. Measures

We used the same measures for political attitude, listening perception ($\alpha = 0.96$), state openness ($\alpha = 0.91$), willingness for future interactions ($\alpha = 0.92$), and outgroup attitude favorability as in the previous studies. In addition to these, the five-item scale used by Itzchakov et al. (2020) was included as an additional measure of state openness. The preface read: "To what extent did the conversation you imagined made you experience the following?" Example items were: "Helped you discover new insights about yourself," and "made you think more deeply about the topic" ($\alpha = 0.96$). Study 3 included a measure of self-reported attitude change (Itzchakov et al., 2024), which, while distinct from attitude favorability, provided insight into participants' subjective experiences. Prior research links listening to changes in this measure. In this study, perceived attitude change correlated moderately with intergroup attitudes ($r = 0.34$), and participants in the high-quality listening condition reported greater change than those in the control ($t(740) = 3.24$, $p < 0.001$, Cohen's $d = 0.24$).

5.2. Results

5.2.1. Preliminary Results

The distribution of political attitudes was once again skewed toward the left, though to a lesser extent than in Studies 1 and 2. Of the participants, 17.9% identified as strong Democrats, 19.9% as Democrats, 16.7% as lean Democrats, 17.8% as neither Democrats nor Republicans, 11.3% as lean Republicans, 9.6% identified as Republicans, and 6.7% as strong Republicans.

5.2.2. Main Effects

The listening manipulation had a strong and significant main effect on participants' listening perception ($t(740) = 24.21$, $p < 0.001$, Cohen's $d = 1.78$). Participants in the high-quality listening condition imagined receiving greater listening than participants in the control condition, indicating an effective listening manipulation.

Participants in the high-quality listening condition reported higher state openness than participants in the control condition ($t(740) = 11.10$, $p < 0.001$, Cohen's $d = 0.82$).

Participants in the high-quality listening condition reported higher self-insight than participants in the control condition ($t(739) = 9.44$, $p < 0.001$, Cohen's $d = 0.69$). Self-insight was strongly associated with state openness ($r = 0.76$), suggesting it serves as an indicator of state openness, at least in the current context.

Contrary to our hypothesis, participants in the high-quality listening condition were not more willing to engage in future interactions than participants in the control condition ($t(740) = 0.92$, $p = 0.178$, Cohen's $d = 0.07$).

As in Studies 1 and 2, no difference emerged between participants in the two groups ($t(740) = -0.98$, $p = 0.163$, Cohen's $d = -0.07$). Table 5 presents the means and standard deviations by group. Table 6 presents the overall descriptive statistics and correlations between study variables.

Table 5. Means and SDs by experimental groups of Study 3.

	High-quality listening		Control	
	Mean	*SD*	Mean	*SD*
Listening perception	7.49	1.68	3.79	2.41
State openness	5.40	1.62	3.95	1.92
Self-insight	5.24	2.30	3.62	2.38
Outgroup attitude favorability	3.41	1.33	3.51	1.40
Willingness for future interactions	4.77	1.97	4.63	2.03

Table 6. Study 3's descriptive statistics and correlations between the variables.

	Mean	*SD*	Range	1	2	3	4	5
1. Listening perception	5.60	2.69	1–9					
2. State openness	4.66	1.92	1–9	0.61**				
3. Self-insight	4.41	2.48	1–9	0.55**	0.76**			
4. Outgroup attitude favorability	3.08	1.13	1–7	0.10**	0.17**	0.23**		
5. Future Interactions	4.70	2	1–9	0.14**	0.31**	0.38**	0.49**	
6. Political attitude[a]	3.40	1.82	1–7	0	0.02	0.02	0.08*	0.04

Notes: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$; [a] = higher values indicate a more conservative attitude.

5.2.3. Mediation Analyses

We conducted mediation analyses using the same bootstrapping approach as before (Hayes, 2017). New to this study, we conducted additional mediation analyses, including self-insight as an additional mediator.

The indirect effect of the listening manipulation on outgroup attitude favorability through state-openness was significant (indirect = 0.23, *SE* = 0.05, 95% CI [0.13, 0.32]). The direct effect was also significant (direct = −0.32, *SE* = 0.11, 95% CI [−0.53, −0.12]). The indirect effect of the listening manipulation on outgroup attitude favorability through self-insight was significant (indirect = 0.24, *SE* = 0.04, 95% CI [0.16, 0.34]). The direct effect was also significant (direct = −0.33, *SE* = 0.10, 95% CI [−0.53, −0.13]).

The indirect effect of the listening manipulation on willingness for future interactions through state-openness was significant (indirect = 0.52, *SE* = 0.07, 95% CI [0.38, 0.67]). The direct effect was not significant (direct = −0.38, *SE* = 0.15, 95% CI [−0.68, −0.09]). The indirect effect of the listening manipulation through self-insight was also significant (indirect = 0.55, *SE* = 0.08, 95% CI [0.40, 0.70]). The direct effect was in the opposite direction of H2a (direct = −0.40, *SE* = 0.14, 95% CI [−0.68, −0.12]).

5.2.4. Auxiliary Analysis

We found a main effect on outgroup attitudes for partisanship but not for listening ($F(2{,}736) = 26.84$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.07$, $f = 0.27$). Post-hoc LSD analysis indicated that partisans had significantly less favorable outgroup attitudes than leaners ($M_{difference} = -0.62$, $SE = 0.11$, $p < 0.001$) and than independents ($M_{difference} = -0.82$, $SE = 0.13$, $p < 0.001$). Leaners and independents did not differ ($M_{difference} = -0.20$, $SE = 0.15$, $p = 0.174$).

Similar results were observed predicting willingness for future interactions. Partisanship but not listening was a significant predictor ($F(2{,}736) = 6.01$, $p = 0.003$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.02$, $f = 0.17$). Post hoc analyses showed that partisans had less favorable outgroup attitudes than leaners ($M_{difference} = -0.57$, $SE = 0.17$, $p < 0.001$). None of the other pairwise comparisons were significant (*ps* = 0.087, 0.291), respectively.

5.3. Discussion

Study 3 provided mixed support for the hypotheses. H1 was supported using both the original and additional openness measures. Mediation hypotheses (H2b and H3b) were replicated, but H2a (listening increasing willingness for future interactions) was not. As in prior studies, H3a (listening increasing outgroup attitude favorability) was unsupported, with no interactions of partisanship or its extremity. Indirect effects remained significant, but direct effects, after accounting for mediation, were in the opposite direction of predictions. This pattern suggests that when controlling for openness, the relationship between listening and outcomes may change in unexpected ways. Since our theory does not justify a suppression effect (MacKinnon et al., 2000), future research should explore this pattern further.

6. Mini Meta-Analysis

A mini-meta-analysis synthesizes findings across the three experiments, each using different methodologies to test the same core hypotheses. By aggregating results, the mini-meta increases statistical power and provides a more robust assessment of the overall effects (Goh et al., 2016).

When computing the effect size for Study 3, we converted Cohen's f to Cohen's d. As can be seen in Table 7, the effect size for state openness, which included the self-insight measure from Study 3, was also large, with high heterogeneity and considerable variability between the studies. Outgroup attitude favorability showed a negligible and non-significant overall effect size, with moderate heterogeneity and low between-study variance, suggesting that high-quality listening did not affect attitudes toward political outgroups. The second dependent measure, willingness for future interactions with political outgroup members, had a small but significant effect size, with moderate heterogeneity and low between-study variance, suggesting relatively consistent effects across the studies.

Table 7. Meta-analysis of the experiment (N = 1,390).

	d	SE	Z	$P(Z)$	τ^2	I^2	Q	P(Q)
State openness	0.74	0.13	5.88	<0.001	0.86	86.43%	16.99	<0.001
Outgroup attitude favorability	0.03	0.07	0.44	=0.660	0.01	38.98%	3.10	=0.212
Willingness for future interactions	0.20	0.08	2.41	=0.015	0.01	52.49%	4.23	=0.120

7. General Discussion

Three experiments using varied methods to manipulate listening during political conversations provided partial support for the hypotheses. High-quality listening consistently increased speakers' state openness, supporting H1. Effects on willingness for future interactions were mixed, but a small yet significant meta-analytic effect (d = 0.20) partially supported H2a. No direct effects emerged for outgroup attitude favorability, failing to support H3a. However, mediation analyses showed that increased state openness explained the effects of listening on both willingness for future interactions and outgroup attitude favorability, supporting H2b and H3b.

Our findings suggest that high-quality listening fosters state openness and willingness to engage with politically opposed others without necessarily shifting attitudes or reducing outgroup animosity. This pattern may reflect the complex nature of attitude change, which often requires prolonged exposure, repeated interactions, or additional cognitive and emotional processing beyond a single conversational context (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). High-quality listening may not immediately reduce polarization but could serve as a critical first step by creating a psychologically safe environment where open-mindedness and dialogue are more likely to occur. Increased openness, even without immediate attitude change, might reduce conversational avoidance and encourage future interactions with those holding opposing views. These incremental changes in conversational dynamics could, over time, contribute to a more constructive and less polarized political discourse.

The present work makes several theoretical contributions to understanding the nature and outcomes of political conversations. First, it suggests that, although there was no evidence that high-quality listening improved attitudes toward partisan outgroups relative to lower-quality listening, listening effectively increased speakers' intention to interact with outgroup members. This finding is particularly important given the current sociopolitical climate, where individuals from opposing political parties often avoid engaging in dialogue due to the perception that conversations will be unproductive, emotionally taxing, or conflict-inducing (Gidron et al., 2023; McCoy et al., 2018). Encouraging behavioral intentions to interact with outgroup members is a crucial step toward reducing polarization, as repeated positive interactions can foster trust and decrease intergroup biases over time (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006).

Second, the finding that high-quality listening increases state openness is conceptually important because openness facilitates critical cognitive and emotional processes necessary for effective social interaction. Increased openness allows individuals to engage more deeply with the perspectives and experiences of others (Kruglanski et al., 2006). This finding contributes to the literature by demonstrating that listening is not merely a passive act but an active mechanism that influences the speaker's cognitive and emotional state, enabling greater receptivity to dialogue. Moreover, this underscores the role of high-quality listening as a catalyst for cognitive flexibility, which is foundational for navigating complex interpersonal and societal issues (Sassenberg & Moskowitz, 2005).

High-quality listening increased willingness to engage with outgroup members but did not affect outgroup attitudes. Notably, willingness for future interactions correlated positively with more favorable outgroup attitudes (*r*s for Studies 1–3 = 0.40, 0.52, 0.43, respectively), suggesting openness to dialogue rather than a desire to argue or persuade. While no direct effects on outgroup attitudes emerged, increased willingness for contact may shape intergroup attitudes over time if interactions are positive. Since negative expectations can deter contact (Fazio et al., 2004), initial openness to engagement may lead to more favorable attitudes in the long run (Wald et al., 2024).

Further, the consistent indirect effect of state openness on outgroup attitude favorability and willingness for future interactions with outgroup members of opposite partisan groups highlights the theoretical importance of this construct in facilitating positive intergroup outcomes. Although direct attitude shifts may be difficult to achieve in political contexts due to increased psychological reactance (Rosenberg & Siegel, 2018), the mediation findings suggested that state openness functions as a key mechanism through which high-quality listening exerts its effects. This underscores the role of openness as a psychological bridge within political conversations, enabling speakers to approach intergroup interactions with relative curiosity and flexibility rather than defensiveness. More broadly, such findings expand understanding of how interpersonal communication can shape key mediators like openness to foster constructive relational outcomes, even in contentious settings.

Our studies relied on self-reports, recall, and imagination, which are common methods for examining subjective experiences such as openness and political attitudes (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Although there are inherent methodological limitations associated with self-reports, they remain widely accepted in this type of research (Paulhus & Vazire, 2007). In Studies 1 and 2, recall and imagination prompts were specifically structured to target particular aspects of the conversation, thereby reducing cognitive load and recall bias. Furthermore, the use of multiple modalities, namely recall, imagination, and video-guided imagination, across

studies strengthens the validity of our findings. Moreover, the preregistration of Study 3 further enhanced the robustness of the conclusions. To validate these findings in more ecologically valid settings, future research should incorporate live conversations.

8. Limitations and Future Research

This research should be considered alongside several limitations. First, samples, especially in Study 2, were skewed toward left-leaning participants, which may limit generalizability. High-quality listening effects could vary by political orientation, as conservatives and liberals differ in openness to outgroup perspectives and responses to interpersonal interventions (Jost et al., 2018).

An additional notable limitation is the absence of a live conversation within the current studies. The most robust listening manipulation used in previous research relies on trained research assistants to manipulate listening (Itzchakov et al., 2023; Weinstein & Itzchakov, 2025). Although the listening manipulation requires extensive training, time, and money, it lets participants experience rather than imagine listening.

Our sample's age distribution varied, with Studies 1 and 2 skewing younger than the median age of our target population (United States Census Bureau, 2025). Although age can influence interpersonal communication (Hupet et al., 1993), we expect the effects of listening to generalize across age groups as listening comprehension remains relatively unchanged until ages 65–70 (Sommers et al., 2011). The sample was also skewed toward females. Although women are perceived to be better listeners than men (Kluger et al., 2024), we are not aware of any research that tested whether gender moderates the effects of being listened to during political conversations. Additionally, we did not collect race or ethnicity data, thus, we cannot assess its impact. Given that the Study 3 video featured only White listeners, racial dynamics might have influenced responses, as prior research suggests that racial identity can shape the reciprocity of self-disclosure (Wetzel & Wright-Buckley, 1988).

Random assignment balanced preexisting attitudes, ideological strength, and trust across conditions. Future research could explore how these traits affect receptivity to listening interventions and identify subgroups that benefit most. Future research should explore listening quality and its effects in dyadic interactions where both parties alternate between speaking and listening. In challenging conversations, individuals are more likely to listen effectively when they perceive attentive listening from their partner (Coduto & Eveland, 2022). Such reciprocity may enhance interpersonal dynamics, fostering mutual engagement and reducing defensiveness during disagreements.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online here: https://osf.io/zu6s2/?view_only=ead9434d2984428c823f94ea8ffcf15d

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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

deliberative democracy; elaboration questions; feeling heard; political deliberation; political discussion

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

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(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

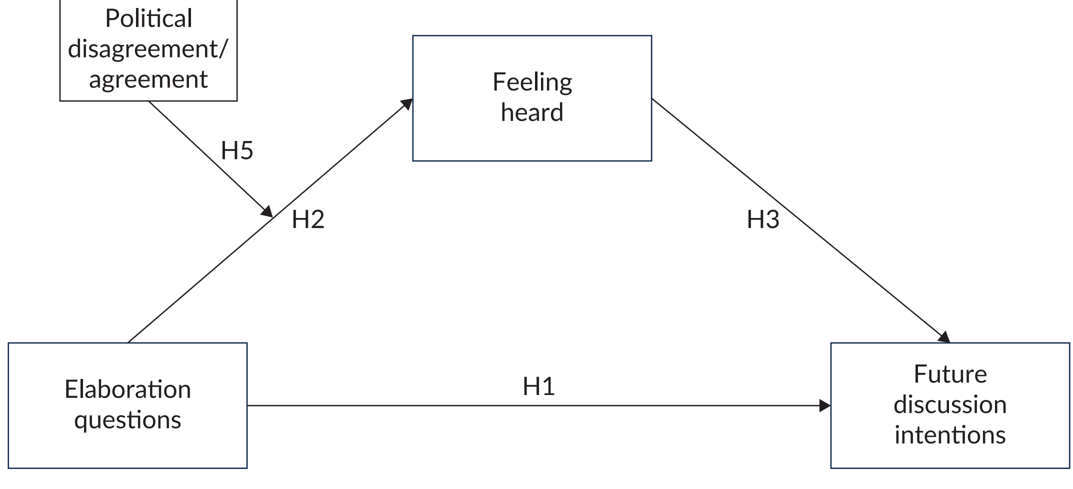

Figure 1. Proposed conceptual model.

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, α = 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.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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ARTICLE

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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 (α = 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 (α = 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.

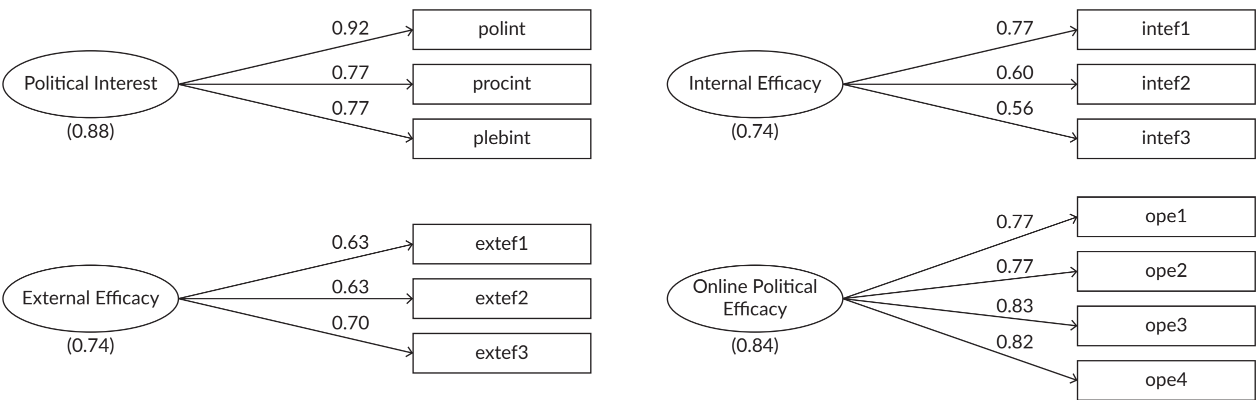

Figure 1. Measurement model for political efficacies and political interest. Notes: Ovals are factors and boxes are variables from the survey; the figure shows the reliability if an item is dropped and the general standard alpha in parentheses.

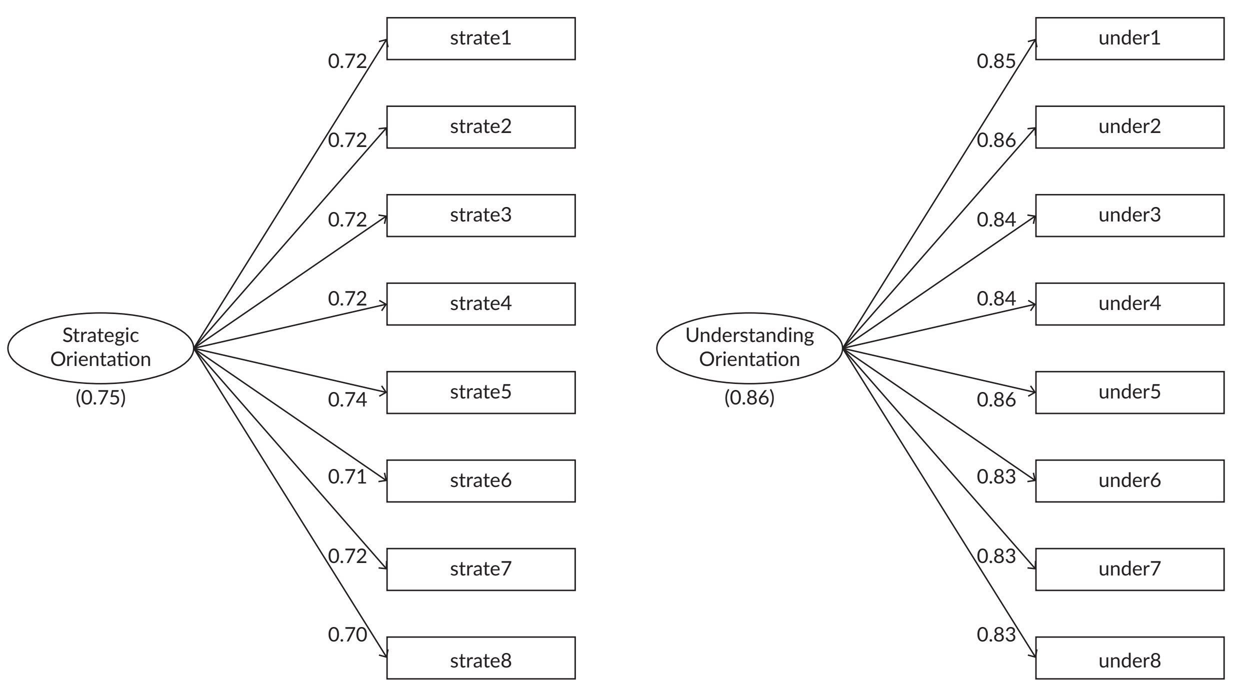

Figure 2. Measurement model for understanding and strategic orientations. Notes: Ovals are factors and boxes are variables from the survey; the figure shows the reliability if an item is dropped and the general standard alpha in parentheses.

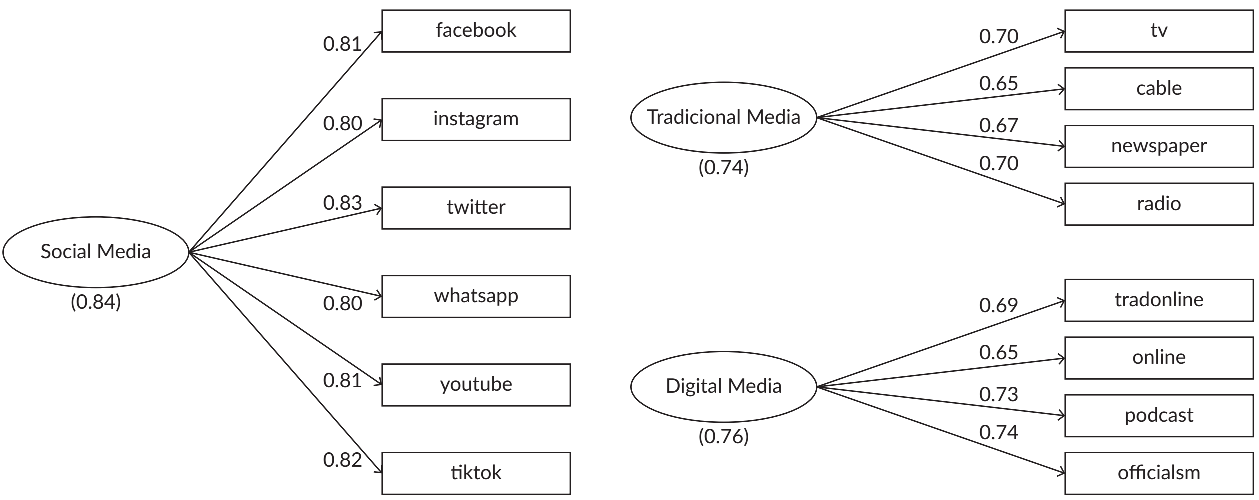

Figure 3. Measurement model for news consumption. Notes: Ovals are factors and boxes are variables from the survey; the figure shows the reliability if an item is dropped and the general standard alpha in parentheses.

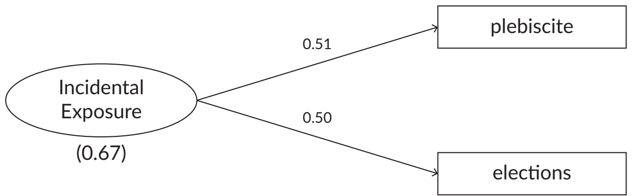

Figure 4. Measurement model for incidental exposure. Notes: Ovals are factors and boxes are variables from the survey; the figure shows the reliability if an item is dropped and the general standard alpha in parentheses.

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

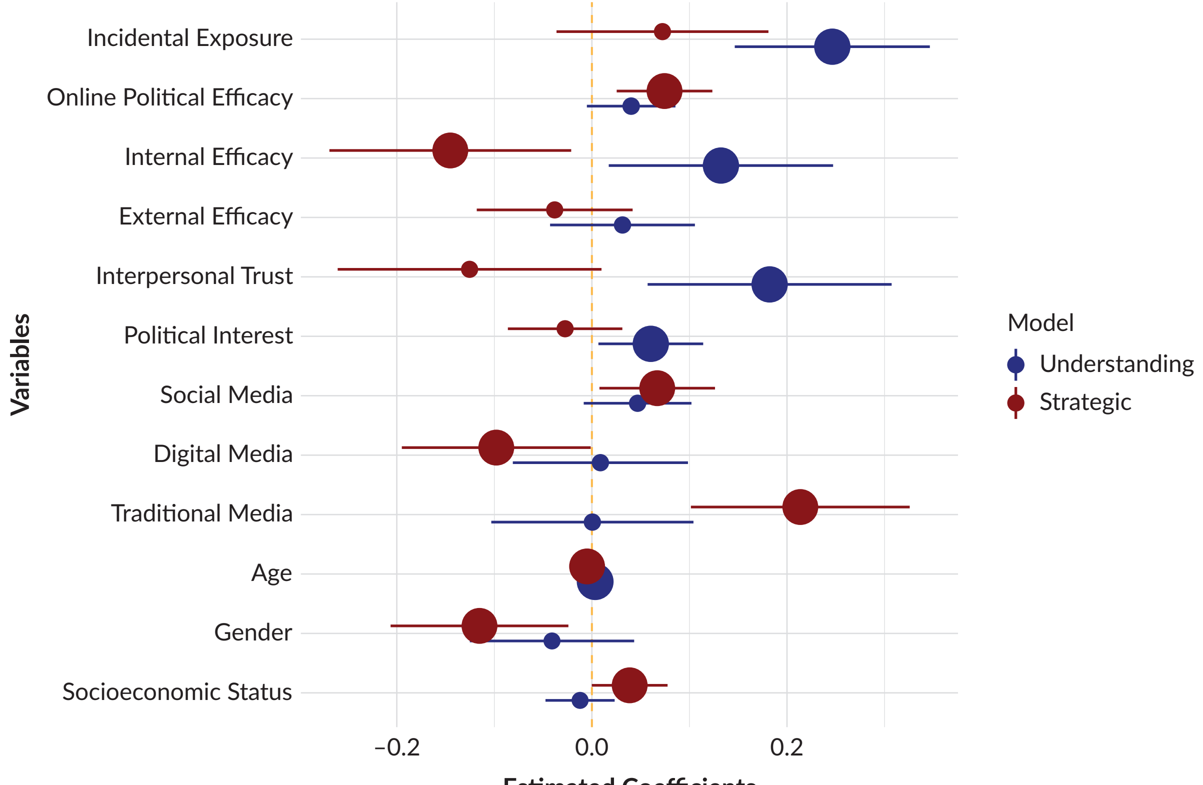

Figure 5. OLS estimates for understanding orientation and strategic orientation. Notes: Larger circles indicate statistically significant results (p-value < 0.05); the specific coefficients and standard errors are provided in the Supplementary File (Appendix 2).

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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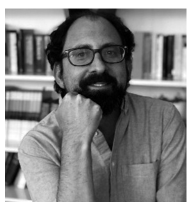

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ARTICLE

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How Partisan Media Influences Aversion to Political Compromise

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Abstract

We investigate how partisan media during and after the 2020 US presidential (Study 1) and 2022 midterm (Study 2) elections influenced preferences for unyielding politicians who do not compromise with partisan opponents. Our findings suggest that partisan media use may undermine willingness to support politicians who engage in deliberative compromises with opponents. This effect is likely driven by the tendency of partisan media to diminish willingness to engage in political listening and instigate moral considerations of the party's policy goals.

Keywords

attitude moralization; deliberative democracy; election coverage; partisan asymmetry; partisan media; political compromise; political listening

1. Introduction

Compromise is essential to the maintenance of civil society (Skocpol, 2011). While plurality of voices and contestations are inherent to democratic societies (Barber, 2003), recent years have witnessed increased antipathy among partisans in the US electorate (Abramowitz & Webster, 2018; Iyengar et al., 2012). This, coupled with seemingly intractable disagreements and an unwillingness to meaningfully engage with the other side among partisan lawmakers at the federal and state levels, raises concerns about political dysfunction and the erosion of civic culture (Grumbach, 2022; Mann & Ornstein, 2016; Mason, 2018). Compounding this issue, mediated narratives warn politicians and individuals with more extreme views that compromising or even engaging in conversation with the other side is to be avoided (Huddy & Yair, 2021; Wells et al., 2017). We contend that this aversion to political compromise signals a fractured civic society in the US, potentially hindering effective democratic governance (Friedland et al., 2022). In light of these

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concerns, we examine what role our increasingly polarized and asymmetric partisan media ecology might play in accelerating the erosion of civic culture, undermining a willingness to hear opposing perspectives—a precondition to negotiation and conciliation (Almond & Verba, 1963)—while at the same time instigating a moral consideration of important policy issues.

To this end, we connect patterns of partisan media use, including their changes over time, with an aversion to political compromise and further explore the underlying mechanisms of this process in the context of US politics. One such mechanism is political listening, defined as thoughtfully and fairly deliberating on divergent views (Scudder, 2020a). We propose that partisan media use may reduce individuals' willingness to engage in political listening, thereby indirectly contributing to their aversion to political compromise. Another potential mechanism is attitude moral relevance (Skitka et al., 2021). A growing body of research has found that partisan media content can trigger a process of moralization (e.g., D'Amore et al., 2022; Simonsen & Bonikowski, 2022), which refers to the increased relevance of one's standards of right and wrong with a political attitude.

Although research on affective and ideological polarization abounds, the attitudinal and behavioral manifestations of opposition to compromise remain understudied. This study hopes to fill the gap by investigating how partisan media use during and after the 2020 US presidential (Study 1) and 2022 midterm (Study 2) elections influenced preferences for unyielding politicians, using two sets of two-wave panel surveys conducted in the US. Leveraging the advantage of panel datasets, relationships are tested using fixed-effects models, such that in Study 1, we first examine how partisan media is associated with levels of aversion to compromise. We then test the mediating process in Study 2. In the following section, we first delineate the concept of political compromise before laying out how it may be attenuated by exposure to partisan media.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1. Political Compromise

Public support for political compromise, or coming to an agreement with political opponents, has implications for the healthy functioning of democracies in general, and in particular, within the US political context. First, it gets things done: When politicians perceive that citizens are unwilling to support compromise, they are more likely to refuse to reach across the aisle to seek mutually agreeable solutions, resulting in legislative gridlocks (Anderson et al., 2020). Indeed, the frequency of legislative gridlock, measured as the percentage of failed agenda items tallied against issue coverage in *The New York Times*, has increased from 1947 to 2012 (Binder, 2003, 2014), lending credence to the claim that "little change can happen in democratic politics without some compromise, and almost no major change can happen without major compromises" (Gutmann & Thompson, 2010, p. 1129).

Second, a willingness to cooperate across the aisle is also an important indicator in a normative sense, delivering on policy outcomes while also serving as an indicator of deliberative citizenship, open-mindedness, and accommodation toward different political views (MacKuen et al., 2010). Support for political compromise suggests a deliberative mindset (Gutmann & Thompson, 2010) because it requires mutual tolerance, a willingness to turn-take, and respect for the opposition as legitimate representatives of society (see Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2019). Such a deliberative mindset closely resembles a "strong democracy"

(Barber, 2003), where citizens resolve political conflict through democratic talk and is heralded as a marker of civic health and participatory engagement.

Despite the importance of political compromise as outlined above, negative attitudes toward lawmakers and politicians who reach agreements with political opponents continue to be observed in the general public (Hibbing & Theiss-Morse, 2002; Wolak & Marcus, 2007) or in particular groups—such as proponents of procedural democracy (Davis et al., 2022), individuals whose ideological and partisan identities are aligned (Davis, 2019), or those who hold moral convictions on policy issues (Delton et al., 2020; Ryan, 2017). This aversion to politicians engaging in efforts to reach compromise among the members of the public goes beyond opposition to reaching bipartisan agreements on deeply vested policy issues. A general aversion to reaching bipartisan agreements is likely to be driven by something else, such as a lack of mutual respect and a closed-mindedness to different opinions (Gutmann & Thompson, 1996, 2010).

2.2. Partisan Media Influence on Aversion to Compromise During Elections

Aversion to compromise fluctuates over time. While citizens are generally overwhelmingly favorable towards the principle of political compromise, responses vary over time (Pew Research Center, 2023; Tyson, 2019). One period that may trigger opposition to compromise among politicians is the election season. During this time, aversion to compromise may intensify, as candidates are motivated to present themselves as standing against their opponent and project an unwavering commitment to their party's principles (Gutmann & Thompson, 2010). This also suggests that these effects may dissipate in the wake of elections, as partisan conflicts become less focal. Research shows that media coverage plays a key role in this dynamic, fostering or dampening support for compromise. For example, partisans were more likely to believe their party should strike bargains after consuming news in which an in-party politician called for prudent concessions, compared to when news coverage featured a politician expressing a steadfast unwillingness to compromise with the opposing party (McLaughlin et al., 2017). Wolak (2020) demonstrated that people are more likely to support compromises, even when their preferred policy outcome has been achieved, if they are given information that public opinion is opposed to the outcome.

How exactly does partisan media factor into this variation in aversion to working with the other side? Partisan media, just like candidates and parties, are motivated to foster opposition to finding a middle ground with political outgroups during election periods. Partisan media sources favor particular ideological viewpoints, emphasizing the version of the news that benefits their side and sharing a cloistered media ecology that reinforces their own beliefs (Jamieson & Cappella, 2008; Levendusky, 2013a). Such an environment polarizes the audience and stigmatizes engagement with the other side (Gutmann & Thompson, 2010). Moreover, past studies found partisan sources such as cable TV (e.g., FOX News, MSNBC), conservative talk radio (e.g., Rush Limbaugh), and digital news (e.g., Daily Kos) not only dampened trust in media (Guess et al., 2021; R. K. Garrett et al., 2014; Stroud, 2010) but also polarized the electorate (Druckman et al., 2018; Levendusky, 2013a, 2013b; R. K. Garrett et al., 2019; Suk et al., 2023). Suk et al. (2022) demonstrated that increasing use of partisan-aligned media sources and engagement in conversations with co-partisans widened party differences in trust toward social outgroups. This suggests that partisan media influences political attitudes and behaviors in a direction that increases ideological and affective gaps between parties and partisans, with deeper immersion in these sources potentially driving opinions to more polarized and less conciliatory directions.

Past studies have also shown how the defining content features of partisan media may foster an aversion to reaching across the aisle. For nearly two decades, research on media politics has emphasized rising televised incivility; a combination of insulting discourse, close-up camera perspectives, interruptions, and an absence of civil turn-taking was found to reduce the perceived legitimacy of opponents' arguments (Mutz, 2007). This "videomalaise" cultivated by "in-your-face politics" extends to judgments of candidate incivility and reductions in political trust (Cho et al., 2009). Likewise, in the contemporary media environment, close-ups and split-screen shots are used to amplify the experience of contentious exchanges characteristic of news production, especially partisan cable news, where expressions of outrage between "talking heads" are commonplace (Sobieraj & Berry, 2011). The implication is a delegitimized opposition—one that is less likely to be considered a collaborative policymaking partner. Moreover, partisan media instill the sense that cherished identities and worldviews are under attack from political opponents (Gervais, 2019; Hasell & Weeks, 2016). Such perceptions are not conducive to openness to hearing opposing viewpoints and reaching compromises.

In a particularly relevant study, Levendusky (2013a) demonstrated that partisan media consumption negatively predicted willingness to compromise. Participants who viewed news clips from media sources that were commonly assumed to align with their party identity reported a lower willingness to compromise with the opposing party. Though not manipulated in the experiment, it was speculated post hoc that partisan media's focus on the flaws of the other party, combined with a psychological negativity bias, may be drivers of this influence. Building on this point, a recent field experiment incentivized a subset of FOX News viewers to watch CNN for one month and found that this shift fostered learning and moderated partisan attitudes (Broockman & Kalla, 2025). Taken together, we hypothesize right- and left-leaning partisan media use is positively associated with aversion to political compromise:

> H1: Within individuals, increases in partisan media use are associated with increases in aversion to compromise.

2.3. Exploring Mechanisms

2.3.1. Political Listening

Political listening refers to giving fair and meaningful consideration to different opinions (Scudder, 2020a). It is one of two key communicative acts, along with reason-giving, that constitute democratic deliberation (see also Dobson, 2014) and grant legitimacy to democratic processes by ensuring that the views of participants are authentically considered, even when they are not reflected in the final decision (Scudder, 2020a). Political listening is related to, but distinct from virtues of the public sphere previously put forth by deliberative democrats (e.g., Dahlberg, 2007; Delli Carpini et al., 2004), such as empathy (which is selective and contingent on perceived common ground) or inclusivity (which is not sufficient to facilitate a fair consideration of different voices; Scudder, 2020b). Instead, ideal listening involves a concept called "uptake," meaning that listeners go beyond simply hearing or paying superficial attention to spend a sincere effort into understanding and considering the different perspectives (Scudder, 2020b, 2021; see also Bickford, 1996). Distinguishing listening from compromise, Scudder (2020a) argues that listening across lines of difference is useful for democracy even if it does not lead to compromise. Implied in this notion of listening is an openness to meaningfully engage with diverse viewpoints. This openness is also a key element underlying

the mindset for good listening, as advanced by other scholars (Bickford, 1996; Dobson, 2014; see also Eveland et al., 2020).

Given that openness encourages interaction with alternative perspectives, political listening is likely to reduce an aversion to political compromise. Authentically engaging with different viewpoints may make the prospect of political compromises less threatening. That is, while political listening—and the mindset that supports it—does not guarantee openness to political concessions, it seems likely to reduce an aversion to political compromise among elites.

2.3.2. Attitude Moralization

Attitude moralization refers to the process by which individuals transform previously non-moral attitudes, such as preferences, into morally charged ones (Skitka et al., 2021). Once an attitude becomes moralized, a negative stance is no longer merely a matter of personal dislike; rather, it is perceived as a moral wrongdoing and judged according to individuals' standards of right and wrong. Such attitudes have high moral relevance.

Attitudes with high moral relevance tend to be resistant to concessions (e.g., Ryan, 2017; Skitka et al., 2005; see also Delton et al., 2020) because when attitudes are closely tied to one's inner moral compass, individuals are likely to reject the value of negotiations with the other side, echoing the description of "principled tenacity" of the uncompromising mindset in Gutmann and Thompson (2010). In a series of telling experiments, Ryan (2017) demonstrated that individuals whose attitudes were closely associated with moral values (i.e., high moral relevance) tended to oppose political compromises and were more willing to penalize politicians for seeking bipartisan agreements on said issue. This pattern was found even after controlling for other attitude attributes, including attitude extremity and importance. Moreover, the consequences of moralization are not confined to specific issue attitudes; they spill over onto attitudes toward other policy issues (Shah et al., 1996) as well as perceptions of partisan politics in general (K. N. Garrett & Bankert, 2020). That is, when attitudes toward multiple political issues are grounded in moral values, the general tendency to regard politics as a matter of right or wrong also increases, potentially amplifying aversion to political compromises in general.

Such moral obstinacy is problematic from the perspective of bipartisanship (Gutmann & Thompson, 1996), especially if more and more politicians refuse to work across the aisle for fear of punishment from constituents (Harbridge & Malhotra, 2011; see also Anderson et al., 2020). Therefore, it is critical to understand the factors that trigger such rigid ways of thinking. Building on these previous works, we examine how exposure to partisan media might impact political listening and attitude moral relevance.

2.3.3. Partisan Media Influence on Political Listening and Attitude Moralization

As discussed above, past work indicates that partisan media play a key role in political polarization by delegitimizing the opposition (Mutz, 2007), eroding political trust (Cho et al., 2009), and amplifying negative perceptions of the other side (Levendusky, 2013a). In particular, partisan media's persistent focus on showing "why the opposition is wrong" (Levendusky, 2013b, pp. 566–567) can contribute to the vilification and denigration of political outgroups. By highlighting the flaws of the other side, partisan news reports provide situational cues that discourage political listening while encouraging individuals to evaluate politics through a moral lens.

Political listening relies on *openness*—an individual's willingness to meaningfully engage with and consider divergent perspectives (see Eveland et al., 2020). This openness is undermined when partisan media frames political opponents as morally objectionable, portraying them as being unworthy of engagement and illegitimate members of society. Partisan media can also transform policy opinions into matters of right or wrong. One way partisan media can achieve this is by repeatedly employing media frames that present sacred values (e.g., Tetlock et al., 2000) or innocent entities (Rozin, 1997) under threat of harm, thereby morally condemning the opposition. Some scholars have referred to this type of media frame as "harm" frames—those that present the political opposition as a perpetrator inflicting harm on the ingroup or a vulnerable agent. For example, exposure to a news article describing universal healthcare as a fundamental right for Americans heightened the relevance of moral concerns in attitudes not only toward healthcare but also toward other policy issues such as the economy and education (Shah et al., 1996). In another study, participants who read news stories portraying one side of a policy debate as violent (i.e., causing harm) reported greater moral relevance of policy attitudes (D'Amore et al., 2022). Such strategic use of frames or negative portrayals of the outgroup may be especially pronounced during elections (see Smith & Searles, 2014) when these outlets are incentivized by electoral goals to place blame on the outgroup, its politicians, and supporters. As such, we propose the following:

> H2: Within individuals, increases in partisan media use are associated with decreases in willingness to engage in political listening, which, in turn, predict decreases in aversion to compromise.

> H3: Within individuals, increases in partisan media use are associated with increases in attitude moral relevance, which, in turn, predict increases in aversion to compromise.

Previous research suggests that partisan media content undermines a willingness to engage in political listening and facilitates moral interpretations of issues, laying the ground for preferring a "principled" stance. Still, questions remain. Does this partisan media influence differ by (a) the political slant of the partisan media and (b) the relevant policy issue? Regarding the (a) potential asymmetry, a content analysis of partisan media found conservative media sources were more likely to emphasize moral outrage (Sobieraj & Berry, 2011; see also Friedland et al., 2022; Shah et al., 2017). However, given the lack of a systematic comparison of right- and left-leaning partisan media effects, we explore the potential asymmetry as a research question:

> RQ1: How are changes in individuals' (a) right-leaning and (b) left-leaning partisan media use related to political listening and attitude moral relevance?

Second, (b) does the partisan media influence on aversion to compromise through attitude moral relevance differ by policy issue? For example, is increased use of right-leaning partisan media associated with increased moral relevance of attitudes toward abortion but not the environmental issue? We explore the following question:

> RQ2: How are changes in individuals' partisan media use associated with changes in the moral relevance of attitudes toward different policy issues?

3. Study 1

3.1. Method

3.1.1. Data

In Study 1, we analyzed a two-wave panel survey of two swing state residents, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin, collected during the 2020 US presidential election. Because swing states tend to be the most politically contested during elections and typically receive a high volume of political and media attention, they provide a useful context for examining how changes in partisan media use during and after an election shape changes in attitudes toward political compromise. Respondents were recruited using nested quotas based on gender, age, and strata, with external quotas for education, race, and income. The pre-election wave (W1) was collected between October 21 and November 1, 2020. Respondents from the first wave were contacted to participate in the post-election wave (W2) between December 7 and December 15, 2020, to capture changes in the aftermath of the election. Among respondents who participated in both waves of the survey, those who recorded a change in our outcome measure—aversion to compromise—were included in our analysis ($N = 370$), representing 20.77% of the respondents. This was mandated by our analytic strategy of employing fixed-effects logistic regression, which automatically excludes individuals who record no change on the dependent variable and conducts listwise deletion on any missing values (Allison, 2009; see S1 of the Supplementary Material for demographics).

3.1.2. Measures

As all variables were repeatedly measured in W1 and W2, for continuous variables we reported their means and standard deviations at the overall, between-person, and within-person levels based on the final sample of responses ($N = 370$ respondents $\times$ 2 waves = 740). For dichotomous variables (i.e., aversion to compromise, restarted talking), we reported the number of positive responses at W1 and W2. As our main analyses use fixed-effects models, which employ only within-person variations, the distribution of the changes between waves is presented in the Supplementary Material (S2.1).

A dichotomous item, adapted from the American National Election Studies (2016) Time Series Study, was used to assess Aversion to Compromise: "In general, do you think lawmakers should stick to their principles no matter what or make compromises to get something done?" (1 = *stick to principles no matter what*, 0 = *compromise to get something done*). The number of respondents demonstrating an aversion to compromise was 266 in W1 and 104 in W2.

The survey included items measuring respondents' media use: "Thinking of your recent media use, how often in the last week have you used the following types of media content?" Respondents answered the question for each media source (e.g., CNN cable news, Breitbart) on a five-point scale (1 = *never*, 5 = *very often*). Using these responses, we generated indices of left, right, and centrist media by categorizing 18 media sources based on the sources' ideology scores estimated by Faris et al. (2020), following the approach taken in past studies (Borah et al., 2024; Ghosh et al., 2020). Media sources with Faris scores ranging from −0.3 to 0.3 were averaged as exposure to Centrist Media: *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, CNN, nightly network news on CBS, ABC, or NBC, *Politico*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Hill*, and *USA Today* ($M = 1.71$, $SD_{overall} = 0.77$,

$SD_{between}$ = 0.73, SD_{within} = 0.24). Sources with Faris scores higher than 0.3 were considered Right-Leaning Partisan Media: FOX cable news, The Daily Caller, Breitbart, conservative talk radio, and One America News Network (M = 1.51, $SD_{overall}$ = 0.72, $SD_{between}$ = 0.68, SD_{within} = 0.24). Sources indexed lower than −0.3 were categorized as Left-Leaning Partisan Media: MSNBC cable news, Vox, *Slate*, *HuffPost*, and National Public Radio (M = 1.50, $SD_{overall}$ = 0.72, $SD_{between}$ = 0.67, SD_{within} = 0.27). The Supplementary Material reports the Faris scores (S3) and descriptive statistics for media use indices by wave (S4.1). However, we found that in our dataset, the left and centrist media exposure indicators showed extremely high correlations (in both W1 and W2, $r > 0.85$, $p < 0.001$; see S4.1 of the Supplementary Material). We also ran exploratory factor analyses and found the left-leaning and centrist sources were not distinguishable, whereas the right-leaning sources formed a unique factor. To err on the side of caution, we combined the left and centrist media sources, generating an index of Left + Centrist Media Use (M = 1.63, $SD_{overall}$ = 0.73, $SD_{between}$ = 0.69, SD_{within} = 0.23), to compare their effects with those of right-leaning media exposure and reported these models in the Supplementary Material (S5).

An index of Attitude Extremity was generated using responses to nine issue position items. Respondents were asked to indicate their opinion on a five-point bipolar scale regarding restrictive immigration policy, raising taxes on the top 5%, Obamacare, abortion, environmental regulations, Green New Deal, strengthened background checks on gun sales, the Black Lives Matter movement, and a government requirement to wear masks in public indoor spaces. Responses were folded in the middle to create an indicator of attitude extremity, then averaged (M = 1.28, $SD_{overall}$ = 0.43, $SD_{between}$ = 0.40, SD_{within} = 0.17).

The partisan composition of the Talk Network was measured by asking respondents to indicate "how many days per week do you discuss politics and current events with" Republicans and Democrats (0–7 days). Then, an index was computed by subtracting the responses about Democrats from those about Republicans (M = −0.08, $SD_{overall}$ = 2.58, $SD_{between}$ = 2.34, SD_{within} = 1.09). A positive value indicated greater inclusion of Republicans in a talk network.

Restarted Talking was measured using the following question: "In the last two months, have you tried to restart talking with someone you had stopped talking to because you disagreed about politics?" (1 = *yes*, 0 = *no*). The number of positive responses was 28 in W1 and 36 in W2.

3.1.3. Analytic Strategy

To analyze the two-wave panel dataset, we tested fixed-effects regressions with generalized least-squares estimation, which discards all between-subjects variation and employs only the within-subjects changes by using each respondent as their control. This approach has the advantage of reducing threats to spurious relationships when testing media effects and allows us to examine how an individual *i*'s change in partisan media use explains the change in *i*'s aversion to compromise.

As fixed-effects models control for time-invariant variables—even those unmeasured—our choice of model automatically ruled out many potential confounders that influence both partisan media use and attitudes toward compromise, such as partisan identity, gender, and race (Frasure & Williams, 2009; Hansen & Goenaga, 2021; see also Benesch, 2012). We, therefore, explicitly controlled only those variables that can be (a) considered as "causes" of both partisan media use and compromise attitudes and (b) expected to shift

between the survey waves for individual *i*. We included Attitude Extremity (Abelson, 1995) as it may increase partisan media use (Rodriguez et al., 2017) while at the same time decreasing openness to concessions with opposing parties. Additionally, we included three variables indicating the partisan (un)biasedness of individuals' communication environment (Suk et al., 2022): centrist media use, the partisan composition of political talk networks, and whether or not one restarted talking with someone from whom they had been estranged due to political differences.

3.2. Results

The fixed-effects logistic regression revealed a positive association between change in right-leaning partisan media use and variation in the likelihood of expressing an aversion to political compromise ($b = 0.84$, $SE = 0.34$, $p = 0.015$; see Table 1). Specifically, a one-unit increase in an individual's right-leaning partisan media use index was associated with 2.31 times higher odds of exhibiting aversion to compromise, after accounting for other forms of media use, interpersonal conversations, attitude extremity, and stable individual characteristics. Results remained unchanged when left-leaning partisan media and centrist media use were combined into a single index (see Supplementary Material S5.1). In contrast, greater use of left-leaning partisan media was associated with a 52% decrease in the odds of expressing an aversion to compromise ($b = -0.73$, $SE = 0.34$, $p = 0.034$); however, this pattern disappeared when left-leaning and centrist sources were combined.

To facilitate the interpretation of magnitudes and over-time patterns of change, we evaluated the mean change in partisan media use (Supplementary Material S6.1 and see also S2.1 for a visual distribution of the change scores). We found that on average, all focal variables showed a pattern of decline over time in the post-election wave, though only the reduction in right-leaning partisan media use was statistically significant. We next assessed how this average decline in partisan media use corresponded to a change in the predicted likelihood of aversion to compromise (see Mutz, 2018). Drawing on the fixed-effects model in Table 1, the net effects of the mean change in partisan media use indices were estimated as the change in the predicted

Table 1. Within-person effects of partisan media use on the likelihood of aversion to compromise.

	Aversion to Compromise		
Variables	Log-Odds	*SE*	Odds Ratio (95% CI)
Right-Leaning Partisan Media	0.84*	0.34	2.31 (1.18, 4.51)
Left-Leaning Partisan Media	−0.73*	0.34	0.48 (0.25, 0.95)
Centrist Media	0.33	0.35	1.39 (0.70, 2.76)
Talk Network	0.02	0.05	1.02 (0.92, 1.13)
Restarted Talking	−0.27	0.36	0.77 (0.38, 1.54)
Attitude Extremity	0.003	0.34	1.00 (0.51, 1.96)
Wave [a]	−0.93***	0.12	0.40 (0.31, 0.50)
Observations		740	
Number of Respondents		370	
McFadden R^2		0.1605	

Notes: Cell entries are obtained from a fixed-effects logistic regression model (xtlogit in Stata 18) which excludes individuals who record no change on the dependent variable and conducts listwise deletion on observations with at least one missing value in any variable (Allison, 2009); [a] = the reference category is the pre-election wave (W1); † $p < 0.10$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

probabilities of aversion to compromise while all other variables were held at their W1 means. On average, reduced right-leaning partisan media use predicted a decrease in the likelihood of expressing aversion to compromise in the post-election period (see Supplementary Material S6.2 and S6.3).

3.3. Discussion of Study 1

Study 1 found that an individual's right-leaning partisan media use is positively correlated with one's aversion to political compromise. Left-leaning partisan media appeared to reduce this aversion to compromise, though, when combined into a single index with centrist media, the effect disappeared (see S5.1 in the Supplementary Material). This asymmetry between the left- and right-leaning partisan media is consistent with what previous studies have found regarding the bifurcated state of the political communication ecology in the US, in which the right-wing media sources have formed an echo chamber, operating in an insular and partisan manner, largely isolated from other mainstream sources (Benkler et al., 2018; see also Friedland et al., 2022). In particular, right-leaning media use spurred opposition to politicians who strive for deliberative solutions, supporting previous findings that demonstrated right-leaning sources instigate outrage or condemnation (Sobieraj & Berry, 2011).

On average, respondents reported a decline in their use of right-leaning partisan media after the election, and the extent of this decline corresponded to a net decrease in the likelihood of expressing a preference for lawmakers who "stick to principles," a finding that aligns with what Broockman and Kalla (2025) found by incentivizing FOX News viewers to watch CNN for a month and reporting more tempered policy attitudes (see S6.1–S6.3 in the Supplementary Material).

It is also interesting that no covariate in our model predicted aversion to compromise in a statistically significant manner, except the time (i.e., wave) variable. While past studies have shown that one's interpersonal networks may influence perceptions toward political compromise, we did not find evidence that the partisan composition of individuals' interpersonal conversations (i.e., talk networks, restarted talking) predicted their aversion to political compromise. That is, within-individual variation in individuals' talk networks did not impact attitudes toward political compromise, at least in the current dataset.

While shedding light on how the partisan media ecology may influence attitudes toward working with the other side, Study 1 has notable limitations. The final sample size was small due to our analytic choice. To reduce the uncertainty regarding causal inference from observational data, we restricted our analysis to within-person variations, thereby minimizing potential confounding effects. However, this approach limited the analysis to a small subset of the survey respondents (see Section 3.1.3), sacrificing efficiency to reduce bias from time-invariant confounders. Moreover, as the data was collected only in two states, our findings could be specific to the states in which the survey was conducted, which were highly contested in the 2020 presidential election. To replicate Study 1 with a larger sample and to investigate mechanisms that underlie this partisan media influence, we collected responses using a national panel survey during the 2022 midterm election period.

4. Study 2

While Study 1 found a positive relationship between sustained use of right-leaning partisan media and aversion to compromise among elected officials, it is less clear how and why this influence occurs. In Study 2, we test potential mechanisms building on insights from the literature on political listening (e.g., Bickford, 1996; Dobson, 2014; Morrell, 2018; Scudder, 2020a) and attitude moralization (Delton et al., 2020; Ryan, 2017; Skitka et al., 2021).

4.1. Method

4.1.1. Data

We employed a two-wave panel survey dataset administered as a web-based survey during the 2022 US midterm election through SSRS, a survey company. The survey was completed by a national probabilistic online panel recruited randomly based on a nationally representative address-based sample design. The pre-election wave (W1) was collected between October 31 and November 14, 2022. Respondents from the first wave were contacted to participate in the post-election wave (W2) between March 23 and April 6, 2023, to observe post-election shifts in public opinion. The recontact response rate was 72% (N_{W1} = 1,792, N_{W2} = 1,798; see S1 in the Supplementary Material for demographics).

4.1.2. Measures

All variables were repeatedly measured in W1 and W2. For continuous variables, we reported the means of these variables and standard deviations at the overall, between-person, and within-person levels, based on the final sample of respondents.

For Aversion to Compromise, we asked respondents to indicate agreement with the following statement: “Lawmakers should look for opportunities to compromise” (1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*). The item was then reverse coded (M = 2.10, $SD_{overall}$ = 0.91, $SD_{between}$ = 0.81, SD_{within} = 0.44).

Right-Leaning Partisan Media (M = 1.40, $SD_{overall}$ = 0.63, $SD_{between}$ = 0.59, SD_{within} = 0.23) and Left-Leaning Partisan Media (M = 1.54, $SD_{overall}$ = 0.68, $SD_{between}$ = 0.62, SD_{within} = 0.26), as well as Centrist Media (M = 1.67, $SD_{overall}$ = 0.68, $SD_{between}$ = 0.63, SD_{within} = 0.25) use were measured using the same items as Study 1, except right-leaning partisan media did not include national conservative radio, and left-leaning partisan media did not include *Slate*. Correlation coefficients for media use indices by wave are reported in the Supplementary Material (S4.2).

Restarted Talking was measured using the same item as Study 1. The number of participants who responded “yes” was 190 in W1 and 163 in W2.

To measure the partisan leaning of an individual’s Talk Network, we first asked participants to identify one to three “people with whom you discussed government, elections, politics, or political issues.” Then, we asked a follow-up question about the “perceived political identification” of each person (−3 = *strong Democrat*, −2 = *Democrat*, −1 = *independent who leans Democrat*, 0 = *independent* and *don’t know*, 1 = *independent*

who leans Republican, 2 = *Republican*, 3 = *strong Republican*). Responses were then averaged (M = 0.04, $SD_{overall}$ = 3.98, $SD_{between}$ = 3.74, SD_{within} = 1.39). Like in Study 1, a higher positive value reflected a greater inclusion of Republicans in one's talk network.

To measure Exposure to Political Content on Social Media, we first asked respondents to indicate the social media platform they most frequently used. Then, based on this answer, we assessed how often they saw (a) friends' posts about politics and social issues, (b) news organizations' posts about politics and social issues, and (c) advertisements from political campaigns or political groups on the platform. We then generated an index by averaging the three responses (M = 2.23, $SD_{overall}$ = 1.02, $SD_{between}$ = 0.91, SD_{within} = 0.48).

To gauge a willingness to engage in political listening, we measured respondents' Openness to Different Perspectives by asking them to indicate agreement with the following two statements: "It is important that citizens talk to those with whom they disagree" and "we should be equally open to proposals from both parties to solve public problems" (1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*). An index was generated by averaging responses (M = 4.01, $SD_{overall}$ = 0.70, $SD_{between}$ = 0.62, SD_{within} = 0.33).

To measure attitude moral relevance and attitude certainty regarding specific policy issues (i.e., topic), respondents were first asked to select two that were "most important" to themselves from a list of topics: immigration, tax, health care, abortion, the environment, gun policy, the Black Lives Matter movement, the MeToo movement, and the war in Ukraine. Then, they were asked about the moral relevance and certainty of their attitudes on one of the two issues they selected (see S9 in the Supplementary Material for the number of respondents for each issue). Attitude Moral Relevance was measured to gauge attitude moralization and was assessed by asking individuals the following question: "How much are your feelings about the issue connected to your moral beliefs" (1 = *not at all*, 5 = *very much*; M = 3.65, $SD_{overall}$ = 1.31, $SD_{between}$ = 1.12, SD_{within} = 0.71). Attitude Certainty was measured using three items: "How certain are you that your position is the correct position to have," "how strongly do you feel that other people should have the same position as you on this issue," and "how clear in your head is your true feeling toward the issue" (1 = *not at all*, 5 = *very much*; α_{w1} = 0.77, α_{w2} = 0.78, M = 3.99, $SD_{overall}$ = 0.87, $SD_{between}$ = 0.76, SD_{within} = 0.44).

To assess Attitude Extremity, we used a five-point bipolar scale to measure issue preference regarding the same policy issue about which individuals were asked about Attitude Moral Relevance and Attitude Certainty. Responses were then folded in the middle (M = 1.54, $SD_{overall}$ = 0.73, $SD_{between}$ = 0.64, SD_{within} = 0.40). For example, the following question was asked about immigration: "Using the 1 to 5 scale below, please indicate where your opinion falls on the spectrum for each issue. Oppose a restrictive immigration policy (1)—favor a restrictive immigration policy (5)."

4.1.3. Analytic Strategy

As in Study 1, we tested fixed-effects regression models with generalized least-squares estimation, employing only within-subject variations. The conceptual model is presented in Figure 1.

Our analytic strategy proceeded in three steps. First, we regressed openness to different perspectives and attitude moral relevance on partisan media use, in separate models. For attitude moral relevance, interaction terms between partisan media and topic were included, as moral relevance was measured with respect to a

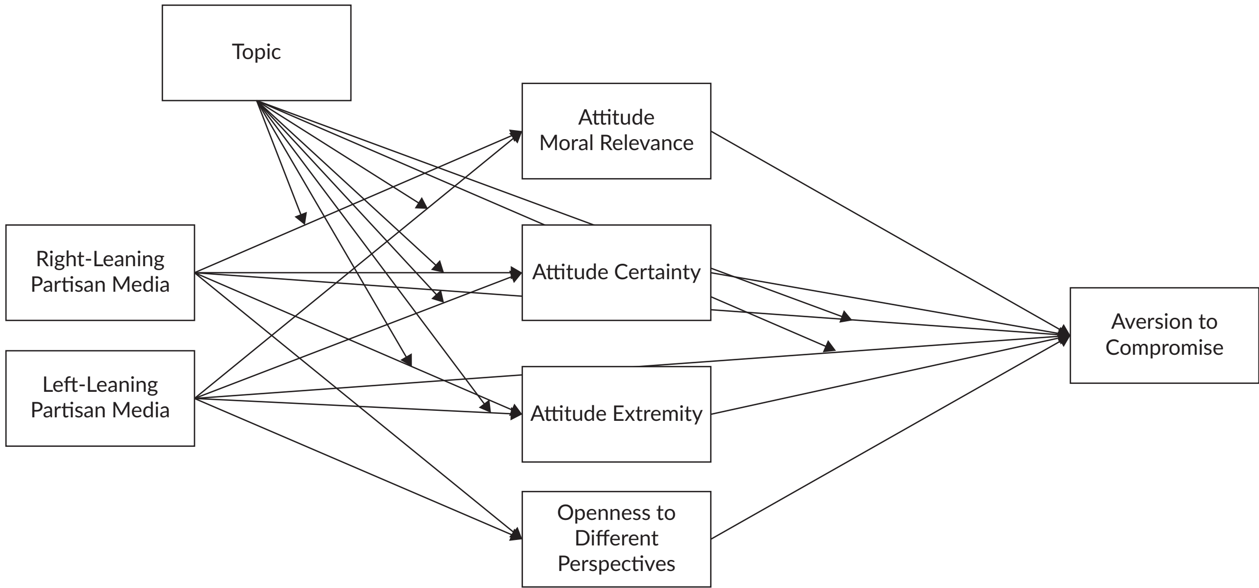

Figure 1. Conceptual model.

specific policy. Second, we estimated the influence of openness to different perspectives and attitude moral relevance on aversion to compromise. Attitude certainty and attitude extremity were included as predictors in this step because these alternative attitude dimensions were considered parallel mediators that may underlie partisan media's effect on compromise attitudes (see Ryan, 2017). Third, we conducted a formal test of the significance of the indirect effects of partisan media on aversion to compromise by estimating 95% confidence intervals using the Monte Carlo method for assessing mediation with 20,000 replications (Selig & Preacher, 2008). In all models, we included a set of covariates that were kept consistent with Study 1 where possible. Specifically, we included indicators of the partisan (un)biasedness of the communication environment (Suk et al., 2022): Centrist Media, Talk Network, and Restarted Talking. In Study 2, we also included a measure of exposure to Political Content on Social Media.

4.2. Results

4.2.1. Within-Person Effects of Partisan Media Use on Openness and Attitude Moral Relevance

Results of the fixed-effects regression models are presented in Table 2. Regarding openness to different perspectives, a within-person increase in right-leaning partisan media use predicted reduced openness ($b = -0.09$, $SE = 0.04$, $p = 0.034$). In contrast, left-leaning partisan media use showed no significant association ($p = 0.565$; see Table 2, Model 1).

Next, we examined the interaction effect of partisan media use and topic on attitude moral relevance, controlling for all covariates (Table 2, Model 2; Figure 2). Results indicated that the overall F-tests for both interaction terms were statistically significant ($p = 0.014$ for right-leaning partisan media and $p = 0.026$ for left-leaning partisan media), suggesting that the associations between partisan media use and attitude moral relevance differed across topics. A decomposition of these interactions revealed that right-leaning partisan media use was positively associated with higher moral relevance of individuals' attitudes on the issues of tax ($b = 0.50$, $SE = 0.16$, $p = 0.002$) and abortion ($b = 0.41$, $SE = 0.17$, $p = 0.018$). Conversely, left-leaning

partisan media use negatively predicted the moral relevance of abortion attitudes ($b = -0.31$, $SE = 0.15$, $p = 0.035$) and was positively related to the attitude moral relevance regarding the Ukraine topic ($b = 0.44$, $SE = 0.19$, $p = 0.020$). Results for attitude certainty and extremity are reported in the Supplementary Material (S7).

To clarify the magnitudes and temporal dynamics of change, we examined the average change in partisan media use (see Supplementary Material S6.4; see S2.2 for a visual distribution of the change scores). Both partisan media use variables showed a pattern of decline, though the magnitude of the change was statistically significant only for left-leaning partisan media use. Using the predicted values derived from the fixed-effects model (Table 2, Models 1 and 2), we then estimated the total net change in openness to different perspectives and attitude moral relevance driven by the mean change in partisan media use in order to aid the interpretation of our findings (see S6.5 and S6.6 in the Supplementary Material). The decline in the average left-leaning partisan media use predicted a net increase in openness in the post-election wave. While the corresponding over-time change in right-leaning partisan media was not statistically significant (see S6.4), the magnitude of the average change was also associated with an increase in political listening after the election. With respect to attitude moral relevance, the direction of the predicted net change varied across topics, as expected, given the topic-specific associations between partisan media use and moral relevance of the tax, abortion, and Ukraine topics.

4.2.2. Within-Person Effects of Openness and Attitude Moral Relevance on Aversion to Compromise

Next, we regressed aversion to compromise on openness to different perspectives and attitude moral relevance (Table 2, Model 5). Results indicated that within-person change in political listening was negatively associated with aversion to compromise ($b = -0.44$, $SE = 0.03$, $p < 0.001$) while attitude moral relevance positively predicted aversion to compromise ($b = 0.04$, $SE = 0.02$, $p = 0.009$).

Formal tests of significance were conducted on the indirect effects of political listening and attitude moral relevance, using the Monte Carlo method (see Section 4.1.3). Right-leaning partisan media use was negatively associated with openness to different perspectives, which in turn, was linked with a reduction in aversion to compromise ($ab = 0.041$, Monte Carlo 95% CI [0.003, 0.080]). It was also positively associated with the moral relevance of attitudes, which subsequently predicted greater aversion to compromise (tax: $ab = 0.020$, Monte Carlo 95% CI [0.004, 0.044]; abortion: $ab = 0.017$, Monte Carlo 95% CI [0.001, 0.039]).

Left-leaning partisan media use was positively linked to the moral relevance of Ukraine attitudes, which in turn was associated with greater aversion to compromise ($ab = 0.018$, Monte Carlo 95% CI [0.001, 0.042]). On the other hand, it was negatively related to the moral relevance of abortion attitudes, which positively predicted aversion to compromise ($ab = -0.013$, Monte Carlo 95% CI [−0.031, −0.0002]).

Given the high correlation between left-leaning partisan media and centrist media use indices, we also fitted alternative versions of all models presented in Study 2 using a combined index of left-leaning and centrist media, similar to what we did in Study 1. Results largely replicated the main models (see S5.2 in the Supplementary Material).

Table 2. Within-person effects of partisan media use on aversion to compromise through openness to different perspectives and attitude moral relevance.

	Mediators								Outcome	
	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4		Model 5	
	Openness to Different Perspectives		Attitude Moral Relevance		Attitude Certainty		Attitude Extremity		Aversion to Compromise	
Variables	*b*	*SE*	*b*	*SE*	*b*	*SE*	*b*	*SE*	*b*	*SE*
Right-Leaning Partisan Media	−0.09*	0.04	0.50**	0.16	0.09	0.10	−0.02	0.09	0.10	0.09
Left-Leaning Partisan Media	−0.03	0.04	−0.30†	0.16	−0.06	0.10	0.08	0.09	−0.09	0.09
Centrist Media	0.004	0.05	−0.02	0.10	0.11†	0.06	0.02	0.05	0.08	0.06
Talk Network	0.001	0.01	0.03*	0.01	0.0003	0.01	0.01†	0.01	−0.004	0.01
Restarted Talking	0.05	0.05	−0.17†	0.10	−0.09	0.06	0.003	0.06	0.10	0.06
Political Content on Social Media	0.01	0.02	−0.05	0.04	0.02	0.02	−0.01	0.02	−0.01	0.02
Wave[a]	−0.05**	0.02	−0.06	0.04	−0.02	0.02	0.01	0.02	0.03	0.02
Topic[b]	—		$p = 0.342$		$p = 0.004$		$p < 0.001$		$p = 0.756$	
Right-Leaning × Topic[c]	—		$p = 0.014$		$p = 0.157$		$p = 0.192$		$p = 0.241$	
Left-Leaning × Topic[c]	—		$p = 0.026$		$p = 0.025$		$p = 0.029$		$p = 0.164$	
Openness	—		—		—		—		−0.44***	0.03
Attitude Moral Relevance	—		—		—		—		0.04**	0.02
Attitude Certainty	—		—		—		—		−0.06*	0.03
Attitude Extremity	—		—		—		—		−0.03	0.03
Observations[d]	3,589		3,590		3,590		3,588		3,588	
Number of Respondents	2,000		2,001		2,001		2,000		2,000	
Within R^2	0.0116		0.0399		0.0599		0.0652		0.1372	

Notes: Cell entries are unstandardized coefficients and standard errors; the final sample size for each model fitted differs because the fixed-effects regression conducts listwise deletion on observations with a missing value in any variable (xtreg in Stata 18); [a] = reference category is the pre-election wave (W1); [b] = topic is a factor variable with nine levels, indicating the policy issue about which attitude moral relevance, certainty, and extremity items were asked (a set of eight dummy variables was created to include topic in the regression model, with tax set as the reference level in the table); [c] = p-values are from overall F-tests for the interactions between partisan media and topic; [d] = number of observations does not match that of respondents because Stata includes singleton groups when fitting the regression models (however, these unpaired observations do not influence the substantive outcome of interest); † $p < 0.10$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

Attitude Moral Relevance

Attitude Certainty

Attitude Extremity

2

1

0

−1

Right-Leaning ($p = 0.014$)

Left-Leaning ($p = 0.026$)

Right-Leaning ($p = 0.157$)

Left-Leaning ($p = 0.025$)

Right-Leaning ($p = 0.192$)

Left-Leaning ($p = 0.029$)

Immigration

Taxation

Health

Abortion

Environment

Gun

Black Lives Matter

MeToo

Ukraine

Figure 2. Within-person effects of partisan media use across topics. Notes: The graphs present the effects of right- and left-leaning partisan media on attitude moral relevance, attitude certainty, and attitude extremity, for each level of topic; the p-values from overall F-tests are indicated in parentheses.

4.2.3. Supplementary Analysis on Openness and Aversion to Compromise

A supplementary analysis using the Study 1 dataset (post-election wave) replicated findings from the fixed-effects models above. Openness to different perspectives mediated the relationship between right-leaning partisan media use and aversion to compromise (see S8 in the Supplementary Material).

4.3. Discussion of Study 2

Study 2 examined political listening and attitude moral relevance as potential mechanisms linking partisan media use to aversion to compromise. Regarding political listening, consistent with expectations, increases in right-leaning partisan media use were associated with reduced openness to opposing views, which in turn predicted lower aversion to compromise. No other variable in the model, aside from the survey wave, significantly predicted openness to differing perspectives. Further supporting this pattern, a supplementary cross-sectional analysis that included an item on respect for political opponents suggested an indirect effect of right-leaning media on aversion to compromise through diminished openness to different perspectives, consistent across multiple measures of aversion to compromise (see S8 in the Supplementary Material). While these measures of openness to different opinions are proxy measures of political listening, they reflect respect for and recognition of divergent perspectives as legitimate and being willing to engage across political divides (Eveland et al., 2020; Morrell, 2018; Scudder, 2020a). Such openness is critical to the functioning of American democracy, which requires inter-party cooperation to govern effectively. To the extent that partisan media erode this mindset, they may weaken the communicative foundations of democratic negotiation. These findings also highlight the need for more refined tools to measure political listening (Scudder, 2020b; see also Rojas, 2008) and better understand how media environments shape deliberative orientations over time.

Regarding attitude moral relevance, we found that the indirect effects varied by issue, with significant effects observed only for abortion, taxation, and Ukraine. Increases in right-leaning media use predicted greater moral relevance of tax and abortion—longstanding focal points in conservative discourse (Wagner & Gruszczynski, 2016)—which in turn heightened aversion to compromise. In contrast, left-leaning partisan media use negatively predicted the moral relevance of abortion attitudes. Left-leaning media use was also linked to greater moralization of the Ukraine issue, aligning with its prominence in left-leaning media during the study period. While we posed this as an exploratory question and cannot rule out chance findings, the presence of topic-specific variation is consistent with research showing that issues are not inherently moral or nonmoral, but rather, they become moralized at particular moments in history (Rozin, 1999)—often as a result of strategic framing by parties and media (Kreitzer et al., 2019). For example, it is widely accepted that the abortion debate is dominated by moral frames in US political discourse, ever since Roe v. Wade mobilized the pro-life camp (Luker, 1984), further amplified when the Dobbs decision ended the Constitutional right to abortion and allowed individual states to regulate or prohibit abortion access. Taxation, by contrast, has traditionally been viewed as a nonmoral and technical policy domain. However, recent studies suggest that it too can be moralized under certain conditions, when framed in ways that make its moral relevance more salient (Simonsen & Widmann, 2024). Future studies should investigate how media narratives contribute to the moralization of domestic policy issues like taxation and foreign policy issues like Ukraine.

It is also worth noting that as respondents reduced their partisan media use after the election, openness to differing perspectives and the moral relevance showed a net increase and decline, respectively, in the post-election wave, suggesting that political tensions were heightened during the election period. This pattern aligns with Gutmann and Thompson's (2010) view that elections can hinder deliberative mindsets.

Two important limitations deserve note. First, the results regarding attitude moral relevance were observed for issues that respondents personally deemed important (see Section 4.1.2), raising the possibility that topic-specific effects may partly reflect self-selection (see S9 for the demographics of individuals who selected into each topic in the Supplementary Material). For instance, the observed moderated mediation effect for the abortion issue may be a function of those who considered abortion to be an important issue to themselves. Because our design did not randomize issue assignment, we cannot rule out this alternative explanation. Experimental studies with random assignment would help clarify these dynamics. The small indirect effects also warrant attention. This may be due to our use of fixed-effects models, which, while reducing bias, limit observable variation (see the SD_{within} vs. $SD_{between}$ in Section 4.1.2) and the product-of-coefficients method (Baron & Kenny, 1986), which typically yields smaller estimates by design. Additionally, the mismatch in specificity between the issue-level mediators and the general outcome measure (i.e., aversion to compromise) may have further attenuated the effects (see the compatibility principle; Ajzen & Fishbein, 1977; Kraus, 1995). Nonetheless, the observed patterns offer valuable insight into the mechanisms through which partisan media use shapes aversion to political compromise.

5. Conclusion

This study finds that increased partisan media use is associated with an increased aversion to political compromise, based on two panel surveys from the 2020 and 2022 US elections. Using fixed-effects models, we relied exclusively on within-person variations, controlling for time-invariant confounders and key features of respondents' communication environments, such as centrist media use and talk networks.

Across both studies, right-leaning partisan media had a consistently stronger relationship with compromise aversion than left-leaning partisan media, suggesting asymmetry. Study 1 showed that increases in right-leaning media use predicted greater aversion to compromise. Study 2 further demonstrated indirect effects through reduced openness to opposing views (a proxy measure for political listening) and increased attitude moral relevance, varying by issue. These findings suggest partisan media may differ not just in ideology but in how they frame the other side and moralize political issues, undermining deliberative norms (Barber, 2003). Future studies should empirically test this idea by systematically examining the content broadcast by right- and left-leaning partisan media sources to better understand the topic variations in these effects. Another important next step, given the persistence of right-leaning partisan media effects, would be to examine how exclusive exposure to right-leaning media compares to more ideologically mixed media diets in their influence on the mechanisms underlying partisan media effects on compromise attitudes.

Several limitations warrant discussion. First, our media use measures do not capture the entirety of respondents' communication environment, let alone political news sources. News aggregators and social media are frequent sources of news that we could not score in terms of their ideological slant, as content varies by user. While we included political content on social media as a covariate in Study 2 to improve our measures from Study 1, our measures are still limited, though more comprehensive than many empirical

investigations. Additional limitations related to measurement—such as the use of single-item indicators, variation in the items across studies, and the interpretation of variables for non-partisan respondents—are discussed in greater detail in S10 of the Supplementary Material.

Second, important contextual differences exist between the studies. The 2020 presidential election was highly salient, marked by a change in party control and the incumbent's populist rhetoric, which may have impacted partisan media use and resistance to compromise (Çinar et al., 2020). The 2022 midterm election was less salient in comparison. The timing of the post-election surveys also differed: Study 1 (2020) was fielded in December during widespread discourse about election legitimacy, especially in right-leaning networks, while Study 2 (2022) was fielded the following April. These differences likely shaped both media content and respondents' answers—for instance, left-leaning partisan media use was negatively associated with compromise aversion in Study 1 but not in Study 2, possibly reflecting distinct post-election attitudes. Still, given the complexity of these factors, it is difficult to predict their precise effects.

Third, our findings may not generalize to other electoral contexts. Recent US elections have been particularly contentious, with partisan media displaying more negative content than usual. The US also has a distinct two-party system and media environment (Hallin & Mancini, 2004)—such differences in political systems and media structures can shape how media influences democratic attitudes. For example, parliamentary systems like those in Scandinavia often require coalition governments by design, thus fostering inter-party negotiation (Arter, 2004). In such contexts, norms of consensus may encourage more favorable public attitudes toward compromise. Cross-national studies are needed to examine how these differences shape partisan media effects on compromise attitudes.

Fourth, all relationships observed are correlational, not causal. While our use of fixed-effects models addresses time-invariant confounders, it does not resolve the endogeneity problem. For example, individuals whose attitudes are moralized may seek more partisan media, which tend to employ anger and outrage in their content (e.g., Sobieraj & Berry, 2011). As such, without random assignment of treatment, strong assumptions are needed for causal interpretation, especially in the case of the mediation models in Study 2 (see VanderWeele, 2015). This challenge is common in observational studies of media effects. Future studies could build on experimental efforts to randomly assign media use (e.g., Broockman & Kalla, 2025).

This study connects the literature on deliberative attitudes (e.g., Barber, 2003; Gutmann & Thompson, 2010) with partisan media (e.g., Levendusky, 2013a, 2013b; R. K. Garrett et al., 2014), drawing on political listening (Dobson, 2014; Scudder, 2020a) and attitude moralization (Skitka et al., 2021) to illuminate the underlying mechanisms of this relationship. Despite limitations, we find partisan media's adverse impact on civic culture, specifically an aversion to compromise among elected officials. We hope these findings will lay the groundwork for future research that empirically and systematically examines the characteristics of partisan media and their impact on unwillingness to listen, moral consideration of political issues, and opposition to political compromise.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

The data underlying this article will be shared upon request to the corresponding author.

Supplementary Material

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

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ARTICLE

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Listening Across Divides: Contextual Moderation in Political Talk and Participation

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Abstract

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

Keywords

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

1. Introduction

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

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

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

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

2. Literature Review

2.1. Political Talk and Participation

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

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

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

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

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

2.2. The Importance of Listening in Political Talk

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

3. Methods

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

3.1. Political Participation

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

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

3.2. Political Talk Contexts

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

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

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

3.4. Control Variables

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

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

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

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

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

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

4. Results

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Table 2. Main effects of listening on participation.

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

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

Table 3. Interaction effects on participation.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

5. Discussion

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Data Availability

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

Supplementary Material

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

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ARTICLE

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Mapping and Measuring Listening in Public Communication Settings

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Abstract

Scholars have made advancements in how to interpret, with detailed measures, the different characteristics and levels of distinct listening practices used by individuals when they are deliberating (Scudder, 2020, 2022). However, listening is not only a practice that occurs directly, but also a broader phenomenon that occurs across the public sphere (Bächtiger & Parkinson, 2019; Ercan et al., 2019). Public discourse occurs across hybrid media systems (Chadwick, 2017) in complex discursive exchanges (Maia et al., 2023) as networks of publics interact (Bruns, 2023). Such complexity imposes challenges for research to properly understand listening at a macro level. In this article, I present how to map and measure listening at this broader level. I reconstruct the discussion on listening as a normative foundation for political communication, from which we derive three key listening elements: attentiveness, openness, and responsiveness. I outline how listening is measured in direct interactions, to then explain how it can be assessed in public communication and mediated interactions, from the perspective of who listens, who is (or is not) listened to, and the actual listening acts.

Keywords

deliberative democracy; deliberative system; digital publics; listening; political communication; public sphere

1. Introduction

Decades after the rise of liberal democracies, free speech is increasingly invoked as an absolute right, often to resist regulation and deflect concerns over speech harm, content manipulation, and digital platforms' governance (Balkin, 2017; Ricknell, 2020). This trend is exemplified by Elon Musk's 2022 takeover of X (previously Twitter) and Mark Zuckerberg's 2025 rollback of Meta's fact-checking program in the US—both moves justified as commitments to "free expression" (Jarral, 2025). They illustrate an emphasis on

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unrestrained speech that overshadows concerns about the quality of public discourse and the conditions necessary for meaningful democratic communication. It seems like the perfect time to shift the focus from speech and reclaim another equally important but often overlooked element of communication: listening, which is much less addressed in public communication. A conception of democracy that has been described as deliberative, discursive, or dialogical demands not only the negative right to free speech but also the positive right to be heard. As Chambers (1996) suggests, beyond ensuring that individuals have the space and opportunity to speak, productive public discourse also requires that they are listening, responding, and engaging with one another's views. While listening cannot be enforced in the same way as free speech, it can be valued and integrated as a political framework for political cultures and institutions, and in the making of meanings and opinions in the everyday life of civil society (Scudder, 2020).

Important theoretical developments have been made to better understand what listening is, what it means for democracy, its normative value, and what can be expected from it (Bickford, 1996; Dobson, 2012, 2014; Morrell, 2018; Scudder, 2020). More recently, studies have identified ways to detect and measure listening in political discussions (Esau & Friess, 2022; Scudder, 2022). This is important because a detailed analysis not only helps identify where and how listening occurs but also informs how to foster more frequent and higher-quality listening practices. However, scholars have drawn attention to the indirect, mediated, and complex nature of the political and media systems in which listening occurs (Dreher, 2009; Ercan et al., 2019; Hendriks et al., 2019; Lacey, 2013). Despite this, there is still a lack of measurement strategies to systematically map democratic listening practices and their characteristics across different times and settings. The performative nature of public communication means that listening—at least in its democratic sense—often leaves observable traces in the discourses. Analysing institutional discursive practices, media coverage, and policy shifts, for instance, can show whether certain voices are being acknowledged, considered, or dismissed (Dreher, 2009). The question shifts from whether listening occurs in direct interactions to how public institutions, media actors, and political elites engage with the voices and claims that emerge from different communities, as well as how citizens act in listening practices (Hendriks et al., 2019). Drawing on recent efforts to develop methods for analyzing political discussions from this broader perspective (e.g., Bächtiger & Parkinson, 2019; Maia et al., 2023), this article connects media and communication studies with listening and democratic theory, showcasing how we can study macro dynamics of listening in the public sphere(s). I derive from the listening literature three listening elements: attentiveness, openness, and responsiveness. I then show how to assess them from three observation points: the perspective of who listens, the perspective of who is (or is not) listened to, and the listening manifested in discourse.

2. Listening as a Normative Foundation for Political Communication

As with many concepts in the social sciences, "listening" can have different meanings and evoke different expectations (Witkin & Trochim, 1997). In this article, I approach listening from a discursive, political, and normative perspective. I follow the idea that listening is a fundamental act in defining the contours of democracies, determining who is included and who is excluded from political systems, regulations, broad-reaching discourses, and politically empowered spaces (Bickford, 1996; Dobson, 2014; Dreher, 2009; Scudder, 2020). Yet, some specific delineations are worth revisiting, as different democratic traditions construct varying expectations of what it entails.

The communicative turn in democratic theory has emphasized that legitimacy and epistemic validity are constructed through intersubjective processes of communication. Listening is particularly significant in this perspective, since the legitimacy of decisions and validity of ideas depends not just on participation but on how voices are engaged in discourse. The communicative turn is proposed as a normative foundation opposing domination, coercion, and manipulation. It provides a way to navigate deep conflicts and pluralism not by erasing differences, but by creating a space where diverse perspectives can engage in discourse, testing and justifying their claims through open dialogue rather than force, thereby allowing legitimacy and validity to emerge from mutual understanding rather than from power dynamics (Chambers, 1996). This framework proposes a practical rationality, meaning that reason is constituted through communicative action, where validity claims are tested and justified in a shared discursive space. It is rooted in real-world communication and social interaction rather than in abstract, individual reasoning or fixed, universal principles, and is not imposed by an external authority (Dryzek, 1990; Habermas, 1981/1984, 1981/1987). This rationality is fundamentally tied to communicative processes through which individuals both discover and form a common will (McCarthy, 1981, pp. 326–327). It reflects a discursive and democratic mode of reasoning that emerges through communication processes where individuals engage in discourse to co-construct shared understandings and opinions, rather than through instrumental calculation or authoritarian imposition (Dryzek, 1990, p. 9).

At the heart of this discursive perspective of politics is listening, though it is not always explicitly discussed. As Scudder (2022) argues, deliberation depends fundamentally on listening, which is a constitutive element of the deliberative process itself. Since, for deliberative democrats, the legitimacy and validity of norms are tied to the communicative processes that produced them (how a majority becomes a majority; Habermas, 1992/1996), they are directly dependent on the presence and quality of listening. Because communication itself is the foundation of rationality and legitimacy, listening is essential, as it enables the truthful reciprocal exchange in the first place: “Absent interlocutors hearing and understanding those with whom they disagree, we simply do not have a deliberative democracy” (Morrell, 2018, p. 237). Listening in discourse is the opening of a shared space where meaning and understanding can emerge, making communication possible. It is the constitutive condition of intersubjectivity itself, the process whereby individuals do not merely proclaim words but co-create the very horizon of rationality and mutual recognition through language: “Listening enacts the communicative act of deliberation….In listening to a fellow citizen, you call the deliberative act into existence” (Scudder, 2020, pp. 81–109). Listening, therefore, is not merely a prerequisite for deliberation but its very foundation (Scudder, 2020), as it is through listening that reasons are exchanged, modified, and ultimately legitimized in the public sphere.

Although deliberative theorists and other democratic thinkers who engage with them broadly agree that legitimacy and validity are rooted in communicative processes, there are different expectations of what listening entails and the specific role it should play in democratic discourse. From a Habermasian perspective on communicative action, listening involves a genuine openness to incorporating and critically evaluating the reasons of others in a dialogical space. In other words, deliberative listening means being willing to validate and be validated in a process that seeks shared understanding or agreement. This dynamic distinguishes deliberation from mere strategic confrontations, as the goal is not simply to persuade or impose a view but to construct a common ground. The legitimacy of norms can be understood in normative terms as tied to their justification through inclusive and non-coercive deliberation, where all affected individuals have the opportunity to participate as free and equal interlocutors (Habermas, 1983/1990). In a condition in which all

actors are “equally and fully capable of making and questioning arguments,” with no restrictions of participation, free from domination, strategizing and deception, “the only remaining authority is that of a good argument” (Dryzek, 1990, p. 15). But this perspective has been complexified with a broader account of both conflict and different types of communication other than traditionally “rational” ones.

In constructing the place of listening in conflictive, unequal, and unbalanced democracies, Bickford (1996) criticizes deliberative perspectives that rely on consensus or that separate too narrowly strategic and communicative actions. Such approaches would overlook the inevitable presence of conflict, power differences, and the complexities of political life. For Bickford, democracy is not realized through rational deliberation aimed at agreement. The normative construct for Bickford is located in the listening practices themselves that allow communication and togetherness. This type of listening has a dimension of continuation, “the underlying guide of keeping the field of action open, to act in a way so that future action is possible, so the field of freedom is maintained or expanded” (Bickford, 1996, p. 170). Although proposing a distinct normative core—not consensus, but listening—Bickford’s emphasis on listening does not fundamentally oppose the core intersubjective and communicative orientation of deliberative democratic theory. Meaningful deliberation requires precisely the kind of intersubjective openness that Bickford defends (Scudder, 2020, p. 82). Consensus can’t legitimize a decision if there is no proper listening in the process that formed the consensus—it is the quality of the communicative process that grounds democratic legitimacy.

Recent theoretical work and empirical studies have advanced in connecting critical perspectives on listening, such as Bickford’s, with deliberative democracy scholars like Habermas and Dryzek. A key contribution is Scudder’s theory, which argues that the fundamental democratic force of deliberation is uptake—the process of “giving due consideration to the arguments, stories, and perspectives” that citizens share in deliberation (Scudder, 2020, p. 20). Crucially, uptake is dependent on listening, which enables recognition and fair consideration of others’ contributions. By listening, listeners recognize “that the voice of the speaker is relevant to their own thinking and behavior” (Scudder, 2020, p. 86). This emphasis on listening as a prerequisite for democratic uptake closely aligns with Bickford’s argument that the “presence of listening” is a defining feature of democratic discourse. And importantly, listening does not require embracing the speaker’s preferences or affirming their perspective—its value lies in the openness to being impacted by what is heard (Scudder, 2020, p. 87). In this way, Scudder brings listening theories insights into direct conversation with deliberative theorists by demonstrating that listening is what enables deliberation to fulfil its normative commitments. Listening does not demand agreement but instead requires participants to acknowledge the relevance of others’ perspectives within the deliberative space. Uptake, as the democratic force of deliberation, depends on a form of listening that does not reduce engagement to persuasion but instead centres on the ethical and political obligation to recognize others as legitimate contributors to the democratic process. As she argues, “*in* listening to our fellow citizens, we perform a willingness and desire to take up what they have to say,” and “*in* listening, we acknowledge that they have a rightful say in the decisions we make collectively” (Scudder, 2020, p. 107).

3. Listening Elements

Before moving to how we can map and measure listening, it’s important to identify its core elements by drawing on both the previous theoretical discussion and applied studies that model listening in practice. This

means an attempt to identify what exactly listening requires, what exactly is listening made of. In this article, I conceptualize listening as a process involving attentiveness, openness, and responsiveness to what others say within both direct and mediated social interactions. In this section, we reconstruct the field of listening research by engaging with a range of authors to demonstrate why these three elements are fundamental to understanding and evaluating listening. Two key resources here are: (a) the differentiation made by Scudder (2020) of the auditory, ilauditory, and perauditory listening acts; and (b) the differentiation of the cognitive, affective, and behavioural dimensions of listening made in communication and listening competency research (Bodie, 2016; Worthington & Bodie, 2018). While both are valuable, I opt not to adopt exactly such typologies. Instead, drawing on both normative theories and applied communication studies, I propose attentiveness, openness, and responsiveness as core components that provide a shared terminology across different authors. This framework better supports empirical investigation by bridging normative democratic theory (e.g., Bickford, Dobson, Scudder) with research on listening practices.

In communication research, listening conceptualisation evolved from cognitive perspectives to more complex accounts that take into consideration its affective components (e.g., motivation and attitude), and its behavioural characteristics (e.g., verbal and nonverbal responses; see Worthington & Bodie, 2018). However, the cognitive dimension remains fundamental; listening requires mental engagement, as most sounds we hear are not cognitively processed—that is, they are not comprehended, understood, or retained for future use (Worthington & Bodie, 2018, p. 5). While we hear multiple sounds, multiple voices, or in a more political context, multiple perspectives and ideas, we actually only pay attention to some of them in the first place. Attention is an activity of selection and is not random. As Bickford (1996) argues, social, cultural, and economic forces shape what we notice and what we ignore. These forces can hinder the kind of listening that democratic politics demands (p. 93). Democratic listening requires an intentional effort in attention to hear the speaking and thinking of others (Ercan et al., 2019, p. 25). Attention is thus the "the beginning of involvement" (Rost, 2024). While cognitive research on listening also highlights other components like memory (retention), comprehension, and inference-making (see Worthington, 2018), these are primarily internal processes. They are essential for processing information efficiently and accurately, especially in educational or instrumental contexts. Attention, on the other hand, is not merely a precursor to other cognitive operations, but a normative gesture that signals recognition to the presence and perspectives of others.

Attentiveness in listening is the focus on and the recognition of a speaker's words, signals, and expressions. It is the process of being present in the act of listening, ensuring that the speaker's expressions are received, and thus establishing a shared, intersubjective, communicative space. Multiple theories related to listening have given special focus to attention—from Aristotle to Bickford, and more recently Scudder. Attention is a form of focused awareness, a minimal but essential engagement with others that allows collective life (Bickford, 1996). Importantly for Bickford, political listening is not about empathy or compassion. Drawing from Aristotle, for Bickford it is a kind of "interactive attention" that acts as a political bond even among those who are unequal, divided, or in conflict. It is a form of attention that makes politics possible in the face of conflict and disagreement. The act of paying attention itself acknowledges the political presence of the other and thus begins to constitute the communicative tissue of a functioning democracy.

There are, of course, different levels of attentiveness. One may listen with surface-level awareness, merely acknowledging that words are being spoken, or one may engage in deeper attentiveness, actively tracking

meaning, tone, and context to fully grasp the speaker's intent and perspective. A fully attentive listener devotes effort to truly hearing others, understanding that listening is the only means of accessing another's perspective—as Scudder (2020, p. 116) puts it, "The attentive listener gives time and energy to the listening act, trying her best to hear what the other person is saying and to understand what he means by what he says." But such deep attentiveness is not conditional to the existence of listening—although it is important in normative terms, a minimal attentiveness level guarantees that the listening has occurred. As Bickford (1996) points out, attention does not demand emotional alignment or deep personal investment; especially in deeply conflictive contexts, even minimal, strategic, or grudging attention can be enough to affirm the speaker's presence and sustain the political space where voices are recognized and contested.

But attention alone does not fulfil the democratic potential of listening (Scudder, 2020). Listening is also affective; it entails a willingness to engage with the other (Bodie & Jones, 2018). From a political and normative perspective, beyond merely acknowledging what is said, there must be some level of dispositional stance of the listener toward what is being heard. We refer to such disposition or willingness as openness—an openness to receive another's perspective, even when it challenges one's own views or assumptions; an openness to hear things one may not like (Dobson, 2014). Democratic listening requires a disposition of receptivity, an acceptance of the possibility of being affected by what one hears. Openness is also related to the seriousness that Scudder (2020, p. 115) calls for: "The serious listener recognizes the stakes of the listening act—that they could disagree with their fellow citizens and thus not get their way—and listens nonetheless." This seriousness ensures that listening is both critical and discerning, preventing uncritical acceptance while also avoiding outright dismissal.

As with attentiveness, openness also can vary in levels. One may be open but simultaneously reluctant to engage in the act of listening, acknowledging an ethical commitment to hearing others while feeling the discomfort to do so (Bickford, 1996). At high levels, openness can mean a deep consideration of another's perspectives, as a readiness to change its own perspective or idea. But, as with attentiveness, a deep openness is not conditional—a minimal openness already ensures that listening has occurred. Listening does not demand such readiness to change ideas, but it does require a readiness to recognize another's words as relevant to the shared communicative space (Bickford, 1996; Scudder, 2020). Importantly, the openness to what will be heard also implies some level of openness to where that interaction will lead to (Scudder, 2020, pp. 115–116).

When shifting from viewing listening as an internal cognitive process to seeing it as a communicative activity—an action directed toward another—communication research has begun to study it by examining the observable actions that listeners take while listening (Bodie, 2018). While we recognize that listening can occur without an overt response—as internal acts of listening may not always produce immediate or visible reactions—our focus here is on public communication and macro-level dynamics, where the presence or absence of responsiveness becomes a key indicator of whether listening has taken place. In such contexts, listening manifests not only in an internal, cognitive process, but also through some form of reaction from listeners, indicating that listening has, indeed, occurred. Listening, as any other intersubjective act, is contextual by nature. The existence of listening may demand different things in different contexts. In interpersonal settings, listening can occur even without an immediate or explicit response. A person may listen reflectively, processing what has been said over time. But in institutional contexts, for instance, responsiveness is often the only way to verify that listening has taken place. The absence of any

response—whether through words, actions, policy shifts, or even symbolic gestures—can indicate to who is (or is not) listened to that the act of listening failed.

I am not treating responsiveness here as necessarily demanding forms of acknowledgement, uptake, or agreement, but rather as a broader understanding of "response": anything that indicates that what was said has been received in some meaningful way. Scudder (2020, 2022) argues that focusing on responses risks assessing what listening "might have brought about," rather than the act of listening itself (Scudder, 2020, p. 133). I acknowledge this concern and see its relevance in certain contexts, but in the realm of public discourse, I take a different view. Because listening, like speech, is part of an intersubjective activity, the actor who is (or is not) listened to is just as integral to the listening act as the listener. Therefore, in analyzing communication at the societal level, the presence or absence of responsiveness, and what type of responsiveness has taken place, is not merely a secondary effect or a follow-up of listening but a crucial element in determining whether listening has taken place at all, as it is through some form of response, however minimal, that the act of listening is made perceptible for who is (or not) listened to. Building on Bickford's (1996) notion of continuation, responsiveness plays a key role in sustaining the field of action, ensuring that communication remains open-ended rather than closed-off. Responsiveness does not necessarily imply any change of opinion or endorsement, but rather a basic recognition that the communicative space is still active. As Scudder (2020, p. 137) herself notes, "To know whether a listener has really acted in listening, the speaker must judge the credibility of the listening act," which only occurs through the reaction (response) of the listener. Thus, in public communication, to respond (understood broadly) is integral to listening because it affirms the possibility of continued interaction.

4. Mapping and Measuring Listening in Direct Interactions

Listening is challenging to measure. If we consider that it occurs "in the minds of the receivers," it's then an internal process that cannot be directly observed (Esau & Friess, 2022, p. 3). Even though listening is understood differently across various fields, it is rarely, if ever, directly measurable (Bodie & Worthington, 2018). However, this does not mean it cannot be investigated. A wide range of methods—both observational and self-reported—have been developed to assess different aspects of listening in practice. As seen in the previous section, listening encompasses multiple elements.

Reflecting this complexity, communication literature has approached listening through cognitive, affective, and behavioural dimensions (Worthington & Bodie, 2018), building different methodologies to investigate each of them. Accordingly, in democratic listening studies, different aspects of listening are typically assessed through the direct observation of listening interactions and self-reports from both listeners and those being (or not) listened to.

Common assessments of the cognitive dimension of listening are usually measures of attention, memory (retention), comprehension, and inference-making or interpretation. Research uses tasks like selective attention and recall to evaluate how well individuals focus, retain, understand, and interpret messages (Worthington, 2018). The affective dimension involves motivation, attitudes, beliefs, and emotional responses, typically assessed through self-reports that capture willingness to listen, emotional engagement, and perceived listening competence (Bodie & Jones, 2018). The behavioural dimension, in contrast, focuses on outward indicators—observable actions and responses like eye contact, nodding, paraphrasing, and questioning—that demonstrate attentiveness and engagement during interactions (Bodie, 2018).

In the realm of political discussions, one key approach used in the literature is to observe discursive indicators that indicate listening presence and quality (Choucair & Maia, 2024; Esau & Friess, 2022; Steenbergen et al., 2003; Steiner, 2012). In such approaches, authors emphasize that the way people respond to each other in communicative exchanges makes evident important signs of democratic listening—for instance, whether interlocutors acknowledge, respect, or build on others' statements in a meaningful way. Esau and Friess (2022, p. 3), for example, operationalize reciprocity, an adjacent and "more observable" concept than listening. They assess the quality of replies in online discussions, specifically whether they are on-topic, respectful, and reasoned. Their study distinguishes between simple replying, which lacks deliberative quality, and reciprocity which meets deliberative norms of coherence, respect, and justification. The second is an indicator of listening because it reflects discursive engagement with the original message, demonstrating not only acknowledgement but also a thoughtful response that considers the perspective presented by the other. In the same path, Choucair and Maia (2024) build on this by identifying three ways to measure reciprocity in online discussions: structural reciprocity, which tracks interaction patterns; behavioural reciprocity, which examines whether users engage with others; and discursive reciprocity, which assesses how discourses respond to previous points. Their discursive measure specifically speaks to listening as it assesses whether responses incorporate, contest, or build upon previous arguments. The point in doing so is that incorporating content from previous arguments (a form of uptake) demonstrates that a participant has processed and considered another's perspective, a proxy for genuine listening. Steenbergen et al. (2003) and Steiner (2012) use respect as a discursive proxy for listening. In the first version of the Discursive Quality Index developed by Steenbergen et al. (2003), by showing respect to other groups, demands, and counterarguments, interlocutors are signing that they listened to, or are willing to listen to, such groups, demands, and counterarguments. In another version of the Discursive Quality Index, Steiner (2012) is more directly concerned with listening by naming a specific variable as respectful listening, which evaluates whether a speaker ignores arguments and questions of others, does not ignore but distorts them, or engages with them in a correct and undistorted way (Steiner, 2012 p. 269).

Although the cues identified by reciprocity and respect in discussions provide strong evidence of the presence (or lack of) listening, they do not capture all its forms. Listening in direct interactions will not always leave traces observable in the discourses (Scudder, 2022, p. 177). In other words, listening can occur without an immediate and observable response. Measures of reciprocity, for instance, do not account for cases where individuals listen but choose not to respond, process information without verbalizing engagement, or remain silent due to power imbalances. To address these issues, Scudder (2022) presents a structured and systematic approach to measure listening in deliberation—the Listening Quality Index—that considers both self-reported and discursive directly observable elements, thus approaching listening from the perspective of who is (or is not) listened to, who listens, and how the communication has actually unfolded. Each of the perspectives—the discursive observable elements, the self-reported perspective of the speaker, and that of the listener—has its own limitations, but combined can offer a framework to assess listening in direct political discussions.

Yet, the challenge of measuring listening in direct interactions does not map onto the macro dynamics of listening in the same way. In public discourse, listening operates through mediations, structures, and networks that shape whose voices are heard, how they are amplified, and how they are responded to within broader political and communicative processes. Unlike in direct interactions, where silence or lack of response can obscure whether listening has occurred, public listening leaves more observable traces. Scudder (2022) critiques measures that assume listening is only evidenced by responsiveness, noting that a

failure to respond does not necessarily indicate a failure to listen. However, when certain voices are persistently excluded from media agendas, policymaking, or public debate, the absence of responsiveness over time can signal systemic failures in listening at a societal level. While individuals in direct interactions may listen without responding, public listening is more readily assessed through patterns of engagement, amplification, and exclusion in discourse.

5. Mapping and Measuring Macro and Mediated Listening in Public Communication

In political communication processes, expressing an argument (or an opinion, a story, or any form of contribution to a political discussion) can occur both directly by saying something *to* someone or indirectly, by saying something assuming an audience, through processes of mediation by traditional and/or new digital media platforms (Chadwick, 2017; Maia, 2012). The same applies to listening—it can occur directly by listening to someone or indirectly, for example by reading, absorbing, or interpreting discourses made by someone via the mediation of news outlets, digital platforms, etc. Political interactions unfold in a complex, unstructured network of publics (Bruns, 2023), contemporaneously highly online, where different speakers and listeners—whether individuals or communities—overlap, cluster, fragment, and shift dynamically. Encounters with differing perspectives (and thus opportunities for listening) in this environment can take many forms—for example, a heated exchange in a subreddit with users responding to each other's comments in long threads; or watching a YouTube video discussing a given topic; or reading a news article that presents diverse viewpoints. Such moments of mediated listening often involve engaging multiple senses (Scudder, 2020, pp. 90–91)—seeing, hearing, and reading—as individuals absorb others' input across various platforms.

The public sphere is active in creating, changing, and developing listening to evolving media technologies, which, as Lacey (2013) shows, have enabled publics to engage attentively and anticipatorily with diverse voices beyond their immediate environment. It is still a challenge in current listening studies to understand whether findings from structured, small-scale participatory settings can be meaningfully extended to the more complex and diffuse dynamics of public communication, where listening takes place across numerous, overlapping sites (Hendriks et al., 2019). Rather than focusing solely on either individual perceptions or institutional responsiveness, we need a multidimensional lens that captures how listening is distributed across audiences, speakers, and discourse itself. In what follows, we lay out a framework that enables this by bringing together distinct analytical entry points and core elements of listening to guide empirical and methodological inquiry.

To study listening in complex public communication settings, I propose an integrative framework that connects three core elements of listening—(a) attentiveness, (b) openness, and (c) responsiveness—with three observational perspectives—(a) the listener's perspective, (b) the perspective of the actor who is (or is not) listened to, and (c) the observable manifestations of the listening act itself. This approach builds on previous literature that conceptualizes and measures listening's internal dimensions, interactional perceptions, and discursive traces, but brings them together in an analytical model. The following sections examine each of the three listening elements showing how they can be studied and assessed from each of the three perspectives. We conclude with a comparative summary that highlights empirical pathways for analyzing listening in complex communicative settings.

5.1. Attentiveness

5.1.1. Attentiveness From the Perspective of Who Listens

Attentiveness is the foundational gesture of listening: the act of giving focus to a speaker's words, signals, and expressions. From the perspective of the listener, attentiveness involves the allocation of attention to specific voices, actors, groups, discourses, or channels. In mediated settings, attentiveness can be indirectly observed through consumption patterns and engagement metrics. Audience research offers a useful entry point here, particularly large-scale media surveys such as the Reuters Institute digital news report and Pew Research Center's media studies, which track which platforms people consume news from, their preferred sources and formats, and news consumption habits (Newman et al., 2024; Shearer & Mitchell, 2021). While not designed explicitly as listening studies, these surveys provide important clues about whether and what citizens are listening to in terms of political content, and where attentional gaps may exist. Listening scholars can take insights from these types of studies to, for example, assess which media sources and platforms are more or less listened to, mapping listening patterns across different publics and identifying disparities in whose voices are being heard and through which channels.

Another fruitful approach for studying attentiveness is selective exposure research, which investigates how individuals make choices about which media content to consume, and which to avoid, based on their preexisting attitudes and beliefs. As discussed in Section 2, attentiveness is not a neutral or random process; it is shaped by social, political, and economic factors (Bickford, 1996), and by the choices potential listeners make. Selective exposure research, often situated within media effects and political psychology, studies if and how people may opt to listen to the sources they agree with and avoid or ignore those they do not agree with (e.g., Stroud, 2010). Cognitive dissonance theory suggests that individuals are motivated to avoid information that contradicts their beliefs because such dissonance is uncomfortable, while consonant information is reassuring (Festinger, 1957). Selective exposure can occur to avoid discomfort with disagreement, but it can also emerge as a more strategic act, as individuals may intentionally avoid listening to perspectives that challenge their beliefs. Scholars use survey-based measures such as individuals' stated political orientations and reported exposure to specific content, experimental designs, and digital trace data to determine whether individuals disproportionately attend to ideologically consonant content. While these studies also do not often frame their findings in terms of democratic listening, they offer useful methodological tools for understanding how attentiveness is selectively distributed. They also highlight that attention is not only shaped by structural factors but also by strategic or affective acts of avoidance.

Understanding in detail listeners' attention can entail many other approaches and methodologies, especially new studies interested in how people engage with digital content. Attention is increasingly difficult and fragmented in contemporary media systems, where platform designs, often driven by commercial imperatives, are purposefully engineered to capture and monetize user attention through continuous engagement and emotional stimulation, using for example the affordances of "scrollability" (Lupinacci, 2021; Searles & Feezell, 2023). This often occurs at the expense of deeper, sustained listening, as engagement with content becomes increasingly quicker and superficial, in a model of interaction that values volume and velocity. To study listeners' experiences of attention in such settings, past studies used qualitative methods like interviews and ethnography with social media users (Lupinacci, 2021); and surveys about individual information consumption habits, which often reveal tendencies toward scanning rather than deeply

engaging with full content (American Press Institute, 2014). Many recent methods allow quantizable investigation of attention given to digital content. Web usage mining studies, using large-scale data like clickstreams, can analyze for example dwell time (the time users spend on a given webpage), viewport time (the time users spend viewing specific portions of a given page), mouse cursor tracking, and session metrics (Lagun & Lalmas, 2016; Vermeer & Trilling, 2020). Eye-tracking studies, another example, can assess attentional focus when individuals consume specific information (Duchowski, 2017; King et al., 2019). It adds granularity to attentiveness studies by showing what parts of a media artefact are drawing attention, and for how long.

Beyond assessing the attentiveness of broad audiences, one different and interesting possibility is to focus on the perspective of specific listeners who hold central positions within complex public discourse networks. An example is research on how journalists listen to their sources. Craft and Vos (2018) analyzed journalists' testimonials and comments about their own listening practices, showing they are shaped by ethical and professional judgments about who deserves attention. The authors reveal that after the 2016 US election, journalists recognized their failure to listen to key public voices—particularly rural and working-class voters—due to biases toward elite, coastal perspectives. This failure wasn't just logistical but reflected deeper issues in newsroom culture and source selection. Similarly, other influential actors could be examined. To whom do social media influencers listen to? What do they pay attention to? Although much research has been done on these actors, they are not yet connected with the scholarly debate around listening.

5.1.2. Attentiveness From the Perspective of Who Is (or Is not) Listened To

Attentiveness can also be assessed from the speaker's perspective—namely, whether they perceive their words, arguments, or identities as receiving attention. The speaker's feeling of being heard by the listener is a key component of the listening act (Scudder, 2022). This is especially salient for marginalized groups and communities, who often report feeling overlooked or invisibilized in public discourse. Attentiveness is not just a cognitive event but a form of recognition—a sign that one's presence and perspective matter—perceptions of being ignored can reflect not just individual grievances but deeper systemic exclusions. Extensive research has shown how invisibility can deprive individuals, particularly those from minority groups, of a sense of belonging and the necessary psychological resources to develop positive possible selves (Fryberg & Townsend, 2008).

Empirical studies capturing perceived (in)visibility—for example, through interviews, focus groups, or ethnographic methods—can show how different actors interpret whether others are paying attention to them. People's sense of receiving attention is shaped by a wide range of cues, including media and state representation and inclusion, even in interactions they did not directly participate in. Beyond the feelings of being heard by traditional media and the centre of the political system, listening also occurs in digital environments. Users can, for instance, express frustration with platform algorithms that determine their visibility, shaping their perception of whether their voices are receiving attention—in other words, their perceptions of how the platforms are affecting their experience of being listened to by their networks (e.g., Duffy & Meisner, 2023).

5.1.3. Attentiveness in Discursive Practices

Scholars in media studies and political communication have long explored the visibility of different actors in public debates, investigating whose perspectives gain traction and whose are marginalized (e.g., Barvosa, 2018; Ferree et al., 2002; Maia et al., 2023). Methodological approaches include content, discourse, and narrative analysis, which can be used to assess the extent to which different social groups, political actors, or specific communities receive attention in news media, social media, and other public arenas. Attention in a macro approach to listening manifests in the way voices, claims, experiences, and demands are recognized within broader public conversations—what voices and claims are represented, or silenced, in public communication. This includes both what is said and what is omitted. A key concept here is silence. Silence is ambiguous in the listening process in direct conversations, as it is a condition to let the other speak, but at the same time can mean a withdrawal from the conversation (Bickford, 1996; Scudder, 2020). But in macro and mediated processes of listening, silence more often "mute[s] a whole array of differences of belief and politics, identity and desire" (Dreher, 2009, p. 446). It is possible to study language also by examining the language that is never uttered (Sweeney, 2012, p. 146). The presence or absence of specific voices in relevant discursive spaces (such as news media stories, parliamentary discourse, highly shared pages, accounts, and online channels, etc.) is frequently framed as a voice problem, but we gain a lot if we also frame it as a listening problem (Dreher, 2009).

When a voice is visible in public communication, it's because someone has given it attention and listened to it in the first place. As Entman (1993, p. 53) famously argued, by giving salience to specific voices, claims, demands, and arguments and obscuring others, framing determines "what is made more noticeable, meaningful, or memorable to audiences." This process of selection and omission not only highlights certain perspectives but also silences others, effectively giving the contours of attention in public communication. The presence of specific actors or claims in news coverage, legislative debates, or viral online content signals attentional investment. Conversely, patterns of omission—whose voices are consistently absent or misrepresented—offer a critical lens for diagnosing failures of attentiveness. Quantitative and qualitative content analysis can identify the frequency and distribution of actors in media narratives and unpack how attention is structured: Are dissenting voices cited? Are minority perspectives ignored? These methodologies allow scholars to study attentiveness not just as a cognitive act but as a socially distributed phenomenon.

5.2. Openness

5.2.1. Openness From the Perspective of Who Listens

Openness refers to a dispositional stance—a willingness to receive and engage with what another says, even when that perspective challenges one's assumptions or values. In mediated communication, as with measures of listening in direct interaction, openness can be studied through motivational and attitudinal research, including willingness-to-listen scales and other self-report instruments (Bodie & Jones, 2018). These capture individuals' disposition toward encountering dissonant perspectives and their perceived ability to engage with them. With more details about how individuals listen to mediated discourses, audience studies have been investigating how they engage with content for decades, although often with research questions not directly addressing democratic listening (see Gray, 2017; Jensen & Rosengren, 1990; Lindlof, 1991). These studies often investigate how individuals interpret, internalize, and contest content

they have contact with. Reception analysis, for instance, focuses on how audiences interpret media messages within their own social and cultural contexts, often using in-depth interviews and direct observations (Jensen & Rosengren, 1990). Openness can then be assessed through such forms of qualitative interviews and focus groups, where participants reflect on how they engage with other viewpoints. In these methods, researchers can explore how people describe their emotional responses, cognitive dissonance, and strategies for interpreting challenging content.

5.2.2. Openness From the Perspective of Who Is (or Is not) Listened To

Openness also involves how speakers perceive the receptivity of their audience. This perception shapes whether individuals and groups feel they are taken seriously. When speakers feel that their perspectives are dismissed, caricatured, or selectively acknowledged, they often report a breakdown in openness—even when their message appears to be heard. Media outlets may invite participation while subtly limiting the range of perspectives that are taken seriously. The experience of being tokenized or instrumentalized—where voices are included superficially or tokenistically—can indicate a lack of true openness. Studies examining how people feel about their representation in public discourse and the media offer valuable insights into this dimension of listening (Dreher, 2009). Articulating the concept of listening across differences, Dreher also argues that media can facilitate a more receptive and transformative engagement with diverse perspectives, moving beyond simply allowing people to speak to ensuring they are truly heard and understood (Dreher, 2009).

Research on public consultation processes, participatory governance, and user feedback systems provides a methodological avenue for assessing perceived openness. These include ethnographic and participatory studies that explore how speakers interpret their experiences when listened to by institutions and organisations. Ethnographic studies and participatory research approaches explore how specific communities experience, or fail to experience, being listened to in political processes (for a comprehensive discussion on this topic, see, for example, Couldry, 2010). In digital communication, openness is also affected by platform governance choices: Social media algorithms that amplify harmful or polarizing content may reduce perceived openness by distorting how different perspectives are presented and engaged with. When dissent is met with hostility or ridicule, users may retreat, not because they were ignored, but because they felt unwelcome—a breakdown in openness rather than attentiveness.

5.2.3. Openness in Discursive Practices

Discursively, openness can be observed by examining how dissenting views are framed, engaged with, or resisted in public communication—how the public sphere accommodates differences. It manifests to the extent to which discursive spaces and actors demonstrate a willingness to receive, and engage with, other's perspectives. For example, the specific framing of other's perspectives can signal degrees of openness—whether an opposing perspective is caricatured and dismissed, selectively engaged with, or taken seriously as a legitimate contribution to collective sense-making. Again, as Scudder (2020) and Bickford (1996) argue, openness does not require acceptance of another's argument but does demand recognition that it holds relevance within the communicative space. Specific methods include frame, discourse, and content analysis of public debates, media coverage, or online interactions. For instance, discourse that critically engages with opposing perspectives—paraphrasing, interpreting, or contextualizing them—suggests

a willingness to take them seriously. Conversely, selective or distorted engagement often signals a breakdown in openness. If dissenting perspectives are tokenized or only engaged with in hostile terms, it points to a low-openness communication environment, even if surface-level attentiveness is present.

In highly conflicted contexts, however, it is not easy to encounter openness towards opposing perspectives, especially if considering interactions (even if mediated) between opposing groups directly and not the reporting on them. Empirical studies of listening in polarised contexts show that openness is not a binary condition but varies across different discursive practices. Hendriks et al. (2019), for example, identify four modes of listening—enclave, alliance, adversarial, and transformative listening—each illustrating different degrees of openness in the public sphere. While some modes, such as enclaving listening, reinforce homogeneity, others, such as transformative listening, reveal opportunities for change and engagement across differences.

5.3. Responsiveness

5.3.1. Responsiveness From the Perspective of Who Listens

Responsiveness captures the outward manifestation of listening—a reaction, acknowledgement, or engagement that signals to the speaker and to others that listening has occurred, making the listening act socially perceptible. From the listener's standpoint, responsiveness is the moment of externalization—when internal cognitive and affective listening translates into an observable act. In mediated environments, this may take many forms: commenting on a post, resharing content, sending feedback, or even reframing one's position in response to what was heard. In surveys and interviews, responsiveness can be assessed through self-reported intentions and behaviours: Did the listener feel moved to act, reflect, or respond? Did they report changing their thinking? At an institutional level, responsiveness is particularly visible in decision-making processes—when a listener (e.g., a politician, platform moderator, editor) demonstrates that a particular perspective has shaped an outcome, policy, or position. Studies on journalistic responsiveness (e.g., Craft & Vos, 2018) examine how media actors acknowledge or incorporate citizen voices into coverage. Similarly, research on public feedback systems, like participatory budgeting or consultation responses, can measure how listener-actors (e.g., governments and institutions) indicate that input has been considered—even if not adopted. In digital communication, responsiveness can also be measured through digital trace data; accessing users' digital responses, even if just reactions, helps us understand what they have listened to.

5.3.2. Responsiveness From the Perspective of Who Is (or Is not) Listened To

The credibility of the listening act is often judged by the speaker based on the responses they receive, making responsiveness a key indicator in the perception of whether listening has occurred. Perceptions of responsiveness can be studied through qualitative interviews, focus groups, or surveys that assess how individuals evaluate the presence, absence, or quality of responses from specific institutions or situated contexts. Do speakers feel that their concerns were addressed? Do they believe that any action or acknowledgement followed their input? Focusing on specific types of interaction, social media research has investigated how users interpret responses—such as likes, shares, or comments—as indicators of being listened to, demonstrating how the feeling of being heard can have different triggers in complex digital

media environments (e.g., Dvir-Gvirsman, 2025). When performing specific case studies, scholars can consider reactions from platforms and organisations such as algorithmic amplification and symbolic responses (e.g., platform badges, policy statements, or public apologies) which affect whether speakers feel they have been heard. Importantly, responsiveness is not uniformly expected across all settings. In deliberative encounters, participants may anticipate discursive engagement. In broader public communication, indirect signs—like thematic uptake or agenda setting in media or political discourse after public demonstrations—may be interpreted as responses. Conversely, persistent silence, especially after visible claims or demands, is often interpreted as a refusal to listen.

5.3.3. Responsiveness in Discursive Practices

As an intersubjective act, listening manifests through communication. Responsiveness can be traced directly in public discourse—when public actors or institutions engage with, quote, or respond to claims, demands, or stories, they signal that they are listening—even if they ultimately reject the position. Content and discourse analysis are thus powerful tools to identify responsiveness in public communication. One useful approach is tracing how arguments evolve over time and across communicative spaces (Maia et al., 2025)—fine-grained measurements on the level of the communicative interactions themselves (Bächtiger & Parkinson, 2019; Maia et al., 2023). If certain claims or narratives resurface with modifications that address earlier criticisms or insights, this suggests a form of discursive listening. If previously ignored concerns become central to media coverage or political debate—especially with language that references prior claims—this suggests a discursive response.

For instance, Wahutu (2023) employs content analysis of 800 news articles from Kenya, Rwanda, and South Africa to examine how narratives about the Darfur atrocities were constructed and responded to over time. The study identifies the patterns of thematic continuity, adaptation, and intertextuality in media coverage, showing how African journalism fields engaged with (or not) different voices. By analyzing how the sources were quoted to shape the narrative, the study showed that African journalists played a counterintuitive role in silencing certain African voices, despite the expectation that they would amplify local perspectives (Wahutu, 2023, p. 823). This aligns with the idea that responsiveness in public communication is not simply about whether voices are included but also about how they are inserted in the narrative, engaged with, or dismissed. Wahutu (2023, p. 825) notes that Sudanese sources were central to the coverage across all three countries, but when challenging or supporting their statements, journalists predominantly relied on American and English voices rather than other African sources.

By applying similar discourse-based methodologies, it is possible to trace how public narratives evolve over time and across communicative spaces. More than which sources are mentioned (which is a sign of attentiveness), a how they are framed (which is a sign of openness), a responsiveness-based analysis of public communication can examine whether dominant actors put different perspectives in conversation. In macro-level contexts—where back-and-forth dialogue has another temporality—responsiveness is the very act through which listening becomes publicly recognizable and politically consequential. The challenge remains in distinguishing between superficial responsiveness and genuine engagement, but this is precisely where fine-grained discourse or content analysis, focusing on related concepts such as coherence and respect, can be incorporated (Choucair & Maia, 2024; Esau & Friess, 2022).

5.4. Summary of Listening Elements and Observational Perspectives

The preceding sections outlined how the three elements of listening manifest across three observational perspectives. This structure integrates normative theory with empirical research, offering a framework for analyzing macro and mediated listening in public communication. We now present a summary table (Table 1) that distils the conceptual distinctions and links them to methodological approaches found in existing scholarship. This table is not exhaustive but illustrative of the variety of research strategies that can be employed.

Table 1. Elements of listening across observational perspectives.

	Who Listens (Listener Perspective)	Who Is (or Is not) Listened to (Speaker Perspective)	Listening Act (Discursive Perspective)
Attentiveness	Q: What media, voices, or perspectives are individuals paying attention to? What to assess: Media consumption habits, selective exposure, attention metrics (e.g., dwell time, eye-tracking), digital trace data, and ethnography	Q: Do individuals or groups feel their perspectives are receiving attention in the public sphere? What to assess: Perceptions of (in)visibility, feelings of being overlooked, and marginalized groups' accounts of attention received	Q: Whose voices, claims, and perspectives appear (or are omitted) in media and political discourse? What to assess: Visibility/invisibility in discourse, presence or absence in media narratives, salience of claims, content analysis, framing, and discursive silencing
Openness	Q: Are listeners willing to engage with others? What to assess: Attitudinal studies (e.g., willingness-to-listen scales), qualitative interviews, audience reception studies, and emotional engagement	Q: Do speakers feel their views are taken seriously or meaningfully engaged with? What to assess: Perceived receptiveness, experiences of tokenization, misrepresentation, or exclusion from meaningful engagement	Q: To what extent do public discourses allow space for challenging or dissonant perspectives to be acknowledged as legitimate contributions? What to assess: Framing of dissenting views, quality of engagement, inclusiveness of discursive space, analysis of interpretive frames, and typologies of listening modes
Responsiveness	Q: How do listeners respond after receiving a message (e.g., behaviour, policy shift, public comment)? What to assess: Self-reported behavioural changes, feedback, policy change, digital engagement (e.g., shares, comments), and institutional reactions	Q: Do speakers feel they have received acknowledgement, action, or meaningful response? What to assess: Perceived acknowledgement or disregard, speaker evaluation of response credibility, and emotional or symbolic feedback in media/platforms	Q: Are dominant discourses, narratives, or policies, adapted in response to others' contributions? What to assess: Tracing intertextual responses, thematic uptake, policy or narrative adaptation, longitudinal media analysis, and evidence of discursive uptake or narrative shifts

This comparative structure allows researchers to select entry points that align with their research goals—whether they seek to understand listening from the perspective of participants, assess public perceptions, or analyze communication patterns at scale. Importantly, it also supports multi-method research: For example, triangulating survey data on attentiveness with discourse analysis of media visibility or combining interviews with specific groups with content analysis of how their voices appear in public debate.

6. Conclusion

To enhance the quality of political discussions, we need to focus on the patterns, dynamics, and forms of listening. The expanded and multiple spaces that gather and amplify voices also need their listening counterparts (Ercan et al., 2019) to ensure that communication is actually occurring. The sharp contrast between an overwhelming abundance of communication (Ercan et al., 2019) and the persistent lack of listening in democratic life (Dobson, 2012) can be precisely what prompts both researchers and the public to recognise the need to return to listening—especially as its absence often surfaces in growing resentment and frustration. But to help with this shift, the field of political communication needs to contribute with methodologies and empirical studies that speak to the complexity of the current informational and political systems. The mediated characteristic of listening in these settings adds challenges to the listening acts. The responsibility of who is supposed to listen is diluted, and without the proper possibility to direct back-and-forth to solve misunderstandings, it is usually harder to properly grasp the context, the intent, and the meaning of what is listened to. This highlights the need to move beyond viewing listening as a purely internal cognitive act, and instead approach it as a discursive and observable practice shaped by interaction and context. Rather than treating listening as an unobservable cognitive process, a discourse-based approach allows us to assess its manifestations in public communication. By combining different methodologies showcased particularly in media and communication studies, we can advance the understanding of macro listening practices.

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ARTICLE

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Scaling Up Good Listening: An Assessment Framework for AI-Powered Mass Deliberation Models

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Abstract

The challenges of scaling up deliberative processes to mass audiences have long been highlighted by deliberative theorists. Apart from the difficulty of keeping content quality at a high enough level as more and more people get involved, the technical feasibility of mass participation in a structured form of deliberation has been a serious constraint. The development of digital platforms and AI systems are now making it technically possible to extend structured participation to wider audiences. This article addresses the following question: How can we ensure that good listening is scaled up in these new contexts? Drawing on an analytical framework based on recent contributions in the areas of deliberative democracy and AI, we evaluate the ability of current models of AI-powered mass deliberation to incentivize receptive, responsive, and apophatic listening. We further develop an assessment tool, the "Listening Incentives Score," that can be used to assess whether AI-powered mass deliberation models provide participants with the adequate channels, facilitation, training, and systems of rewards and sanctions to incentivize them to engage in good listening.

Keywords

AI; apophatic listening; deliberative democracy; listening crisis; listening incentives score; mass deliberation; receptive listening; responsive listening

1. Introduction

Democracies worldwide are confronted with a crisis of listening (Macnamara, 2016, p. 3). Citizens do not feel heard by those who should represent them. They often feel that the political process is increasingly unaccountable to them and that they no longer identify with their governing institutions and the laws they

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promulgate (Mansbridge, 2020). This legitimacy deficit of political leaders and their decisions further translates into alarmingly low rates of political participation and often leads to outbursts of civic anger that threaten the stability of democratic systems in many countries (Landemore & Fourniau, 2022).

Moreover, citizens seem less and less capable of truly listening to each other's political concerns. The public sphere is flooded by polarising sound bites, demagoguery, and manipulative misinformation, drawing citizens further and further away from each other and making them less and less capable of engaging in the quality political talk that democracies need in order to flourish (Lafont, 2015).

To restore faith in democratic principles, political authorities must ensure proper channels and leverages through which the citizens' input can be further integrated into the decision-making process (Landemore, 2020; Mansbridge, 2020; Velikanov & Prosser, 2017). Citizens must be given more opportunities to express their political voice, to cultivate it by engaging in deliberation with those who have different opinions on public issues, and to authentically listen and be listened to (Briggs, 2008; Fishkin et al., 2021; Huckfeldt et al., 2004; Landemore, 2020). Large-scale deliberation models have long been proposed as a solution to this crisis of listening, but their technical feasibility has always been a serious limitation. The availability of digital platforms and the possibility of incorporating AI systems into these efforts have now made it possible for such deliberative formats to be implemented in real-life settings.

In this article, we develop a framework for assessing whether these deliberative models incentivize good listening. In order to operationalize good listening in a deliberative context, we must first clarify the notion of democratic deliberation and provide a clear view of its own quality standards.

2. The Deliberative Ideal of Democracy

2.1. The Deliberative Turn in the Theory of Democracy

Dryzek (2000) theorizes the "deliberative turn" as representing a shift away from traditional forms of democracy, one that emphasizes authentic deliberation among equals as the primary source of legitimacy for policies and laws (Cohen, 1989, pp. 17–34; Dryzek, 2000, pp. 1–2). Political decisions cannot be imposed on those concerned but must be the result of a deliberative process in which they are subjected to public critique and defended by arguments and reasons that are accessible and acceptable for the wide citizenry (Bächtiger et al., 2018, p. 2; Gutmann & Thompson, 2004, pp. 3–7; Habermas, 2006, pp. 21–26; Lafont, 2006, pp. 3–6).

Deliberation is defined as a type of communicative exchange that involves weighing and reflecting on preferences, values, and interests regarding matters of common concern, as well as assessing relevant facts from multiple points of view (Bächtiger et al., 2018, p. 2; Fishkin & Mansbridge, 2017, p. 8). Deliberation is distinct from adversarial interactions because it involves a level of reflexivity on the part of both citizens and authorities, as well as an attempt to discover solutions that make sense for all participants (Barber, 1984, p. 175; Velikanov & Prosser, 2017, p. 213). Deliberative processes are meant to help participants regain their capacity to see their own actions as part of a higher-order act that impacts their entire community (Barber, 1984, pp. 174–177, 193–197; Searle, 2010, pp. 42–61).

The deliberative model of democracy offers a more effective way of involving citizens in political decision-making than voting by empowering those who have been systematically marginalized on a political level (O'Flynn, 2006, p. 1). The inclusion of diverse voices in deliberative processes thus becomes a way to make decisions more legitimate and more epistemically robust. Since political decisions typically deal with vast areas of society where uncertainty and complexity reign (Barber, 1984, pp. 129–131), various contributions coming from sufficiently diverse individuals are needed to reach good decisions (Landemore, 2022, pp. 162–163). Deliberative exchanges make it possible for gaps in individual knowledge to be filled with the help of others who have direct experience with the subject at hand, which political leaders may lack (Landemore, 2022, pp. 150–155).

One of the ideals of deliberation is to bring about an increased mutual awareness of citizens' interests and an empowerment of the citizens to act on them in a collective manner (Briggs, 2008, p. 5; Habermas, 1984, p. 286; Rojas, 2008, p. 459). In Iris Marion Young's view, confrontation with different cultural perspectives, interests, and meanings teaches participants an important lesson about the partiality of their own perspective, which further enhances their overall social cognition (Young, 2006, p. 128). This is why, in deliberative settings, differences should not be denied, minimized, or explained away but taken seriously (Eveland et al., 2023, p. 1; Scudder, 2020, p. 144). Even as collective decisions are reached, they must make room for dissenting views to be maintained and left open for further deliberation (Barber, 1984, pp. 135, 192).

2.2. The Standards of Good Deliberation

Concerning the variables that influence the quality of deliberative processes, a variety of perspectives can be found in the literature. For example, Fishkin's position (2009, pp. 33–34) is that the quality of deliberation is influenced by five conditions: information (participants should have access to accurate and relevant data on the issue that is discussed); substantive balance (interpreted as the degree to which reasons offered by one side are addressed by arguments offered by the other side); diversity (defined as the extent to which all significant public positions are represented in the deliberation); conscientiousness (the degree to which participants honestly assess the merits of arguments); and equal consideration (the degree to which reasons are considered on their merits regardless of who presents them).

According to Philip Pettit (2003), the "deliberative democratic ideal" should be understood in terms of three constraints. The "inclusive constraint" stipulates that all members should possess an equal right to vote on the resolution of pertinent collective issues. The "judgmental constraint" emphasizes the necessity for deliberation (prior to voting) based on shared concerns regarding the optimal solution. Finally, the "dialogical constraint" is understood in terms of the need for open and unforced dialogue between members of a democratic society (Pettit, 2003, pp. 139–140).

A widely accepted view is that deliberative design should aim to create the premises for the type of listening that simultaneously fulfills the epistemic function, the ethical function, and the democratic function, theorized as being essential in deliberative processes at any level (Mansbridge et al., 2012, pp. 11–12). The epistemic function is associated with ensuring that decisions are properly informed by facts and logic and are the result of substantive and meaningful consideration of relevant reasons. The ethical function of the system regards the promotion of mutual respect between citizens. The democratic function involves ensuring an inclusive political process based on the assumption that all participants have equal rights (Mansbridge et al., 2012, pp. 11–12).

Summarizing these views, the conditions for good deliberation refer to different aspects of this communicative exchange, some of which are related to the input (relevant and accurate information, diversity of perspectives), while others focus on how this input should be managed and how the participants should be treated (substantive balance, conscientiousness, equal consideration given to the various viewpoints expressed, and respect shown to their proponents). In our view, the dialogical constraint can be understood as a core premise of good deliberation, without which the inclusive and judgmental constraint cannot be fulfilled. In what follows, we focus on the conditions of receptivity that need to be met for citizens to give proper consideration to what is shared in a deliberative setting (Scudder, 2020, p. 34). We draw on three theoretical contributions concerning good political listening—listening that regards discursive exchanges on political topics (Eveland et al., 2023).

3. Good Political Listening in Democratic Deliberation

In Scudder's view, the quality of political listening depends on the uptake of citizens' inputs, defined as "the act of giving due consideration to the arguments, stories, and perspectives that particular citizens share in deliberation" (Scudder, 2020, p. 20). Therefore, the manner in which participants act in listening (the "ilauditory" act) matters. Citizens should listen seriously, attentively, and humbly, investing time and energy in hearing others express their opinions without pretending to know the outcome of the conversation. They should continue to listen with an open mind, even when they realize it is very difficult to come to an agreement (Scudder, 2020, pp. 115–116). "Uptake" is seen by Scudder as a middle ground between inclusion and actual influence on the final decisions—while it requires more than granting someone access to contribute to a deliberative group, it does not require that each person's contribution will shape the final decisions (Scudder, 2020, p. 44). Some views may be left behind even after having been given proper consideration, since differences may persist even after careful weighing of all arguments. Although decisions that are made can eventually leave out some people's views and preferences, they are only legitimate if they have explicitly addressed those people's views (Scudder, 2020, p. 147).

Susan Bickford (1996) examines the role of listening in helping participants deal with the unavoidable conflict that underlies democratic life in pluralistic societies. She argues that communication presupposes both conflict between different individuals and the possibility of discovering shared values. If we automatically agreed, we would not need to speak or listen or argue, nor would we if our differences were completely irreconcilable (Bickford, 1996, p. 4). Bickford draws on Maurice Merleau-Ponty's theory of perception to conceptualize the notion of "listening" in terms of the relation between object and horizon, or figure and background. Listening means accepting that, for the moment, we—as listeners—are the background, and the speaker becomes the figure on which we concentrate our attention (Bickford, 1996, pp. 23–24). Giving attention in listening is a process by which we give meaning to what is being said and to the person saying it (Bickford, 1996, pp. 21–22). Good listening is, therefore, the process of creating a path between the experiences of the other and one's own experiences (Bickford, 1996, pp. 147–148), thus advancing toward the joint construction of an intersubjective world (Bickford, 1996, p. 173).

Bickford's view is echoed by Andrew Dobson (2014), who elaborates on the notion of "good listening" (Dobson, 2014, p. 51). Dobson differentiates between three main types of listening: "compassionate," "cataphatic," and "apophatic" (the use of the terms "cataphatic" and "apophatic" being inspired by the contribution of Leonard Waks regarding listening in educational settings; cf. Waks, 2007, 2010). The "compassionate" listener gives

up one's own thoughts, judgments, or feelings in order to make room for those of the speaker. According to Dobson, this type of listening is not suitable in a political context since it undermines the conditions for genuine dialogue. Cataphatic listening occurs when listeners impose their own categories on what is being said, reorganizing the received content in their minds so as to reinforce their previously held views. This type of listening will inevitably lead to an understanding deficit. Apophatic listening requires the listener to open up authentically to the speaker, to make an effort to really hear what the speaker is saying, and to further ask the necessary questions to give meaning to the novel perspectives and categories that the speaker proposes. Thus, apophatic listening involves a temporary suspension of one's own categories, leaving room for a critical distance that makes authentic dialogue possible. In this way, apophatic listening leads to a co-creation of meaning because the listener is not only open to what the other wants to say but also to the meanings that are developed between oneself and the other (Dobson, 2014, pp. 64–69).

In Dobson's opinion, apophatic listening can have a significant effect on the refinement of the deliberative processes meant to tackle disagreements in democracy. For this to happen, it must take place in a structured dialogue between the listener and the speaker, organized so as to make listening to the other person an obligation (Dobson, 2014, p. 107). To assess the quality of listening in a democracy, one needs to focus on the set of procedures, conditions, and resources that can increase citizens's ability and willingness to engage in listening.

In the following section, we explore different paths that scholars and practitioners have proposed for structuring deliberative experiences in order to cultivate good listening.

4. Structuring Deliberation to Maximize Good Listening

The notion of "deliberative design" encompasses the set of decisions that structure the deliberative process as such: how participants are selected, how the deliberative exchange is organized, to what degree facilitation ensures an equal distribution of speaking rights, how the purpose of the event is presented to the participants, and what resources and cognitive tools are offered to participants to achieve that purpose. By employing structured deliberative processes, we can address the challenges that informal political conversation inevitably poses, such as the lack of a listening disposition that stems from fundamental differences in opinion, interests, preferences, identities, or group affiliations. Informal political conversation creates the premise for a confrontational experience in which the gains of one of the speakers are the losses of the other. Therefore, they tend to be less inclined to listen and learn from their exchange of views (Mutz, 2006). Structured forms of deliberation are meant to create a safe space for a diversity of opinions to be expressed and given due consideration.

The resources that are made available to participants can also contribute to the deliberative processes having better results. It is essential to provide participants with balanced expert information on the topic (Fishkin et al., 2021) and further expert support to revise and shape their proposals. Structuring deliberative interactions in a manner that enhances good listening also means ensuring that the group composition is sufficiently diverse (Huckfeldt et al., 2004, pp. 3–4). The most widespread approach to meeting this requirement is that of creating a mini-public, seen as a microcosm of a particular community. Citizens are recruited to be part of a mini-public by random sampling and called in for certain periods of time to deliberate on a particular issue (Fishkin & Mansbridge, 2017, p. 8).

Deliberative formats include deliberative polls, citizens' juries, consensus conferences, and citizen assemblies (Fishkin & Mansbridge, 2017, p. 8). A systematic perspective regarding the different purposes of mini-publics is provided by Fung (2003, p. 340, as cited in Rountree et al., 2022, p. 150), who distinguishes between: educative fora (developing and refining citizens' opinions on policy issues); participatory advisory panels (shaping citizen recommendations that are further sent to policymakers for consideration); mini-publics focused on participatory problem-solving collaboration (ensuring that citizens are involved in monitoring policymakers' progress on an issue and are given channels to provide feedback on their decisions); and mini-publics aimed at participatory democratic governance (entrusting them with decision-making power).

Structured forms of deliberation have a serious critique to face: The rest of the citizens will not be bound by the decisions made by mini-publics and may not accept them as democratically legitimate and representative (Lafont, 2015, p. 55; Ţuţui, 2012, pp. 74–78). In an attempt to address this limitation, several authors have suggested that digital technologies and AI systems could be used to increase citizen participation in a structured mass deliberation process (Landemore, 2024; Velikanov & Prosser, 2017). However, this increased participation poses serious risks, one of which is that it would only translate into a proliferation of inputs. In this context, we investigate the conditions under which these mass deliberation formats can also contribute to a scaling up of good listening.

To operationalize the concept of "scaling up" good listening, we must first make explicit the two dimensions of "scaling up" deliberation: On the one hand, it depicts the viability of deliberation as a broad and sustained logic of political and social action. Thus, "scaling up" is related to contextual incentives as well as to individual abilities for performing successfully in deliberation. On the other hand, "scaling up" refers to deliberative action that has a discernible impact on policy outcomes (Bächtiger & Wegmann, 2014, p. 118). "Scaling up" good listening would, therefore, require that mass deliberation models provide resources and contextual incentives for citizens and political decision-makers to give proper consideration to the deliberative input. The meaning we give to the notion of "good listening" is closely tied to the deliberative values that were discussed in Section 2. An adequate deliberative model would incentivize listeners to assess the informativity, accuracy, and relevance of the input, to give equal consideration and respect to all the contributions set forth by the other participants, to evaluate the merits of the arguments set forth (conscientiousness), and adequately address them (substantive balance). In the following section, we provide a framework that can be used to evaluate mass deliberation models from this perspective.

5. A Framework for Assessing Listening Quality in AI-powered Mass-Deliberation Models

5.1. A Lexical Scale of Listening Quality

In order to evaluate whether a model incentivizes good listening along these lines, we borrow from Scudder (2022, pp. 118–121) the idea of a lexical scale describing different levels of listening quality. Adapting Scudder's Listening Quality Index to our research question, we distinguish between receptive, responsive, and apophatic listening. Placing them along a lexical scale would mean that receptive listening would be needed for responsive listening, and responsive listening would, in turn, be needed for apophatic listening.

We will further analyze how the mass deliberation models can incentivize each of these listening quality levels.

A mass deliberation model incentivizes receptive listening when it creates the conditions for participants to access the content set forth by other citizens and to signal having done so. In the case of direct engagement in deliberative interactions, such signals could be a nod or other signs of paying attention. In the case of written comments, such indicators would be the number of views of a certain post, the time spent while reading it, the eye movements of the readers, or other signaling systems (such as the "seen" function in various social media apps). In AI-powered mass deliberation, various systems of monitoring whether participants have indeed accessed and understood the other contributions can be set in place.

A mass deliberation model incentivizes responsive listening when listeners are provided with the technical possibilities and adequate resources to ask questions, require details, or nuances regarding the speaker's position. Responsive listening involves participants respectfully addressing the content of the interlocutors' arguments and giving an honest assessment of their contribution in terms of informativity, relevance, and accuracy.

A mass deliberation model incentivizes apophatic listening when citizens are provided with proper conditions to engage in the construction of intersubjective meanings that can further become novel solutions to common issues. Apophatic listening entails a possible revision of one's initial ideas in the joint search for common ground. This level of listening is necessary because quality deliberation cannot be reduced to the epistemic gain of becoming aware of each other's positions. It needs to leave open the possibility for democratically valuable solutions that would belong to everyone involved.

5.2. Whose Listening is Being Assessed?

Mass deliberation formats involve distinct types of listeners. The first type of listener is the citizen who listens to other citizens (we will refer to this as interpersonal listening). In the case of ordinary citizen interactions, the facilitator is expected to take the necessary measures to ensure that participants engage in receptive, responsive, and apophatic listening. This function can be delegated to human moderators or AI agents.

As contributions to a mass deliberative process multiply, it becomes necessary to include a second type of listener. We will refer to it as the aggregative listener. Its function is that of analyzing, synthesizing, and reporting on the contributions advanced by the participants in deliberative settings in order to extract the most valuable viewpoints according to the aforementioned standards of good deliberation: relevance, accuracy, and diversity. The aggregative listener must ensure substantive balance, equal consideration of the contributions, and an honest and competent assessment of the merits of each of them. Aggregative listening functions as an iterative procedure, being performed at every transition from one stage of deliberation to the next. It is a specific function currently delegated to both human and AI agents. Receptive listening, in this case, would involve including all the contributions in an unbiased manner. Responsive listening would entail the aggregator subjecting its report to an assessment that would be open to all participants. Participants should be able to ask questions and provide suggestions on the content of the report. The aggregative listener should further provide a substantive response to these suggestions. Apophatic listening would be attained if the aggregator were open to revising the categories and the ideas initially included in its report.

To secure uptake of the deliberative output, every model needs a communication channel and a binding agreement between public officials and the participants in the mass deliberation process. Without it, the

process would defeat its purpose of improving the quality of democracy and empowering citizens to influence political life (Mansbridge, 2020, pp. 20–22). The third type of listener is, therefore, the political decision-maker who should access the aggregative listener's output containing both the recommendations and the main reasons expressed in support of them. Political actors should be incentivized to give due consideration to the aggregative listener's output without dismissing or explaining away any of its contents (which would amount to receptive listening). Such incentives may include the technical possibility for citizens to track and assess politicians' contributions in this respect. Political actors should also provide a substantive response regarding the possibilities of implementing the proposals included in the aggregative listener's output (which would count as responsive listening). Politicians' demonstrated openness to change their viewpoints and policies according to citizens' recommendations would be a sign of apophatic listening.

5.3. Introducing the Listening Incentives Score

We have developed an assessment tool, called the "Listening Incentives Score" (LIS), which focuses on the listening incentives included in the design of mass deliberation: a channel that allows listeners to access each other's contribution; a facilitator that organizes the communicative exchange so as to maximize the chances for good listening to be performed; a form of training that would increase participants' awareness of good listening and their capacity to perform it; an extrinsic motivation system (based on rewards, sanctions) for stimulating participants to pay increased attention to how they act in listening.

5.3.1. The Need for a Channel

Concerning receptive listening, the possibility for citizens to access each other's contributions depends on whether the deliberative model includes a channel for this purpose. This would mean the technical possibility to hear or read the original viewpoints that were expressed by citizens. This may include a translating function for cases where participants have different cultural or linguistic backgrounds. A channel for responsive listening would provide the technical possibility to ask questions, comment, and engage in an exchange of reasons. In a face-to-face setting, participants would benefit from adequate resources to react to each other's interventions. In a digital setting, an explicit function for participant commentaries and reactions should be included in the deliberative platform. Providing a channel for apophatic listening would involve creating the technical possibility for participants to engage in in-depth deliberation, seeking common ground, and further exploring innovative perspectives that transcend their initial positions.

5.3.2. The Need for Facilitation

An essential condition would be to employ specialized facilitation for all types of listeners. Without it, participants' quality of listening will depend solely on individual dispositions. A listening-focused facilitator should not only ensure an atmosphere of equality and political correctness but should create the conditions for participants to be willing and capable of engaging in a substantive exchange of reasons.

To encourage receptive listening, facilitators should ensure that no participant silences the others or engages in other activities that make them lose their focus on the ongoing deliberation. Facilitators could remind participants to access the content that was previously posted or expressed by other participants. They could further support participants in using the translating functions or the additional informative resources made

available by the organizers of the deliberation. To encourage responsive listening, facilitators should invite participants to express their position regarding the arguments that were set forth and organize the exchange of reasons between participants in a manner that increases the informativity, relevance, diversity, equal consideration, respect, substantive balance, and conscientiousness of the deliberative exchange. Facilitators should use the deliberative phase dedicated to apophatic listening to challenge contributors to think beyond their initial categories and positions, negotiate new meanings that may lead them to a shared viewpoint, and cultivate their democratic capacities.

5.3.3. The Need for Training

Another key requirement is for participants to be trained in good listening (Brownell, 2024, pp. 5–7). The training program could be used at the beginning of the mass deliberation process to explain the distinct objectives of receptive, responsive, and apophatic listening, and to offer practical advice on how to perform each of them. It could further involve training sessions organized at key points in the mass deliberation to correct the mistakes that may have appeared in the deliberative exchanges before they become entrenched modes of relating to each other.

A receptive listening training would be focused on instilling a polite and respectful attitude in the participants and on increasing their ability to follow the logical sequences in the interlocutors' arguments. A responsive listening training would increase participants' capacity to further clarify the relationship between their own position and their interlocutors' by asking pertinent questions and by expressing their assessment of these contributions in terms of informativity, relevance, and accuracy. An apophatic listening training would aim at developing participants' ability to transcend their usual categories and their willingness to engage in a process of searching for a common solution.

5.3.4. The Need for a Rewards and Sanctions System

In addition, listening experts should accompany the deliberative groups and provide feedback on the listening performance of each participant. This feedback should be further related to a system of extrinsic motivation (rewards and sanctions that may be symbolic or material) in order to increase their attention to how they act when they listen (Scudder, 2020, p. 88).

In the case of receptive listening, sanctions should be given for inappropriate behaviors such as interrupting, silencing, or not listening to the speaker. Rewards should be given for correctly answering random questions that test whether the listener has paid attention. Sanctions for failing to engage in responsive listening should be given for a significant number of irrelevant questions or for the attempt to downplay or distort the viewpoints expressed during the debate. Rewards should be given for adequately addressing the argumentative content set forth by the other participants. Regarding apophatic listening, sanctions should be given to the participants who refuse to take part in the in-depth phase of the deliberation process. Rewards should be given for valuable contributions along the lines of identifying common ground and novel solutions.

5.4. The scope of LIS

These resources and conditions are needed for all types of listeners. Therefore, we include the need for a channel, facilitation, training, and a rewards and sanctions system for the aggregative listeners as well, whether they are human or AI. They are needed because the aggregative listener's epistemic competence and fairness heavily influence the quality of the output that is transmitted further. Human experts should be in charge of training, facilitation, and the supervision of the rewards and sanctions system to prevent the aggregators' reports from being flooded by irrelevant, incorrect, or outright dangerous content. In the absence of these resources and conditions, the aggregative listeners may impose their own criteria and categories, making their output less capable of accurately reflecting the essential components of the argumentative exchange.

Moreover, proper channels, facilitation, training sessions, and an extrinsic motivation system should also be in place for political actors' involvement. In this manner, we would ensure that they are treated as equal participants in the deliberative process. In addition, this would increase their awareness of the responsibility they have towards the citizens in a deliberative democratic setting. They would thus be required to get effectively involved in the deliberation and give an account of their positions during the process.

Table 1 illustrates the manner in which LIS can be used to assess the presence of receptive, responsive, and apophatic listening incentives in a mass deliberation model. We opt for a dichotomous approach to assessing the deliberative models from the perspective of the listening quality they incentivize: The presence of an element will bring one point in the final score we assign to each of the models we assess, while the absence of an element will bring zero points in the final score (see Tables 1 and 2). What we evaluate is whether the models include—by design—the resources, procedures, and conditions that would be needed for good listening to be incentivized. This conceptual tool also allows for a comparative assessment of mass deliberative models (as illustrated in Table 2). A higher score would indicate the superiority of a model regarding its capacity to incentivize good listening.

Table 1. LIS.

Type of listener	Resources	Receptive listening	Responsive listening	Apophatic listening	LIS
Interpersonal listener	Channel				
	Facilitation				
	Training				
	Rewards/Sanctions				
Aggregative listener	Channel				
	Facilitation				
	Training				
	Rewards/Sanctions				
Political decision-making listener	Channel				
	Facilitation				
	Training				
	Rewards/Sanctions				
Total score:					

This analytical framework can be used to assess the listening incentive system of a variety of mass deliberative formats—online or offline, synchronous or asynchronous, AI-mediated or not. In the following section, we illustrate its use by applying it to the AI-powered deliberation models proposed by Velikanov and Prosser (2017) and Hélène Landemore (2024). As we shall see, their views differ regarding the functions they entrust AI with. We focus on the communicative channels, affordances, and incentive systems they incorporate in order to create the premises for good deliberation.

6. Applying the Analytical Framework

We now proceed to a description followed by a comparative assessment of the design of two AI-powered mass deliberation models to identify the extent to which they incentivize good listening.

6.1. AI-Powered Mass Deliberation Models

The first model we analyze is that of Velikanov and Prosser (2017), called "mass online deliberation" (MOD), in which all citizens are brought together in a virtual room to engage in an extensive deliberation around a specific issue. They address the inclusion problem by imposing the condition that the deliberative event ("Deliberandum") be intensely promoted so that all citizens who may be interested in the issue would be adequately informed about its purpose. In order to avoid duplicate, fake, and unauthorized contributions, enrolled citizens may be required to upload identity data so that they can be compared with the appropriate national registry or subjected to other forms of controlled registration (Velikanov & Prosser, 2017, p. 237).

There are three main steps in the mass online deliberation envisaged by Velikanov and Prosser. The first is called "ideation" and involves citizens uploading written proposals, while a clustering algorithm operates in the background and organizes these proposals. During this phase, citizens receive the expert information that is relevant to the topic, in an accessible format. Each proposal is sent by an AI system to randomly selected citizens who are invited to rate its clarity, the extent to which they agree with the proposal, and whether they would recommend that other citizens take it into consideration (Velikanov & Prosser, 2017, p. 246). The AI system offers a bird's eye view of the topics discussed up to a certain point to ensure that people coming in at different stages can find out what has been discussed prior to their entering the platform. Citizens can access these AI-generated visual representations of the topics discussed each time they enter the platform. The second phase is called "consolidation" and involves the AI systems associating each cluster with one summarizing sentence. Citizens can rephrase these proposals and write suggestions for cluster mergers on the platform. The third phase, called "reconciliation," invites citizens to write suggestions seeking common ground between the remaining proposals, i.e., the ones that have not been included in the consolidation phase (Velikanov & Prosser, 2017, pp. 253–256). It is worth noting that the interactions between participants are limited to written exchanges of comments.

The other AI-powered mass-deliberation model, "multiple rotating mini-publics" (MRM) has been proposed by Hélène Landemore (2024, pp. 39–68). In this scenario, a significant number of citizens (ideally, the whole population that is concerned by an issue) would be enrolled on a secure digital platform (to prevent bots and other nefarious actors from gaming the system). Participants would be randomly distributed in separate groups and would further engage in direct deliberation with one another. The following steps would involve an iterative procedure of rotating participants among groups until everyone has had the chance to hear most

of the arguments advanced by each side. AI systems would be used to distribute citizens into deliberative subgroups, allocate speaking rights within each group, summarize the output of each group, flag problematic contributions, and visualize and cluster arguments (Landemore, 2024, pp. 60–65). AI would also assess the quality of the deliberative process with established tools such as the Discourse Quality Index, and—in the case of a low score—automatically require human intervention on the part of the organizers (Landemore, 2024, p. 65). AI systems would also be involved in translation, fact-checking, and seeding of ideas that would help consensus emerge (Landemore, 2024, p. 66).

In what follows, we apply our analytical framework to these mass deliberation models.

6.2. A Comparative Assessment of MOD and MRM

6.2.1. Interpersonal Listeners

Regarding interpersonal listening, the MOD setting allows participants' access only to ideas and not their authors (content is anonymized before being sent to the evaluators). The assessment that each participant can formulate on another's contribution does not include a deliberative step in which they can ask questions and build on each other's ideas. The evaluators are thus incentivized to judge each contribution on predetermined personal categories. Therefore, there are no resources and no incentives for apophatic listening. Since its deliberative design ensures only a communication channel that allows participants to read each other's contributions and write comments on them, making only receptive and responsive listening possible, MOD receives a LIS of two points (as illustrated in Table 2).

In the MRM version, mass deliberation includes separate and facilitated deliberative groups that encourage a meaningful exchange of ideas, and therefore, responsive and apophatic listening are incentivized. The responsibilities of the facilitator include the distribution of speaking rights (for the citizens and the experts' interventions) and stimulating participants to respect ethical rules that were settled for the deliberative event. Therefore, the listening incentive score for the interpersonal listener in the MRM setting will amount to six points—since its deliberative design ensures channels and facilitation that can incentivize receptive, responsive, and apophatic listening (as illustrated in Table 2).

6.2.2. Aggregative Listeners

In Velikanov and Prosser's model (2017), mass deliberation proceeds by a sequence of steps taken automatically with the help of AI that are then enriched by human feedback. If the AI aggregative listener tracks all exchanges, the clustering procedure may indeed offer a high level of transparency that would encourage receptive listening. Participants have the opportunity to write comments on the clusters they contributed to. The AI aggregator automatically sends these comments to three different reviewers. If these comments are approved by the reviewers as being justified, the AI aggregator will modify the cluster content or the cluster name accordingly. This reaction is equivalent to a form of responsive listening. Taking all these aspects into account, the aggregative listener in MOD receives two points (as illustrated in Table 2).

In the MRM model, AI systems are even more heavily used in the role of aggregative listeners (Landemore, 2024, pp. 50–53). Tracking all exchanges is equivalent to receptive listening on the part of the aggregative

listener. Since it only provides a channel for receptive listening, the incentive score for aggregative listening is one point in the case of MRM (as illustrated in Table 2).

6.2.3. Political Decision-Making Listeners

Although Velikanov and Prosser mention among the preconditions of their model that public officials should make a clear commitment to take into consideration the output of the deliberative process (Velikanov & Prosser, 2017), their virtual room does not include any function for incentivizing political decision-makers to participate in the deliberative exchange.

In a similar vein, although Landemore has long supported the idea of giving mini-publics increased powers in relation to the political authorities' decisions, including legislating ones (Landemore, 2020), MRM faces the same limit we mentioned in the case of Velikanov and Prosser's model: There is no explicit mention of a distinct function for incentivizing political decision-makers to directly engage citizens' contributions. Therefore both models receive zero points on the political listening level (see Table 2).

Table 2. LIS in MOD and MRM.

Type of listener	Resources	Receptive listening		Responsive listening		Apophatic listening		LIS
		MOD	MRM	MOD	MRM	MOD	MRM	
Interpersonal listener	Channel	1	1	1	1	0	1	
	Facilitation	0	1	0	1	0	1	
	Training	0	0	0	0	0	0	
	Rewards/sanctions	0	0	0	0	0	0	
Aggregative listener	Channel	1	1	1	0	0	0	
	Facilitation	0	0	0	0	0	0	
	Training	0	0	0	0	0	0	
	Rewards/Sanctions	0	0	0	0	0	0	
Political decision-making listener	Channel	0	0	0	0	0	0	
	Facilitation	0	0	0	0	0	0	
	Training	0	0	0	0	0	0	
	Rewards/Sanctions	0	0	0	0	0	0	
Total Score MOD:		2	—	2	—	0	—	4
Total Score MRM:		—	3	—	2	—	2	7

6.3. Recommendations

After applying our framework to these two mass deliberation models, we can notice that they received a relatively low LIS. What should deliberative designers take into account in order to obtain a higher LIS score?

Our first recommendation is for proper weight to be given to the structuring and the facilitation of the interpersonal exchange of reasons. This is why the solution of placing all participants in one virtual room for a potential all-to-all deliberation is prone to undermining the values of good deliberation. Quality listening,

based on substantive balance and equal consideration, does not happen spontaneously in an uncontrolled environment. In addition, listening quality could be further enhanced by training and by an explicit form of expert monitoring, based on which participants can receive rewards and sanctions.

A distinct recommendation we would make is for aggregative listeners to be human, and not AI, as often as possible. If the sequences of aggregation involved more people, the deliberative gains would be significant not only from an output-related perspective, but also from a process-related one. Regarding the output, the clustering process performed by AI risks erroneously merging apparently similar ideas and proposals, resulting in what might be called "phantom similarities." Such clustering errors might result in the system overlooking significant in-group differences, on the one hand, or substantial differences between apparently similar positions of different groups, on the other. From a process-related perspective, the interaction between human minds that is valued in a deliberative exchange is more than just a special case of computation (Scudder, 2020, p. 41; Ţuţui, 2024, pp. 253–262). If more and more people were to fulfill the role of aggregative listeners, they would have the chance to develop their deliberative skills and their ability to substantially contribute to the open and rich dialogue that is needed in a democratic society (Pettit, 2003, pp. 139–140). Even if there were inevitable losses from an efficiency point of view, we believe that such losses are compatible with the central values of scaling up good listening, which essentially rest on purposeful inefficiency.

Our third recommendation is for mass deliberation models to envisage the inclusion of political leaders. This would address the crisis of listening by incentivizing political leaders to answer citizen concerns explicitly. In addition, it may increase the efficacy of the deliberative process by creating richer opportunities for citizen contributions to be taken into consideration in actual policy-making. Both citizens and political leaders might benefit from this interaction. Citizens would have the chance to be provided with details about the functioning of the policy-making process, its leverages, and its limitations, thus gaining insight into these topics that usually generate distrust. As for politicians, their involvement in actual deliberation with the citizens may partially address the "incentive problem" documented by Bächtiger and Wegmann (2014, p. 120). Following Pincione and Tesón (2006), Bächtiger and Wegmann (2014, p. 120) argue that the absence of deliberation in the political sphere is not due to a lack of deliberative abilities on the part of politicians, but is a consequence of the lack of incentives for rational discussion: simplification, polarisation, conflict orientation, negativism, and the personalization of politics tend to be more appealing to uninformed citizens than nuanced, complex, and moderate deliberative approaches to public issues.

7. Limitations and Future Directions

Our contribution is limited to assessing the mass deliberation models in terms of what levels of listening they incentivize by design. LIS is an instrument for assessing whether quality listening is made possible in a deliberative setting (by providing the proper channels, facilitation, training, and an extrinsic motivation system). Since it is based on observing whether these elements are present or not, our framework is especially useful for professional deliberative designers in an initial phase of planning and structuring deliberative interactions at a larger scale. Once mass deliberation models are implemented in real-life settings, it will be possible to perform a more in-depth evaluation of the quality of listening that is actually being scaled up.

Another limitation is related to the partiality of the approach we take. The implementation of mass deliberation models cannot fully solve the crisis of listening in a democratic society. As Bächtiger and Wegmann (2014, p. 121) point out, an institutional order, consisting of both formal and informal rules, must be in place at a national or international level for deliberation to become fully effective. However, if mass deliberation settings are designed and implemented in a manner that succeeds in scaling up good listening, they can have a significant impact on restoring citizens' faith in democratic principles.

An opportunity for future research would be to investigate other roles that AI systems may be performing in interpersonal listening in a deliberative setting. One recent example is the AI system called the "Habermas Machine," designed to formulate group statements that can help participants reach consensus faster (Tessler et al., 2024, p. 1). The "Habermas Machine" engages in individual exchanges with deliberators, asking for their personal opinions on social and political issues, and uses this input to formulate a proposal designed to be collectively acceptable (Tessler et al., 2024, p. 17). In such cases, AI is explicitly used as a listener, replacing humans in interpersonal listening. However, future research in this area should address documented AI vulnerabilities related to introducing or reproducing biases because their pre-programmed parameters might prioritize the interests of certain social groups over others (Coeckelbergh, 2022, p. 81; Simons, 2023, pp. 28–29). This can further create a variety of challenges for the deliberative procedure and the listening it relies on. Moreover, if listeners' interest is redirected to the AI output, there will be no path-building between participants (Bickford, 1996). On a relational level, people's sense of agency, people feeling seen and valued, would be lost.

8. Conclusions

In this article, we looked at citizen participation in structured mass deliberation formats as a possible solution to the listening crisis that is affecting contemporary democracies. People often feel powerless in relation to political decision-makers and perceive that the political process is irremediably closed to them. If the outcomes of the deliberative groups were seriously taken into consideration by political leaders, citizens would regain their confidence in their ability to act as co-designers of political realities, having their voices heard by those who legislate.

Mass deliberation formats have long been proposed as a solution to enlarge citizen participation in political decision-making, but they have only recently become technically feasible, leveraging the power of digital platforms and AI systems. Our main research question was whether the quality of listening can be preserved once AI systems are deployed to scale up these deliberative processes. We proposed an analytical framework that accounts for the conditions, resources, and incentives needed to facilitate receptive, responsive, and apophatic listening. Based on this framework, we developed an assessment tool—the LIS—to measure the capacity of mass deliberation models to incentivize good listening by providing a set of conditions and resources: channels, facilitation, training, and an extrinsic motivation system. We further used our analytical framework to evaluate two AI-powered mass-deliberation models that have been recently proposed and formulated a set of recommendations for improving the ability of mass deliberation to encourage good listening and thus preserve the democratic value of deliberation.

As the development of AI systems is moving the design of deliberative experiences towards a new frontier, the pressures towards efficiency may bring about a serious risk: focusing only on mass participation, while

losing the focus on the values that made deliberation worthwhile in the first place. Deliberation has initially been promoted as an alternative to aggregative procedures precisely because it favored a particular kind of encounter between different minds, different communities, different approaches to public-interest issues, and provided a procedure based on authentic listening that was expected to lead to more legitimate, better informed, and more representative policy decisions. Therefore, our contribution is part of a much-needed research direction, one that should provide tools for assessing whether a deliberative design preserves the core values of good deliberation, among which good listening should always occupy a prominent place.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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