

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Do people like to discuss politics? A study of citizens' political talk culture

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## Abstract

As deliberative democracy is gaining practical momentum, the question arises whether citizens' attitudes toward everyday political talk are congruent with this 'talk-centric' vision of democratic governance. Drawing on a unique survey we examine how German citizens view the practice of discussing politics in everyday life, and what determines these attitudes. We find that only a minority appreciates talking about politics. To explain these views, we combine Fishbein and Ajzen's Expectancy-Value Model of attitudes toward behaviors with perspectives from research on interpersonal communication. Individuals' interest in politics emerges as the only relevant political disposition for attitudes toward everyday political talk. Its impact is surpassed and conditioned by conflict orientations and other enduring psychological dispositions, as well as contextual circumstances like the closeness of social ties and the amount of disagreement experienced during conversations. The beneficial effect of political interest dwindles under adverse interpersonal conditions. The social dimension of everyday political talk thus appears to outweigh its political dimension.

**Keywords:** deliberative democracy; discussant networks; everyday political talk; political culture; political disagreement; psychological dispositions

## Introduction

In recent years, the normative vision of 'talk-centric' deliberative democracy has gained considerable practical momentum. Slowly but steadily, democratic will-formation seems to acquire a 'deliberative timbre' (Bächtiger and Parkinson, 2019: 5). As emphasized in rather general terms by early advocates (Barber, 1984; Manin, 1987; Habermas, 1996), and fleshed out more precisely by recent systemic theorizing (Mansbridge, 1999; Chambers, 2012; Neblo, 2015: 17–25; Tanasoca, 2020), deliberative democratic decision-making ought to be anchored in citizens' discussions with one another. Ultimately, it is ordinary people's political talk in their day-to-day lifeworld – the informal conversations about political themes, casually held in homes, at workplaces, or at neighborhood parties (Conover and Miller, 2018) – that should serve as the mainspring of deliberative politics and touchstone of its democratic character (Schmitt-Beck, 2022).

Almond and Verba's classic congruence thesis suggests that in order to work such a model of democracy presupposes an 'allegiant' political culture (Almond and Verba, 1963, 21–22). Deliberative democracy needs a talk culture (Steiner *et al.*, 2004: 4) that is favorable to the pivotal

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role assigned to political discussions in general, and political talk between ordinary citizens in particular. The members of a society that advances in the direction of a deliberative democracy should hold positive attitudes toward political talk as the procedural, institutional and normative centerpiece of this project (Chambers, 2003). Otherwise, they can be expected to opt out or resist more deliberative processes and may become apathetic or even alienated. Ultimately, incongruence of citizens' attitudes with structures of will-formation and decision-making designed along deliberative democratic maxims may hollow out the practice of this model of democracy and undermine its legitimacy.

Despite this crucial role as the cultural underpinning of deliberative democracy, citizens' *attitudes toward everyday political talk* have only recently begun to attract interest among scholars of this model of democracy (Scudder, 2020: 113–132; Jennstål *et al.*, 2021). Our analysis ties in with this novel strand of research by asking a very simple but fundamental question: *How favorable or unfavorable are citizens' attitudes toward the practice of everyday political talk, and what determines these attitudes?*

We start with a brief discussion of the key role ascribed to everyday political talk in deliberative democracy, and its implications from the perspective of political culture research. Drawing on the *Conversations of Democracy* study, a unique face-to-face survey specially designed to examine German citizens' everyday political talk (Grill *et al.*, 2018), we describe citizens' attitudes toward this category of behavior. We find only a minority expressing positive attitudes. To understand these views we draw on Fishbein and Ajzen's Expectancy-Value Model of attitudes toward behaviors (Fishbein and Ajzen, 1975). To flesh out this generic perspective for everyday political talk, we conceive attitudes on this specific category of behavior as resulting from 'the push-pull of *relational* goals and outcomes versus *political* goals and outcomes' (Pennington and Winfrey, 2021: 102; italics by authors).

Normative theorizing about deliberative democracy typically adopts a purely political understanding of everyday political talk as an activity whose essence consists in the expression, exchange, and mutual consideration of views about public policy. Drawing on scholarship on interpersonal communication we transcend this narrow perspective. We acknowledge that it may also have a 'phatic' dimension (Thornbury and Slade, 2006: 19–20; Senft, 2009) that concerns its function of managing the social bonds between those communicating with one another (Rosenberg, 1954; Eliasoph, 1998; Conover *et al.*, 2002; Cramer, 2004; Mutz, 2006; Watzlawick *et al.*, 2011: 29–52). We accordingly examine the interplay of individual *political dispositions*, on the one hand, and two kinds of social factors, on the other: *interpersonally relevant psychological dispositions* and *interpersonal contexts*.

## The talk culture of deliberative democracy

Deliberative democrats embrace a 'rhetorical' notion of citizenship (Kock and Villadsen, 2017) that conceives citizens as free and equal contributors to an inclusive and encompassing process of interconnected discussions about political problems, goals, and solutions, that permeate society and feed into formal procedures of political decision-making (Habermas, 1996; Parkinson and Mansbridge, 2012). Deliberative politics thus presupposes substantial involvement of the citizenry at large in order to qualify as truly democratic (Schmitt-Beck, 2022).

In their seminal study of political culture, Almond and Verba (1963: 21–22) developed the notion that the proper functioning and stability of a system of governance depends on a 'congruent' political culture. Congruence implies favorable feelings and positive evaluations of the basic make-up of the polity on the part of its citizenry. When this condition is fulfilled, the political culture is 'allegiant' to its structure and expected to lend it support and thereby stabilize it. Indifference gives rise to apathy, whereas negative views are assumed to alienate citizens

and bear the risk of resistance against the political system and its concomitant destabilization. Recent research supports this claim (Welzel and Inglehart, 2009; Claassen, 2020).

This suggests that advocates of deliberative democracy should be concerned about the congruence between culture and structure. Transforming democracy toward a greater centrality of political discussion presupposes an ‘allegiant’ political culture in order to succeed. This concerns in particular what has been labeled citizens’ ‘talk culture’ (Steiner *et al.*, 2004: 4), that is, people’s beliefs, attitudes, and values with regard to this particular mode of political engagement. Congruence of citizens’ talk culture with the institutional, normative, and practical features of deliberative democracy requires largely positive attitudes toward engagement in everyday political talk. For the case of Germany, our study examines to what extent this crucial cultural prerequisite of deliberative democracy is fulfilled. It addresses two research questions:

RQ1: How do citizens evaluate the practice of everyday political talk?

RQ2: What determines these attitudes?

### Explaining citizens’ attitudes toward everyday political talk

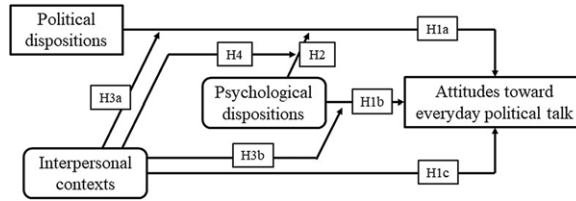
Attitudes toward everyday political talk are a special case of attitudes toward behavior, an orientation defined as ‘the degree to which a person has a favorable or unfavorable evaluation or appraisal of the behavior in question’ (Ajzen, 1991: 188). According to Fishbein and Ajzen’s Expectancy-Value Model (Fishbein and Ajzen, 1975), such attitudes are derived from persons’ ‘readily accessible or salient beliefs about the likely consequences of a contemplated course of action’ (Ajzen and Albarracín, 2007: 5). More precisely, an individual’s attitude toward a behavior reflects the positive or negative valences of outcomes and experiences associated with this behavior in her mind, weighted with the subjective likelihood of these outcomes’ occurrence when the behavior is performed, and totaled across all outcomes that are salient for her when forming this attitude. If cherished outcomes dominate and are expected to occur with a high likelihood, the resulting attitude toward the behavior in question will be positive. But it will be rather negative if adverse outcomes appear more likely than valued ones.

This model offers a generic account of the mechanics that lead to attitudes toward certain behaviors. It assumes that personality traits, values, or socio-demographic characteristics can serve as *dispositions* that influence attitudes toward behaviors by biasing perceptions of their implications and outcomes. It also acknowledges that these beliefs may be responsive to the *contexts* within which activities are performed (Fishbein and Ajzen, 1980: 34–35). The model is agnostic, however, with regard to the specific background factors that give rise to the outcome beliefs that are relevant for any *particular* form of behavior. It is therefore necessary to flesh out this perspective with domain-specific hypotheses that spell out in detail which dispositional and contextual factors can be expected to be of relevance for the behavior of interest (Ajzen and Albarracín, 2007).

Regarding citizens’ attitudes toward everyday political talk, three sets of factors appear potentially relevant: (i) individual dispositions toward the domain of politics, (ii) psychological dispositions pertaining to social interaction, and (iii) characteristics of the interpersonal contexts within which conversations take place. We assume that they affect attitudes toward everyday political talk directly, but also indirectly in a complex layered web of conditioning relationships (cf. Figure 1).

#### **Political dispositions**

The first of these categories follows naturally from deliberative democrats’ preoccupation with everyday political talk as an activity whose essence consists in the expression, exchange, and mutual consideration of views about *politics*. In this perspective, its meaning for those performing it is believed to emanate exclusively from its topical content. Accordingly, dispositions acquired



**Figure 1.** Hypothesized interplay between political dispositions, interpersonally relevant psychological dispositions, and interpersonal contexts as backgrounds of attitudes toward everyday political talk.

*Note:* Angular boxes symbolize political factors and rounded boxes social factors.

during individuals' political socialization can be expected to affect their views concerning the prospect of discussing politics (Beck and Jennings, 1982). Most prominent among potentially relevant political dispositions is *interest in politics* which can be understood as a stable 'expectation that engaging with political content [ . . . ] in the future will turn out to be rewarding' (Prior, 2019: 4). It should give rise to the belief that political conversations are gratifying experiences because they offer the opportunity to occupy oneself intensely with a subject matter deemed intrinsically attractive. Accordingly, it should lead to favorable attitudes toward everyday political talk.

Passionate stances with regard to certain political worldviews, ideological camps or parties could also allow political discussions to appear as gratifying. Persons with strong attitudes concerning directional alignments like *partisanship* and *ideology* may see them as welcome opportunities to affirm their political identity, express it to others, and persuade them of the superiority of their views. As a generalized self-confidence in political matters, *internal political efficacy* (Craig and Maggiotto, 1982) might also nurture the expectation that political conversations offer rewards. We accordingly hypothesize:

**H1a:** Favorable political dispositions (high interest in politics, strong partisanship, strong ideological leaning, high internal political efficacy) lead to more positive attitudes toward everyday political talk.

### ***The social dimension of everyday political talk***

The other two categories acknowledge that political conversations are a specific mode of interpersonal communication and presuppose the participation of fellow citizens as communication partners. For a more complete understanding of people's views about everyday political talk it is crucial to take into account that it implies interactions with other people. When discussing politics, individuals encounter each other not only in the political role of citizens but also as social beings. Alongside the cognitive dimension of the themes, issues, and questions that constitute conversations' substance, they are inevitably also concerned with the affective dimension of interlocutors' linkages to each other (Watzlawick *et al.*, 2011: 29–52). Scholarship of interpersonal communication has long recognized that its meaning cannot be fully understood by focusing exclusively on its topical content. Drawing on seminal work by anthropologist Bronisław Malinowski (1923) and linguist Roman Jakobson (1960) it has adopted the term 'phatic' to denote conversations' distinctly social function of managing the bonds between their participants (Thornbury and Slade, 2006: 19–20; Senft, 2009).

When evaluating the prospect of engaging in everyday political talk, individuals can accordingly be expected to envisage this kind of behavior not only, and perhaps not even primarily, as a political activity, but also in terms of the social interactions that it necessarily entails (Rosenberg, 1954: 351). Studies of everyday political talk have not paid much attention to this dimension. What little research there is, however, suggests that certain social features of political talk might

indeed be at odds with the instrumental political function assigned to it by deliberative democratic theory. In his seminal study of political apathy, Rosenberg already argued that many people may 'be blocked from talking [ . . . ] in behalf of their political beliefs out of fear of losing friends, alienating neighbors, endangering marriages, jeopardizing their positions in groups, losing business, jeopardizing their jobs, endangering production in their plants, facing community pressures, or exposing their feelings of self-esteem to threat' (Rosenberg, 1954: 354).

Over the years, other (mostly qualitative) studies voiced similar concerns. From varying vantage points they converged on the diagnosis that discussing politics with one's peers can be a quite stressful and adverse experience that many people find uncomfortable and prefer to avoid (Scheuch, 1965; Schudson, 1997; Eliasoph, 1998; Conover *et al.*, 2002; Cramer, 2004; Mutz, 2006). Two aspects, in particular, have been highlighted by this literature: that political views may be considered too personal and private to be shared with others, and that discussing such matters may lead to unpleasant or even painful controversies. This suggests that attitudes toward everyday political talk can be expected to be affected by *psychological dispositions of relevance for individuals' interactions with other people*. The fact that this behavior is an inherently social activity also implies that it inevitably takes place in specific social settings. The *circumstances of these interpersonal contexts* might likewise impinge on people's attitudes toward this activity.

### ***Interpersonally relevant psychological dispositions***

Political psychology has in recent years made significant progress in revealing how political behavior is affected by features of citizens' intra-individually highly stable, but inter-individually variable personalities (Caprara and Vecchione, 2013). These personalities are conceived as multi-dimensional internal structures of an enduring nature that are to a large extent genetically rooted and thus heritable. They influence individuals' behavior in all walks of life and therefore can be expected to leave an imprint also in the realm of politics (Mondak, 2010; Cawvey *et al.*, 2017). Research on political talk has thus far mainly referred to the comprehensive 'Big Five' framework of personality traits (Hibbing *et al.*, 2011; Gerber *et al.*, 2012). For the purpose of our study, we need a more fine-grained approach that specifically refers to personality facets of direct relevance for individuals' relationships to other persons. Without claiming to be exhaustive, such interpersonally relevant psychological dispositions entail individuals' need to belong, conflict orientations, subjective discussion competence, and social trust.

*Need to belong* is 'an inherent, primary human need to form and maintain stable interpersonal bonds' (Morey and Yamamoto, 2020: 83). It is a powerful human desire to experience enduring interactions of mutual concern with other persons (Baumeister, 2011). For individuals with a high need to belong, the potentially controversial character of discussions about politics might appear threatening. A strong need to belong can therefore be expected to be associated with rather negative attitudes toward everyday political talk.

Individuals' *conflict orientation* is 'a specific type of approach/avoidance motivation; it is a stable personality trait centered around how people experience and react to conflict – whether they are excited by arguments, uncomfortable when others fight in public, or happy to handle a disagreement face to face' (Sydnor, 2019: 29). It is defined by the opposing poles of conflict aversion (dislike of political confrontation and argument) and conflict seeking (feelings of excitement and enjoyment about dispute and contention). Since everyday political talk may lead to conflictive experiences, conflict aversion can be expected to lead to unfavorable attitudes toward this behavior, whereas conflict seeking should stimulate positive views (Mutz, 2006; Neblo, 2015: 129–144).

Topically focused discussions in general, and political discussions in particular, demand certain skills, among them a basic understanding of the thematized subject matters and some measure of articulateness and eloquence. People differ in these skills, and in their confidence to command them. People endowed with high subjective *competence to discuss politics* (Rubin *et al.*, 1993)

should consider everyday political talk an activity in which they can excel and that is accordingly rewarding. Those with little self-confidence, by contrast, face the '[t]hreat of ego-deflation', associated with 'the prospect of revealing factual ignorance or committing gross logical errors', and consequently a desire 'to avoid the feeling of defeat, abashment, humiliation, or other discomfiture' (Rosenberg, 1954: 353). Accordingly, they should view political discussions rather negatively.

Trusting an actor involves one's confidence that this actor will deliberately refrain from behaving in ways that violate one's interests, even if the actor could do so without fearing sanctions. In the case of *social trust*, this actor is the anonymous aggregate of people outside one's intimate core networks. This orientation has often been described as a lubricant that enables smooth cooperation between the members of societies (Nannestad, 2008) – a beneficial function that can be assumed to extend to everyday political talk as well. If people expect fellow citizens to exploit opportunities to cause them harm, they will associate a high risk of humiliating or otherwise painful experiences with interactions that involve revealing personal opinions, such as one's views about politics. Trusting persons, by contrast, should feel unhampered by such worries and accordingly develop more positive attitudes (Wyatt *et al.*, 2000).

The following formal hypothesis summarizes these expectations:

**H1b:** Favorable psychological dispositions (low need to belong, conflict seeking, high discussion competence, strong social trust) lead to more positive attitudes toward everyday political talk.

### **Interpersonal contexts**

Ordinary citizens' talk about public affairs typically takes place between the members of social networks (Huckfeldt and Sprague, 1995; Tanasoca, 2020). Since these networks define contextual circumstances for political conversations, their attributes should play an important role for attitudes toward this behavior. Two characteristics appear particularly important: the relationships between network members (Morey *et al.*, 2012; Schmitt-Beck and Grill, 2020), and the amount of disagreement individuals encounter when discussing politics with these persons (Nir, 2017). With regard to both, our expectations run counter to normative claims emphasized by theorists of deliberative democracy.

Concerning *relationships between interlocutors*, the distinction between strong ties and weak ties appears crucial. Strong ties are characterized by intimacy, mutual regard, and positive affect (Straits, 1991). They circumscribe political talk of a private nature, involving close associates in protected spaces, such as people's homes, and encompass two types of relationships: kinship bonds with spouses and other family members (Zuckerman *et al.*, 2007), and friendships (Fischer, 1982). Weak ties connect people who know each other, although not necessarily well, and are outside of each other's circles of intimates, such as co-workers, neighbors, and other acquaintances (Huckfeldt and Sprague, 1995). Since they involve interactions in more public settings like workplaces, bars or over the proverbial garden fence, they are often considered more valuable from a deliberative democratic point of view (Huckfeldt *et al.*, 2004; Tanasoca, 2020). However, in view of the challenging character of discussions about politics, strong ties can be expected to offer a more comfortable context (Schudson, 1997; Morey *et al.*, 2012) which, consequently, should be associated with more favorable attitudes toward this activity.

Advocates of deliberative democracy praise discussions between those holding opposing views as the most constructive mode to address the pluralism of societal interests and value orientations (Thompson, 2008: 502; Sunstein, 2003). Yet, deliberative democrats' appreciation of disagreeable encounters seems to go against the grain of how ordinary people want to structure their social life. Many find *disagreement* a source of tension, with a potential to disrupt highly valued social relationships, and accordingly uncomfortable (Mutz, 2006). Studies indicate that citizens try to avoid political conversations when they anticipate controversies (Gerber *et al.*, 2012; Settle and Carlson,

2019). This suggests that attitudes toward everyday political talk should be more negative when these conversations are expected to entail experiences of political disagreement. Concern about the ‘tyranny’ of majority opinion voiced by classics like de Tocqueville (1990: 254–286) and Mill (2015: 5–54), but also modern-day spiral-of-silence theory, suggests that individuals find encounters with disagreeable views particularly unpleasant when they are held by a majority (Noelle-Neumann, 1974; Hayes *et al.*, 2001). Envisaging such experiences should, accordingly, lead to even more negative attitudes toward this behavior.

We accordingly hypothesize:

**H1c:** Favorable interpersonal contexts (strong ties, no or limited political disagreement) lead to more positive attitudes toward everyday political talk.

### **A web of conditioning relationships**

Everyday political talk needs to be ‘safely integrated into the fabric of everyday lives and relationships’ (Mutz, 2006: 137). It therefore requires balancing political motives with the presumably more profound desire to maintain harmonious relationships with one’s associates (Pennington and Winfrey, 2021: 100). Interpersonal motives are closely associated with individuals’ fundamental longing for affiliation, social identification, self-esteem and well-being as accepted members of their groups and communities (Zayas and Sakman, 2020). They are therefore constantly activated as people lead their daily lives. Political dispositions, by contrast, pertain only to one specific domain of life that is, moreover, fairly remote from people’s lifeworld, accordingly more abstract, and often not very salient (van Deth, 2000). Individuals can therefore be assumed to function as social beings first, and as *zoi politikoi* only second. As noted by Mutz, ‘[p]eople tend to care more about social harmony in their immediate face-to-face personal relationships than about the larger political world’ (Mutz, 2006: 106). This general perspective bears two implications for our research. First of all, it suggests that social factors exert an overall stronger impact on persons’ attitudes toward everyday political talk than their political dispositions. We accordingly hypothesize (not visualized in Figure 1):

**H1d:** Psychological dispositions and interpersonal contexts are more relevant for attitudes toward everyday political talk than political dispositions.

In addition, over and above this merely additive specification in terms of competing direct effects, the general assumption that interpersonal factors are more powerful than political ones leads us to expect that they affect attitudes toward everyday political talk also indirectly by conditioning the influence of political dispositions. Mondak *et al.* (2010), among others, have argued that the impact of distal personality features on political orientations should indeed be seen as primarily interactive. Supporting this claim, a small body of research on various modes of political communication has demonstrated such moderating effects of conflict orientations (Mutz, 2006; Dalisay, 2012; Testa *et al.*, 2014; Sydnor, 2019; Wolak, 2022), and the need to belong (Eck *et al.*, 2017). We accordingly hypothesize that individuals’ psychological dispositions condition the effects of political dispositions on attitudes toward everyday political talk. If persons value social rewards higher than political gratifications, then strong political interest, intense directional passions, and marked internal efficacy should most clearly nurture the expectation that everyday political talk is associated with rewarding experiences when their need to belong is weak, when they enjoy rather than abhor conflict, when they feel competent to stand their ground in discussions, and when they trust their fellow citizens strongly. By contrast, under conditions of a strong need to belong, marked conflict avoidance, little subjective discussion competence, and weak social trust, the dreaded social costs of such conversations should suppress the beneficial effects of political dispositions. Put formally:

**H2:** Under favorable psychological dispositions political dispositions are more relevant for attitudes toward everyday political talk than under unfavorable psychological dispositions.

The same line of thought leads us to expect that the impact of dispositions is moderated by the contextual circumstances of everyday political talk as ultimate exogenous factors. Mondak *et al.* (2010; see also Mondak, 2010; Cawvey *et al.*, 2017) have made a strong case that effects of psychological dispositions should be conceived as conditional on the situational settings of behaviors. To the extent that features of contexts resonate with personality facets, individuals differently endowed with these features can be expected to respond in dissimilar ways to identical social situations. In other words, variable contextual conditions can be expected to moderate and thereby cause heterogeneity in the effects of psychological dispositions. They ‘contribute to patterns of political behavior, but the expression of these effects will often be contingent on the situation’ (Mondak *et al.*, 2010: 85). It seems highly plausible to expect similar situational contingencies also for political dispositions.

Importantly, in bearing with our previous hypotheses, contextually induced heterogeneity should work in opposite directions for psychological and political dispositions. We assume that political dispositions affect attitudes toward everyday political talk more strongly when interpersonal settings are favorable (analogous to H2). Conversely, the impact of political dispositions should be muted under more adverse contextual circumstances. The contrary pattern should emerge for psychological dispositions. Their impact should be boosted, especially when they resonate with these contextual features. Conflict orientations, for instance, should become more influential when conversations are envisaged as disagreeable (Mutz, 2006; Sydnor, 2019). Thinking further along these lines also suggests an even more complex three-way interaction. It implies that the contextual circumstances affect not only the direct effects of psychological and political dispositions, but also the conditioning impact of the former on the effects of the latter.

**H3a:** In favorable interpersonal contexts political dispositions are more relevant for attitudes toward everyday political talk than in unfavorable contexts.

**H3b:** In favorable interpersonal contexts psychological dispositions are less relevant for everyday political talk than in unfavorable contexts.

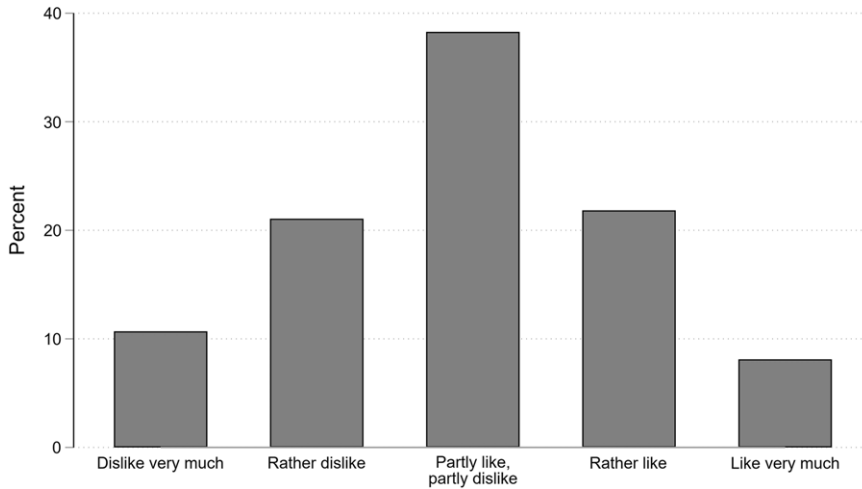
**H4:** In favorable interpersonal contexts the moderating impact of psychological dispositions on the relevance of political dispositions for attitudes toward everyday political talk is weaker than in unfavorable contexts.

### How do citizens evaluate the practice of everyday political talk?

To answer our research questions we draw on data from the *Conversations of Democracy (CoDem)* study, a high-quality face-to-face survey, based on a random sample of voting-age respondents and specially designed to examine German citizens’ everyday political talk.<sup>1</sup> Respondents’ attitudes toward everyday political talk were elicited with a complex instrument that started with the question: ‘How much do you like or dislike talking about politics with members of your family?’ Analogous questions were asked for friends, and then ‘acquaintances such as neighbors and co-workers’. Responses were registered on five-point scales ranging from ‘like very much’ to

<sup>1</sup>Based on a register-based one-stage random sample, 1,600 interviews with voting age citizens were completed between 15 May and the German federal election on 24 September, 2017. Following the model of major studies of political communication in citizens’ lifeworld (Lazarsfeld *et al.*, 1968; Huckfeldt and Sprague, 1995; Huckfeldt *et al.*, 2004; Conover *et al.*, 2002) the study was conducted locally. Its site was Mannheim, a city in the South of Germany characterized by the variegated social structure, economy, culture and political life of a typical mid-sized German city. The study was conducted under a grant of the German National Science Foundation DFG. For methodological details see Grill *et al.* (2018).





**Figure 2.** Attitudes toward everyday political talk (percent).

Note: Data are weighted (by gender, age, and city district) and stacked over all conditional circumstances within respondents ( $N = 13,880$ ).

‘dislike very much’. The same set of questions was repeated twice, introduced by primes that stressed increasing amounts of political disagreement: first, ‘when differences of opinion emerge during conversations,’ and second, ‘when during conversations a clear majority of the other participants rejects your opinion’. Thus, respondents’ views of everyday political talk were recorded for nine different interpersonal contextual circumstances of this behavior, resulting from a cross-classification of three types of relationships between conversation partners with three scenarios of disagreement experiences while talking with them.

Figure 2 displays the joint distribution of responses to these questions across all contextual conditions. The pattern is remarkably symmetric. Somewhat less than four out of ten responses indicate indifference. The rest is divided roughly equally between liking and disliking, with a slight edge on the negative side. This has important implications for the cultural foundations of deliberative democracy. In a congruent political culture, most citizens would hold positive views of the kind of behavior on which this model of democracy crucially depends. Yet, in our data only less than a third of all responses are positive, and less than 10% are very favorable. Supportive views of deliberative democracy’s central mode of citizen engagement are thus a minority phenomenon. Germans’ talk culture seems quite removed from the ideal of allegiance with the political order of deliberative democracy. Instead, the data reveal a considerable potential for apathy or even alienation, arising from indifferent or opposing views toward the basic practice of everyday political talk. Why is this the case?

## What determines citizens’ attitudes toward everyday political talk?

### **Dependent variable and methodological approach**

As indicated above, respondents’ assessments of everyday political talk were recorded for nine different interpersonal contextual circumstances, resulting from a cross-classification of three types of relationships between conversation partners and three kinds of disagreement experiences. To turn these contextual conditions into variables whose impact on attitudes toward everyday political talk can be estimated in conjunction with respondents’ political and psychological dispositions, the survey dataset was reshaped into a long format. It was organized in such a way that the information contained in the original questions was shifted into a generic variable indicating

respondents' like or dislike of political talk and two variables that specify relationships between interlocutors, respectively, the amount of disagreement. The dataset is stacked by disagreement nested within relationships nested within respondents, resulting in nine observations per respondent. In the linear ordinary least squares regression models<sup>2</sup> presented below, the generic like-dislike variable serves as the dependent variable, whereas the two indicators of contextual circumstances are used as independent variables.

### **Independent and control variables**

*Political dispositions:* *Political interest* is measured by means of self-reports on a five-point scale. The indicator of *partisanship* takes the form of a five-point scale ranging from non-partisans to very strong party identifiers. *Ideological extremity* is measured by means of an 11-point left-right scale folded at the midpoint. *Internal political efficacy* is measured by an additive scale based on two items.

*Psychological dispositions:* *Subjective discussion competence* and *need to belong* are indicated by additive scales based on two items each. The latter's coding is reversed because a low need to belong should be associated with positive attitudes toward everyday political talk. Six items were used to construct an additive scale of *conflict orientations*, with low values indicating conflict aversion and high values conflict seeking. For measuring *social trust*, an additive scale was used that combined items pertaining to respondents' trust in acquaintances and strangers.

*Interpersonal contexts:* To indicate the *strength of social ties* a dummy variable is used that distinguishes weak ties (1 = acquaintances) from strong ties (0 = family members and friends). The *amount of disagreement* is indicated by two dummy variables. The first pertains to disagreement as such, the second to majority disagreement. They are coded in such a way that the estimate for the former expresses the contrast with the base condition without disagreement prime, whereas majority disagreement is contrasted with simple disagreement.

All models include the following socio-demographic controls: *gender*, *age*, *immigration background*, *education*, *occupational status* and *economic well-being*. In addition, the models control for the psychological traits *need to evaluate*, *need for cognition*, and *need for cognitive closure* (see Online Appendix for details of instrumentation).

### **Findings**

The findings for model (1) in Table 1 are mostly in line with the basic hypotheses H1a, H1b, and H1c. H1a receives only partial support since political interest is the only political disposition that makes a difference in attitudes toward everyday political talk. This suggests that highly interested individuals find political talk much more rewarding than those with little or no interest, whereas partisan or ideological passions and internal efficacy have no additional impact. Therefore, these orientations will no longer be considered in the following analyses.<sup>3</sup> The other findings are unequivocally in line with H1b and H1c. Individuals' conflict orientations are the overall strongest predictor in the model. Conflict seeking is associated with much more positive attitudes toward everyday political talk than conflict avoidance. The effects of social trust, discussion competence and need to belong are substantial, but weaker. The impact of interpersonal contexts is overall somewhat less pronounced, but all effects are likewise in line with our expectations. Political conversations within strong ties are viewed more positively than those within weak ties. The prospect of disagreement renders attitudes toward everyday political talk less favorable, and the most

<sup>2</sup>Since these models are cross-sectional we can, strictly speaking, not demonstrate causal relationships. Since the phenomena of interest are all of high intra-individual stability over time, panel data spanning long sections of respondents' life cycles would be needed to identify such patterns.

<sup>3</sup>Further analyses show that they are also not relevant in interaction models.

**Table 1.** Direct effects of political dispositions, psychological dispositions, and interpersonal contexts on attitudes toward everyday political talk (unstandardized regression coefficients)

	Full model		(2) Baseline model		(3) Political dispositions		(4) Psychological dispositions		(5) Interpersonal contexts		(6) Psych. Dispositions + Interpers. contexts	
Political interest	0.206***	(0.024)			0.296***	(0.025)						
Partisanship	0.015	(0.014)			0.025	(0.016)						
Left-right extremity	-0.005	(0.018)			-0.001	(0.020)						
Internal efficacy	-0.003	(0.027)			0.073*	(0.029)						
Need to belong (low)	0.044*	(0.022)					0.038	(0.024)			0.038	(0.024)
Conflict orientation (seeking)	0.401***	(0.029)					0.447***	(0.030)			0.447***	(0.030)
Discussion competence	0.073**	(0.024)					0.129***	(0.023)			0.129***	(0.023)
Social trust	0.121***	(0.027)					0.142***	(0.028)			0.142***	(0.028)
Weak ties	-0.090***	(0.004)							-0.090***	(0.004)	-0.090***	(0.004)
Disagreement	-0.071***	(0.005)							-0.071***	(0.005)	-0.071***	(0.005)
Majority disagreement	-0.042***	(0.005)							-0.042***	(0.005)	-0.042***	(0.005)
Male	0.022*	(0.009)	0.062***	(0.011)	0.032**	(0.010)	0.031**	(0.010)	0.062***	(0.011)	0.031**	(0.010)
Age	-0.066**	(0.023)	-0.088***	(0.027)	-0.144***	(0.025)	-0.017	(0.023)	-0.088**	(0.027)	-0.017	(0.023)
Immigration background	-0.012	(0.012)	-0.051**	(0.016)	-0.037*	(0.015)	-0.014	(0.013)	-0.051**	(0.016)	-0.014	(0.013)
Education	0.005	(0.010)	0.036**	(0.012)	0.012	(0.011)	0.013	(0.010)	0.036**	(0.012)	0.012	(0.010)
Occupational status	0.009	(0.023)	0.076**	(0.027)	0.029	(0.025)	0.026	(0.024)	0.075**	(0.027)	0.025	(0.024)
Economic well-being	0.003	(0.025)	0.048	(0.031)	0.016	(0.027)	0.016	(0.027)	0.047	(0.031)	0.015	(0.027)
Need to evaluate	0.037*	(0.019)	0.103***	(0.022)	0.036 <sup>#</sup>	(0.021)	0.064***	(0.019)	0.103***	(0.022)	0.065***	(0.019)
Need for cognition	0.033*	(0.014)	0.082***	(0.018)	0.051**	(0.016)	0.044**	(0.015)	0.082***	(0.018)	0.044**	(0.015)
Need for cognitive closure	0.019	(0.018)	0.074***	(0.021)	0.064***	(0.019)	0.008	(0.018)	0.075***	(0.021)	0.008	(0.018)
Constant	0.051 <sup>#</sup>	(0.028)	0.253***	(0.030)	0.181***	(0.028)	-0.051 <sup>#</sup>	(0.028)	0.344***	(0.030)	0.041	(0.028)
Observations	10,884		10,884		10,884		10,884		10,884		10,884	
Adj. R <sup>2</sup>	0.310		0.088		0.169		0.228		0.143		0.283	
Adj. ΔR <sup>2</sup> (relative to model (2))	0.222				0.081		0.140		0.055		0.195	

Robust standard errors (clustered by respondents) in parentheses. All variables are normalized to range 0 to 1.  
<sup>#</sup>*p* < 0.10, \**p* < 0.05, \*\**p* < 0.01, \*\*\**p* < 0.001.

challenging scenario of having to face a disagreeable majority gives an additional push toward more negative attitudes.

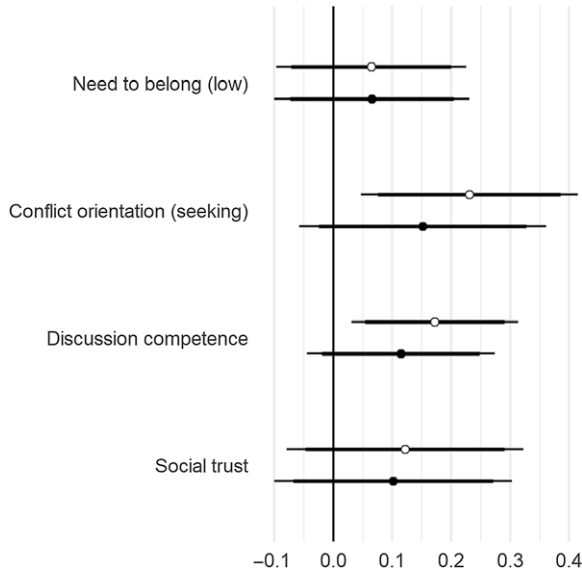
Comparing the incremental model fit statistics of models (3) to (6) (relative to the baseline model (2)) allows assessment of H1d. Compared to the purely political model (3), the incremental explanatory power of the complete social model (6), which entails both interpersonally relevant psychological dispositions and interpersonal contexts, is more than twice as large. The interpersonal predictors thus outweigh the political ones by a large margin. Most of this model's superior fit is due to the psychological dispositions, however (cf. model (4)), whereas the overall impact of contextual circumstances alone (model (5)) is smaller than the explanatory power of the block of political dispositions. H1d thus receives qualified support. The analysis suggests that interpersonally relevant psychological dispositions are more important for attitudes toward everyday political talk than political dispositions, whereas contextual circumstances play a more limited role – at least in a purely additive perspective.

In addition to these direct effects, we expect social factors to affect attitudes toward everyday political talk also conditionally in a complex interplay of moderating relationships with political dispositions. To test these hypotheses for political interest (as the only political disposition of relevance) we add multiplicative interaction terms to the full model (1) displayed in Table 1. We pursue a two-track strategy that combines a more permissive with an extremely conservative approach to modeling. The first approach consists of a series of models in which each interaction effect implied in the generic conditional hypotheses is estimated separately. In the restrictive approach, all proposed interactions are examined simultaneously in a combined model. Since even simple two-way interaction models include the predictors of interest twice in the same equation they are by definition affected with considerable multicollinearity (Brambor *et al.*, 2006). This erects high hurdles for achieving conventional levels of statistical significance already in the permissive models. Including key predictors multiple times, as is necessarily the case in the combined models, raises the bar even higher.

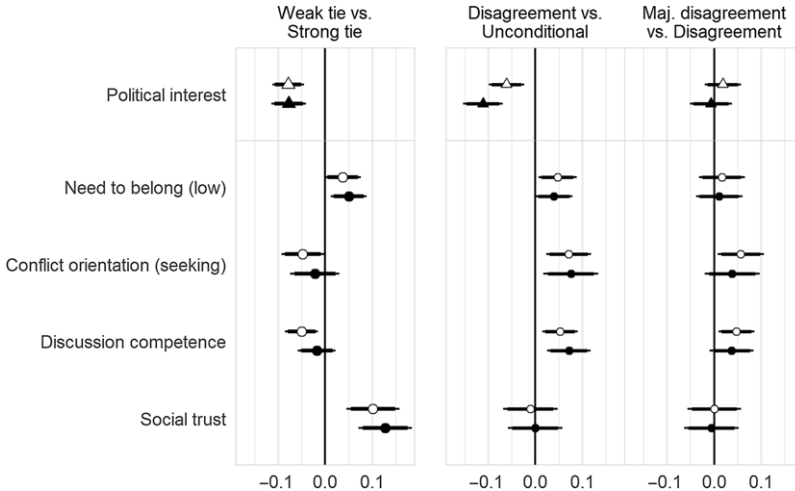
According to our first conditional hypothesis (H2), the positive effect of political interest should to some extent depend on favorable psychological dispositions. All interaction effects displayed in Figure 3 are in line with this expectation, but most of them fail to attain statistical significance. In the separate models, conflict seeking and high confidence in one's ability to discuss politics are associated with a stronger impact of political interest, as expected. High political interest thus appears to induce more favorable attitudes toward everyday political talk primarily among individuals that are confident in their ability to stand their ground in such discussions and do not shy away from political conflicts. But these effects are not robust when subjected to the tough test of the restrictive combined model.

The second set of conditional hypotheses claims that the impact of political and psychological dispositions on citizens' views of everyday political talk is in opposite ways conditioned by the interpersonal contexts within which this activity takes place. The estimates of the interaction terms displayed in Figure 4 show for political interest and the four psychological dispositions how these associations are amplified or mitigated by weak ties in comparison to strong ties, as well as by disagreement in contrast to no disagreement, and by majority disagreement compared to simple disagreement. H3a predicts that weak ties, as well as disagreement of growing intensity, depress the positive effect of political interest. This expectation is largely supported by our data. Attitudes toward everyday political talk are considerably less responsive to differences in citizens' political interest when the envisaged discussions take place within weak ties or entail disagreement. These patterns emerge not only in the separate models but very clearly also in the combined models. However, it makes no further difference whether disagreeable views are expressed by a majority of one's interlocutors.

H3b posits the opposite pattern for psychological dispositions. Across the board, they should be more relevant under the more challenging conditions of weak ties and disagreeable interlocutors.

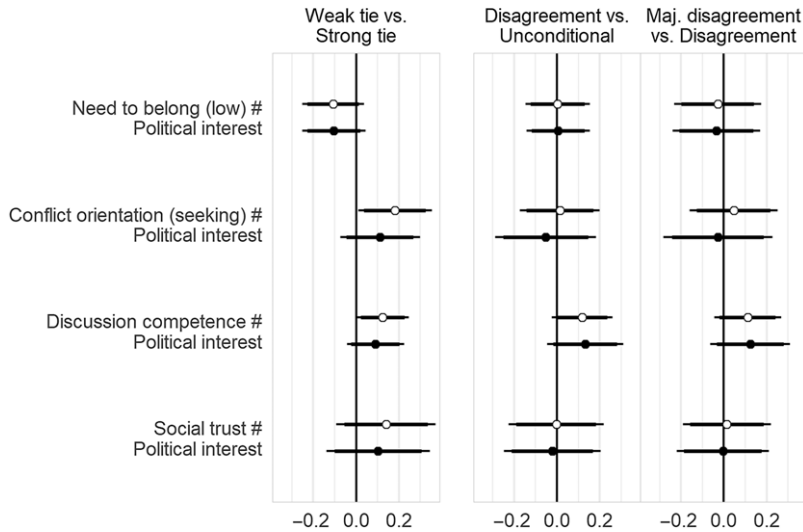


**Figure 3.** Moderation of effect of political interest by psychological dispositions.  
*Note:* Entries are two-way interaction effects from multiple linear regression models with robust standard errors (tails indicate 95-% and 90-% confidence intervals). Empty symbols are based on permissive models, filled symbols on restrictive models. See Online Appendix for complete models.



**Figure 4.** Moderation of effects of political interest and psychological dispositions by interpersonal contexts.  
*Note:* Entries are two-way interaction effects from multiple linear regression models with robust standard errors (tails indicate 95-% and 90-% confidence intervals). Empty symbols are based on permissive models, filled symbols on restrictive models. See Online Appendix for complete models.

With some qualifications, this expectation is also sustained. Social trust, for instance, is much more strongly associated with attitudes toward everyday political talk within weak ties. Disagreement, by contrast, does not appear to condition the role of social trust. For the need to belong, we also see interaction effects in the expected direction – less pronounced with regard



**Figure 5.** Moderation of interactions between political interest and psychological dispositions by interpersonal contexts. *Note:* Entries are three-way interaction effects from multiple linear regression models with robust standard errors (tails indicate 95-% and 90-% confidence intervals). Empty symbols are based on permissive models, filled symbols on restrictive models. See Online Appendix for complete models.

to the strength of ties, but unlike social trust also pertaining to disagreement (but not majority disagreement). Concerning conflict orientations and discussion competence, the picture is also not uniform. The separate models suggest statistically meaningful conditioning effects of the strength of ties in the wrong direction. But they are not robust to the more restrictive model specification. Moderating effects in the hypothesized direction emerge for conversations that entail disagreement. Majority disagreement appears to boost these effects further, but only under permissive model specifications. Figure 3 thus suggests that the role of social trust is only conditioned by the strength of ties, whereas conflict orientations and discussion competence are primarily important when disagreement is envisaged to occur in conversations. Need to belong has weaker conditioning effects under both contextual conditions. What does not appear to matter much is the difference between the simple presence of disagreement and disagreement expressed by a majority.

The final analysis combines the perspectives of the previous ones in three-way interaction models. This erects even higher hurdles for interaction terms to achieve statistical significance. H4 posits that the deflating role of unfavorable psychological dispositions on the effect of political interest is intensified by adverse contextual circumstances, that is, for conversations within weak ties or in the presence of disagreement, especially majority disagreement. When all hypothesized three-way interactions are modeled simultaneously, none of them is statistically significant (Figure 5). But this finding should not be overrated, given the enormous complexity of these models. The separate models, by contrast, find the effect of political interest on attitudes toward everyday political talk indeed being significantly more sensitive to conflict orientations within weak ties compared to strong ties. The same pattern is detected for discussion competence. Among the conflict averse and those with little confidence in their ability to persist in discussions, strong political interest translates to a lesser extent into a positive view of everyday political talk when it is envisaged to take place outside strong ties. Regarding the moderating role of discussion competence, we also see effects in the expected direction conditional on disagreement as well as majority disagreement, but they do not attain sufficient levels of statistical significance.

## Conclusion

The discussion about the ‘talk-centric’ deliberative model of democracy (Chambers, 2003: 308) has stimulated growing interest in ordinary people’s everyday political talk (Mansbridge, 1999; Conover and Miller, 2018). As emphasized by Barber, deliberative democracy requires ‘wide-spread and ongoing participation in talk by the entire citizenry’ (Barber, 1984: 197). Our study addressed a crucial cultural prerequisite of this kind of democracy. According to classic theorizing about political culture, political systems’ institutional and normative architectures need ‘allegiant’ political cultures in order to work and remain intact (Almond and Verba, 1963). Accordingly, deliberative democracy requires a talk culture (Steiner *et al.*, 2004: 4) that is congruent with the centrality of citizens’ political talk in its political process. Against this background, we examined how German citizens view the activity of everyday political talk. We found less than a third of the responses being positive. Negative attitudes are slightly more frequent, and the modal category consists of indifferent views. This distribution of attitudes signals a considerable potential for political apathy and even alienation (Almond and Verba, 1963: 22) when political talk among ordinary people becomes more important and consequential in democratic will-formation and decision-making.

Two mechanisms may give rise to these risks. The first is unhappiness and estrangement about the increasing normative valuation of ‘rhetorical’ (Kock and Villadsen, 2017) or even ‘deliberative’ citizenship (Doheny, 2007), that is, the growing public appreciation of engagement in political discussions as a desirable mode of engagement or even duty of citizens in deliberative democracy (Mayne and Geissel, 2016), among those holding indifferent or even unfavorable attitudes toward this activity. Deliberative democracy may thereby lose its cultural underpinning among citizens that do not cherish the mode of activity central to its conception of how politics should work.

The second mechanism functions via political outcomes. Individuals are more likely to perform a behavior if they hold a positive attitude toward it, and less likely if their attitude is negative (Ajzen, 1991). Those viewing everyday political talk positively should accordingly have a higher likelihood of actual participation in political discussions than those with indifferent or even negative attitudes. Under deliberative democracy’s talk-centric process of will-formation and decision-making, such behavioral effects may give rise to political inequality. If people’s participation in everyday political talk is correlated with specific political perspectives and viewpoints, unequal engagement may lead to unequal ‘discursive representation’ (Dryzek and Niemeyer, 2008), since the themes relevant to those staying silent are then unlikely to enter the agenda and their concerns less likely to find expression<sup>4</sup> and influence political outcomes. To the extent that deliberative democratic decision-making ultimately originates from impulses generated in citizens’ discussions with one another (Habermas, 1996; Tanasoca, 2020), these perspectives’ prospects of affecting public policies would be impaired. Seeing their interests sidelined may lead to further estrangement among those disliking political discussion.

Broadly, participatory deliberative democracy is advocated as a superior mode of legitimate governance (Manin, 1987; Cohen, 1989; Habermas, 1996). However, looming behind both mechanisms – indifference or even dislike of political talk as its central *modus operandi*, and frustration about one’s interests not being effectively represented in its talk-centric decision-making – is the possibility that for significant segments of the mass public it may lead to the opposite outcome: estrangement and feelings of illegitimacy, rather than enhanced support for its regime norms, principles, and output (Easton, 1975).

<sup>4</sup>Preliminary research found not very strong, but still detectable patterns of overrepresentation and underrepresentation with regard to the political perspectives of those engaging in everyday political talk. They are more pronounced with regard to weak ties than strong ties, and suggest that citizens preferring mainstream center-left or center-right parties are somewhat underrepresented, and adherents of niche parties overrepresented among those that discuss politics. In addition, those holding leftist-liberal positions tend to be overrepresented, and those holding right-wing and populist positions underrepresented (Schmitt-Beck and Schnaudt, 2022).

Building on the Expectancy-Value Model as a generic theory of attitudes toward behavior (Fishbein and Ajzen, 1975) and domain-specific hypotheses inspired by scholarship about interpersonal communication, both generally (Watzlawick *et al.*, 2011: 29–52) and specifically referring to politics (Conover *et al.*, 2002; Mutz, 2006), we examined the interplay of political and social backgrounds of attitudes toward everyday political talk. Political interest emerged as the only political disposition of relevance. Our findings suggest that a strong interest in politics leads to the expectation that talking about this topic is a gratifying experience, which in turn affects attitudes toward this activity favorably. However, views of everyday political talk also reflect a broad variety of enduring psychological dispositions and circumstances of interpersonal contexts that refer to the ‘phatic’ function of conversations as a specific form of managing interactions between people (Thornbury and Slade, 2006: 19–20; Senft, 2009).

Overall, these social factors are more important for attitudes toward everyday political talk than political predictors. Specifically, conflict seeking and generalized social trust, but also individuals’ subjective competence to discuss politics and to a lesser extent also a low need to belong, render attitudes toward political talk more positive. By contrast, individuals that are highly averse to conflict, have little confidence in their ability to persist in a political discussion, distrust fellow citizens, or feel a strong desire to stay on good terms with other people seem to associate rather unpleasant experiences with everyday political talk and therefore tend to dislike it. Advocates of deliberative democracy are mainly concerned that its practice could be impaired by adverse effects of social marginalization (Young, 2000; Knops, 2006). Our findings indicate that the egalitarian imperative of deliberative democracy might also be subverted by individuals’ variable endowment with psychological dispositions that entail heritable components (Mondak, 2010; Caprara and Vecchione, 2013). Conversations about politics are also viewed less favorably if they take place within weak rather than strong ties, and when they entail disagreement, most notably majority disagreement. This suggests that attributes of political discussions that are highly valued by advocates of deliberative democracy – communications within weak ties rather than the secluded private world of strong ties (Tanasoca, 2020), and encounters with the political heterogeneity of the social world (Sunstein, 2003) – are in fact detrimental to the kind of political engagement that is considered key to its vision of better and more legitimate governance.

Importantly, we even found interpersonal factors moderating the impact of interest in politics. Our analyses thus suggest that, concerning attitudes toward everyday political talk, social concerns not only outweigh but may even take precedence over political ones. To some extent, the positive role of political interest appears to presuppose comfortable social circumstances. Especially concerning the varying conditions of interpersonal contexts, its role as a driver of favorable attitudes toward everyday political talk bears features of a ‘fair weather phenomenon’. Under rather unpleasant circumstances, when conversations are envisaged to take place outside the safe haven of kinship and friendship, or when they are expected to include non-like-minded interlocutors, the impact of political interest is deflated. Under such conditions, appreciation of political discussions tends to be less pronounced even among those strongly interested in politics. Under the same conditions, these views are more responsive to psychological dispositions like most notably social trust, conflict orientations and the subjective competence to discuss politics. We also found indications that political interest translates more easily into favorable attitudes toward everyday political talk among people that enjoy rather than abhor dispute and contention, and that this conditioning effect is especially pronounced within weak ties. This observation ties in with a growing literature on the moderating role of conflict orientations in processes of political communication (Mutz, 2006; Dalisay, 2012; Testa *et al.*, 2014; Sydnor, 2019; Wolak, 2022).

Our findings suggest that in several ways, social concerns interfere with political dispositions as backgrounds of citizens’ views about everyday political talk, the mode of engagement that is crucial for the democratic element in deliberative democracy’s vision of truly legitimate governance. To the extent that attitudes toward everyday political talk lead to a higher intensity of such engagement, people endowed with certain political, and even more so psychological dispositions



are advantaged, and those lacking them are disadvantaged. It is difficult to imagine how these obstacles to a more participatory and egalitarian working of deliberative democracy ‘on the ground’ could be overcome. In organized mini-publics smart design choices concerning such events’ institutional make-up can to some extent alleviate problems of this kind (Karpowitz and Mendelberg, 2014). Establishing protected social zones where those burdened with disadvantages can hold ‘enclave deliberations’ restricted to people like themselves is a particularly far-reaching example of these kinds of formalized approaches (Karpowitz *et al.*, 2009). But such strategies appear neither realistic nor appropriate in the unruly world of spontaneous everyday political talk. Attitudes toward this informal practice of citizens’ lifeworld are probably mainly responsive to socialization experiences in childhood and youth (Almond and Verba, 1963: 323–374; Nolas *et al.*, 2017). Communication practices within families are protected by norms of privacy and therefore hardly open to outside interventions from public agencies. Conscious training of discursive behavior in schools appears more promising as a strategy to affect deliberative democracy’s cultural underpinnings in favorable ways. But clearly, that can only be a long-term program. And it would affect the less important background of attitudes toward everyday political talk – political interest – more strongly (Koskimaa and Rapeli, 2015; Prior, 2019: 211–262) than the dominant factors, individuals’, to a significant extent heritable, psychological dispositions.

Our study indicates several fruitful avenues for future research. Our conditional hypotheses can be translated into testable expectations about selectivities in the actual practice of everyday political talk that emerge from the interplay of contextual conditions with political (Huckfeldt and Sprague, 1995) and psychological dispositions (Caprara and Vecchione, 2013: 47–48). From a theoretical point of view, our findings demonstrate the utility of the Expectancy-Value Model of attitudes toward behavior for the study of political talk. This model is a specific element of the Theory of Planned Behavior (Fishbein and Ajzen, 1980) that aims to provide complete accounts of why individuals display certain behaviors or not. As a general model of human action, this approach has a lot more to offer to the study of citizens’ engagement in political discussions and should be utilized further. Finally, research should attend to the implications of the incongruence between deliberative democracy’s prioritization of political discussion and the rather low esteem in which this activity is held by substantial parts of the citizenry.

**Supplementary material.** To view supplementary material for this article, please visit <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1755773922000625>.

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