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## Do citizens enjoy talking politics? How political and social dispositions shape our attitudes towards political conversations.

**Many ideas for improving modern democracy are built on the active engagement of citizens in political conversations with each other. In our study, however, we find that few people actually have a positive attitude towards political talk. In explaining this phenomenon, the social aspects outweigh the political ones.**

In recent years, liberal democracies have seen a decrease in social and political cohesion. To tackle this problem, political and civic actors have taken a variety of grassroots initiatives. These so-called 'democratic innovations' often go beyond traditional tools of representative democracy, such as voting, and aim to encourage discussions and dialogue between citizens. For example, initiatives such as My Country Talks, a platform that brings together people with opposing viewpoints, seek to foster conversations based on a variety of principles— most importantly the equal inclusion of all citizens—to promote a lively exchange of viewpoints among citizens.

However, political talk does not only take place in organised settings but above all in everyday encounters, such as between family members at the dinner table or with colleagues during the lunch break. In practice, such conversations help people make sense of the political world, improve their political knowledge, and develop tolerance towards others and their opinions. Considering all these positive aspects of everyday political conversations, it is not surprising that they are often regarded as a means of overcoming the challenges of modern democracies. *However, there is a catch: Do people actually enjoy talking about politics?*

### Attitudes

According to the psychologists Fishbein and Ajzen (1975), attitudes are a person's positive or negative evaluation of a specific behaviour. This evaluation depends on whether the person thinks a behaviour leads to a good or a bad outcome. Applied to our case, we expect citizens to have a positive attitude towards political conversations when they anticipate that they will enjoy talking politics and a negative attitude when they fear that such an interaction will have unpleasant consequences.

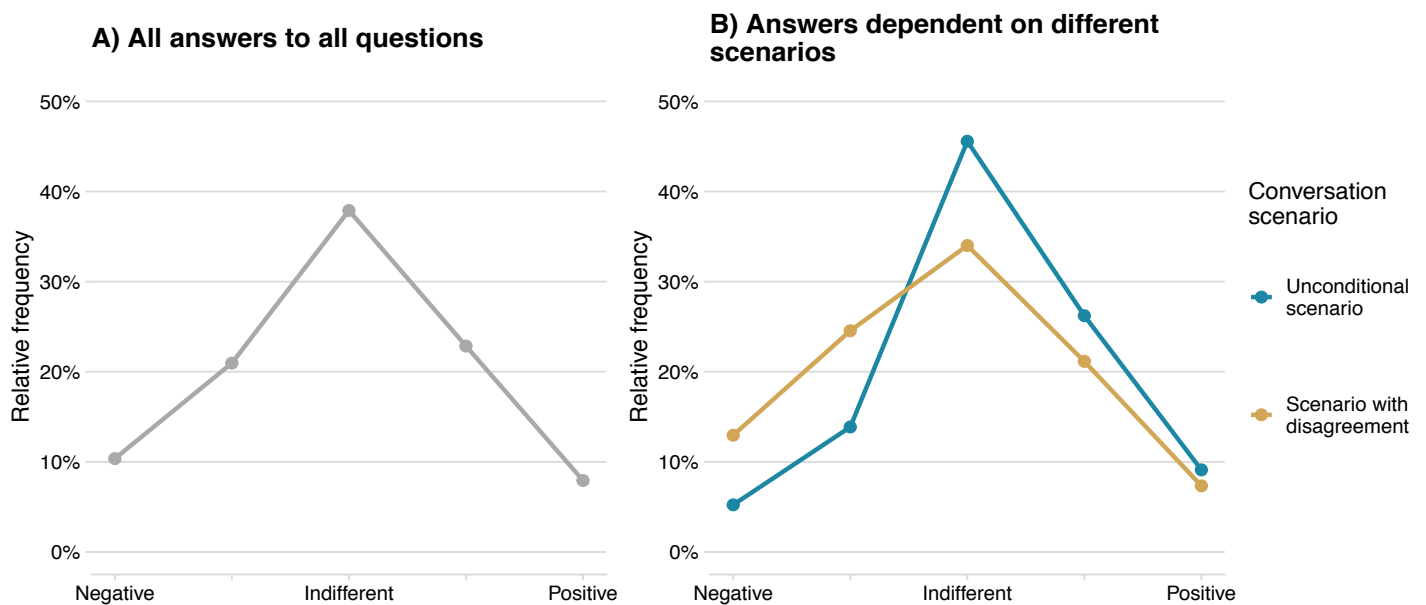
Any attempt to improve democracy through discussion-based approaches needs committed and eager participants. A positive attitude towards political conversations is therefore crucial. Additionally, for political conversations to be considered truly democratic given citizens' active and equal participation, these attitudes must be widespread among citizens.

## The project Conversations of Democracy (CoDem)

Our project *Conversations of Democracy (CoDem)* aims to investigate citizens' political conversations and associated dimensions, such as their attitudes, motivations, and behaviour. To this end, we collected data using a high-quality face-to-face survey among 1,600 eligible voters in the city of Mannheim in the run-up to the 2017 German federal election. The sample was randomly selected on the basis of the city's population register. More details about the data can be found in the report by Grill, Schmitt-Beck, and Metz (2018).

To explore respondents' attitudes towards political talk, we specifically asked them whether they generally think positively or negatively about engaging in everyday political talk with family members, friends, and acquaintances. We also enquired how they would feel about these conversations if their conversation partners disagreed with them.

Our analysis reveals that only a minority thinks positively about political talk. As can be seen in Figure 1, Panel A, fewer than three in ten respondents enjoy talking about politics in general, and fewer than one in ten enjoy it very much. Strikingly, four in ten respondents are indifferent, i.e. have neither a positive nor a negative attitude towards political conversations, which is approximately four times as many as those who hold a very positive or very negative attitude. However, when political conversations involve disagreement, respondents tend to have more negative than positive attitudes, as shown in Panel B in Figure 1.



**Figure 1** presents the percentages of the answers given by survey respondents regarding their attitudes towards political talk. In panel A, all answers to all questions are summed up to show whether people hold overall neutral, negative, or positive attitudes. It is evident that citizens with positive attitudes are in the minority, in contrast to people exhibiting indifferent or negative attitudes. Panel B depicts the responses separated according to two different scenarios we asked about. It is apparent that citizens have substantially more negative attitudes when political talk involves disagreement.

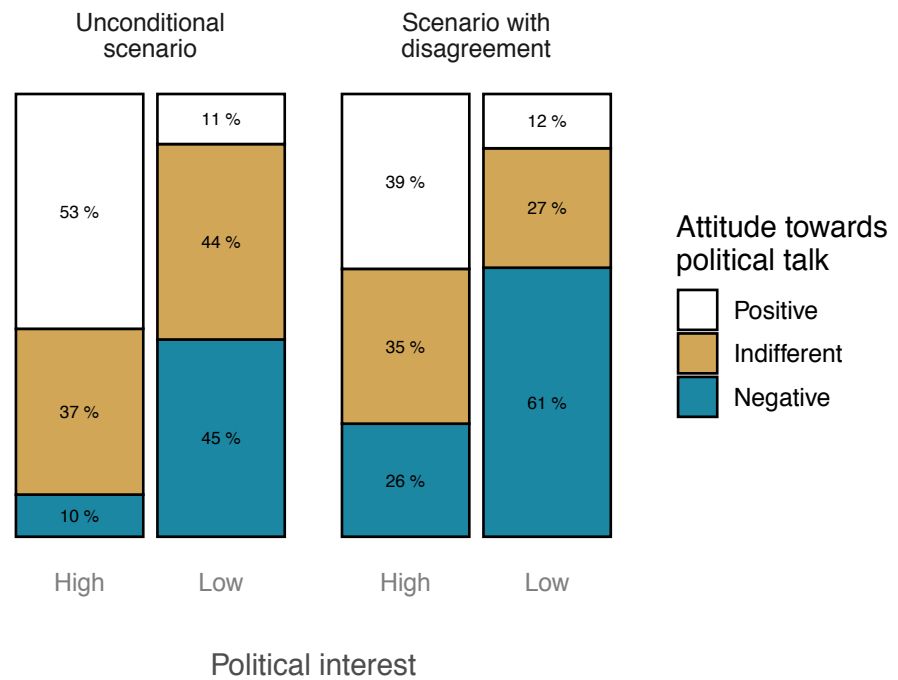
## Explaining attitudes towards political talk

How can we explain this pattern? What influences whether people like or dislike talking about politics? We considered two different possible explanations: First, individuals' political dispositions could have an influence on their attitudes towards political talk. Second, individuals' social and psychological characteristics could influence how sensitive they are to the social consequences of political conversations.

## 1 The political dimension

Since political talk revolves around the expression and exchange of political opinions, we initially expected three factors in particular to affect whether people will enjoy talking about politics: general interest in politics, affiliation with a political party, and a strong ideological position. Our analyses, however, show that only political interest plays a crucial role: respondents with a high interest in politics are more likely to enjoy political talk than those with little or no interest in politics.

Furthermore, as can be seen in Figure 2, this tendency only applies to attitudes towards political conversations in general. When disagreements arise, even those who are interested in politics moderate their positive views: less than four in ten respondents enjoy talking about politics under such circumstances. Even interest in politics is therefore not a reliable indicator of whether people enjoy talking about politics.



**Figure 2** illustrates the attitudes towards political talk among respondents with high and respondents with low political interest according to the respective scenario (including or excluding disagreement). The figure shows that highly interested people are much more likely to have a positive attitude towards political talk than people with low political interest (white). However, this difference is much smaller in the scenario with disagreement: even highly politically interested citizens do not save predominantly positive attitudes towards such conversations.

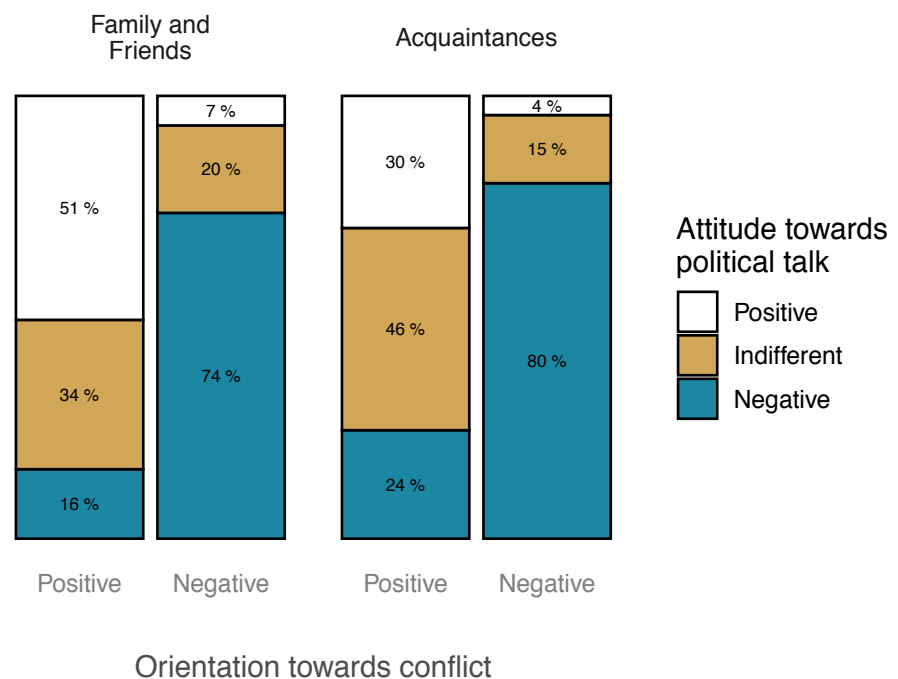
## 2 The social dimension

Because political conversations are not just exchanges of information but also social interactions, our second approach to explaining the differences in attitudes towards political talk concerns the social dimension. As sharing political views is a disclosure of personal views and can lead to unpleasant disputes, it can have a profound impact on the relationships between individuals. Therefore, to explain attitudes towards political talk, we must examine not only individuals' political but also their social dispositions, especially those indicating how they feel about potentially conflictual social interactions. To do so, we looked at how our respondents' need for affiliation, attitudes towards social conflict, self-assessed discussion skills, and level of social trust affects their attitudes towards political talk.

Our findings show, among other things, that respondents who generally avoid conflict are less likely to enjoy talking about politics, regardless of the situation. In contrast, those who find pleasure and thrill in conflictual situations are more likely to engage in political conversations, although more so with family and friends than with acquaintances (see Figure 3). Consequently, argumentative persons generally enjoy talking about politics but still make strong distinctions regarding who they want to talk to about such a 'risky' topic. Conflict orientation is thus a prime example of how social and psychological aspects strongly influence attitudes towards political talk.

Other social orientations that have a positive impact on attitudes towards political talk are a high level of confidence in one's discussion skills, a low need to fit in or belong to a group, and a high level of trust in others. A more detailed explanation can be found in Rüdiger Schmitt-Beck and Manuel Neumann (2023).

All in all, the key takeaway of our analyses is that people's interpersonal and social orientations have a stronger influence on their attitudes towards political talk than their political orientations.



**Figure 3** illustrates the distribution of attitudes towards political talk among respondents who like conflict and those who do not, depending on different conversation partners. Those with a negative attitude towards conflict tend to have clearly negative attitude towards political talk (blue), irrespective of the interlocutor. Respondents with positive conflict orientations are considerably more likely to have positive attitudes towards political conversations when these take place with family members and friends. Positive attitudes among them are much less common regarding conversations with acquaintances.

### How can positive attitudes toward political conversations be fostered?

Our results show that only a minority of citizens think positively about everyday political conversations. Even fewer enjoy political conversations when these involve disagreement. This finding suggests that citizens perceive the very features of conversations that are considered vital to a vibrant democracy, i.e. the exchange of opinions between different people, as threatening. Most generally, people dislike engaging with other political views or talking about politics with people outside the inner social circle.

We also found that political and social orientations help us understand why some people like and others dislike political talk. Those with a high interest in politics, a positive attitude towards conflict, strong communication skills, a high level of social trust, or a lower need for social affiliation generally have a more positive attitude towards talking about politics. Importantly, this mostly applies in conversations that do not explicitly involve disagreement, and with familiar conversation partners rather than with acquaintances. Such systematic differences have crucial implications for democratic ideas that build on an actively deliberating citizenry. Our findings imply that there are differences in who openly discusses political issues and, consequently, in whose concerns are eventually heard, as attitudes towards political conversations influence actual participation in political discussions.

While this study focussed particularly on spontaneous, informal political conversations, our finding that social orientations have a strong influence on attitudes towards political conversations also has important implications for the organisation of all kinds of participation formats aimed at stimulating citizens' political deliberation.

Our results highlight that the experience of uncertainty, conflict, and disagreement can negatively affect individuals' attitudes towards political talk. To encourage participation in political talk, it is therefore important to make the discussion partners feel comfortable and secure with each other. Practical solutions for formal events aimed at fostering political conversations could be to familiarise the participants with each other in extended introductions. While conflict orientation cannot be easily changed, organisers of discussion-based political events would be well advised to cater for the needs of those who are uncomfortable with dissent or heated discussions. Another way to support inclusive dialogue can be to prepare and coach the participants in advance on how to respectfully present and react to arguments or divergent political viewpoints. Where possible, active third-party moderation can prevent discussions from becoming unpleasant or conflictual. Roundtables with like-minded interlocutors before points are being made in broader and more contentious discussions can also be forums to collect the perspectives and viewpoints of people inhibited by fear of stigmatization or personal attacks. However, such suggestions are hardly applicable in everyday political conversations, as these usually occur spontaneously. Here, for example, targeted training in discussion skills at school could have a positive influence on how people perceive political conversations.

All in all, are everyday political conversations just a 'fair-weather phenomenon'? One could almost assume so. If conversations take place under more unpleasant conditions, for example outside the circle of family or friends, or with disagreeing interlocutors, even politically interested or conflict-seeking people tend to have a negative attitude towards political talk. Therefore, it is important to understand political conversations foremost as social interactions if one wants to encourage an inclusive culture for vibrant political conversations across the citizenry. Fostering conversations about political issues in more formal events also includes creating an environment that mitigates the risks and potential discomfort associated with cultivating interpersonal relationships in controversial discussions.

The full paper by Rüdiger Schmitt-Beck and Manuel Neumann was published with the title 'Do people like to discuss politics? A study of citizens' political talk culture' (2023) in *European Political Science Review*.

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