Political talk preferences: Selection of similar and different discussion partners and groups

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Political Talk Preferences:
Selection of Similar and Different Discussion Partners and Groups

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Focusing on two distinct dimensions of similarity and difference (political identity, political opinions), this study uses a within-subjects experimental design implemented in an online survey to examine preferences for discussion partners and groups that are similar to (same party and same opinion) or different from (different party and different opinion) or that represent a combination of similarity and difference (same party and different opinion, or different party and same opinion) relative to oneself. Participants comprising a diverse national sample (N = 820) completed eight political discussion selection tasks (four discussion partner tasks, four discussion group tasks) by ranking four political discussion options from most to least preferred. Results indicate that complete similarity is not always preferred (in analyses of all ranked discussion groups) and that partisan similarity is preferred over opinion similarity (in analyses of first-ranked discussion partners). More generally, findings reveal that preferences for political discussion depend on the context of the discussion, including whether the discussion involves a single discussion partner or a discussion group and whether preference focuses on individuals' most preferred option only or relative rankings across a range of options.

Keywords: political discussion, similarity/difference, agreement/disagreement, selective exposure

Political discussion involving a diverse range of opinions and peoples bestows vibrancy upon the public sphere and legitimacy upon democratic governance (Delli Carpini, Cook, & Jacobs, 2004). Contrary to the deliberative ideal, one's everyday political discussion networks typically include discussion partners

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whose political views and orientations are similar to one's own (Mutz, 2006), and the contentious debate that political disagreement might evoke generates serious apprehension among many citizens (Walsh, 2004). Yet, a bias toward political agreement does not come at the complete expense of disagreement (Huckfeldt & Sprague, 1995), and motivations to learn about others' views may increase openness to political disagreement (Conover, Searing, & Crewe, 2002). An evident, yet clearly not exclusive, proclivity toward homogeneity in political discussion suggests that much remains to be understood about citizens' preferences for political similarity over political difference.

Testing a widely assumed—yet heretofore untested—preference for politically homogeneous discussion, this study directly assesses political discussion preferences using a within-subjects experimental design (implemented in an online survey) in which participants ranked four distinct political discussion conditions from most to least preferred. Departing from the unidimensional approach to political difference typically observed in the political discussion literature, this study distinguishes between two critical dimensions of political difference—political opinions and partisan identity. Predictions about preferences for hearing attitude-consistent views versus associating with in-group partisan members derive from distinct theoretical frameworks (with distinct assumptions about the precursors, underlying processes, and effects of exposure to political difference), and a multidimensional approach to political difference provides the opportunity to examine the effects of similarity (same party identification and same opinion about a political issue), difference (different party and different opinion), and a combination of similarity and difference (same party and different opinion, or different party and same opinion) on political talk decisions. Perhaps optimally suited to avoid contentious discussion while satisfying motivations to learn new and different views, combined similar and different discussion options may prove profitable to political discussion theory and practice. Finally, whereas research on political discussion partners and networks has evolved somewhat separately from the literature on small group discussion, this study examines preferences for both discussion partners and discussion groups.

Literature Review

Political Discussion and Preferences for Homogeneity

Deliberative theory emphasizes that exposure to a diverse range of opinions and peoples is a particularly integral component of the public sphere, in which high quality opinions are formed, shared, and expressed. Empirical research demonstrates that exposure to political disagreement fosters political tolerance, enhances understanding of one's own views, and increases awareness of opposing views (Mutz, 2006; Price, Cappella, & Nir, 2002). Yet, beginning with Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet's (1944) pioneering work on voting behavior (frequently credited as a harbinger of selective exposure research), an expansive and consistent body of empirical research shows that discussion networks are largely characterized by homogeneity (Huckfeldt & Sprague, 1995; Mutz, 2006).

The majority of research on exposure to political disagreement in informal political talk includes survey-based studies assessing frequency of perceived (and sometimes actual) exposure to political difference and disagreement, either with specific discussion partners (Huckfeldt & Sprague, 1995) or more generally across all discussants within an individual's political discussion network (Scheufele, Nisbet,

Brossard, & Nisbet, 2004). Despite comprising an instructive and insightful body of research, survey research assessing perceived or actual exposure to political difference affords only indirect evidence about citizens' preferences for political discussion.

Selection of political discussion partners is guided by two distinct forces: availability and preference. Citizens tend to be situated in social and communication environments that readily offer similar and like-minded others, leading to *de facto* selective exposure, also referred to as *structurally induced* or *supply homophily* (Huckfeldt & Sprague, 1995; McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Cook, 2001; Sears & Freedman, 1967). Psychological preference for similarity over dissimilarity, on the other hand, drives *de jure* selective exposure, also referred to as *choice-produced* or *demand homophily*. With survey research on exposure to similarity and difference unable to disentangle the influence of social structure (availability) from actual preference on the composition of discussion networks, preference for political similarity remains an oft declared but empirically untested assumption.

Understanding preferences (apart from availability) is increasingly imperative in the contemporary communication environment. Through myriad discussion formats offered by the Internet and expanded social networks online, citizens today are provided with an almost unlimited number and range of political discussion options. Substantially increased availability of discussion choices, paralleled by enhanced control over the individuals and information to which citizens are exposed, has generated evermore fervent concerns about selective exposure, echo chambers, and polarization (Sunstein, 2007). The importance of preference in communication and information decisions is highlighted by findings from a recent study showing that individual choice had a stronger impact on exposure to cross-cutting socially shared news on Facebook than the ideological composition of one's Facebook friend network (Bakshy, Messing, & Adamic, 2015).

Not only are structurally induced and choice-produced selective exposures distinct processes (with distinct precursors and presumably distinct consequences), but more generally, distinctions between availability and preference (and actual behavior and behavior under controlled conditions) are also widely recognized across numerous fields of study. Interestingly, although research has yet to clearly assess preference apart from availability in political discussion, mediated selective exposure research—the sibling of interpersonal selective exposure—includes a range of studies capturing media habits in everyday life (e.g., Dilliplane, 2011) and media preferences in controlled environments. Mediated selective exposure experiments typically present participants with a variety of news articles (headlines, leads, or actual stories) and examine how opinion-reinforcing or opinion-challenging information influences interest in reading, article selection, or time spent reading different articles (e.g., Garrett, 2009; Knobloch-Westerwick & Kleinman, 2012). Borrowing from the mediated selective exposure playbook, this study uses an experimental design in which participants indicated their preferences for a variety of political discussion options varying in their extent of political similarity and difference.

Similar, Different, or a Combination of Similar and Different?

Upon first consideration, the concept of political difference may appear deceptively simple, suggesting nothing more than a discrepancy between the views or characteristics of two individuals. Many

empirical studies on exposure to political difference provide little in the way of conceptual definitions, perhaps indicating a presumed understanding and consensus about the meaning and nature of disagreement and difference in political discussion. Yet, because political beings are multifaceted and complex, so too is political difference. Substantial variability across operational definitions of political similarity and difference attest to this complexity. Many studies focus on only one dimension upon which similarity or difference might exist. Whereas some studies focus on a social or political identity criterion (most often partisanship or party support; e.g., Eveland & Hively, 2009; Pattie & Johnston, 2009), others focus on specific political opinions (typically candidate preference; e.g., Huckfeldt & Sprague, 1995; Nir, 2005). Assessing both identity-based and opinion-based measures of political difference (Mutz, 2006; Scheufele et al., 2004), other studies seem to acknowledge (at least implicitly via measurement) the multidimensional nature of political difference, yet analyses focus on combined indices rather than separately examining different dimensions of difference.

Partisan orientations and political opinions represent decidedly important dimensions upon which political difference may exist. Although these dimensions are intimately related (party members may often hold partisan stereotypical attitudes about specific political issues), political identity and political opinions are inherently distinct concepts. Whether citizens find partisan similarity and opinion congruity equally appealing, or out-group partisan members and opposing political viewpoints equally aversive, has yet to be determined in the political discussion literature.

Partisan and opinion similarity are intimately related to two distinct theoretical frameworks, such that understanding the effects of political opinion versus partisan identity in driving political discussion preferences will help determine the theoretical approach that is most appropriate to political discussion decisions (or which approach is most applicable in which circumstances). Social identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and other group-related theories provide theoretical rationale for predicting preferences for talking with similar partisans and avoiding out-group partisan members. Cognitive dissonance theory and its progeny selective exposure theory (Festinger, 1957) predict that individuals will seek out discussion partners offering attitude-consistent information and will avoid those with attitude-inconsistent views. Importantly, both social identity theory and selective exposure theory anticipate preferences for political homogeneity. Just as importantly, however, each of these theories specifies distinct precursors, motivations, underlying mechanisms, and effects of exposure to difference.

Of course, evidence that either partisan or opinion similarity exerts a stronger influence on political discussion preferences in one particular study cannot provide definitive evidence that political discussion decisions are driven exclusively by social identity theory or selective exposure theory, respectively. Political opinions may serve as a basis for social identities, and exposure to opposing partisans may elicit feelings of dissonance. Conclusive evidence—indicating whether selective exposure and social identity serve as equally viable theoretical foundations for political discussion decisions, whether one framework is universally superior, or whether each theory is more appropriate under different circumstances—will require studies directly testing competing predictions derived from each of these theories pertaining to the antecedents, psychological processes, and effects of exposure to opinion and partisan difference.

A multidimensional approach to political difference also offers a unique opportunity to study preferences for discussions that involve similarity, difference, or a combination of similarity and difference (e.g., someone with the same political party affiliation but a different view on a particular issue, or someone from an opposing party who shares the same opinion on a political issue). From a practical standpoint, comparing oneself to virtually any other person will likely lead to the conclusion that there exist both similarities to and differences from oneself (political or otherwise), such that discussion partners who represent a combination of similarity and difference may be the norm rather than the exception in the political world in which citizens reside. From an empirical vantage point, discussion networks are biased toward similarity, yet citizens do not completely isolate themselves from political difference (Huckfeldt & Sprague, 1995) and indicate an openness to political disagreement when it facilitates learning about others' opinions (Conover et al., 2002). Finally, from a theoretical perspective, motivations to learn and share information that underlie some citizens' political discussion behaviors (Eveland, Morey, & Hutchens, 2011) are more likely to be achieved through exposure to political disagreement rather than agreement.

Discussions and discussion partners representing a combination of similarity and difference may strike a critical balance between the need for social support and avoidance of acrimonious debate, on the one hand, and motivations to learn new information and hear opposing opinions, on the other. Sharing common ground in one respect may give people room to explore their disagreement, which could lead to learning, awareness of and respect for opposing views, and even attitude change. Conversations involving similarity and difference may thus offer the greatest potential for instilling democratic norms and facilitating processes such as compromise and negotiation that are vital to democracies, particularly amid increasing concerns over political polarization (e.g., Sunstein, 2007).

Preferences for Discussion Partners

This study manipulates discussion partner partisanship and issue opinions to examine preferences for political discussion partners who may be similar to or different from oneself, and individuals who represent a combination of similarity and difference. Participants were presented with the following discussion partner conditions: (a) same party and same opinion (SS), (b) different party and different opinion (DD), (c) same party and different opinion (SD), and (d) different party and same opinion (DS).

Preferences for SS over DD discussion partners are clearly indicated by cognitive dissonance and selective exposure theories (Festinger, 1957) as well as by social identity and group-related theories (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Indirect evidence is also provided by survey research on the composition of discussion networks, with studies indicating that from 60% to 70% of all listed discussion partners are perceived as politically similar (Huckfeldt & Sprague, 1995; Morey, Eveland, & Hutchens, 2012). Although similarity should be preferred over difference, it is unclear how partners who exhibit characteristics both similar to and different from oneself—the two combined similar and different conditions (SD, DS)—will fare as preferred political discussion options. A combination of similarity and difference may be preferred just as much as complete similarity (SS) or might be just as aversive as complete difference (DD). Preferences may also differ for the two combined similar and different conditions. Whereas cognitive dissonance theory and selective exposure theory suggest that individuals will be most apt to avoid those with dissimilar political opinions (DS preferred over SD), social identity theory and research on the power of partisanship

and party cues (e.g., Campbell, Converse, Miller, & Stokes, 1960; Cohen, 2003) suggest that political identity similarity should exert the stronger force over political discussion selection preferences (SD over DS).

H1:   Completely similar (SS) discussion partners will be preferred over completely different (DD) discussion partners.

RQ1:   Will completely similar (SS) discussion partners be preferred over the combined similar and different (SD, DS) discussion partners?

RQ2:   Will the combined similar and different (SD, DS) discussion partners be preferred over completely different (DD) discussion partners?

RQ3:   Will there be a difference in preferences for the combined similar and different (SD, DS) discussion partners?

Preferences for Discussion Groups

More likely to fulfill the deliberative standard of "publicity" (Conover et al., 2002) than dyadic political discussion, political discussion in group contexts plays an important role in normative democratic society. Interestingly, research on political discussion partners and the composition of discussion networks (Huckfeldt & Sprague, 1995; Mutz, 2006) has evolved somewhat separately from the literature on formal deliberation and small group discussions (Fishkin & Luskin, 2005; Gastil, Black, & Moscovitz, 2008).

To examine preferences for similarity and difference in political discussion groups, the simplest analogy might be four discussion groups of which each represents one type (SS, SD, DS, or DD) of individuals. However, studying the influence of similarity and difference is more complex in the context of discussion groups (relative to partners) because groups can be mixed in two respects: (a) those whose individual members are similar to and different from oneself, and (b) those whose members are heterogeneous among themselves. Groups with all SD or all DS individuals would meet the first criterion but not the second. This study included the following discussion group conditions: (a) all same party and same opinion (All SS), (b) all different party and different opinion (All DD), (c) half same party and same opinion, half different party and different opinion (HSSHDD), and (d) half same party and different opinion, half different party and same opinion (HSDHDS). It is important to note that although representing both homogeneity and heterogeneity within groups, the discussion group options afford less leverage than the individual discussion partner conditions for disentangling the effects of partisanship and opinions on political talk decisions.

The political discussion literature offers little insight into the frequency of dyadic versus group contexts in which political discussions occur, let alone preferences for similarity and difference in these contexts. Group political discussion has been most effectively studied through deliberative experiments (Fishkin & Luskin, 2005), small group discussions (Gastil et al., 2008), and ethnographic research (Walsh, 2004). Generalizable findings about either exposure to or preferences for political similarity and difference

are difficult to extrapolate from these studies, as deliberation and small group political discussion studies assign individuals to discussion groups, and findings from ethnographic research are not necessarily representative of larger patterns of behavior.

Similar to the discussion partner context, discussion group preferences should favor similarity over difference (based on cognitive dissonance and selective exposure theories as well as social identity and group-related theories), and it is unclear whether a difference will emerge in preferences for the two combined similar and different options (HSSHDD, HSDHDS). Yet, strength of preference for complete similarity over complete difference may differ in dyadic versus group contexts, as interpersonal and group discussion dynamics are markedly distinct (evidenced by the distinct literatures that guide these areas of communication research). Research on conformity (Asch, 1956), group norms (Hogg & Reid, 2006), salience of social identity in group contexts (Tajfel, 1982), opinion suppression in perceived hostile opinion climates (Noelle-Neumann, 1974), and willingness to talk in public versus private communication contexts (McCroskey & Richmond, 1990) might suggest that preferences for similarity are amplified in group relative to dyadic discussion contexts. On the other hand, social network research indicates that political discussion networks (within nonpolitical groups) tend toward heterophily (Eveland & Kleinman, 2013), perhaps indicative of a weakened preference for similarity in group discussions.

H2:   *Completely similar (All SS) discussion groups will be preferred over completely different (All DD) discussion groups.*

RQ4:   *Will completely similar (All SS) discussion groups be preferred over the combined similar and different (HSSHDD, HSDHDS) discussion groups?*

RQ5:   *Will the combined similar and different (HSSHDD, HSDHDS) discussion groups be preferred over completely different (All DD) discussion groups?*

RQ6:   *Will there be a difference in preferences for the combined similar and different (HSSHDD, HSDHDS) discussion groups?*

RQ7:   *Will preference for complete similarity relative to complete difference be stronger in dyadic or group discussion contexts?*

Method

Sample

A national sample (N = 820) of U.S. adults completed the online survey experiment used in this study. Participants were recruited by Qualtrics (an Internet survey company), and the study was IRB approved by the university that contracted the survey firm. Qualtrics recruited a partisan-only sample (participants had to identify with one of the two major U.S. political parties to be eligible for the study). Data were collected from November 12 to November 18, 2015. The survey was started by 1,095 individuals. Data from 275 participants were excluded from analysis for reasons such as not finishing the

survey, not providing consent, or incorrectly answering a quality control question embedded in the survey. (Additional details about the exclusion of cases can be found in Online Appendix A. All online appendices mentioned in this article—A through F—are available through the following link: https://www.dropbox.com/s/iz6bq7pvoh0vpm9/PoliticalTalkPreferences_OnlineAppendix_IJoC_FINAL.docx ?dl=0).

Demographic quotas were used to ensure sample diversity. The final sample was evenly divided between females (49.5%) and males and included slightly more Democrats (58.4%) than Republicans. Respondents ranged in age from 18 to 88 years old (M = 44.98; SD = 14.59; Mdn = 44). A majority of participants identified their race as White (81.1%). The median response for highest level of education completed was "associate or technical degree" (M = 3.83, SD = 1.50; 3 = some college; 4 = associate or technical degree), and median family income in 2014 was reported between $50,000 and $75,000. (See Online Appendix A for additional information about final sample characteristics and the use of online volunteer samples.)

Procedure

The survey (average response time: 18.32 minutes) included questions assessing basic demographic information, political orientation, and political attitudes about a variety of issues. These questions were followed by the experimental task, which presented participants with a series of eight separate issues (four discussion partner trials, four discussion group trials). For each issue, participants indicated their political discussion preferences by ranking each of four discussion conditions (partners or groups) from most to least preferred. To enhance the realism of the study context and increase validity of responses, participants were told that the online survey comprised Part 1 of the study, with completion of Part 1 leading to eligibility for Study Part 2. Part 2 ostensibly involved having two 10-minute online discussions about political issues, with responses provided in Part 1 used to match participants to one political discussion partner and one political discussion group for Study Part 2. During debriefing at the conclusion of the online survey, respondents were informed that there was no Study Part 2.

Political Issues

The experiment included eight discussion selection trials (four partner trials, four group trials), with each trial focused on a separate sociopolitical issue. Using a variety of issues establishes the robustness of findings, as the generalization of results based on only one or two issues would be tenuous. Different issues were used for discussion partner and group selections to keep participants engaged in the task and to reinforce the realism of the study. To enhance the generalizability of findings, issues were also selected to vary in party divisiveness, with high and low party divisiveness determined by examining public opinion poll results reporting issue support separately for Democrats and Republicans. Half of the issues used in this study were highly divisive along political party lines (climate, immigration, gun control, education), and half reflected less contentious partisan issues (evolution, ISIS, vaccines, genetic modification). Partisan divisiveness of issues did not moderate preferences for similarity and difference in either the discussion partner or group contexts, such that this variable is not included in analyses presented below. (Additional information about party divisiveness and the nonsignificant moderating

effects of this variable can be found in Online Appendix B. The specific issues, exact poll questions, poll source, and percentage support among Democrats and Republicans used to select issues can be found in Online Appendix C.)

Experimental Conditions

Each discussion selection experimental trial presented participants with one of eight issues, with each issue followed by four discussion options representing the four experimental partner and group conditions (shown, with examples, in Table 1). The wording of discussion options was written to match as closely as possible the poll questions initially used to select the eight issues (see above) and the political attitude survey questions (see below).

Table 1. Discussion Partner and Discussion Group Conditions and Examples.

Conditions	Examples
Partner Conditions and Examples	
(for a Democrat who agreed that global climate change poses a serious threat)	
SS: Same party and same opinion	A Democrat who believes global climate change poses a serious threat
DD: Different party and different opinion	A Republican who does NOT believe global climate change poses a serious threat
SD: Same party and different opinion	A Democrat who does NOT believe global climate change poses a serious threat
DS: Different party and same opinion	A Republican who believes global climate change poses a serious threat
Group Conditions and Examples	
(for a Democrat who indicated support for stricter gun control laws)	
All SS: All same party and same opinion	A group composed of Democrats who believe laws covering the sale of guns should be made more strict
All DD: All different party and different opinion	A group composed of Republicans who do NOT believe laws covering the sale of guns should be made more strict
HSSHDD: Half same party and same opinion, half different party and different opinion	HALF of the group includes Democrats who believe laws covering the sale of guns should be made more strict, and HALF of the group includes Republicans who do NOT believe the sale of guns should be made more strict
HSDHDS: Half same party and different opinion, half different party and same opinion	HALF of the group includes Democrats who do NOT believe laws covering the sale of guns should be made more strict, and HALF of the group includes Republicans who believe the sale of guns should be made more strict

For each discussion selection trial, four versions of the survey were created, such that each version included the appropriate conditions for Democrats who supported, Democrats who opposed, Republicans who supported, and Republicans who opposed said issue. Prior to the experimental task,

survey questions asked respondents to report their political party affiliation (strong Democrat = 14.6%, Democrat = 34.5%, lean Democrat = 9.3%, strong Republican = 8.2%, Republican = 21.1%, lean Republican = 12.3%; recall that the sample included partisans only). Political opinions were assessed by asking respondents to agree or disagree (1 = strongly disagree, 6 = strongly agree; recoded using a 0-to-5 scale, with higher scores indicating stronger agreement) with statements pertaining to the eight sociopolitical topics. (Exact wording and descriptive statistics for the political attitude items—written to match as closely as possible the poll questions used to initially select the eight issues—can be found in Online Appendix C.)

Based on participants' party affiliation and attitudes toward the eight issues, filter or contingency logic was used to assign each participant to one of the four survey forms for each of the eight discussion selection trials. For the discussion partner selections, all respondents ultimately received the same four options, as there are four possible conditions representing the 2 (partisanship: Democrat, Republican) by 2 (issue position: support, oppose) experimental stimulus design. However, the condition represented by each of the options was contingent upon each participant's party affiliation and position on that specific issue. Unlike the discussion partner task, the four specific discussion group options presented to each participant differed across respondents (e.g., a Democrat who supported stricter gun laws did not receive the same four options as a Democrat who opposed stricter gun laws). The four discussion partner and four discussion group tasks were presented in separate blocks. Order of presentation of the two blocks was randomized across participants. Within blocks, order of the specific issues was randomized, as was presentation of the four discussion selection options within each issue.

Independent and Dependent Variables

Dummy codes were created to represent the discussion partner (SS, DD, SD, DS) and discussion group (All SS, All DD, HSSHDD, HSDHDS) conditions (independent variables). For each discussion selection trial, experimental instructions asked participants to "Please indicate—ranking from (1) most preferred to (4) least preferred—the individual or group you'd like to discuss this topic with" (dependent variable). Analyses focus on how discussion partner and group similarity and difference (i.e., experimental conditions) influence preference for talking to each of these individuals or groups (i.e., rank order).

Data Analysis

Hypotheses and research questions were tested using conditional logit for rank-ordered data. To account for the nested nature of the data (conditions nested within issues, nested within individuals), data were stratified by both individual participant and specific issue, and analyses used bootstrapped standard errors. (A detailed description of data preparation, restructuring, the advantages of conditional logit for the rank-ordered data used in this study, and accounting for nested data can be found in Online Appendix D.)

Cox regression was run in SPSS 23. The dependent variable is the rank order (1, 2, 3, 4) assigned to each specific discussion partner or group option by the participant. The independent variables (experimental conditions) are the dummy codes (described above) representing similar and different

discussion option characteristics. Based on logit models, resulting β-coefficients represent log odds, and exponentiated coefficients represent odds ratios. (Descriptive statistics and results of models conducted for each specific issue can be found in Online Appendix E. Effects of condition on discussion preferences were consistent across issues, with results of nonsignificant moderating effects of specific issues discussed in Online Appendix F.)

To answer the hypotheses and research questions, analyses focus separately on discussion partner trials and discussion group trials, and separately examine the first-ranked discussion option (i.e., how do similarity and difference influence preference for the most preferred discussion options?) followed by rankings of all four options (i.e., how do similarity and difference influence the likelihood of ranking a particular discussion option higher than the other options?). Conditional logit was used for both the first-ranked and all ranked discussion option analyses.

Results

Discussion Partners

Descriptive statistics (percentage, count) for the first-ranked discussion partners (Table 2, Column 1) suggest a preference for SS (55.3%), followed by SD (19.7%), with seemingly little difference between the least frequently selected options of DS (12.7%) and DD (12.4%) discussion partners. This pattern is confirmed by results of a conditional logit for first-ranked discussion partners (Table 3, Columns 1–4). Compared to the odds of selecting a DD discussion partner (reference group) as one's most preferred discussion partner, the odds of selecting an SS discussion partner are 4.47 times higher (β = 1.50, SE = 0.06, p < .001), and the odds of choosing an SD discussion partner are 1.59 times higher (β = 0.47, SE = 0.06, p < .001). In contrast, the odds of preferring DS discussion partners are no higher (β = 0.03, SE = 0.07, exp(β) = 1.03, p = .742) than the odds of most preferring DD discussion partners.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics for First-Ranked and
All Ranked Discussion Partner and Group Conditions.

	Discussion Partners			Discussion Groups	
Condition	Frequency % (count)	Mean Ranking (*SD*)	Condition	Frequency % (count)	Mean Ranking (*SD*)
SS	55.25 (1773)	1.85 (1.09)	All SS	44.66 (1430)	2.13 (1.17)
SD	19.69 (632)	2.52 (0.97)	HSSHDD	24.83 (795)	2.24 (0.97)
DS	12.68 (407)	2.54 (0.97)	HSDHDS	18.33 (587)	2.51 (0.97)
DD	12.37 (397)	3.08 (1.08)	All DD	12.18 (390)	3.11 (1.07)
Total	3209			2302	

Table 3. Conditional Logit for First-Ranked and All Ranked Discussion Partner Conditions.

	First-Ranked				All Ranked			
	β	*SE*	*exp*(β)	95% CI	β	*SE*	*exp*(β)	95% CI
SS	1.50*	0.06	4.47	4.01–4.98	1.35*	0.04	3.87	3.61–4.16
SD	0.47*	0.06	1.59	1.40–1.81	0.67*	0.03	1.96	1.84–2.09
DS	0.03	0.07	1.03	0.89–1.18	0.71*	0.03	2.03	1.90–2.17
$\chi^2(df)$	1610.2(3)*				1514.3(3)*			

*$p < .001$.

A conditional logit model (not shown) in which the similar party and dissimilar opinion (SD) condition is used as the reference group reveals that relative to the odds of selecting an SD discussion partner, the odds of most preferring an SS discussion partner are higher (β = 1.03, SE = 0.05, exp(β) = 2.81, $p < .001$), whereas the odds of preferring a DS discussion partner are lower (β = −0.44, SE = 0.06, exp(β) = .64, $p < .001$). When it comes to individuals' top choice, SS discussion partners easily carry the day, with one of the combined similar and different options (SD) coming in at a not-so-close second. A difference in preference for the two combined conditions is clearly evident, with most preferred DS discussion partners occurring as infrequently as DD discussion partners. Accordingly, partisanship seems to have a stronger effect than political opinions on discussion partner choice.

Expanding analyses beyond individuals' most preferred discussion partner choice, examination of preferences across all options simultaneously (not just choice 1, but choices 1, 2, 3, and 4) tells a slightly different story. Consistent with the results presented above, descriptive statistics for all ranked discussion partner conditions (Table 2, Column 2) suggest greatest preference for SS (M = 1.85, SD = 1.09) and least preference for DD (M = 3.08, SD = 1.08) discussion partners. On the other hand, in contrast to the first-ranked discussion partner results, rankings across all discussion partner options reveal a fairly comparable ranking of SD (M = 2.52, SD = 0.97) and DS (M = 2.54, SD = 0.97) discussion partners. Results of a conditional logit model across all ranked discussion partners (Table 3, Columns 5–8) confirm this pattern. Relative to the odds of preferring a DD discussion partner (reference group), the odds of preferring an SS discussion partner are 3.87 times higher (β = 1.35, SE = 0.04, $p < .001$), and the odds of preferring an SD and DS discussion partner are 1.96 times (β = 0.67, SE = 0.03, $p < .001$) and 2.03 times higher (β = 0.71, SE = 0.03, $p < .001$), respectively.

Results of two additional models (not shown), each using one of the combined similar and different options as the reference group, reveal that the odds of preferring an SS discussion partner are higher than the odds of choosing either an SD or DS discussion partner ($p < .001$ for the SS coefficient in both SD and DS reference group models), and the odds of preferring a DD discussion partner are lower than the odds of choosing either of the combined similar and different discussion partners ($p < .001$ for the DD coefficient in both SD and DS reference group models). Finally, the odds of ranking either one of the combined similar and different options over the other are not significantly different ($p = .267$). Similar to the results of only the most preferred discussion partner, analyses across all discussion partner rankings reveal a clear bias toward SS. In contrast to the first-ranked discussion partner results, no

difference between SD and DS emerges, with both options preferred less than SS and more than DD options.

Discussion Groups

Turning attention to first-ranked discussion groups, descriptive statistics (Table 2, Column 4) suggest a preference for All SS (44.7%), followed by HSSHDD (24.8%), HSDHDS (18.3%), and All DD (12.2%). Conditional logit results (Table 4, Columns 1–4) confirm this pattern. Compared to the odds of choosing an All DD discussion group (reference group) as one's most preferred discussion group option, the odds of ranking an All SS group first are 3.67 times higher (β = 1.30, *SE* = 0.06, *p* < .001), and the odds of choosing HSSHDD and HSDHDS options are 2.04 times (β = 0.71, *SE* = 0.06, *p* < .001) and 1.51 times higher (β = 0.41, *SE* = 0.07, *p* < .001), respectively.

Table 4. Conditional Logit for First-Ranked and All Ranked Discussion Group Conditions.

	First Ranked				All Ranked			
	β	*SE*	*exp*(β)	95% CI	β	*SE*	*exp*(β)	95% CI
All SS	1.30*	0.06	3.67	3.23–4.10	1.00*	0.04	2.72	2.54–2.91
HSSHDD	0.71*	0.06	2.04	1.81–2.30	0.98*	0.03	2.67	2.50–2.86
HSDHDS	0.41*	0.07	1.51	1.32–1.71	0.72*	0.03	2.05	1.92–2.19
χ^2(*df*)	762.5(3)*				1117.0(3)*			

*p < .001.

Results of additional models (not shown)—in which each of the combined similar and different discussion group options serve as the reference group—reveal that the odds of most preferring an All SS discussion group are higher than the odds of preferring either of the combined groups (All SS in HSSHDD reference group model: β = 0.59, *SE* = 0.04, *exp*(β) = 1.80, *p* < .001; All SS in HSDHDS reference group model: β = 0.89, *SE* = 0.05, *exp*(β) = 2.44, *p* < .001), whereas the odds of most preferring an All DD discussion group are lower than the odds of preferring either of the mixed groups (All DD in HSSHDD model: β = −0.71, *SE* = 0.06, *exp*(β) = 0.49, *p* < .001; All DD in HSDHDS model: β = −0.41, *SE* = 0.07, *exp*(β) = 0.66, *p* < .001). Results further demonstrate a difference in preferences for the combined similar and different options, with the odds of most preferring HSSHDD discussion groups higher than the odds of first selecting HSDHDS groups (β = +/−0.30, *SE* = 0.05, *exp*(β) = 1.35/0.74, *p* < .001).

Similar to the results for discussion partners, the pattern of results differs slightly for the first-ranked and all ranked discussion groups. Examining the average rankings across all discussion group conditions (Table 2, Column 5), the ranking of All SS discussion groups is highest (*M* = 2.13, *SD* = 1.17) but close to the average ranking of HSSHDD discussion groups (*M* = 2.24, *SD* = 0.97). HSDHDS groups are ranked lower (*M* = 2.51, *SD* = 0.97), followed last by All DD groups (*M* = 3.11, *SD* = 1.07). Results of a conditional logit model (Table 4, Columns 5–8) confirm the pattern indicated by the mean rankings. Compared to the odds of preferring an All DD discussion group, the odds of preferring an All SS discussion group are 2.72 times higher (β = 1.00, *SE* = 0.04, *p* < .001), and the odds of preferring HSSHDD and HSDHDS groups are 2.67 times (β = 0.98, *SE* = 0.03, *p* < .001) and 2.05 times higher (β = 0.72, *SE* = 0.03, *p* < .001), respectively. Results of another conditional logit model (not shown) using HSSHDD as the reference group show that the odds of preferring HSSHDD discussion groups are not statistically different

from the odds of preferring All SS discussion groups (p = .628) but are higher than the odds of preferring HSDHDS discussion groups (p < .001). Results of all ranked discussion groups thus indicate that one's preferences do not differ for groups in which 100% versus 50% of members are completely similar to oneself.

Partners Versus Groups

To examine whether strength of preferences for complete similarity relative to complete difference varies between discussion partner and group contexts, the confidence intervals (CIs) for SS and All SS are examined (in the models presented above, in which DD and All DD serve as the reference groups, respectively) for the first-ranked and all ranked discussion options. When 95% CIs overlap by less than 50%, effects are statistically different at the p < .05 level (Cumming, 2009). Figure 1 illustrates the 95% CIs for SS and All SS for the most preferred (left) and all ranked (right) discussion options models. For the most preferred models, the two CIs overlap by less than 50%, with the upper bound of the All SS CI (4.101) falling below the lower bound of the SS CI plus half the average range of the two CIs (4.005 + 0.449 = 4.454). For the all ranked options model, the two CIs share zero overlap. Together, these results indicate a stronger preference for complete similarity over complete difference in dyadic versus group political discussion—regardless of whether analysis focuses on only the most preferred option or all ranked discussion options.
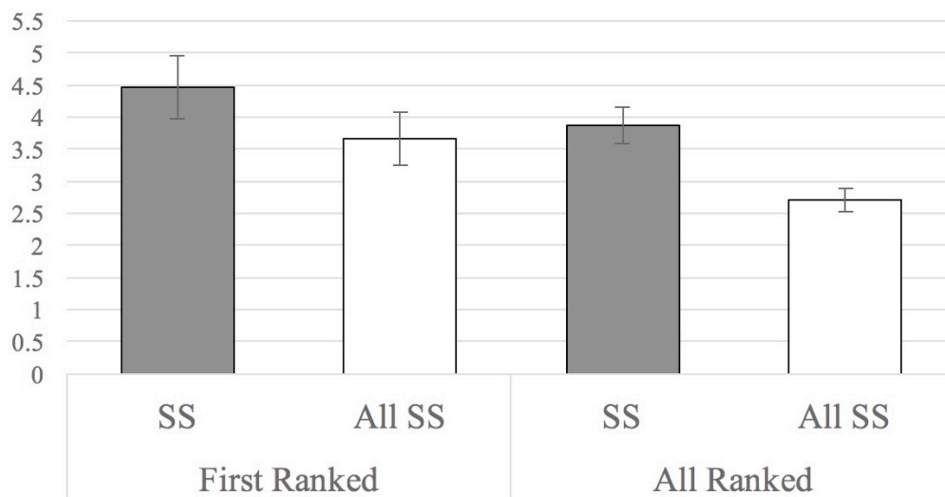
Figure 1. The 95% confidence intervals indicate preferences for same party and same opinion discussion partners (SS relative to DD) and all same party and same opinion discussion groups (All SS relative to All DD) for first-ranked and all ranked discussion options.

Discussion

Summary and Implications

The critical role of exposure to difference in everyday political discussion has prompted a generous body of research on exposure to disagreement in political discussion and discussion networks. Although survey research on existing political discussion networks indicates a preference for political homogeneity, this assumption has thus far avoided direct empirical scrutiny. The current study used an experimental design to examine preferences for political discussion, the understanding of which has become particularly imperative in a contemporary media environment that affords ever-expanding control over one's communication choices and elicits increasingly vehement concerns about echo chambers and political polarization.

The multidimensional approach to political difference employed in this study recognizes that political identity and political opinion similarity are distinct concepts (related to distinct theoretical frameworks) that may not be equally weighted in political discussion decisions. A multidimensional approach also affords the opportunity to examine one's preferences for partners and groups that are similar to or different from oneself or that represent a combination of similarity and difference relative to oneself. Discussion options representing a combination of similarity and difference may prove appealing (both theoretically and practically) by striking an important balance between citizens' openness to difference and desire to learn new perspectives, on the one hand, with their trepidation for political conflict, on the other.

Results demonstrate that preferences for political discussion depend on the context of the discussion, including whether the discussion involves a single discussion partner or a discussion group and whether consideration is given to individuals' most preferred discussion option only or relative preferences across a range of options. Substantiating indirect findings from survey research on the composition of existing discussion networks, complete similarity is the most preferred option in most circumstances. However, when considering relative rankings across a range of discussion groups, one of the combined similar and different discussion groups (HSSHDD) is preferred just as much as complete similarity (All SS). This finding holds optimistic implications for the public sphere. Opportunities to discuss politics with a group that includes a combination of political similarity and difference (with some individuals completely similar to and some completely opposite to oneself) may allow exposure to different perspectives in a safe social environment.

Important differences emerge between the two combined similar and different discussion options—for both discussion partners and discussion groups. When considering most preferred discussion partners only, one's discussion partners who share the same political identity but hold different views (SD) are preferred over out-group partisan members whose political opinions align with one's own (DS). Indeed, DS discussion partners do not fare any better than DD discussion partners. This finding suggests a stronger influence of social or political identity than political opinions on political discussion decisions. Results of the discussion group models provide tentative substantiation of this conclusion. Preferences for HSSHDD over HSDHDS discussion groups—which suggest an inclination toward discussion groups

composed of individuals who are "completely like me" and "completely different from me" relative to groups including individuals all of whom are "kind of like me, but kind of not"—may underscore the role of "me/not me" distinctions that partly underlie social identity theory.

This inference raises additional questions about the nature of the conversations that might occur in politically mixed groups. Citizens may capitalize on the opportunity that HSSHDD groups provide for learning, safeguarded by social support. On the other hand, a desire for HSSHDD over HSDHDS groups might suggest that instead of approaching mixed groups with an open mind and eagerness to learn, citizens may instead be excited at the prospect of a heated debate between us and them, in which appreciation of the other side is unlikely to emerge.

Preferences for identity- and opinion-based similarity are primarily based on distinct theoretical frameworks (social identity and group-related theories versus cognitive dissonance and selective exposure theories) that may suggest distinct causes, underlying mechanisms, and consequences of political agreement and disagreement. Results of this study will hopefully encourage further exploration into different types of political difference. Grounded in both social identity and selective exposure theories, the political discussion literature may be significantly advanced by studies predicting different contexts in which political identity versus political opinion similarity is most preferred (saliency of partisan membership versus personal importance of issues), different psychological processes involved in exposure to difference (motivated reasoning, group conformity), and potentially different effects (polarization, opinion change) resulting from exposure to political difference.

Importantly, a bias toward political identity homogeneity over opinion similarity is evident when considering first-ranked but not all ranked discussion partners, and HSSHDD groups are preferred no less than All SS groups when considering all ranked but not first-ranked discussion groups. These findings suggest that much remains to be understood about political discussion preferences. Future research should continue to explore how different contexts influence preferences for similarity and difference, and should consider the theoretical and practical implications of most-preferred versus across-all-preference analyses. First choices may play a predominant role in driving everyday political discussion behavior, as citizens may decide to talk politics only when the most opportune and preferred situation arises. On the other hand, relative preferences across choices may ultimately uncover important insight into citizens' psychological orientations toward political discussion and conflict (given a range of discussion options, what makes HSSHDD just as appealing as All SS discussion groups?). Although results revealed fairly consistent preferences across sociopolitical issues (see Online Appendices E and F), future research should also examine how different issue-level factors influence preferences for political similarity and difference.

Results of this study indicate that preference for complete similarity (relative to complete difference) was stronger in dyadic than in group discussion contexts—another optimistic finding for the public sphere that might suggest exposure to difference is increasingly likely in open, public discussions among groups of citizens. Yet, this finding warrants a critical caveat. Preferences in this study (even when considering only the first-ranked option) are relative (with selections made among categories offered) rather than absolute (e.g., indicating preference for each option on a 1-to-5 scale). If discussion partner selection options included only SS and DD, and group options included only All SS and All DD, it is possible

that aversion to complete difference would be stronger in group than in dyadic discussion contexts. Results showing a stronger preference for complete similarity (relative to complete difference) in group than in dyadic discussion might simply indicate that All SS was chosen less frequently in group contexts because individuals are more open to the two combined similar and different discussion groups rather than indicating a reduced aversion to All DD per se. Indeed, the percentages and mean rankings of DD and All DD are quite comparable (12.37% and 12.18%, 3.08 and 3.11, respectively). The complex nature of political difference is only compounded when considering the composition of multiple-discussant contexts. Future research should work to develop increasingly innovative methods for examining preferences for similarity and difference in analogous dyadic and group discussion contexts.

Limitations

Although the experimental design lends significant internal validity to the results of this study, several limitations must be recognized. Although this study assumed a multidimensional approach to political difference, political difference might exist across myriad dimensions. Future research might begin to identify a range of dimensions and explore how each of these dimensions contributes to preferences for political discussion. Nevertheless, partisan identity and opinion similarity are not only the most frequently studied dimensions of political difference in the political discussion literature but are also integral to two well-established theoretical frameworks (cognitive dissonance and selective exposure theories versus social identity and group-related theories).

The experimental task and the discussion options presented to respondents involved some artificiality. Discussion options explicitly identified the party identification and issue opinions of discussion partners and groups, information that may not be readily available to citizens when making everyday political discussion decisions. On the other hand, individuals do make (often accurate) inferences about others' political orientations (Huckfeldt & Sprague, 1987). Moreover, the expanding online political sphere increasingly offers just the sort of political identity and opinion cues used in this study (discussion forums such as "Pro Life Discussion" and "Democratic Climate Forum," and postings, shared content, nicknames, and group memberships posted on social media may identify individuals' partisanship and political attitudes).

Study participants were told that the answers they provided in the online survey would be used to match them to one political discussion partner and one political discussion group for Part 2 of the study, which ostensibly involved having two 10-minute online discussions about political issues. As most political discussions occur with our strong rather than weak ties (i.e., close, intimate others such as family and friends rather than coworkers, casual acquaintances, and strangers), researchers should examine whether similar preferences emerge within citizens' existing social and discussion networks. Although this study focused on an online discussion context (selected to ensure the realism of Study Part 2), future research should explore potential differences in discussion preferences for online versus face-to-face communication. In contrast to this study, which used different issues for discussion partner and group selections (to keep participants engaged in the task and to enhance the realism of the study), future research should replicate results using identical issues for dyadic and group discussion selections.

Although the sample for this study was diverse, future research should replicate the findings reported here using a probability sample, as results based on an online volunteer sample are not necessarily generalizable to the larger U.S. population. Recognizing the conceptual and operational difficulty of defining party identity similarity and difference among nonpartisans (e.g., are independents similar to other independents in the same way that Republicans are similar to other Republicans?), this study included only partisans. Yet, nonpartisans comprise a critical segment of the citizenry, and both mass mediated and interpersonal selective exposure research will certainly find advantageous studies that examine preferences for similarity among individuals who do not identify with either of the major political parties in the United States.

Conclusions

This study contributes to a vast and varied body of literature on political discussion by using a within-subjects experimental design to examine preferences for similar, different, and combined similar and different discussion partners and groups. While confirming an assumed (but heretofore untested) preference for similarity over difference, this study demonstrates that the desire for homogeneous political discussion is not a universal law, but rather varies by context. From a normative perspective, results demonstrating that combined politically similar and different discussion groups (specifically HSSHDD) are preferred just as much as completely similar groups provide an optimistic outlook for deliberation. Conceptually and methodologically, this finding also emphasizes the need to thoughtfully consider different types of political discussion decisions made by citizens (first-ranked option, all ranked options) and to integrate multidimensional political difference approaches that recognize the many shades of gray that exist within the seemingly black-and-white portrait of political difference often painted by the political discussion literature. Results also demonstrated that different dimensions of political similarity and difference may not be equally weighted in determining political discussion decisions. With preferences for similar opinions and similar partisans deriving from distinct literatures, these findings suggest that additional research on preferences for attitude-consistent opinions versus in-group party members may provide critical guidance and insight into the causes, underlying mechanisms, and consequences of political difference. Finally, findings of this study showing that preferences for similarity over difference differ in dyadic and group discussion contexts will hopefully encourage future research to integrate and directly compare preferences for, behavior during, and outcomes of political disagreement in one-on-one versus small group discussion.

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