


---

This is the **author's version** of the journal article:

Ciordia Morandeira, Alejandro [et al.]. *Not All Political Topics Are Created Equal : How Issue Polarization Shapes Partner Selection in Informal Political Discussion*, 2025. 28 pàg.

---

This version is available at <https://ddd.uab.cat/record/323556>

under the terms of the  license.

# **Not All Political Topics Are Created Equal: How Issue Polarization Shapes Partner Selection in Informal Political Discussion**

Preprint, November 2025

**Alejandro Ciordia** – Maastricht University & Scuola Normale Superiore

**Miranda J. Lubbers** – Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona

**Eva Jaspers** – Utrecht University

**Jan-Willem Simons** – Utrecht University

\* Correspondence email address: [alejandro.ciordia@maastrichtuniversity.nl](mailto:alejandro.ciordia@maastrichtuniversity.nl)

## ***Abstract:***

Informal political conversations are vital for the functioning of liberal democracies, especially when they involve individuals with differing political views. While prior research suggests that incidental and non-political factors may guide individuals' choice of discussion partners and outweigh strictly political ones, this article argues that these dynamics may shift depending on the topic of discussion. Drawing on original personal network data from the highly polarized context of Catalonia, Spain (65 citizens reporting on 663 social relationships), we compare discussion partner selection across three topics: general politics, Catalan independence (high polarization), and climate change (low polarization). We examine: (1) the extent to which political and non-political interpersonal factors facilitate or inhibit political discussion, and (2) whether their influence varies by issue polarization. Contrasting previous findings, our results reveal that opinion similarity is the strongest predictor of discussion partner selection across all topics, even when controlling for interaction opportunities, highlighting the role of purposeful partner selection. Selection on non-political factors such as tie strength, structural proximity, and socio-demographic similarity also occurs, but their influence varies depending on the issue being discussed. Tie strength and network centrality were more powerful predictors for discussion on the more polarized issue. Overall, the findings reveal that individuals selectively activate ties for political talk, and that issue polarization amplifies this selectivity, thus linking topic-alter dependence in informal political discussion networks with the growing literature on affective polarization.

***Keywords:*** informal political conversation, personal networks; political discussion; intergroup contact; issue-based polarization

**Funding details:**

This research was supported by the Volkswagen Foundation under the Inclusivity Norms to Counter Polarization in European Societies (INCLUSIVITY) project (9B060). The second author acknowledges funding from the ICREA Acadèmia programme of the Catalan Institution for Research and Advanced Studies.

**Disclosure statement:**

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

**Biographical notes:**

*Alejandro Ciordia* is a postdoctoral researcher at the Maastricht Sustainability Institute (MSI), Maastricht University, in the Netherlands and the Faculty of Political and Social Sciences at the Scuola Normale Superiore in Italy.

*Miranda J. Lubbers* is a full professor of social and cultural anthropology at the Autonomous University of Barcelona.

*Eva Jaspers* is a full professor of empirical and theoretical sociology at Utrecht University.

*Jan-Willem Simons* is a PhD candidate at the Department of Sociology at Utrecht University.

## Introduction

Interpersonal political dialogue is widely regarded as a cornerstone of healthy liberal democracies. Classic deliberative theories emphasize the democratic value of everyday exchanges of views and arguments among citizens, especially across political divides. Such interactions foster opinion formation (e.g., Huckfeldt et al., 2004; Schneider & Weinmann, 2023) and enhance political knowledge and participation (Eveland & Hively, 2009; Klofstad et al., 2013; Sinclair, 2012), leading to more reflective political evaluations and improving accountability (Conover et al., 2002; Delli Carpini et al., 2004; Eveland et al., 2011). Furthermore, cross-cutting political conversations, as a form of intergroup contact (Pettigrew, 1998), can promote tolerance towards social and political outgroups (e.g., Ikeda & Richey, 2009; Mutz, 2002) and mitigate affective polarization (e.g., Baldassarri & de Jong, 2025; Hartman et al., 2022; Lee, 2022). Understanding when and why informal political discussion occurs is therefore essential.

Key questions concern why people discuss politics with only particular others in their personal networks, and the extent to which this leads to politically homogeneous discussion networks. Although evidence shows significant political homogeneity in interpersonal discussion (e.g., Huckfeldt & Sprague, 1995; Ikeda & Huckfeldt, 2001), it remains unclear whether this results more from structural opportunities for non-political social interactions or from purposive selection of like-minded partners (choice homophily). Responding to recent calls for “advancing more comprehensive models of political discussion behavior and developing practical strategies for encouraging more deliberative everyday political talk” (Morey & Yamamoto, 2020, p. 79), our study builds on and extends prior research on how political and non-political relational factors shape the likelihood of political discussion within personal networks.

Uniquely, to address the long-noted yet seldom-tested question of *topic-alter dependency* (Bearman & Parigi, 2004) and to bridge research on informal discussion with growing attention to the everyday consequences of affective polarization (Hutchens et al., 2019), we examine these mechanisms across three types of political conversations. Specifically, the study asks:

- (RQ1) *To what extent are regular political discussions within personal networks driven by political, non-political, or purely incidental factors?*
- (RQ2) *To what extent does the influence of these drivers of political discussions depend on the level of issue polarization of the discussed topic?*

We investigate these questions with original personal network data from Catalonia (Spain), a highly polarized context marked by a long-standing conflict over national self-determination. For more than a decade, Catalan society has been almost evenly divided between supporters and opponents of independence, accompanied by high levels of affective polarization (Balcells & Kuo, 2021, 2023). Respondents (65 citizens) nominated people they regularly interacted with in their everyday life, those with whom they discussed important personal matters, those with whom they discussed politics, and those they avoided discussing politics with. Afterwards, for each network member, they indicated the frequency of political talk and whether they felt comfortable expressing their true opinions to them across three topics: general politics, Catalan independence (a highly polarized issue), and climate change (a comparatively low-polarization issue; see “Context”). This design allows us to assess whether predictors of political discussion vary with issue polarization.

This innovative design yields two main contributions to research on interpersonal political communication. First, we examine how multiple political and non-political relational factors—such as political disagreement, relationship proximity, sociodemographic similarity, and socialization frequency—shape the likelihood of engaging in political talk, offering a more integrated understanding of the social dynamics underpinning political discussion. Second, we move beyond the traditional focus on “general political conversation.” By incorporating issue-specific variation, we illuminate how issue polarization shapes interpersonal political engagement.

## **Who Talks What Politics with Whom?**

### ***Common drivers of informal political discussion***

Researchers have long examined why people discuss politics with some contacts but not others, identifying a range of interpersonal and contextual factors that increase or decrease the likelihood of such exchanges. Among these, the most extensively studied is perceived similarity in political views, as individuals tend to discuss politics with those they expect to agree with and avoid those with whom they anticipate disagreement (e.g., Bello & Rolfe, 2014; Levinsen & Yndigegn, 2015). Political interest and knowledge can also attract conversation partners, as politically engaged individuals are often perceived as stimulating or credible discussants (Ahn et al., 2013; Huckfeldt et al., 2014).

Yet informal political talk is not only shaped by political motivations. It is embedded in everyday social life, as political conversations often arise within the same

relationships where other important matters are discussed (Klofstad et al., 2009; Marsden, 1987). Contact opportunities, structured by broader patterns of homophily (McPherson et al., 2001), also make political discussion more likely among people who interact frequently or share similar backgrounds. Furthermore, political talk is more common within strong than weak ties (Eveland et al., 2011; Knoke, 1990; McClurg et al., 2017; Morey et al., 2012). Strong relationships foster trust and emotional closeness, allowing individuals to engage in political talk more openly and with less fear of conflict (Huckfeldt & Sprague, 1995; Morey et al., 2012). This pattern is most pronounced where political disagreement entails higher social risks—such as in polarized (Davies, 2022) or authoritarian environments (Tse & Lee, 2025).

In an influential contribution, Minozzi and colleagues (2020) jointly examined a wide variety of these factors and heuristically grouped the diverse explanations for discussion partner selection into two broad models: *purposive* and *incidental*. The purposive model assumes that individuals deliberately select discussion partners to seek information, compatible views, and to avoid conflict, whereas the incidental model views political talk as “a by-product of other social interactions” (Minozzi et al., 2020: 136). Their findings suggest that incidental factors such as friendship or shared demographics predict political talk more strongly than explicitly political ones like shared partisanship or ideology.

However, the labels “purposive” and “incidental” may blur important distinctions. In practice, the incidental category mixes mechanisms that reflect both by-products of contact opportunities and non-political assortative choices. While Minozzi and colleagues’ “purposive” factors capture deliberate selection based on political traits, the so-called “incidental” ones actually encompass two logics: selection on non-political attributes (e.g., emotional closeness, social similarity) and strictly incidental mechanisms grounded on contact opportunities (e.g., physical proximity, frequency of interaction). Our key point is that purposive selection can extend beyond political attributes. Choosing discussion partners based on emotional closeness or demographic similarity also reflects intention and preference, even if the underlying criteria are non-political. Those who interact more often may discuss politics as a spillover of everyday contact, whereas emotionally close or identity-based relationships can encourage and sustain political discussion even when contact opportunities are held constant. Therefore, while we build on Minozzi et al. (2020), we propose a revised classification of dyadic factors, distinguishing between: (1) political characteristics, (2) social contact opportunities, (3),

relationship characteristics, and (4) socio-demographic similarities. Drawing on this framework, we formulate the following hypotheses, applicable in principle across all types of political conversations.

First, a consistent finding in studies of political discussion is that people are more likely to talk about politics with those who share their opinions (e.g., Butters & Hare, 2020; Eveland & Gee, 2024; Levinsen & Yndigegn, 2015). Perceived agreement reduces potential discomfort and conflict, while reinforcing social validation and conversational ease. Similarity in political outlooks also increases the chances that political talk is experienced as enjoyable or worthwhile, and is thus more likely to continue over time. Accordingly, we expect:

*Opinion homophily hypothesis (H1):* All else equal, individuals are more likely to regularly engage in political discussions with others they perceive to hold similar political opinions.

Second, political discussion also emerges incidentally from ongoing social contact. The more frequently individuals interact, the likelier politics will arise as a casual or secondary topic within broader social relationships (Minozzi et al., 2020), which are rarely initiated for political reasons (Lazer et al., 2010) but instead reflect opportunities from routine association. Thus, frequent contact becomes a driver of political conversation.

*Socialization spillover hypothesis (H2):* All else equal, individuals are more likely to regularly engage in political discussions with people with whom they interact frequently.

Third, the strength and structural position of relationships—what we jointly refer to as ‘relational proximity’—also shape engagement in political conversation, net of contact opportunities. Strong ties, characterized by emotional closeness, trust, and intimacy, provide a “safe space” for political talk even amid disagreement (Davies, 2022; Morey et al., 2012). Although typically correlated with higher contact frequency, we expect that emotional closeness has an independent effect: strong ties enable not only more frequent but also more meaningful discussions. Alters’ structural position in an ego’s network also matters. More centrally positioned contacts are likely to be involved in shared social circles, fostering mutual trust, respect, and social reinforcement (Raissi

& Ackland, 2023). Political talk with these alters often occurs in group settings, where shared acquaintances can help diffuse tension and sustain dialogue. Taken together, both affective and structural proximity create relational environments conducive to political discussion.

*Relational proximity hypotheses (H3):* All else equal, individuals are more likely to regularly engage in political discussions with others to whom they feel emotionally close (H3a) and with those embedded in shared circles of social relations (H3b).

Fourth, homophily mechanisms extend beyond attitudes to background traits such as age, gender, ethnicity, education, or social class. These socio-demographic characteristics shape everyday socialization patterns and affect the comfort and ease of interaction (Marsden, 1987; McPherson et al., 2001). As a result, politically diverse but socially similar individuals may still be more likely to engage in discussion simply because their shared social positions facilitate interaction and mutual understanding.

*Sociodemographic homophily hypothesis (H4):* All else equal, individuals are more likely to regularly engage in political discussions with others who share similar socio-demographic traits.

Finally, although political opinion homophily is often assumed to be the key driver of discussion partner selection, empirical findings suggest this homogeneity may actually stem from relational and social considerations or mere contact opportunities, which correlate with opinion similarity. Building on Minozzi et al.'s (2020) “predictability hypothesis,” we expect that the predictive power of political opinion similarity will be inferior to non-political variables reflecting social contact opportunity, relational proximity, and demographic similarity.

*Predictability hypothesis (H5):* Political opinion variables add less predictive power to models of political discussion than non-political relational variables.

### ***Topic-specific dynamics and the role of issue polarization***

Most evidence on informal political discussion concerns “general political conversations.” This limitation largely stems from the widespread use of unspecific name generators in egocentric network surveys—such as the conventional “political

discussant” item (Huckfeldt & Sprague, 1995; Sokhey & Djupe, 2014). As Bearman and Parigi (2004) noted in their critique of the GSS “important matters” generator, this lack of content specificity can mask substantial heterogeneity in discussion content and weaken both the interpretability and validity of the resulting measures (see also Huckfeldt et al., 2011; McClurg, 2017). Without distinguishing which political discussions respondents report about, we cannot compare how dynamics vary across issues or whether distinct political content is associated with different relational configurations. The failure to unpack the content of political talk prevents examining topic–alter dependencies, that is, the possibility that “topics of conversation may be systematically associated with specific roles” (Bearman & Parigi, 2004: 547). As Morey and colleagues argued, it is necessary to “examine how different issue-level factors influence preferences for political similarity and difference” (2018: 374), yet systematic comparative evidence on how topic characteristics shape partner selection remains scarce, with a few exceptions (e.g., Wyatt et al., 2000).

Recent evidence suggests that topic characteristics—its salience, emotional charge, and degree of polarization—can affect whether and how people engage in political discussion (Settle & Carlson, 2019). Some issues may invite open dialogue, while others provoke avoidance or self-censorship. Therefore, it is crucial to consider the role of issue-based polarization, defined as affective divisions rooted in social identities organized around shared opinions on a specific political issue (Hobolt & Tilley, 2025). When such identities become sufficiently salient, they foster strong in-group affinity and out-group animosity, making political discussion more selective and potentially more segregated. We thus expect that the degree of polarization associated with a topic conditions the relevance of different predictors of political talk. Specifically, for highly polarized issues, individuals should be more selective in choosing discussion partners, prioritizing those with similar opinions on the issue. The Reinforcing Spirals model (Slater, 2015) posits that rising polarization increases individuals’ tendency to interact with like-minded others—a dynamic confirmed in recent U.S. research (Hutchens et al., 2019). In highly polarized environments, individuals may also avoid political discussion or refrain from expressing their opinions, as shown by research on discussion avoidance (Peacock, 2019) and opinion non-disclosure (Cowan & Baldassarri, 2018). In addition, because polarizing issues entail higher social costs (Balcells & Kuo, 2024), individuals can be prone to rely on relational proximity when choosing whom to talk politics with.

Under such conditions, emotionally close or centrally positioned alters provide trust and a more private, protected space for exchange.

*Issue polarization hypotheses (H6):* When the discussion topic is strongly polarized, the predictive power of political opinion similarity (H6a) and relational proximity (H6b) increases, whereas the predictive power of socialization frequency diminishes (H6c).

## **Context**

In Catalonia, the most divisive political topic is the highly contentious conflict over self-determination and secession from Spain. This conflict has generated deep societal divisions between citizens holding contrasting ethnonational identities and territorial preferences regarding Catalonia's status (Dowling, 2018; García Agustín, 2021), contributing to high levels of affective polarization (Balcells & Kuo, 2023; Medina Lindo, 2021).

Following a 2010 ruling by the Spanish Constitutional Court that struck down parts of the newly reformed Catalan Statute of Autonomy—and amid the Great Recession after the 2008 global financial crisis—public support for independence rose to unprecedented levels. Successive Catalan governments led by pro-independence parties demanded a referendum on self-determination, which the Spanish central government repeatedly rejected as unconstitutional. In 2017, the Catalan Parliament unilaterally approved an independence referendum, later declared illegal by the Constitutional Court. The vote nonetheless took place on October 1, 2017, with massive turnout among pro-independence citizens and heavy police repression against voters and protesters (della Porta et al., 2021). On October 27, the Catalan government proclaimed independence but immediately suspended its implementation. In response, the Spanish government invoked Article 155 of the Constitution for the first time, suspending Catalonia's autonomy and calling new regional elections that December. Although the anti-independence party *Ciudadanos* came first in votes, it fell short of a majority, leading to the formation of another pro-independence coalition government. Following the unauthorized 2017 referendum, several pro-independence political and social leaders were prosecuted for sedition or rebellion. Some went into exile, while others were tried and sentenced by the Supreme Court before being pardoned in June 2021 by Spain's Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez. Although everyday tension has since declined compared with the peak of

contention surrounding the 2017 events, the independence question remains highly salient and divisive in Catalan and Spanish politics (Rodon & Rodríguez, 2023; Vall-Prat & Rodon, 2024).

In contrast to Catalan independence, climate change represents a topic with relatively lower levels of polarization in Catalonia. Recent surveys show broad recognition of anthropogenic climate change among Catalans, with fewer than 10% expressing scepticism (Fundación AXA, 2024; Guinjoan, Rodon & Ardiaca, 2025). The combination of broad consensus on the existence of anthropogenic climate change with limited public opinion saliency—the issue is rarely listed among the most important political concerns (Centre d’Estudis d’Opinió, n.d.)—makes climate change a comparatively low-polarization topic. This contrasts with the highly polarized issue of Catalan independence provides a valuable opportunity to explore how the topic of discussion conditions the dynamics of interpersonal political dialogue.

## **Method**

### ***Sample***

As part of an international research project, we conducted 76 semi-structured personal network interviews in Catalonia between October 2022 and January 2023. Respondents were either born and/or raised in Catalonia or had resided in the region for at least 18 months, and were selected through a quota sampling design aimed at obtaining a roughly balanced distribution of the three major opinion groups on Catalonia’s relation to Spain identified by previous research: pro-independence, pro-status quo, and intermediate pro-autonomy positions (Balcells & Kuo, 2021, 2023). Within each opinion subgroup, we sought variation in left-right ideology, age, gender, and political and civic engagement, including both citizens and representatives of civic organizations and political parties. Recruitment combined chain referrals, field outreach at public political events, and direct invitations to representatives of selected organizations (Ciordia *et al.*, 2024). After discounting six incomplete interviews in which personal network data was not successfully collected<sup>1</sup> and five additional cases with no fully complete ego-alter

---

<sup>1</sup> In four interviews, the personal network module was not administered due to respondents’ lack of time, whereas in two cases the personal network data was removed from the sample due to the unreliability of responses about personal contacts’ attributes, indicated by inconsistent answers and set-response patterns.

observations after listwise deletion, the final analytical sample for this article was reduced to 65 individual respondents (33 men, 32 women;  $M_{\text{age}} = 39.0$  years,  $SD = 15.4$ ).

### ***Procedures***

Interviews were conducted face-to-face in Spanish or Catalan by a trained five-member team using the interactive CAPI software *Network Canvas* (Birkett et al., 2021) on touchscreen devices. They lasted on average 2 hours and 10 minutes and were recorded with informed consent; participants received a €15 compensation. All procedures complied with the Helsinki Declaration (1975/2008 revision) and were approved by the Institutional Review Board of the authors' university.

Each interview combined structured (survey) and open-ended (qualitative interview) modules. Respondents first reported their political beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors, and then completed personal network elicitation following standard name generator and interpreter procedures (McCarty et al., 2019). In this case, six name generators captured both frequent and politically relevant ties, those they (1) were in contact with more often, (2) discussed personal matters with, (3) discussed politics with, (4) disagreed with, (5) avoided discussing politics with, or (6) had distanced from due to political disagreements (see Appendix, Table A1). Respondents could list as many alters as they wished for each generator and could also list the same number under multiple generators.

The 65 respondents named 1,045 unique alters ( $M = 16.1$ ;  $SD=5.4$ ), but follow-up questions ("name interpreters") were restricted to a maximum of 15 alters per ego,<sup>2</sup> yielding 881 observations ( $M = 13.6$ ;  $SD=2.3$ ). Name interpreter questions covered contact frequency, political discussion frequency for each topic, emotional closeness, opinion similarity, and alter demographics, as well as alter–alter ties to capture the structure of each respondent's network. After excluding inactive ties (alters with whom the respondent maintained contact less than once a year) and cases with missing data, the final analytic network comprised 663 ego–alter dyads ( $M = 10.2$ ;  $SD = 3.3$ ).

---

<sup>2</sup> The number of alters on which to collect full attribute data was limited to 15 to balance adequate representation of elicited ties with reasonable interview length and cognitive burden (Stadel & Stulp, 2022; Marin & Hampton, 2007).

### *Measures*<sup>3</sup>

#### *Dyadic outcome variables: Regular political discussion*

For each topic (general politics, Catalan independence, climate change), we measured regular political discussion by combining discussion frequency and opinion self-disclosure. A dyad scored 1 if ego reported discussing the topic *frequently or very frequently* and revealing their opinion *completely or to a great extent*; otherwise, it scored 0. Regular discussions occurred with 64% of alters for general politics, 60% for Catalan independence, and 40% for climate change (see Appendix, Table A2). Correlations between topics ranged from 0.22 to 0.52 (all  $p < .001$ ; see Appendix, Table A3). Only 184 relationships (28%) discussed all three topics regularly.

#### *Dyadic explanatory variables*

- *Ego-alter opinion similarities* were computed as the reversed absolute distance between ego and alter on 7-point scales for ideology (left–right), national identity (unionist–independentist), and climate concern (skeptical–concerned). Higher values indicate greater similarity (maximum=6). Because Catalonia’s party system is widely recognized as two-dimensional (Baras et al., 2015; Dinas, 2012), structured along both a left–right ideological axis and a national identity axis reflecting support for secession, we use opinion similarity on both the left–right and national identity axes for all topics, and additionally, similarity on climate change concern for the climate topic.
- *Frequent socialization* was measured by asking individuals how often they typically had face-to-face, phone, or web-based contact with each network member. Response categories were: “almost every day”, “at least once a week”, “at least once a month”, “at least once a year”, “less than once a year”. Values were dichotomized, coding 1 for alters with whom contact is at least weekly and 0 otherwise.
- *Emotional closeness* was measured by asking respondents “How close do you feel to the following individuals?” using a 4-point ordinal scale (“very close”, “somewhat close”, “not very close”, “not close at all”). Values were

---

<sup>3</sup> For descriptive statistics of all variables used in the analyses, see Appendix, Table A2.

dichotomized, coding 1 for alters described as “very close” and 0 otherwise. , Emotional closeness is seen as a better indicator of tie strength than roles such as friends and family (McCarty et al., 2019).

- *Network centrality* was measured through the normalized ‘average reciprocal distance’ (Agneessens et al., 2017) from every other social contact within the alter-to-alter social network of active social relationships. The average reciprocal distance is a measure of closeness centrality calculated as the mean of the inverse distances from the focal node to all other nodes in the network (with zero assigned when two nodes are unconnected).
- *Same gender* was assigned a 1 if alter’s gender matched ego’s gender and 0 if it did not. ‘Non-binary’ was not observed for egos nor for alters despite it being a response category.
- *Similar age* was calculated by matching the age categories of social contacts with the age of respondents. For alters, these categories were 18-25, 26-35, 36-45, 46-55, 56-65, and >65 years old. A value of 1 reflects that ego and alter are within the same 10-year age range, and 0 indicates that this is not the case.

#### *Individual control variables*

Individual-level variables included respondents’ *age*, *gender*, *positive feelings toward political conversation*, and *political views* on the three relevant opinion dimensions. The latter two deserve additional explanation (for full details, see AUTHORS).

*Positive feelings toward political conversation* were measured as a count variable of positive emotions when answering the following question: “Generally speaking, what feelings do you experience when having political conversations with people around you?” Drawing on a prior study on affective polarization in Catalonia (Medina Lindo, 2021), 3 positive feelings (interest, commitment, and enthusiasm), were used from a list of 8 feelings.

Ego’s political orientations were assessed on the left-right ideological axis, territorial preferences, and concern about climate change. All of them are recoded into three-category ordinal variables for parsimony and comparability.

- *Left-right ideology* was recoded from the original 1-7 Likert scale into left-wing (1-3), center (4), and right-wing (5-7).

- Opinion groups about the territorial status of Catalonia were measured through a validated trichotomy that distinguishes between “pro-independence,” “pro-autonomy,” and “pro-status quo” based on the responses to a multiple-choice question about territorial preferences (Balcells & Kuo, 2021, 2023).
- Climate opinions were measured through a validated survey instrument (see Chryst et al., 2018), consisting of four multiple-choice questions regarding global warming. Respondents were classified in six categories based on their answers, following Chryst et al. (2018): “dismissive”, “doubtful”, “disengaged”, “cautious”, “concerned”, and “alarmed”. For these analyses, we distinguish the “alarmed” and “concerned” from the less concerned categories, which are merged.

### ***Analyses***

To test the hypotheses, we use multilevel logistic models that predict the likelihood of regular political discussion between ego and alter for each topic, with dyads (level 1), nested within respondents (level 2; cf. Vacca, 2018). The model was formalized as follows:

$$\text{logit} [\text{Prob } Y_{ij} = 1] = \beta_0 + \sum_{h=1}^r \beta_h x_{hij} + \sum_{k=1}^s \beta_k z_{kj} + u_{0j} \quad [1]$$

$\text{Prob } Y_{ij}$  denotes the probability that ego  $j$  has regular, disclosed political discussion on the given topic with alter  $i$ ,  $x_{hij}$  denotes the  $h = \{1, \dots, r\}$  explanatory variables of relationship  $i$  of ego  $j$ , and  $z_{kj}$  the  $k = \{1, \dots, s\}$  explanatory individual variables of ego  $j$ .  $\beta_0$  represents the intercept, and  $\beta_h$  and  $\beta_k$  the regression parameter associated with the explanatory variables for relationships and individual control variables, respectively. Finally,  $u_{0j}$  represent the random deviations of the prediction for group  $j$ , which are normally distributed with mean 0 and variance  $\tau_0^2$ .

To test Hypotheses 5 and 6, we follow Minozzi and colleagues (2020) in comparing the predictive power of dyadic variable blocks across discussion topics, computing the ROC-AUC scores to compare the unique accuracy that a given set of variables adds to the model.<sup>4</sup> To do so, we calculate the change in ROC-AUC between

---

<sup>4</sup> The ROC-AUC score summarizes a model’s ability to distinguish positive from negative cases—in this study, between dyads that do or do not involve regular political discussion. It represents the probability that the model assigns a higher predicted value to an actual discussion

the full model and a restricted model excluding each group of variables, interpreting the resulting difference as the predictive contribution of that variable block.

## Results

### *Bivariate analyses*

We first present the percentage of relationships where informal political discussion took place by relational characteristics (see Table 1). As noted earlier, 64% of the relationships regularly involved general political discussion, 60% Catalan independence, and 40% climate change, confirming the lower salience of the latter.

*Table 1. Descriptive analysis of the likelihood of regular political discussion by relational characteristics*

<b>Ego-alter characteristic</b>	<b>Response categories</b>	<b>Unspecified political issues</b>		<b>Catalan independence</b>		<b>Climate change</b>	
Ego-alter opinion similarity, left-right scale	Very similar views [5-6]	75.1		72.8		46.8	
	Significant differences [3-4]	52.8	***	43.1	***	35.9	***
	Opposite views [0-2]	37.3		37.3		17.3	
Ego-alter opinion similarity, Catalan independence	Very similar views [5-6]	74.7		72.4		43.7	
	Significant differences [3-4]	54.1	***	41.9	***	40.1	**
	Opposite views [0-2]	41.0		43.0		27.0	
Ego-alter opinion similarity, climate change	Very similar views [5-6]	-		-		48.7	
	Significant differences [3-4]	-		-		31.6	***
	Opposite views [0-2]	-		-		13.8	
Frequent socialization with alter	Yes	70.6	***	65.4	***	44.0	**
	No	47.8		46.2		30.6	
Emotional closeness to alter	Yes	70.2	**	69.8	***	52.8	***
	No	59.2		51.7		29.6	
Network embeddedness	High [ $\geq 0.5$ ]	71.1		71.7		52.4	
	Medium [ $0.1 \geq x > 0.5$ ]	61.6	(n.s.)	60.1	***	37.1	***
	Low [ $< 0.1$ ]	62.7		48.2		34.3	
Same gender	Yes	60.3	*	57.5	(n.s.)	39.7	(n.s.)
	No	69.8		63.6		41.1	
Same age group	Yes	67.0	(n.s.)	62.0	(n.s.)	44.1	*
	No	61.3		57.9		36.2	
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>64.3</b>		<b>60.0</b>		<b>40.3</b>	

*Note:* Percentages of alters who regularly engage in informal political discussions on three selected topics, by micro-contextual characteristics.

Significance levels from tests of equality of proportions: \*  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$

Both political and non-political relational characteristics were bivariately significantly associated with whether people talked regularly and openly about politics. Pairs of people with very similar ideologies and issue opinions were more likely to discuss all topics, indicating political homogeneity. Non-political dyadic characteristics also

---

tie than to a non-tie; values near 1 indicate better discrimination, while 0.5 reflects random performance.

mattered: frequency of contact, emotional closeness, and network embeddedness were all positively associated with regular political talk. By contrast, sociodemographic similarity displayed weaker and inconsistent patterns. Age similarity was only related to political discussion about climate change, while—contrary to expectations—cross-gender dyads were slightly more likely to talk about politics in general, but gender similarity was unrelated to the two issue-specific discussions.

#### ***Multivariate analyses: H1 to H4***

To test our hypotheses, we conducted multilevel logistic regression analyses that account for potential confounding variables (see Table 2), allowing us to examine the unique contributions of each explanatory variable. The random-effects variance indicates that discussions about climate change cluster more strongly at the individual level than discussions about general politics or Catalan independence, suggesting that personal dispositions play a greater role in shaping conversations on this issue.

Continuing with individual-level dispositions that function as control variables, respondents' gender and age did not significantly affect the likelihood of engaging in political talk for any topic. For general political discussion, no individual-level predictors reached significance. However, for the two issue-specific conversations, several effects emerged. Respondents reporting more positive feelings toward political discussion were more likely to talk about Catalan independence, but not about the other two topics. Furthermore, left-wing and pro-status quo respondents were less likely to discuss the independence issue than centrists or those with intermediate pro-autonomy positions. In the case of climate change, as expected, those concerned or alarmed about the issue were much more likely to engage in related discussions, while general ideological orientation no longer predicted discussion once climate-specific attitudes were accounted for.

Perceived political opinion similarity robustly increased the likelihood of political discussion across all topics, supporting H1. Despite Catalonia's two-dimensional party system, only left–right ideological similarity predicted discussion consistently across the three topics, while similarity in views on Catalan independence predicted general and independence-related discussions, but not discussions about climate change. As expected, perceived similarity in climate concern predicted more frequent discussion of that specific topic. These findings confirm H1 while highlighting the issue-specific salience of different opinion dimensions.

Table 2. Multilevel logistic regression of regular engagement in three types of informal political conversation; logit coefficients (standard errors in parentheses)

Parameter	Unspecified political issues	Catalan independence	Climate change
(Intercept)	0.674 (0.768)	1.024 (0.861)	-2.477 (1.588)
<i>Dyadic characteristics</i>			
Opinion similarity, left-right	<b>0.293***</b> (0.079)	<b>0.306***</b> (0.080)	<b>0.315**</b> (0.107)
Opinion similarity, Catalan independence	<b>0.278***</b> (0.065)	<b>0.289***</b> (0.067)	-0.066 (0.080)
Opinion similarity, climate change	--	--	<b>0.492***</b> (0.106)
Frequent socialization (ref. no)	<b>0.817***</b> (0.234)	0.163 (0.238)	0.464 (0.283)
Emotional closeness (ref. no)	0.108 (0.214)	<b>0.802***</b> (0.223)	<b>1.179***</b> (0.250)
Network embeddedness	0.193 (0.122)	<b>0.427**</b> (0.133)	0.145 (0.161)
Same gender (ref. no)	<b>-0.482*</b> (0.201)	-0.322 (0.204)	0.025 (0.224)
Same age group (ref. no)	<b>0.553**</b> (0.204)	0.351 (0.205)	0.428 (0.234)
<i>Ego characteristics</i>			
Male (ref. female)	0.485 (0.288)	0.295 (0.320)	-0.802 (0.530)
Age	0.008 (0.011)	0.022 (0.012)	0.017 (0.020)
Positive feelings toward political conversation	0.233 (0.159)	<b>0.442*</b> (0.181)	0.409 (0.303)
Opinion group general: left-wing (ref. center)	-0.736 (0.590)	<b>-1.726*</b> (0.688)	-1.234 (1.054)
Opinion group general: right-wing (ref. center)	-0.879 (0.607)	-1.002 (0.696)	-0.103 (1.134)
Opinion group independence: pro-independence (ref. pro-autonomy)	0.261 (0.316)	0.459 (0.352)	0.250 (0.574)
Opinion group independence: pro-status quo (ref. pro-autonomy)	-0.447 (0.375)	<b>-0.852*</b> (0.426)	-0.994 (0.746)
Opinion group climate: concerned (ref. others)	--	--	<b>2.024*</b> (0.867)
Opinion group climate: alarmed (ref. others)	--	--	<b>2.568**</b> (0.873)
<i>Random effects</i>			
Intercept (std. dev.)	0.675	0.826	1.605
<i>Diagnostics</i>			
Observations: dyads [egos]	663 [65]	663 [65]	663 [65]
Log Likelihood	-360.61	-359.30	-324.95
AIC	753.22	750.61	687.90
BIC	825.16	822.56	773.34
Pseudo-R2 (fixed effects)	0.255	0.318	0.370
Pseudo-R2 (total)	0.346	0.435	0.647
Predictability: AUC	0.742	0.786	0.833

Note: \*  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$

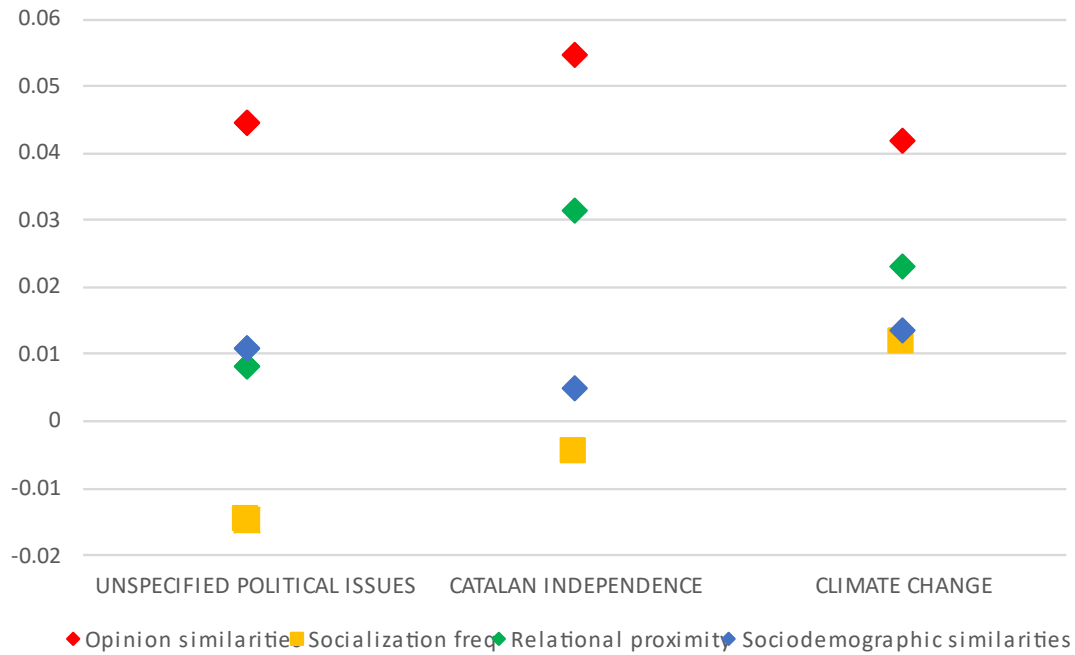
Results for H2-H4 on non-political factors were more nuanced. Contact frequency (H2) strongly predicted general political discussion, but not issue-specific discussions. This suggests that discussions about politics “in general” may indeed often emerge as a by-product of routine interaction, but partner selection in issue-specific discussions is more purposive by nature. In contrast, relational proximity (H3)—emotional closeness and network centrality—was more relevant for specific issues. Emotional closeness increased the likelihood of discussing Catalan independence and climate change, while network centrality predicted discussion only on the most salient and polarized topic, Catalan independence. These findings support the idea that affectively and structurally proximate alters provide a “safe space” for potentially contentious exchanges. Demographic similarity (H4) yielded mixed results. Same-age and cross-gender dyads were slightly more likely to engage in general political discussion, but these associations did not extend to issue-specific conversations. Overall, H1 received strong support, whereas H2–H4 were only partially confirmed.

#### ***Predictability analyses: H5 and H6***

Subsequently, we assessed whether, as H5 posited, non-political social factors such as contact frequency, relational proximity, and sociodemographic similarity contribute more to explaining political discussion than political opinion variables (see Figure 1). Contrary to H5, the results show that contact frequency slightly reduced predictive accuracy, except for climate change, where its effect was almost negligible. Sociodemographic similarities also added minimal predictive power. Most importantly, contradicting Minozzi et al. (2020) and H5, opinion similarity consistently displayed stronger predictive power than any social factor across all topics.

Finally, the comparison between Catalan independence and climate change allows testing the issue polarization hypotheses (H6). The predictive power of both opinion similarity and relational proximity was substantially higher for Catalan independence, confirming H6a and H6b. This indicates that for highly polarized issues, individuals prefer to discuss mainly with like-minded and stronger, more embedded social relationships. Conversely, for the less polarized topic of climate change, contact frequency had slightly higher predictive power than for Catalan independence, though its overall contribution remained modest, providing partial support for H6c.

Figure 1. Comparison of the predictive power (ROC-AUC scores) of different sets of variables for different topics of informal political conversation



### Discussion and conclusions

This study aimed to examine how political and non-political relational factors shape the likelihood of engaging in informal political discussion across different topics, using original personal network data collected in the polarized context of Catalonia. By contrasting regular conversations about general politics, Catalan independence, and climate change, we explored whether the relational and attitudinal predictors of political talk depend on the issue’s level of polarization.

Our findings offer several important contributions to the literature on interpersonal political communication. First, they call into question the view of the “incidental pundit” rooted in the findings of Minozzi et al. (2020): that non-political social factors systematically outweigh political ones in predicting who talks politics with whom. In contrast to this expectation, political opinion similarity emerged as the most consistent and powerful predictor of discussion across all topics. One plausible explanation for this divergence lies in contextual and sample differences: our study surveyed ordinary citizens in a highly polarized European region, whereas Minozzi and colleagues’ sample focused on university students across the US. Political homophily may therefore be more salient for older populations with more consolidated political identities and old ethno-national conflicts that divide societies around issues of sovereignty (Guelke, 2012).

Second, our results invite a reassessment of the notion that non-political dyadic factors are purely incidental. While frequent contact predicted general political discussion, emotional closeness—an affective indicator of relational proximity—proved more consequential for issue-specific and more polarizing topics. This indicates that strong ties may not only facilitate political talk through increased contact but also serve as deliberately chosen safe spaces for navigating controversial debates. Likewise, network centrality predicted discussion only for Catalan independence, underscoring that well-embedded alters may play a key role as trusted interlocutors on polarizing topics, or perhaps also that slightly more room for opinion diversity emerges in group settings, as suggested by Morey et al. (2018).

Third, the comparison across topics demonstrates that predictors of political discussion are not uniform. Leaving aside political homophily, general political talk was shaped by routine contact and broad demographic characteristics, while issue-specific discussions—particularly on Catalan independence—were more influenced by affective closeness and political alignment. These findings highlight the importance of topic-specific analyses and suggest that the content of political talk—its salience, emotionality, and degree of polarization—fundamentally conditions the relational configurations through which dialogue unfolds. Future research should therefore move beyond generic “political discussant” measures and systematically incorporate issue characteristics when studying interpersonal political dialogue.

Among the strengths of this study are its comparative design across distinct political topics and its use of a refined network-elicitation protocol combining multiple political and non-political name generators with detailed interpreter questions that enable a robust operationalization of regular and open interpersonal political discussion. These design choices enabled a more detailed mapping of how various dimensions of relational and political similarity jointly shape multidimensional conversational dynamics. In addition, the use of a diverse sample of citizens of different ages—rather than university students—, social origins and political orientations enhances the ecological validity of our findings.

Nonetheless, the study is not without limitations. Most notably, the relatively small sample size and lack of representativeness limit the generalizability of our findings and may reduce statistical power for detecting more subtle effects. Furthermore, our cross-sectional design inhibits a better understanding of causality. Future research should therefore replicate these analyses in larger samples, and ideally across different political

and cultural contexts and over time, to assess the robustness of our conclusions. Third, while our focus on Catalonia provides a theoretically rich case of issue polarization, comparative replication across other political and cultural contexts would be necessary to assess external validity.

Despite these limitations, the evidence presented here underscores that the dynamics of political discussion cannot be reduced to a simple opposition between purposive and incidental factors. Instead, they reflect a context-sensitive interplay among political alignment, relational proximity, and issue polarization. Recognizing this interplay advances our understanding of how polarization operates not only in the public sphere or the media, but also within everyday social interactions. In conclusion, future research integrating network analysis with measures of issue polarization could illuminate how specific topics act as categorical fault lines generating “permeative propensities” (Horowitz, 2000). Such work would help connect the study of interpersonal political dialogue to macro-level processes of polarization and depolarization (McCoy et al., 2018; McCoy & Somer, 2019).

## REFERENCES

- Agneessens, F., Borgatti, S. P., & Everett, M. G. (2017). Geodesic based centrality: Unifying the local and the global. *Social Networks*, 49, 12–26. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socnet.2016.09.005>
- Ahn, T. K., Huckfeldt, R., Mayer, A. K., & Ryan, J. B. (2013). Expertise and Bias in Political Communication Networks. *American Journal of Political Science*, 57(2), 357–373. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-5907.2012.00625.x>
- Balcells, L., & Kuo, A. (2021). Preferences in between: Moderates in the Catalan secessionist conflict. *Politics and Governance*, 9(4), 386–398. <https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.v9i4.4563>
- Balcells, L., & Kuo, A. (2023). Secessionist conflict and affective polarization: Evidence from Catalonia. *Journal of Peace Research*, 60(4), 604–618. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00223433221088112>
- Balcells, L., & Kuo, A. (2024). Social costs and policy preferences: Evidence from territorial strategies in Catalonia. *Nations and Nationalism*, 30(4), 700–718. <https://doi.org/10.1111/nana.13043>
- Baldassarri, D., & de Jong, J. (2025). Partisanship Meets Social Networks: How Politically Heterogeneous Acquaintances and Close Relationships Buffer Partisan Animosity. *Sociological Science*, 12, 409–430. <https://doi.org/10.15195/v12.a18>
- Baras, M., Barberà, O., Barrio, A., & Rodríguez-Teruel, J. (2015). How does May's law work in multi-dimensional competition? Intra-party opinion structure in Catalonia. *World Political Science*, 11(2), 205–226. <https://doi.org/10.1515/wps-2015-1005>
- Bearman, P., & Parigi, P. (2004). Cloning Headless Frogs and Other Important Matters: Conversation Topics and Network Structure. *Social Forces*, 83(2), 535–557. <https://doi.org/10.1353/sof.2005.0001>
- Bello, J., & Rolfe, M. (2014). Is influence mightier than selection? Forging agreement in political discussion networks during a campaign. *Social Networks*, 36, 134–146. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socnet.2013.06.001>
- Birkett, M., Melville, J., Janulis, P., Phillips, G., Contractor, N., & Hogan, B. (2021). Network Canvas: Key decisions in the design of an interviewer-assisted network data collection software suite. *Social Networks*, 66(312), 114–124. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socnet.2021.02.003>
- Butters, R., & Hare, C. (2022). Polarized Networks? New Evidence on American Voters' Political Discussion Networks. *Political Behavior*, 44(3), 1079–1103. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11109-020-09647-w>
- Centre d'Estudis d'Opinió (CEO). (n.d.). *Baròmetres d'Opinió Política (BOP)*. Generalitat de Catalunya. Last accessed October 2025, from <https://ceo.gencat.cat/es/barometre/index.html>
- Chryst, B., Marlon, J., van der Linden, S., Leiserowitz, A., Maibach, E., & Roser-Renouf, C. (2018). Global warming's "Six Americas Short Survey": Audience segmentation of climate change views using a four question instrument. *Environmental Communication*, 12(8), 1109–1122. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17524032.2018.1508047>
- Ciordia, A., Alcalà-i-Rams, M., & Lubbers, M. J. (2024). *A personal network study of informal political conversation in Catalonia: Fieldwork report of Work Package 3 of the INCLUSIVITY research project*. OSF. [https://doi.org/10.31235/osf.io/nhszu\\_v1](https://doi.org/10.31235/osf.io/nhszu_v1)
- Conover, P. J., Searing, D. D., & Crewe, I. M. (2002). The deliberative potential of political discussion. *British Journal of Political Science*, 32(1), 21–62. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123402000029>
- Cowan, S. K., & Baldassarri, D. (2018). "It could turn ugly": Selective disclosure of attitudes in political discussion networks. *Social Networks*, 52, 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socnet.2017.04.002>
- Davies, K. (2022). Sticking together in 'divided Britain': Talking Brexit in everyday family relationships. *Sociology*, 56(1), 97–113. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00380385211011569>
- della Porta, D., Gunzelmann, H. J., & Portos, M. (2021). Repression and democracy amidst the eventful 1-O referendum. In Ó. García Agustín (Ed.), *Catalan Independence and the Crisis of Sovereignty* (pp. 127–150). Palgrave Macmillan. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-54867-4\\_6](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-54867-4_6)
- Delli Carpini, M. X., Cook, F. L., & Jacobs, L. R. (2004). Public deliberation, discursive participation, and citizen engagement: A review of the empirical literature. *Annual Review of*

- Political Science*, 7, 315–344. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.polisci.7.121003.091630>
- Dinas, E. (2012). Left and right in the Basque country and Catalonia: The meaning of ideology in a nationalist context. *South European Society and Politics*, 17(3), 467–485. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13608746.2012.701898>
- Dowling, A. (2018). *The Rise of Catalan Independence: Spain's Territorial Crisis*. Routledge.
- Eveland, W. P., & Gee, W. (2024). Independent political networks: Comparing the discussion network size and Composition of partisans, leaners, and independents. *Political Behavior*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11109-024-09985-z>
- Eveland, W. P., & Hively, M. H. (2009). Political discussion frequency, network size, and “heterogeneity” of discussion as predictors of political knowledge and participation. *Journal of Communication*, 59(2), 205–224. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.2009.01412.x>
- Eveland, W. P., Morey, A. C., & Hutchens, M. J. (2011). Beyond deliberation: New directions for the study of informal political conversation from a communication perspective. *Journal of Communication*, 61(6), 1082–1103. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.2011.01598.x>
- Fundación AXA (2024). *Estudio sobre percepción ciudadana ante el cambio climático en España*. Madrid. Retrieved from [https://www.axa.es/cambio-climatico/estudio\\_cambio\\_climatico](https://www.axa.es/cambio-climatico/estudio_cambio_climatico)
- García Agustín, Ó. (2021). *Catalan Independence and the Crisis of Sovereignty*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Guelke, A. (2012). *Politics in Deeply Divided Societies*. Polity Press.
- Guinjoan, M., Rodon, T., & Ardiaca, J. (2025). El suport a les polítiques de canvi climàtic: costos, beneficis i expectatives. *5centims.Cat*. Retrieved from <https://www.5centims.cat/el-suport-a-les-politiques-de-canvi-climatic-costos-beneficis-i-expectatives/>
- Hartman, R., Blakey, W., Womick, J., Bail, C., Finkel, E. J., Han, H., ... Gray, K. (2022). Interventions to reduce partisan animosity. *Nature Human Behaviour*, 6(9), 1194–1205. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-022-01442-3>
- Hobolt, S. B., & Tilley, J. (2025). Affective polarization around issues. In M. Torcal & E. Hartevelt (Eds), *Handbook of Affective Polarization* (pp. 228–238). Edward Elgar Publishing.
- Horowitz, D. (2000). *Ethnic Groups in Conflict*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Huckfeldt, R., Mendez, J. M., & Osborn, T. (2004). Disagreement, ambivalence, and engagement: The political consequences of heterogeneous networks. *Political Psychology*, 25(1), 65–95. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9221.2004.00357.x>
- Huckfeldt, R., Pietryka, M. T., & Reilly, J. (2014). Noise, bias, and expertise in political communication networks. *Social Networks*, 36, 110–121. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socnet.2013.02.003>
- Huckfeldt, R., Sprague, J. (1995). *Citizens, Politics, and Social Communication: Information and Influence in an Election Campaign*. Cambridge University Press.
- Hutchens, M. J., Hmielowski, J. D., & Beam, M. A. (2019). Reinforcing spirals of political discussion and affective polarization. *Communication Monographs*, 86(3), 357–376. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03637751.2019.1575255>
- Ikeda, K., & Huckfeldt, R. (2001). Political Communication and Disagreement Among Citizens in Japan and the United States. *Political Behavior*, 23(1), 23–51. <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1017617630744>
- Ikeda, K., & Richey, S. (2009). The impact of diversity in informal social networks on tolerance in Japan. *British Journal of Political Science*, 39(3), 655–668. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123408000574>
- Klofstad, C. A., McClurg, S. D., & Rolfe, M. (2009). Measurement of political discussion networks. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 73(3), 462–483. <https://doi.org/10.1093/poq/nfp032>
- Klofstad, C. A., Sokhey, A. E., & McClurg, S. D. (2013). Disagreeing about disagreement: How conflict in social networks affects political behavior. *American Journal of Political Science*, 57(1), 120–134. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-5907.2012.00620.x>
- Lazer, D., Rubineau, B., Chetkovich, C., Katz, N., & Neblo, M. (2010). The Coevolution of Networks and Political Attitudes. *Political Communication*, 27(3), 248–274. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2010.500187>
- Lee, F. L. F. (2022). Ego-network difference, political communication, and affective polarization during political contention. *International Journal of Communication*, 16, 4934–4957.
- Levinson, K., & Yndeggn, C. (2015). Political discussions with family and friends: Exploring the

- impact of political distance. *Sociological Review*, 63(S2), 72–91. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-954X.12263>
- Marsden, P. V. (1987). Core Discussion Networks of Americans. *American Sociological Review*, 52(1), 122–131. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2095397>
- McCarty, C., Lubbers, M. J., Vacca, R., & Molina, J. L. (2019). *Conducting Personal Network Research: A Practical Guide*. Guilford Press.
- McClurg, S. D., Klofstad, C. A., & Sokhey, A. E. (2017). Discussion Networks. In J. N. Victor, A. H. Montgomery, & M. Lubell (Eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Political Networks* (pp. 515–534). Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190228217.013.21>
- McCoy, J., Rahman, T., & Somer, M. (2018). Polarization and the global crisis of democracy: Common patterns, dynamics, and pernicious consequences for democratic polities. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 62(1), 16–42. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764218759576>
- McCoy, J., & Somer, M. (2019). Toward a theory of pernicious polarization and how it harms democracies: Comparative evidence and possible remedies. *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 681(1), 234–271. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716218818782>
- McPherson, M., Smith-Lovin, L., & Cook, J. M. (2001). Birds of a feather: Homophily in social networks. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 27, 415–444. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.soc.27.1.415>
- Medina Lindo, L. (2021). *Affective Polarization and political sentiment in Catalonia (1995-2021): Report of the findings of the ICPS 2021 Catalonia Opinion Survey*. Barcelona. [https://doi.org/https://www.icps.cat/archivos/sondeigs/informe\\_sondeig\\_icps2021\\_angles.pdf?noga=1](https://doi.org/https://www.icps.cat/archivos/sondeigs/informe_sondeig_icps2021_angles.pdf?noga=1)
- Minozzi, W., Song, H., Lazer, D. M. J., Neblo, M. A., & Ognyanova, K. (2020). The incidental pundit: Who talks politics with whom, and why? *American Journal of Political Science*, 64(1), 135–151. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ajps.12469>
- Morey, A. C., Eveland, W. P., & Hutchens, M. J. (2012). The “who” matters: Types of interpersonal relationships and avoidance of political disagreement. *Political Communication*, 29(1), 86–103. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2011.641070>
- Morey, A. C., Kleinman, S. B., & Boukes, M. (2018). Political Talk Preferences: Selection of Similar and Different Discussion Partners and Groups. *International Journal of Communication*, 12, 21–21.
- Morey, A. C., & Yamamoto, M. (2020). Exploring political discussion motivations: Relationships with different forms of political talk. *Communication Studies*, 71(1), 78–97. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10510974.2019.1692885>
- Mutz, D. C. (2002). The consequences of cross-cutting networks for political participation. *American Journal of Political Science*, 46(4), 838. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3088437>
- Peacock, C. (2019). (Not) Talking Politics: Motivations and Strategies for Avoiding the Expression of Political Opinions. *Western Journal of Communication*, 83(5), 581–599. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10570314.2019.1597157>
- Pettigrew, T. F. (1998). Intergroup Contact Theory. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 49(1), 65–85. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.psych.49.1.65>
- Raissi, M., & Ackland, R. (2021). Important relationships in a multilevel world: The role of network structure in explaining closeness of relationships and access to resources in later life. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 38(9), 2442–2464. <https://doi.org/10.1177/02654075211009311>
- Rodon, T., & Rodríguez, I. (2023). A bitter victory and a sweet defeat: the July 2023 Spanish general election. *South European Society and Politics*, 28(3), 335–357. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13608746.2024.2326300>
- Schneider, F. M., & Weinmann, C. (2023). In need of the devil’s advocate? The impact of cross-cutting exposure on political discussion. *Political Behavior*, 45(1), 373–394. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11109-021-09706-w>
- Settle, J. E., & Carlson, T. N. (2019). Opting out of political discussions. *Political Communication*, 36(3), 476–496. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2018.1561563>
- Sinclair, B. (2012). *The Social Citizen Peer Networks and Political Behavior*. University of Chicago Press.

- Slater, M. D. (2015). Reinforcing spirals model: Conceptualizing the relationship between media content exposure and the development and maintenance of attitudes. *Media Psychology*, 18, 370–395. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15213269.2014.897236>
- Sokhey, A. E., & Djupe, P. A. (2011). Interpersonal Networks and Democratic Politics. *PS: Political Science & Politics*, 44(1), 55–59. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096510001861>
- Tse, C. H., & Lee, F. L. F. (2025). Understanding avoidance of political discussions in an autocratizing society. *International Journal of Public Opinion Research*, 37(2), edaf013. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ijpor/edaf013>
- Vacca, R. (2018). Multilevel models for personal networks: Methods and applications. *Italian Journal of Applied Statistics*, 30(1), 59–97. <https://doi.org/10.26398/IJAS.0030-003>
- Vall-Prat, P., & Rodon, T. (2024). The Spanish 2023 general elections: Unexpected snap elections to survive in power. *West European Politics*, 47(6), 1419–1434. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1080/01402382.2024.2317679>
- Wyatt, R. O., Katz, E., & Kim, J. (2000). Bridging the spheres: Political and personal conversation in public and private spaces. *Journal of Communication*, 50(1), 71–92. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.2000.tb02834.x>

## Appendix

Table A1. Name generators and average number of alters nominated

Name generator	Number of unique persons elicited [N=663 alters; N=65 respondents]		
	Range (Min – Max)	Average	Median
<b>1. Frequent contact</b> <i>Who do you talk to frequently throughout a typical week? (either face-to-face, by phone and/or messaging)</i>	(5 – 20)	9.6	9
<b>2. Important personal matters</b> <i>With whom do you usually talk about personal and intimate matters? (e.g., concerns, important decisions or life events...)</i>	(0 – 18)	6.4	5
<b>3. Political discussion, any kind</b> <i>With whom have you talked lately (at least during the last year) about current political and social issues?</i>	(2 – 24)	10.5	10
<b>4. Disagreeing political discussion</b> <i>And lately (at least during the last year), with whom have you talked about current political and social issues and disagreed?</i>	(1 – 23)	5.1	4
<b>5. Avoidance of political discussion</b> <i>And with whom do you prefer not to talk about certain current political and social issues, for whatever reason?</i>	(0 – 11)	3.1	3
<b>6. Strained relationships due to political disagreement</b> <i>During the last few years, have any of your relationships been damaged or even broken as a result of political disagreements? If so, with whom?</i>	(0 – 8)	1.8	1
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>(5 – 29)</b>	<b>16.1</b>	<b>15</b>

Table A2. Descriptive statistics

<b>Dyadic outcome variables [N=663]</b>				
<i>Binary (i=1 if discussion takes place, else 0)</i>			<i>N<sub>i=1</sub></i>	<i>%</i>
Regular informal political conversation	- Unspecified political issues		426	64.3
with alter about...	- Catalan independence		398	60.0
	- Climate change		267	40.3
<b>Dyadic explanatory variables [N=663]</b>				
<i>Binary (i=1 if characteristic is present, else 0)</i>			<i>N<sub>i=1</sub></i>	<i>%</i>
Frequent social contact			477	71.9
Emotional closeness			305	46.0
Same gender			388	58.5
Similar age [ego and alter are within the same 10-year age group category]			345	52.0
<i>Ordinal and ratio</i>			<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Network embeddedness [0-1, avg. reciprocal distance in the alter-alter network]			0.31	0.24
Ego-alter opinion similarity [0-6]	- Left-right scale		4.47	1.45
[reversed absolute distance between	- Catalan independence		4.37	1.76
ego-alter positions on 7-point scale]	- Climate change		4.49	1.45
<b>Individual control variables [N=65]</b>				
<i>Categorical</i>		<b>Category <i>i</i></b>	<i>N<sub>i</sub></i>	<i>%</i>
Ego's political opinion	- Politics in general	Left	46	70.8
		Center	5	7.7
		Right	14	21.5
	- Catalan independence	Pro-independence	24	36.9
		Pro-autonomy	23	35.4
		Pro-status quo	18	27.7
		- Climate change	Alarmed	31
		Concerned	19	29.2
		Other	15	23.1
Ego's gender	Male	33	50.8	
	Female	32	49.2	
<i>Interval</i>			<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Ego's age (years)			39.0	15.4
Number of positive feelings associated with informal political conversations [count: 0-3]			1.69	0.90

Table A3. Zero-order correlations between the dyadic variables

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Discussion general politics (DV, binary)										
2. Discussion Cat. Independence (DV, binary)	0.52***									
3. Discussion climate change (DV, binary)	0.34***	0.22***								
4. Opinion similarity left-right	0.31***	0.32***	0.21***							
5. Opinion similarity Catalan independence	0.31***	0.30***	0.11**	0.48***						
6. Opinion similarity climate change	0.14***	0.14***	0.25***	0.41***	0.21***					
7. Contact frequency (binary)	0.21***	0.18***	0.12**	0.18***	0.19***	0.07				
8. Emotional closeness (binary)	0.11**	0.18***	0.24***	0.16***	0.08	0.04	0.34***			
9. Network centrality	0.11**	0.18***	0.15***	0.09*	0.07	0.10**	0.19***	0.16***		
10. Same gender (binary)	-0.10*	-0.06	-0.01	-0.06	-0.05	-0.02	0.02	-0.01	-0.07	
11. Same age (binary)	0.06	0.04	0.08*	0.05	-0.04	0.08*	-0.10*	-0.03	-0.06	0.08*

Note: Colors represent a heatmap. \*  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$