We Like What We Know: Partner and Topic Familiarity Predict Positive Ratings of Real Time Political Conversations

Abstract

Political talk is an important form of participation in which citizens develop opinions, encounter alternative viewpoints, and engage with their communities. Yet most people find these interactions aversive, conflictual, and exhausting. While research has examined why people avoid political conversations, less is known about what shapes people's preferences for how these conversations unfold. Drawing on a novel, multimodal dataset of 571 in-person dyadic interactions featuring political and non-political prompts, we test a set of hypotheses spanning perceived similarity, conversation structure, topic engagement, conversational balance, and linguistic mimicry. Using the Social Relations Model to isolate relationship-specific interaction components, we find that perceived general similarity with one's partner and topic engagement—but not political similarity, conversation order, speaking-time balance, and linguistic style matching—predicted conversation quality. These results suggest that fostering a sense of common ground and topic competence may effectively improve the quality of political discourse between citizens.

Keywords

political talk, conversation quality, deliberative democracy, dyadic interaction, perceived similarity

Introduction

Political conversations serve a key mechanism through which citizens develop political opinions, encounter alternative viewpoints, and engage with the broader political community. Despite their importance for democratic participation, political conversations are often uncomfortable. Research consistently shows individuals tend to avoid political discussions, particularly with those they perceive as politically different from themselves (Mutz, 2002; Klar & Krupnikov, 2016). Most citizens do not seek political deliberation, as they find it aversive, conflictual, and exhausting (Hibbing & Theiss-Morse, 2002). This aversion has real consequences in limiting opportunities for cross-cutting exposure and developing political tolerance.

Most research concerns whether people avoid political conversations in the first place—not what distinguishes a good political conversation from a bad one once it happens. Some are tense and unpleasant, while others are engaging and productive. Understanding what separates these experiences is both theoretically important and practically relevant for those interested in fostering strong democratic norms. What makes for a good political conversation? Drawing on a novel, multimodal dataset of 571 in-person dyadic interactions, including transcripts, facial recordings, and pre- and post-interaction survey data, we test a set of hypotheses spanning perceived similarity, conversational structure, topic engagement, and verbal behavior as predictors of higher-quality political discussions.

Political Conversations as Deliberative and Democratic

Political theorists have long argued that communication across lines of difference is essential to democratic functioning. To date, most of the research on political conversations focuses on "public deliberation." Carpini et al. (2004) define public deliberation along five criteria, (1) involving

citizen-to-citizen discourse, (2) forming political participation, (3) including (but not limited to) formal institutional processes of civic-political life, (4) occurring through various media, and (5) focusing on local, national, or international issues of public concern. Among forms of public deliberation, everyday political talk is a less demanding form of public deliberation, though "democratic theory argues that such discourse is a good in and of itself" (Carpini et al., 2004, p. 322). Other researchers affirm this, suggesting that:

> Everyday political talk itself might not be ideally deliberative nor reasonable, but it is perhaps the only practical way through which citizens construct and reveal their identities, understand others, produce rules and resources for deliberation, enhance their opinions, transform the domestic spheres into the public sphere, and bridge their private lives to the political world (Kim & Kim, 2008, p.66).

Further empirical work support these positions. Mutz (2002) draws on national and experimental survey data to show that political discussions expose citizens to opposing viewpoints and increase their understanding of oppositional viewpoints. Using interviews, Ekström (2016) shows that political talk with peers is an important tool for developing young peoples' political identities.

Beyond deliberative theory, empirical work on political discussion networks has emphasized that citizens' political views and behaviours are shaped by their surrounding discussants and social contexts (Huckfeldt & Sprague, 1987; 1995). As such, political conversations are not merely a byproduct of political engagement, but a mechanism of engagement itself. Political talk increases internal efficacy, civic identity, and political participation (Gastil & Xenos 2010), and is positively correlated with both political knowledge and political participation (Kwak et al., 2005; Eveland & Hively, 2009).

Yet the fact that political talk is important for democracy does not mean people enjoy it. One of the most important aspects of political talk is that citizens interact with those they disagree with. But often, people expect these disagreements to lead to conflict. Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (2002) explain the idea of stealth democracy, arguing that although people want the *ability* to

participate in politics without *actually* participating. This extends to political conversations, which can "evoke anxieties and sometimes threaten social bonds…" (Mutz, 2006, p.124). Further evidence suggests this is the case for more deliberative forms of talk. For example, Jacquet (2017) finds that citizens are uninterested in participating in "mini-publics"—deliberative democratic forms with randomly selected citizens. Though mini-publics are seen as a solution to democratic backsliding, they are prone to low acceptance rates and procedural formats that risk self-selection biases and misleading claims of representativeness (Binnema & Michels, 2022; Spada & Peixoto, 2025). In everyday contexts, citizens are not interested in talking politics and risking hostile disagreement with potential adversaries (Carlson & Settle, 2023; Wald et al., 2023). Even within closer personal ties, concerns about conflicting political views are salient. For example, Klar et al. (2018) examine parental attitudes towards their children's spouses holding opposing viewpoints, finding that parents do not mind out-partisans *if* they do not discuss politics frequently. Yet not all political discussions necessitate disagreement and displeasure. Here, it is important to unpack what makes a good—and bad—political conversation.

Subjective Conversation Quality

In political and non-political conversations alike, interaction satisfaction may vary. Concerning non-political conversations, Hecht (1978) raises survey measures of interpersonal communication satisfaction, suggesting that satisfying conversations feature multiple components, regarding a general level of affect and morale, the substance and salience of the conversation, and "free interaction" (the ability to freely discuss). Different individual- and structural-level features, such as social cognitive skills and dyad indicators of similarity, may also shape interaction quality (Dziura et al., 2023). Other features of good conversations relate to shared perceptions of positive

resonance, whereby speakers experience mutual warmth, concern, and synchronicity through co-expressed positive affect and nonverbal affiliation cues (Zhou et al., 2025). Co-experienced negative affect may positively contribute to conversation quality through shared processing (Brown et al., 2022), especially when speakers encourage each other to reappraise negative experiences (Lee et al., 2020). Even when discussion entails disagreement, high-quality listeners exhibiting positive intentions and clear attention can foster greater wellbeing, satisfaction, and optimism in conversations (Saluk et al., 2026).

Conversation quality is therefore related to outcomes beyond the scope of discussion, including, such as greater happiness, altruism, prosocial tendencies, and "social connectedness" (Sun et al., 2020; Zhou et al., 2025). Social connectedness is relevant to political participation and civic engagement through the forms of contacting government officials, protesting, persuading others to vote, volunteering for political campaigns, and making political donations (Reilly, 2017; Billard, 2022). Though literature on conversation quality focuses on non-political conversations, recent scholarship has recently addressed questions surrounding political conversations concerning aspects that help and hurt prospects of political deliberation in everyday life. Namely, certain features of political discussions may undermine aspects of good conversations including positive affect, free interaction, and perceived similarity.

Literature tends to focus on negative anticipatory perceptions and habits of avoidance. As political conversations entail important but divisive subject matter, people may overestimate possibilities of disagreement alongside constraints on free expression and social cohesion when talking politics (Wald et al., 2024). People expect self-censorship and conformity when discussing political opinions with those who hold opposing political views (Carlson & Settle, 2016). As politics is typically conflictual and opinionated, people may especially avoid public discussions

with conversation partners they are less familiar with and similar to (Carlson & Settle, 2022; Schmitt-Beck & Schnaudt, 2023).

Relating to general patterns whereby people avoid disagreement, people may request greater compensation to engage in political discussions with out-partisans than with in-partisans (Settle & Carlson 2019). However, concerns and reservations surrounding disagreement, free expression, and social cohesion may vary depending on individual- and contextual-level conversation features. Considering the potential for disagreement, traits such as greater political interest, conflict seeking orientations, need for cognition, and lower need for belonging may foster positive attitudes towards everyday political talk (Schmitt-Beck & Neumann, 2023). Greater social trust and lower social isolation correspond with greater willingness to engage (Schmitt-Beck & Schnaudt, 2023). Considering the value of listening, understanding, and empathy in non-political conversations, recent work on political conversations has highlighted the value of these virtues in fostering willingness to engage in political deliberation (Schmitt-Beck & Schnaudt, 2026).

Although political discussions entail disagreement and conflict, certain behaviours may elicit an intent to listen and a willingness to understand. Face-to-face interactions feature the potential for nonverbal mimicry, and facial mimicry of emotional expressions can signal emotional understanding and carry positive implications for social interactions by strengthening affiliation and communication even when concerning negative emotions (Ravreby et al., 2025). Although different facial expressions are reciprocated, genuine smiles carry greater social rewards and are mimicked predictively rather than reactively (Heerey & Crossley, 2013). Importantly, variation in the subjective value assigned to genuine smiles shape responsiveness in conversations and subsequent partner ratings of interaction quality (Heerey et al., 2024). Nonetheless, mimicry across other expressions and emotions may improve interaction quality. In face-to-face conversations

between in-partisans and out-partisans, facial mimicry may improve communication and perceived understanding despite disagreement (Ravreby et al., 2025). Research on non-political conversations further suggests that mimicry carries distinct effects on social trust decisions within interactions across low and high similarity conditions (Clerke & Heerey, 2021).

Hypotheses

Perceived Similarity

Attitudinal and trait similarity relate to positive interpersonal perceptions including attraction, perceived intelligence, knowledge, morality, and adjustment (Byrne, 1997). People discuss politics most often with those they agree with, such as in-party members (Morey et al., 2012). Perceived similarity also shapes persuasiveness, whereby higher non-political similarity entails greater closeness and likelihoods of updated views (Balietti et al., 2021). Likewise, association with likeminded people may mitigates conflict (Mutz, 2001) and widen polarization (Bail et al., 2018). We expect various perceptions of similarity should relate to conversation quality:

> **H1a**: Participants who perceive themselves as generally similar to their partner report, on average, higher quality conversations.
>
> **H1b**: Participants who perceive themselves as politically similar to their partner report, on average, higher quality conversations.
>
> **H1c:** Participants who are objectively generally similar to their partner report, on average, higher quality conversations.
>
> **H1d**: Participants who are objectively politically similar to their partner (measured, not perceived) report, on average, higher quality conversations.

Conversation Structure

Greater conversation quality may also come with greater familiarity. As people converse and get to know one another, they build mutual trust and respect (Nadler, 2003). Negotiations and

predicted trustworthiness may improve when an open chat is available before engagement (Mislin et al., 2011). Likewise, when strangers can engage in "small talk" or non-political conversations, later political discussions may be easier:

> **H2:** Participants who discuss a non-political topic before discussing politics report, on average, higher quality conversations.

Topic Engagement

Unrelated to partner characteristics, there is reason to believe that the level of familiarity with a topic should influence the quality of conversation. Political knowledge is correlated with higher levels of political participation (Galston, 2001; Carpini & Keeter, 1996) and the number of political conversations one has (Conover et al., 2022), possibly in relation to internal political efficacy (Reichert, 2016). In a survey experiment, Moy and Gastil (2006) show that political expertise and self-efficacy relate to conversation quality. However, they rely on survey recollections of conversations rather than live interactions and reports. Having one or more engaged speakers may benefit conversation quality:

> **H3a**: Participants who are more engaged with the topic report, on average, higher quality conversations.
>
> **H3b:** Participants who interact with partners who are more engaged with the topic report, on average, higher quality conversations.
>
> **H3c:** Participants who are more engaged with a topic, as well as having a partner who is more engaged with a topic, on average, report higher quality conversations.

Conversation Balance

A dyadic *conversation* is not a monologue, and balanced participation may be relevant to conversation quality. Unequal speaking time produces a substantial gap in perceived influence and authority between men and women (Karpowitz et al., 2012). Although influence is conceptually distinct from conversation quality, speaking time can be relevant to speaker experiences. In non-

political conversations, equal speaking opportunities are related to improved external perceptions of conversation quality (Raman et al., 2023).

Yet while conversation balance is important to deliberation, personality differences might affect how people feel about their own participation . Hirschi et al. (2023) find that, While people think they need to speak less to be liked, participants tended to be more likeable the more they spoke (Hirschi et al., 2023). Noting conversations as a social act, extroverted personalities may thrive more than others (Sangwan, 2023), possibly through less shyness and inhibition in conversation (Kwiatkowska & Strus, 2021). The relationship between speaking time and conversation quality may therefore be shaped by introverted or extroverted dispositions:

> **H4**: Participants who speak equally or more than their partner report, on average, higher quality conversations, moderated by extraversion.

Facial Mimicry

Nonverbal (facial) mimicry may be positively associated with political discussion quality, as it can improve social trust, increase subjective conversation quality ratings, and signal greater similarity among interaction partners (Clerke & Heerey, 2021; Heerey et al., 2024). These nonverbal signals of attention may be especially valuable in improving the quality of political discussions potentially obstructed by conflict and disagreement, in which mimicry signals a willingness to foster engagement and association—rather than distance and disinterest—with political discussants (Ravreby et al., 2025). As such, the presence of facial mimicry in face-to-face political conversations may carry a positive outcome on subjective quality ratings. As mimicry is directional, we expect both participant and partner mimicry to be relevant:

> **H5a**: Participants who exhibit facial mimicry towards their partner report, on average, higher quality conversations.

H5b: Participants who interact with partners who exhibit facial mimicry towards them report, on average, higher quality conversations.

H5c: Pariticipants who exhibit facial mimicry towards their partner, and who's partner exhibit facial mimicry towards them report, on average, higher quality conversations.

Linguistic Mimicry

Other less conscious indicators may also matter. Linguistic style matching (LSM), the degree to which the words one participant uses covary with the words the other chooses, is present in conversations across various lengths of time (Niederhoffer & Pennebaker, 2002). Yet the relation ship between LSM and conversation quality is unclear. While LSM can predict the likelihood that partners remained together at follow-up (Ireland et al., 2011), LSM may be unrelated to single conversational engagements The effect of LSM and conversation quality in political discussions is less studies, and we explore this an open question.

Methods

Data

We recruited participants from the entire study body of a Canadian university, inviting them to participate in a lab study about conversation topics in exchange for $30. Participants completed pre-interaction survey measures, including questions about their demographic characteristics, interest in politics, personality measures, and more. Groups of seven participants were invited to interact with each other in a round-robin design, whereby each participant spoke once with every other participant. Participants answered post-interaction questions relating to their perspectives about their partner and the conversation. Each interaction consisted of one two-minute introduction followed by two five-minute conversations with different topic prompts—one political and one

non-political topic. Topics were randomly drawn from eight political and eight non-political topics, and the order in which the political topic appeared (first or second) was also randomized. For more details about the study design, see Heerey et al. 2026.

Interactions were video-recorded and transcribed, yielding both text and video data. The dataset includes 571 unique dyadic interactions. The unit of analysis for this project is the dyadic interaction, reported separately from each participant's perspective. Because participants rated interaction quality once per partner rather than once per prompt, quality ratings do not distinguish between introductions and following prompts.

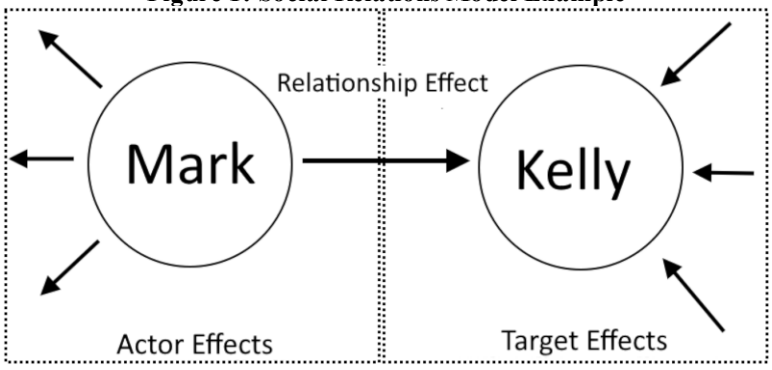
Measures

Interaction Quality. Interaction quality is measured as an aggregate of nine post-interaction survey items (rated on a strongly-agree-to-strongly-disagree scale): "The interaction was engaging", "The interaction felt smooth and coordinated", "I did not enjoy the interaction" (reverse coded), "The interaction felt natural", "The interaction had more awkward pauses than usual" (reverse coded), "I had a lot to say to my conversation partner", "It was hard to get my interaction partner talking" (reverse coded), "I felt comfortable during the interaction" and "The interaction made me feel positive". Because interactions occurred in a round-robin design, a simple analysis of these ratings would violate independence assumptions in two ways: ratings from the same participant across their different partners are correlated (some people rate every interaction more favorably than others), and ratings of the same partner by different participants are correlated (some people are simply easier to talk to).

To address this, we used the Social Relations Model (SRM; Kenny & La Voie, 1984), which decomposes each rating into three components: an actor effect (a participant's average rating

tendency, independent of partner), a target effect (how a participant is rated on average by their partners, independent of who is rating), and a relationship effect (what is unique to a specific pairing, accounting for both actor and target tendencies). To clarify, the social relations model works by taking any variable that is measured through the round-robin design, and decomposes it into its actor, target, and relationship components. The terms describe types of variances within one variable's ratings. For example, imagine we want to understand how well Mark's interaction went with Kelly. In this example, Mark is the actor, and his actor effect would be how well conversations go for Mark generally. Kelly is the target, and her target effect is how well people think their conversations go with her. To understand how their conversation went, we calculate the "relationship effect" that accounts for actor and target effects. This is done using a single measure of conversation quality, which participants respond to after each interaction in a round-robin design. Figure 1 shows how the social relation model works in theory.

Figure 1: Social Relations Model Example



We fit the SRM separately within each session (each session forming a closed round-robin group) using the TripleR package in R, applied to interaction quality averaged across all topics discussed within each dyad. This yielded a substantial payoff for using relationship effects rather than raw ratings: in the full sample, only 19% of variance in interaction quality was attributable to actor effects and 23% to target effects, while 59% was relationship specific. Because our

hypotheses concern how specific pairs of people experienced their conversations with each other, rather than generic dispositions either partner brings to any interaction, we use each participant's relationship effect for their political-topic interaction as our dependent variable throughout. Two sessions were excluded from the SRM due to having three or fewer participants.

Table 1: SRM Variance Decomposition

SRM Variance Components: Interaction Quality

Component	Estimate	Standardized	SE	t value	p value
actor variance	0.092	0.187	0.017	5.283	0.0000
partner variance	0.111	0.225	0.020	5.613	0.0000
relationship variance	0.290	0.588	0.018	16.425	0.0000
error variance	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
actor-partner covariance	0.049	0.486	0.014	3.444	0.0007
relationship covariance	0.041	0.140	0.018	2.297	0.0226

Perceived Similarity. To measure perceived similarity, participants responded to post-interaction survey questions rating their perceived similarity on two items, one general and one political, each on a scale from 0-100 (0 = very dissimilar, 100 = very similar). Importantly, these are post-hoc impressions, not pre-existing traits: participants interacted with one another then were asked whether they thought their partner was similar to them.

Objective Similarity. To understand whether objective similarity influences the quality of political conversations, we needed to measure participant characteristics before their interaction. To measure objective political similarity, we computed the negative absolute difference between a participant's self-reported political orientation and their partner's self-reported political orientation, such that higher (less negative) values indicate greater objective similarity. This keeps the direction of the measure consistent with the two perceived-similarity items, where higher

values indicate greater similarity. To measure objective general similarity, we compared participants' pre-interaction HEXACO personality scores. Both partners' scores on the six personality dimensions were standardized, and similarity was computed as the Spearman correlation between each partner's six trait scores. This measure ranges from -1 (perfectly inverse) to 1 (identical), with higher values representing greater similarity. We used the Spearman correlation rather than Pearson correlation as recent methodological work comparing similarity measures finds it to be more robust (Carlier et al., 2024).

In addition to the personality measure for objective similarity, we also examine objective similarity among demographic characteristics. The demographic characteristics we chose to examine are participants' gender, whether they were born-in-Canada, their ethnicity, their religion, their birth year, their education and the importance of their religion. Gender is measured as either "Man", "Woman", "Non-Binary" and an open text box for "other". Ethnicity and religion are open text boxes, which we had to manually sort. Birth year is an open text box in which participants inputted their birth year. Education is measured as their highest level of education that they completed between: "Elementary school", "High school", "Technical, Community College, CEGEP, College Classique", "Some University", "Bachelor's degree", "Master's degree", "Professional degree or Doctorate" and an open text box for "other". Lastly, importance of religion is measured using a 4-point Likert scale from "Very Important" to "Not at all important".

Conversation Structure. We created a dummy variable indicating whether the political topic was discussed first or second within a given dyad's pair of prompts (whether the non-political topic preceded or followed the political topic).

Topic Engagement. The post-interaction survey included three topic-specific items (strongly-agree-to-strongly-disagree): "I had a lot of knowledge about the topic before the

conversation," "This is a topic I'm comfortable discussing," and "I felt able to express my attitudes about this topic." We averaged these into a single topic engagement index (Cronbach's $\alpha = .74$). Results were substantively unchanged when the third item was excluded and the index was limited to the first two. Participants were asked to rate their topic engagement with both topics provided, not a single measure per dyadic interaction. For our analyses, we focused on the topic engagement to the political prompts.

Linguistic Style Matching. To measure the mimicry of conversational text, we analyzed the transcript data from each dyad's political-topic conversation. We followed the same general approach as the original LSM studies, which quantify linguistic style matching by comparing two speakers' use of function words. Each transcript was separated into individual speaking turns, with speaker identity determined from participant ID labels embedded in the transcripts. Turns were aggregated into a single document per speaker per conversation. Speaker-documents containing fewer than 30 words were excluded, as function-word proportions become unstable in very short texts. Using the lingmatch R package, we calculated LSM scores ranging from 0 (no matching) to 1 (complete matching.) The lingmatch R package uses its own function-word dictionary rather than the proprietary LIWC dictionary used in the original studies; the two are conceptually similar, and lingmatch has been used as an open-source alternative to LIWC.

Facial Mimicry. To measure facial mimicry between participants, we recorded participant interactions and analyzed their faces using Noldus FaceReader, which outputs frame-by-frame estimates of basic emotions based on facial expression. We used the valence score, which is the intensity of happiness shown on participant's faces minus the intensity of negative emotions (higher values mean more positive expressions). Frames where no face is detected are treated as missing. We averaged the valence scored into 1-second bins using each frame's timestamp.

Recordings with fewer than 500 valid seconds were excluded, and some recordings were unable to be analyzed due to technical issues (n = 50).

For each direction within each dyad, we examined whether the follower's valence tracked the leaders' valence over the following 1 to 4 seconds, accounting for the follower's own recent expressions. The four resulting values were averaged into a single mimicry score. To separate mimicry from chance co-occurrence, we established a baseline by shifting the leader's expressions to a random, unrelated point in the same conversation and recomputing the score (200 times). We operationalize mimicry as the difference between the observed score minus the baseline score, so positive values mean the follower tracked the leader more than chance would predict.

Analysis

For each hypothesis, we used OLS regression to predict the relationship-effect quality score from the relevant independent variables. Continuous predictors and the outcome were standardized so that coefficients could be compared across models. Before finalizing each model, we checked a set of demographic and personality variables (age, political orientation, political interest, and Big Five personality traits) as possible confounders, including a variable as a covariate only if it was related to both the independent variable and interaction quality.

Results

Similarity

General perceived similarity significantly predicted interaction quality ($\beta = .30$, $p < .001$). Dyads who saw themselves as more generally similar reported higher quality interactions. Likewise, perceived political similarity was a significant predictor of interaction quality ($\beta = .16$, $p < .001$).

Objective general similarity, calculated using personality, was found to be uncorrelated to conversation quality (β = .02, p = .490).

Calculating objective general similarity using demographic variables led to mixed results. Gender similarity was not a predictor of conversation quality, though it was bordering on standard indicators of significance (β = .06, p = .053). Similarity regarding being born in Canada was not significant (β = .02, p = .505), and neither was religion (β = - .06, p = .291), birth year (β = .05, p = .116) nor religion's importance (β = .006, p = .844). Ethnic similarity was significant but negative (β = - .06, p = .037), while education was significant and positive (β = .08, p = .007). Lastly, objective political similarity, the reverse coded absolute difference between partners' self-reported political orientation, was found to be uncorrelated to conversation quality (β = .01, p = .797). Political orientation itself correlated with all similarity measures except for objective general similarity and was tested as a covariate. Including it did not meaningfully change any of these results and it was not itself a significant predictor of quality (p = .51). Table 2 shows the correlations between core similarity measures, with a full correlation table found in the appendix.

Table 2: Similarity Measures Correlation Matrix

Correlation Matrix: H1 Similarity Measures

	Perceived General Sim.	Objective General Sim. (Spearman)	Perceived Political Sim.	Objective Political Sim.
Perceived General Sim.	1.00			
Objective General Sim. (Spearman)	0.06	1.00		
Perceived Political Sim.	0.59	0.00	1.00	
Objective Political Sim.	0.05	0.04	0.13	1.00

Table 3: Similarity measures individual regressions

H1: Similarity (Perceived and Objective) Predicts Interaction Quality

Variable	b	SE	95% CI	t	β	p	n
Core Predictors							
General similarity (perceived)	0.006	0.001	[0.005, 0.007]	10.16	0.296	<.001	1096
Political similarity (perceived)	0.003	0.001	[0.002, 0.004]	5.35	0.163	<.001	1055
Political similarity (objective)	0.000	0.001	[-0.001, 0.002]	0.26	0.009	0.797	894
Personality similarity (objective)	0.019	0.027	[-0.035, 0.073]	0.69	0.020	0.490	1146
Demographic Predictors							
Gender similarity	0.049	0.025	[-0.001, 0.099]	1.94	0.057	0.053	1146
Born in Canada similarity	0.017	0.025	[-0.032, 0.066]	0.67	0.020	0.505	1146
Ethnicity similarity	-0.061	0.029	[-0.119, -0.004]	-2.09	-0.064	0.037	1074
Religion similarity	-0.058	0.055	[-0.165, 0.050]	-1.06	-0.056	0.291	356
Birth year similarity	0.007	0.004	[-0.002, 0.015]	1.57	0.055	0.116	756
Education similarity	0.026	0.009	[0.007, 0.044]	2.71	0.080	0.007	1146
Religion importance similarity	0.003	0.013	[-0.024, 0.029]	0.20	0.006	0.844	1064

To test whether each similarity measure retained unique predictive value net of the others, we entered predictors into three joint models varying in scope and sample size (see table 4.) Model 1 entered the four core H1 predictors together (n = 830, versus 894-1146 in the solo models above). General perceived similarity remained a strong, significant predictor, with its coefficient essentially remaining unchanged from the solo model (β = .31, p < .001), while perceived political similarity's effect disappeared once general similarity was accounted for (β = -.00, p = .915). Objective political similarity (β = -.00, p = .933) and objective personality similarity (β = -.03, p = .323) remained non-significant.

Model 2 added the demographic similarity measures with the largest available samples: gender, born in Canada, ethnicity, education, and religion's importance. We exclude religion and birth year similarity to preserve sample size (n = 757). General perceived similarity again remained the strongest predictor ($\beta = .31$, $p < .001$). Ethnicity similarity is a significant negative predictor net of the other similarity measures ($\beta = -.01$, $p = .006$), and objective personality similarity approached significance in the same direction ($\beta = -.06$, $p = .098$), Gender, born-in-Canada, education, and religion's importance similarity did not reach significance.

Model 3 entered all eleven similarity predictors simultaneously, adding religion and birth year similarity at the cost of a substantially smaller complete-case sample (n = 210). General perceived similarity remained significant ($\beta = .30$, $p < .001$), but no other predictor reached significance in this more conservative test. Notably, ethnicity similarity's effect from Model 2 did not hold at this reduced sample size. Given the drop in observations, we treat Model 2 as our preferred specification for evaluating demographic-similarity measures, with Model 3 reported as a robustness check.

In sum, conversation quality was consistently associated with perceived general similarity across every specification (H1a), while perceived political similarity's independent contribution did not survive one general similarity was accounted for (H1b), suggesting the two share overlapping variance rather than each contributing uniquely. Objective political similarity was uncorrelated with conversation quality throughout (H1d). Objective general similarity (H1c) showed mixed results: personality similarity had no reliable effect on its own, though it approached significance net of other predictors in Model 2. Among the demographic similarity measures, education showed a significant positive effect in isolation but did not retain predictive value once entered alongside the other similarity measures, again suggesting shared variance. Ethnicity

similarity showed a significant negative effect both individually and in Model 2, but its significance did not survive in the smaller, fully adjusted Model 3. Gender, born-in-Canada, education, religion, birth year, and religion's importance similarity showed no significant effects in any joint model.

Table 4: Standardized coefficients for H1 joint models

Standardized Coefficients (β) for H1 Joint Models

Variable	Model 1: Joint (Core)	Model 2: Joint + Demographics (excl. religion, birth year)	Model 3: Joint + All Demographics
General similarity (perceived)	0.31 (0.04)**	0.31 (0.04)**	0.30 (0.09)**
Political similarity (perceived)	-0.00 (0.04)	-0.00 (0.04)	-0.10 (0.09)
Political similarity (objective)	-0.00 (0.03)	0.02 (0.04)	0.09 (0.07)
Personality similarity (objective)	-0.03 (0.03)	-0.06 (0.04)†	-0.07 (0.07)
Gender similarity		-0.01 (0.04)	-0.03 (0.07)
Born in Canada similarity		-0.01 (0.04)	0.01 (0.07)
Ethnicity similarity		-0.10 (0.04)**	-0.09 (0.07)
Religion similarity			-0.09 (0.07)
Birth year similarity			0.03 (0.09)
Education similarity		0.05 (0.04)	0.11 (0.09)
Religion importance similarity		0.01 (0.04)	0.01 (0.08)
N	**830**	**757**	**210**

Note: Cell entries are standardized coefficients, with standard errors in parentheses. Blank = predictor not in that model. Model 2 excludes religion and birth year similarity to preserve sample size; Model 3 retains them at reduced N due to item missingness. † p < .10, * p < .05, ** p < .01

Conversation Structure

We tested whether discussing a non-political topic before the political topic was associated with higher interaction quality, using a dummy variable for whether the political topic was discussed first. There was no association between topic order and interaction quality ($\beta = -.01$, $p = .82$). Order was not associated with any of the demographic or personality variables checked, nor with gender, suggesting the two ordered conditions were well balanced, and this null finding is not attributable to a confounder. H2 was not supported.

Topic Engagement

Participant topic engagement was a significant predictor of interaction quality ($\beta = .16$, $p < .001$). This result was robust across composite constructs, whereby knowledge and comfort independently produced a similarly significant estimate. Partner topic engagement was also significantly associated with quality ($\beta = .059$, $p = .047$). When modeled alongside participant topic engagement, partner topic engagement's significance disappears ($\beta = .03$, $p = .274$), as participant topic engagement remains significant ($\beta = .16$, $p < .001$). Lastly, examining the interaction between participant topic engagement and partner topic engagement, we find that it is not associated with quality above the individual influences of participant topic engagement and their partner's topic engagement ($\beta = .04$, $p = .193$).

Overall, participant topic engagement was associated with higher conversation quality across the models (H3a), while partner topic engagement was only associated with conversation quality when modeled alone (H3b). The interaction between participant and partner topic engagement was not found to be associated with higher conversation quality (H3c).

Table 5: H3 regression results

H3: Topic Engagement Predicts Interaction Quality

Variable	b	SE	95% CI	t	β	p	n
Topic engagement (own)	0.083	0.015	[0.054, 0.112]	5.54	0.162	<.001	1144
Topic engagement (partner)	0.030	0.015	[0.000, 0.060]	1.99	0.059	0.047	1144
Topic engagement (own, joint model)	0.082	0.015	[0.052, 0.112]	5.34	0.159	<.001	1142
Topic engagement (partner, joint model)	0.017	0.015	[-0.013, 0.047]	1.09	0.033	0.274	1142
Own x Partner engagement interaction	0.023	0.018	[-0.012, 0.058]	1.30	0.037	0.193	1142

Conversational Balance and Extraversion

We used word counts extracted from conversation transcripts to measure each participant's relative share of speaking time and tested whether speaking more than one's partner was associated with higher quality, and whether this depended on extraversion. Neither the main effect of relative speaking time (β = .01, p = .63), the main effect of extraversion (β = - .01, p = .80), nor the interaction (β = - .004, p = .89) were significant predictors of quality.

Linguistic Style Matching

Using the transcripts, we computed each dyad's linguistic style matching (LSM) score (the degree to which partners used function words at similar rates) and tested whether this was associated with interaction quality. It was not (β = .03, p = .33), supporting prior work suggesting that LSM is unrelated to conversation quality.

Facial Mimicry

We used the recordings of the conversations and analyzing the facial data to test whether facial mimicry is associated with higher quality conversations. Neither one's own facial mimicry (β =

.05, p = .07), their partner's facial mimicry (β = -.005, p = .86), nor the interaction (β = -.05, p = .10) were significant predictors of quality.

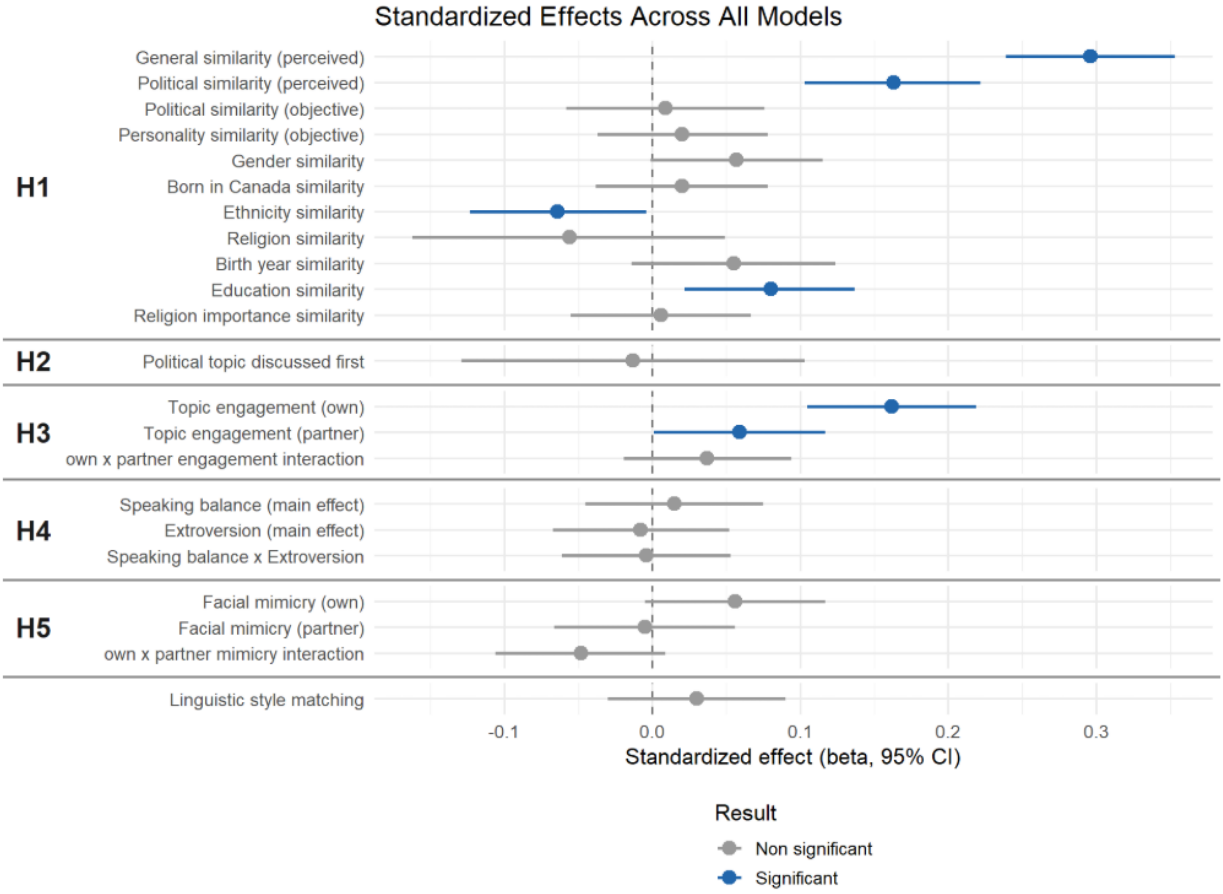
Summary

Across the five hypotheses, two variables showed clear, robust associations with interaction quality: general perceived similarity (H1a) and one's own topic engagement (H3a). Both effects held up consistently across every specification tested, including when entered alongside numerous other predictors. Perceived political similarity (H1b) was significant on its own, but when entered into a joint model with general perceived similarity, its effects became insignificant. Objective political similarity (H1c) was consistently uncorrelated with conversation quality across every model tested. The descriptive similarity measures showed mixed results. Ethnicity similarity showed a significant negative relationship with conversation quality, in both the solo model and the joint model (without religion and birth year to preserve a high n). However, in the smaller, fully adjusted model, its effects did not hold. Education similarity showed an effect in the solo model but not when modeled alongside the other similarity variables. The other descriptive similarity measures showed no results. The partner's engagement to the topic (H3c) was significant to conversation quality when modeled alone, but when modeled alongside participant engagement, it became insignificant.

The remaining hypotheses, conversation order (H2), speaking time balance and extraversion (H4), the interaction between participant and partner topic engagement (H3c), and facial mimicry (H5) were all unsupported, showing no association with conversation quality. Additionally, our open question of linguistic style matching was found to have no effect on conversation quality. Notably, the two variables that mattered most were both about participants'

own subjective engagement or perception, while the variables that did not were largely structural or behavioural features of the conversation. Figure 2 offers a summary of the findings from the individual models.

Figure 2: Summary of standardized effects in individual models (blue = significant result)



Discussion

We explored five hypotheses about what makes a good political conversations, defined by the subjective quality rating raised by participants. General perceived similarity (H1a) and topic engagement (H3a) were the only significant predictors of conversation quality held across model specifications. Perceived political similarity (H1b) and education similarity were significant when modeled alone, but not when modelled alongside other similarity measures. Ethnicity similarity

negatively affected conversation quality, but this effect disappeared when modeled with religion and birth year, possibly due less power from high missingness. Participant and partner topic engagement (H3a, H3b) were significant when modeled alone, but not when modeled together. Results did not support the other expectations concerning objective political similarity and objective general similarity (H1c, H1d), political topic order (H2), interactive partner-speaker topic engagement (H3c), conversation word count balance and extraversion (H4), and both facial (H5) and linguistic mimicry. This split is worth treating as a broader pattern rather than as five independent findings. Perceived general similarity and (non-interactive) topic engagement both relate to whether a participant can feel comfortable and capable of engaging with their partner on political topics. This result is aligned with different strands of current literature that underline the values of free expression (Hecht, 1978), perceived similarity (Balietti et al., 2021), and individual-level engagement (Reichert, 2016).

Perceived general similarity may be sufficiently important to improve conversation quality, more so than political and objective trait similarity. While political similarity significantly predicted conversation quality on its own, this relationship did not hold when modelling with perceived general similarity. Recognition of shared traits based on perceptions of partners as substantively similar—rather than as descriptively similar—may foster better quality through greater mutual persuasiveness (Balietti et al., 2021) and more positive beliefs about each others' intelligence, morals, and knowledge (Byrne, 1997). Importantly, however, it is difficult to establish directionality (whether perceived similarity leads to higher quality political conversations or whether higher quality political conversations contribute to feelings of similarity) concerning the mostly null results stemming from pre-interaction survey measure of similarity.

If greater topic engagement is associated with a greater quantity (Conover et al., 2022) and quality (Moy & Gastil, 2016) alongside internal political efficacy (Reichert, 2016), individuals who are more engaged themselves may rate their interactions more positively. This finding intuitively links greater personal engagement with better conversations. The weaker but still positive benefits from topic engagement in one's partner, but the lack of interactive effects between partner and personal engagement, suggests mutual engagement is helpful but potentially unnecessary for conversation quality. Topic engagement from one or more partners may influence interaction quality ratings by shaping substance and salience of the conversation (Hecht, 1978). By contrast, other structural features of the conversation (the sequencing of topics, how much each person spoke, how closely their language matched) may be less meaningful to what conversation partners take from an interaction. However, expectations concerning topic order, especially in light of the positive benefits of pre-conversation "small talk" (Mislin et al., 2011; Nadler, 2003), which may have occurred in the two-minute introduction period in conversations where political topics preceded non-political ones. Likewise, although speaking time might be relevant to conversation quality (Hirschi et al., 2023), our measure relying on word count may be less important than self-reported perceptions of conversation balance, which were unfortunately not recorded.

Both perceived similarity and topic engagement may also contribute to the ability for speakers to engage in free expression in conversation (Hecht, 1978). While research suggests that shared pre-existing attitudes and group identities may obstruct the instigation of cross-cutting political discussions in everyday talk, a good political conversation may rely more simply on perceptions of partner similarity and the presence of at least one engaged speaker. People may fear confrontation with strangers (Carlson & Settle, 2023; Wald et al., 2023) and anticipate conflict with out-partisans (Klar et al., 2018), Perceived similarity beyond self-reported political ideologies

and demographic traits—alongside the enjoyment of engagement directly through oneself or indirectly through one's partner—may help form a space that can foster positive affect, mutual trust, and a higher quality conversation.

There are a few limitations worth noting. Interaction quality was measured entirely through participants' own post-interaction ratings, so all of our results capture subjective experience rather than potentially objective measures of conversational enjoyment. This may entail an inherent feature of our research design, since outside observers are rarely prompted to share evaluations of everyday conversations. We also draw our sample from a single university population, which may not reflect how these patterns play out in more demographically or politically diverse groups. Another limitation is that participants rated their overall interaction rather than each prompt separately, so we cannot analyse the quality of independent conversation segments. Future research on everyday political conversations should take these limitations into account to assess whether observed results extend to different iterations of political deliberations.

This study highlights the importance of increasing perceptions of general similarities and enhancing engagement to improve the subjective quality of political topics. While people avoid such conversations due to negative expectations surrounding conflict with those holding opposing views, the experience of higher quality conversations may foster greater willingness to take part in an important form of democratic political participation. As benefits from similarity appear to stem from subjective interpretations of general similarity rather than descriptive demographics or self-reported political orientations, intergroup conflict and political polarization in political conversations may be limited by emphasizing perceptions of each together as more alike than not.

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Appendices

Descriptive Statistics: H1 Similarity Measures (Core and Demographic)

Variable	Mean	SD	N
Core Predictors			
Perceived General Similarity	59.73	21.41	1117
Perceived Political Similarity	60.09	20.95	1072
Objective General Similarity (Spearman)	-0.02	0.45	1158
Objective Political Similarity	-25.60	17.37	898
Demographic Predictors			
Gender Similarity	0.60	0.49	1158
Born in Canada Similarity	0.52	0.50	1158
Ethnicity Similarity	0.26	0.44	1086
Religion Similarity	0.22	0.41	358
Birth Year Similarity	-3.58	3.39	758
Education Similarity	-1.57	1.31	1158
Religion Importance Similarity	-1.24	0.98	1072

Appendix A: H1 Descriptive Statistics

H2: Sample Sizes by Order Condition

order_condition	n	proportion
Political Second	556	0.485
Political First	590	0.515

Appendix B: H2 Descriptive Statistics

H3: Quality and Engagement by Topic

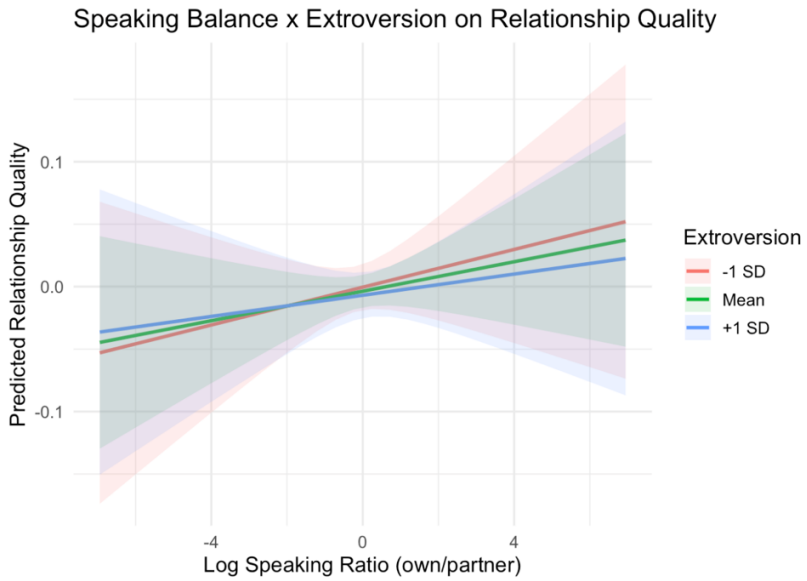
topic	n	Mean_Quality	SD_Quality	Mean_Engagement	SD_Engagement
idealPolitician	140	0.080	0.385	-0.306	0.865
regulateSocMed	132	0.076	0.385	0.087	0.653
climateChange	132	0.061	0.404	0.276	0.785
CanadianID	180	0.009	0.487	0.176	0.754
womenGovernment	136	-0.044	0.423	0.301	0.732
democracyMeaning	136	-0.047	0.406	-0.117	0.834
participatePolitics	144	-0.051	0.356	-0.098	0.863
legalSportBetting	146	-0.084	0.463	-0.301	0.833

Appendix C: H3 Descriptive Statistics

H4: Descriptive Statistics

Variable	Mean	SD
own_words	419.297	163.080
ptr_words	419.297	163.080
total_words	838.594	180.253
speaking_share	0.500	0.166
log_speaking_ratio	0.000	1.069
quality_relationship	-0.004	0.423

Appendix D: H4a Descriptive Statistics

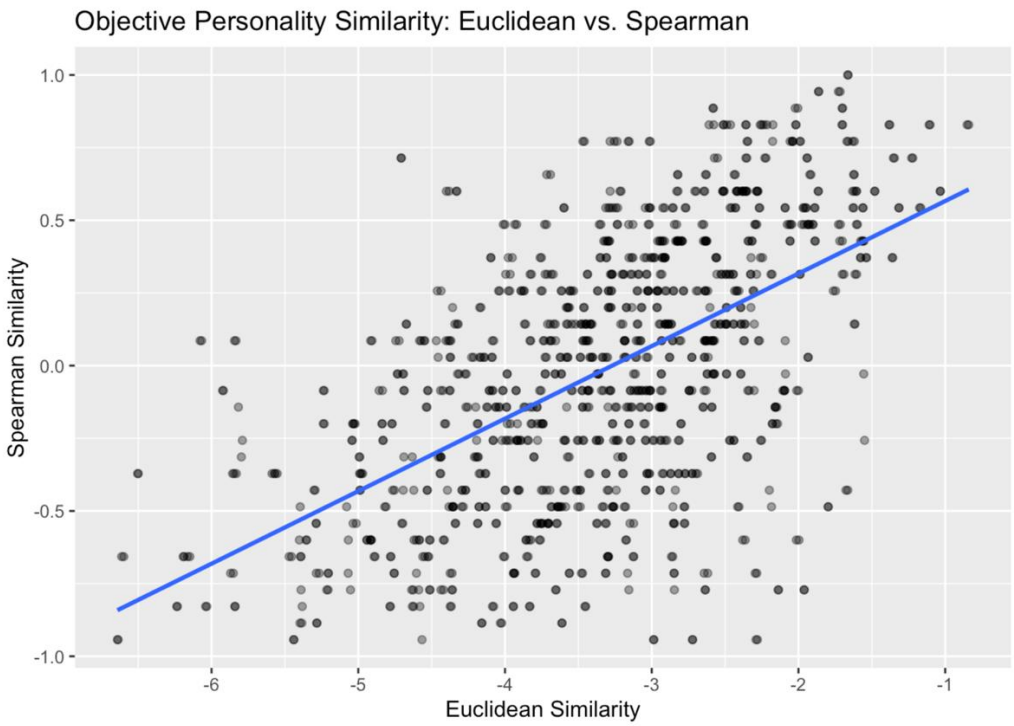


Appendix E: Speaking Balance by Extroversion on Conversation Quality

H4: Descriptive Statistics

Variable	Mean	SD
own_words	419.297	163.080
ptr_words	419.297	163.080
total_words	838.594	180.253
speaking_share	0.500	0.166
log_speaking_ratio	0.000	1.069
quality_relationship	-0.004	0.423

Appendix F: H4b Descriptive Statistics



Appendix G: Euclidean vs. Spearman Similarity correlation

Correlation Matrix: All Similarity Measures (H1 Core + Demographic)

	Perc. General Sim.	Perc. Political Sim.	Obj. Political Sim.	Obj. Personality Sim.	Gender Sim.	Born in Canada Sim.	Ethnicity Sim.	Religion Sim.	Birth Year Sim.	Education Sim.	Religion Importance Sim.
Perc. General Sim.	1										
Perc. Political Sim.	0.59	1									
Obj. Political Sim.	0.05	0.13	1								
Obj. Personality Sim.	0.06	0	0.04	1							
Gender Sim.	0.17	0.11	0.08	0.04	1						
Born in Canada Sim.	0.07	0.09	0.02	0.04	-0.06	1					
Ethnicity Sim.	0	-0.02	0	-0.02	0	0.09	1				
Religion Sim.	0.08	0.02	0.07	0.03	-0.11	0.19	0.23	1			
Birth Year Sim.	0.13	0.08	-0.02	-0.06	0.01	-0.02	0.04	0.11	1		
Education Sim.	0.07	0.01	-0.07	0.01	0.01	0.04	0.01	0.14	0.33	1	
Religion Importance Sim.	0.03	0.04	-0.02	-0.04	-0.03	0.03	0.08	0.09	-0.07	0.05	1

Appendix H: Full Similarity measures correlation