The Effects of Gender and Extraversion in Face-to-Face Political Conversations

Amanda Friesen*[1, 2]
Erin Heerey[2]
Samantha Jones[2]
Jesse Mehravar[1]
Jamie Chow[1]
Axel Dery[1]

University of Western Ontario

[1]Department of Political Science
[2]Department of Psychology

ABSTRACT

Political discussion can be an important element of democratic participation, yet we know little about what transpires during these conversations. Sometimes people choose to talk politics, but they also may find themselves in conversations with partners that shift into the political. An important element of this interpersonal communication is interaction quality. When people perceive their interactions as being higher in quality, they tend to experience more positive and less negative affect. These conversations may also be less stressful. Interaction quality metrics may be especially important in political discourse, where disagreements can become heated. Using round robin dyadic, in-person conversations with 40 groups of 3-7 participants in Canada during April and September 2023, we randomly assigned political and nonpolitical conversation prompts, following online personality and demographic surveys and preceding post-conversation partner ratings.

*Director, The Body Politics Lab, afries4@uwo.ca

The political world is rife with conflict, making everyday political discussion a form of social risk-taking. From the perspective of understanding social relationships, disclosing a politicized belief, arguing a politicized topic, or acknowledging support for a political movement with the non-likeminded are divisive enough actions to break up friendships, families, and employment relationships (Settle and Carlson, 2019). From a political perspective, the quality of deliberation around political issues and political participation are impacted by an individual's orientation toward conflict, and choice of political discussion partners (Huckfeldt et al., 2004; Mutz 2002). Whether online or with friends, family, or coworkers, understanding if and how people talk about politics is important to the health of democracy. For example, political knowledge increases with the frequency of these conversations and the size of individual discussion networks (Amsalem & Nir, 2021). There is a rich literature on the importance and nature of democratic deliberation, which we will not recount here. But we hope that our study of what happens during randomized political conversation topics with strangers will help inform this under-studied interaction point in the public sphere (Schmitt-Beck & Schnaudt, 2022).

Extraversion and Political Conversations

Social scientists have established many connections between personality traits and political attitudes and behavior (Gerber et al., 2010; Fatke, 2017). Yet, the relationship between extraversion and political behaviour is often under developed, offering assumptions that extraverts will generally like political acts that are social (Mondak 2010). Generally, there is a positive relationship between extraversion and all forms of political involvement (see Bromme, Rothmund & Azevedo, 2022 for a meta-analysis). Specifically, reporting engagement in political discussion is linked with higher levels of extraversion and larger discussion networks, though this has been based on self-report and not observed behavior (Mondak & Halperin, 2008; Huber

et al., 2021; Hibbing, Ritchie & Anderson, 2011). Extraverted individuals are more likely to discuss politics frequently, and they are also expected to be less responsive to disagreement during political discussions (Gerber et al., 2012).

Recent work in the United States, however, demonstrates that if the activities are pleasant, extraverts enjoy social and nonsocial political acts more than their less extraverted counterparts, and this effect is stronger for men (Friesen, Rebasso & Djupe, n.d.; Diener & Lucas, 2001). When examining whether a political act may involve conflict (e.g., attending a meeting, watching a political debate, etc.), extraverted men rate these activities as more pleasant compared to extraverted women, but all extraverts rate the conflict items as causing more happiness than introverts, with weaker effects among women (Friesen, Rebasso & Djupe, n.d.). This supports a long line of work demonstrating that women often avoid conflict, and men may seek it (Ulbig & Funk, 1999, Wolak, 2020). Furthermore, in a German sample, Neumann (2021) demonstrates that women are less likely than men to engage in political conversations, and this is mostly explained by a gender gap in efficacy, not past negative experiences in political discussions.

The Purposeful and the Incidental Models of Political Conversation

Much of the research on political conversations relies on self-reported behavior from surveys and political discussion networks. Two models appear at odds when studying in-person political conversations. On one hand, because political conversations have the potential of generating conflict, the *purposive model* of political discussion implies that individuals will seek politically similar discussion partners and avoid politically opposing views (Minozzi et al., 2020). This inclination towards seeking like-minded partners aligns with the concept of political homophily, which refers to people's tendency to interact with similar others (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Cook, 2001).

On the other hand, the *incidental model* argues that political talk is "non-purposive, informal, casual, and spontaneous" (Kim and Kim, 2008: 53). It implies that political conversations are driven by motivations other than politics (Lazer et al., 2010), therefore people are expected to interact about politics regardless of their ideological similarities (Mutz & Mondak, 2006). For scholars interested in explaining the nature of political conversations, these two arguments seem to sit uncomfortably alongside each other. Minozzi et al. (2020) demonstrated that political talks are predicted by incidental processes, with social context and network structure being better predictors than political information. This finding implies that most political conversations occur by chance rather than intentional seeking of like-minded peers. It suggests that people do not purposely avoid others of different political views; rather, they talk politics with those around them due to their social networks.

Along those lines, studies like Gerber et al. (2012) found that even when individuals engage in political discussions with those holding different views, they rarely confront opposing opinions directly. Therefore, even in diverse discussion networks, people might infrequently encounter opposing viewpoints, not due to a lack of exposure, but because they often select topics that avoid disagreements. The authors also find that extraversion moderates the impact of political agreement on the frequency of political conversations. However, these studies don't specifically examine gender's role in political talk. As this study aims to demonstrate, there's compelling evidence to suggest that gender can mediate the effect of extraversion on political discussions.

Generally, social scientists survey respondents about their political discussion activities, often asking for frequency of this activity along with a list or selection of types of discussion partners (e.g., family members, friends, co-workers, out partisans). We know very little about

how these conversations come about and what happens when political topics may emerge when talking with strangers or acquaintances. In a comprehensive face-to-face survey about political conversations across different types of networks (family, friends, strangers), Schmitt-Beck and colleagues investigated the motivations and experiences of everyday political talk in their project The Conversations of Democracy (for a theoretical review of how everyday political talk translates to deliberative democracy, see Schmitt-Beck & Schnaudt, 2022). The resulting series of studies reveal great asymmetry in political discussion across various social network ties, with some people reporting contributing very little to such social exchanges (Schmitt-Beck, 2022). Individuals also report bringing up different topics to avoid political talk or ending these conversations altogether (Schmitt-Beck, 2022; Settle and Carlson, 2019). Further evidence that conflict orientation influences political participation (Wolak, 2020), avoiding disagreeable topics and tense social moments is certainly central to the act of political discussion (Schmitt-Beck & Neumann, 2022).

Though individuals in The Conversations of Democracy German sample spoke about politics to strangers less often than with their friends and family, they reported there was little conflict in these stranger exchanges (Schmitt-Beck & Schnaudt, 2022), lessening the likelihood of political learning or "hearing from the other side" (Mutz, 2002; Wells et al., 2019). Other factors like social trust and conflict orientations may impact who seeks out or experiences political talk with strangers. Though the Conversations of Democracy project is as thorough of an exploration to date of strong and weak ties as well as encounters with strangers (no ties), it relies on participant memory and self-report. We know very little about what actually happens when political conversations come up during casual small talk between strangers and acquaintances, how

individual dispositions and social identities may impact these encounters, what emotion are expressed, and immediate reports of the experience.

Interaction Quality

Another important element of the social landscape is interaction quality. When people experience their interactions as being higher in quality, they tend to experience more positive and less negative affect (Main, Paxton & Dale, 2016; Mote et al., 2019; Kafetsios & Hess, 2019; Heerey & Kring, 2007). These conversations may also be less stressful (Main, Paxton & Dale, 2016). Interaction quality metrics may be especially important in political discourse, where disagreements can become heated. Because extraverts can be perceived as poor listeners (Flynn, Collins & Zlatev, 2023), we anticipate that conversation ratings will be moderated by the level of extraversion of one's conversation partner.

Hypotheses

Our original pre-registration (Appendix C) included hypotheses about individuals rating the quality of nonpolitical conversations higher than political topics, but due to logistical changes to our protocol, we were only able to ask participants to rate their overall conversation quality after discussing both kinds of topics. The general expectations about the effects of extraversion and gender remain the same.

1) Participants will rate their comfort with the interaction as higher for nonpolitical versus political topics. This will also be evident during the interaction as nonpolitical discussions will include more positive facial behaviour.
2) Gender and extraversion will moderate a social partner's interaction comfort, such that participants in conversations with extraverted men will report less comfort and show

more negative affect. Extraverted men, compared to all others, also will show more positive affect during political conversations.

3) Extraverted men will spend the most time talking on all topics, as compared to other men and all women.

Methods/Design

Participants

Our participants consist of undergraduate, professional (e.g., occupational therapy), and graduate students from a large Canadian university in southwestern Ontario. Participants were recruited via a mass email (see Appendix A) that was sent to all students and faculty at the university. The recruitment email informed participants the study would examine "how people exchange social signals when they chat about things like hobbies and interests, family, housing, healthcare, etc." Participants were required to be between the ages of 18 and 30 years old and be willing to attend an in-person session to participate in the study. The first wave of participants (N=143) completed the study during April and May of 2023. Data collection ceased in May 2023 as many students are away during the months of June, July, and August for summer break. As such, a second and final wave will be conducted in the fall of 2023. Recruitment for the study will stop once 250 participants or 40 sessions have been completed across the two waves.

The purpose of this study is to observe how everyday people have conversations about both political and non-political topics. Although student samples lack representativeness, students nonetheless makeup an important population of everyday people engaged in politics. Notably, we exclude graduate level students enrolled in political science, as such students likely hold more

political knowledge than everyday people and, more importantly, would be knowledgeable about the research of their peers and faculty.

Procedure Outline

This study examines how people converse about political and non-political topics (see Appendix B). Participants were asked to complete: (1) a pre-experimental survey; (2) a set of in-lab pre-experimental tasks; (3) round robin dyadic conversations; (4) post-interaction questionnaires; and (5) a post-experimental survey. Prior to data collection, the study was approved by the university's office of research ethics.

Online Pre-Lab Survey

After responding to the study invitation email, participants completed an online pre-lab survey via Qualtrics, starting with a review of the study's letter of information and providing consent. The pre-lab survey measured participants' demographic characteristics, attitudes, and beliefs (e.g., religion), along with aspects of their personality (e.g., risk-taking disposition). Participants reported their gender by selecting the gender they most "closely identify" with. Participants were presented with the following options: (1) man, (2), woman, (3), non-binary or could choose to instead complete the sentence "I identify as:" using a textbox. Once participants completed the pre-lab survey, they were asked to provide their availability for the in-lab session.

In-Lab Session

After completing the online pre-lab survey, participants were scheduled to come into the lab and engage in dyadic conversations with other participants in their session via a round robin design (described below) and completing several questionnaires. To reduce the likelihood that the pre-lab survey would influence their in-person lab session, participants were scheduled at

least three days after they completed the pre-lab survey. Each session had 3-7 participants, and session duration ranged from 1-2.5 hours, depending on the number of conversations completed. All sessions were audio and video recorded using the Viso System (Viso11) to control the cameras and manage the recordings. Videos were recorded at a rate of 25 frames per second.

Pre-experimental Tasks

For data tracking purposes, participants were assigned a colour-coded identification name tag upon arrival. This tag was placed on the top corner of each participants' shirt to help researchers identify participants in each conversation video. Additionally, the colour-coded ID tags helped guide participants through in-lab surveys and post-interaction questionnaires via colour-coded QR codes and colour-labeled computers. Once participants were given their ID tag, they completed the 60-item version of the HEXACO Personality Inventory – Revised (HEXACO-PI-R; Lee & Ashton, 2009) and watched an instructional video explaining the round robin design on their colour-labeled lab computer. The HEXACO was completed during this time to grant the experimenters time to set up the round robin design (described below).

The HEXACO-PI-R (Lee & Ashton, 2009) measures participants' personality across six domains: (1) honest-humility, (2) emotionality, (3) extraversion, (4) agreeableness, (5) conscientiousness, (6) openness to experience. Participants are presented with 60 statements which are rated from (1) strongly disagree to (5) strongly agree. While participants complete the full 60-item questionnaire, only the subscale measuring extraversion will be examined in the current study. The extraversion subscale consists of 10-items that assess participants' social self-esteem (e.g., "I am reasonably satisfied with myself overall"), social boldness (e.g., "In social situations, I'm usually the one who makes the first move"), sociability (e.g., "The first thing that I always do in a new place is make new friends") and liveliness (e.g., "On most days, I feel

cheerful and optimistic"). Several items (e.g., "I rarely express my opinions in group meetings") are reverse coded to match the measure's scoring guidelines. Scores across the extraversion subscale (including those reverse-coded) are then averaged such that greater mean scores indicate higher extraversion.

Round Robin Conversation Design

Participants engaged in multiple dyadic conversations across several rounds which continued until everyone spoke to each other exactly once. During a given round, dyad pairs were seated in their own rooms and engaged in conversation for 12 minutes. In the case of an odd number of participants, the unpaired participant in each round sat in a waiting room until the next round. A monitor was set up in each room to provide participants with the conversation prompts and an audio cue (i.e., bell ding) signalling when their discussion time was up.

At the beginning of each round, participants were instructed to introduce themselves to their partner (duration: 2 minutes). At the 2-minute mark, the audio cue sounded, and the monitor prompted participants to speak about a political or a non-political topic (duration: 5 minutes). After another 5 minutes, the monitor prompted participants to speak about a new topic (duration: 5 minutes). During each round, conversation topics alternated such that each participant dyad spoke about one political topic and one non-political topic. Conversation rounds were audio and video recorded with two wall-mounted cameras (one perpendicular to each participant). After each conversation round, participants scanned a colour coded QR code presented on the computer monitor. This brought them to the post-interaction questionnaire on Qualtrics, simultaneously passing data including participant and partner ID codes, conversation number and topics discussed into the survey. Upon completion, the post-interaction questionnaire informed participants about where to move (which room and chair) they would be in for the next round.

The topics selected for the study were decided upon by the two principal investigators and five doctoral students. The finalized topic list included 8 political and 8 non-political topics (the exact topic prompts presented to participants can be found in Appendix B). The topics were randomly selected each session, and as such, the composition of topics across sessions varied. In each session, all participant dyads discussed the same two topics, though the order of whether the political or non-political topics was presented first was randomized across pairs. For this study, only the topics' categorization (political versus non-political) is examined.

To determine pair composition, seating arrangements, and topic selections, a purpose-written python script was run by an experimenter. The experimenter ran the script while participants completed the pre-experimental tasks. Using the participants' IDs, the script created a conversation map that identified conversation partners, topics, and room/seating arrangements along with participants' colour coded QR code for each round. The script helped facilitate the round-robin design by ensuring that no individual had a conversation with the same partner or about the same topic more than once throughout the session, and that each participant had a chance to talk to every other participant. The political and non-political topics selected for each round were also randomized via the python script. Within a given round, every pair discussed the same two topics, and no topic was duplicated within a session. When the script ran, information from the script (i.e., topics, chair assignments, QR codes) was fed to a computer in each conversation room where a PsychoPy (Peirce et al., 2019) program controlled the round timing, prompt presentation, and presentation of individualized QR codes.

Post-Interaction Questionnaires

At the end of each conversation round participants completed a post-interaction questionnaire. To assist in data-tracking, the computer presented a pair of QR codes and

participants were instructed to scan the QR code that matched the colour of their ID tag with their smartphone (e.g., someone with a pink ID tag would scan the pink QR code on screen). Once participants scanned their QR code, they were directed to the post-interaction questionnaire, which measured participants' feelings regarding their assigned topics, as well as their conversation partner. The current study assesses participants' interaction comfort, which is measured by the following item: "I felt comfortable during the interaction" rated from (1) strongly agree to (5) strongly disagree. Text at the end of the post-interaction survey indicated the location (room and chair) to which room the participant was assigned for the next round.

Post-experimental Survey

Participants continued to shuffle between rooms and speak with different partners until everyone within the session has spoken to each other once. Participants then returned to their original colour-labelled computer to complete the final set of questionnaires. The post-experimental survey further assessed aspects of participants' personality, attitudes, and beliefs. Upon completion, participants were compensated $30 CAD for their participation.

Analysis Plan

Non-verbal behaviour coding. Following the session, each video file was labeled and then coded for the presence of visible displays of social cues using the facial action unit (see Ekman & Friesen, 1978) module of FaceReader 9.1 (Noldus FaceReader 9). FaceReader uses an optimized deep learning model to classify the presence of a variety of facial cues on a frame-by-frame basis for the duration of the video. From these codes, FaceReader additionally calculates the degree to which facial behaviour is positive versus negative, providing a continuous valence trace across the interaction. These data are subsequently exported to individual files for further analysis using purpose-written Python scripts.

To examine the present hypotheses, the script collected the valence trace from each file and standardized it within participant, to ensure that individual differences in participants' natural facial display intensity did not bias results and that "neutral" face postures were centered at 0. The code then calculated the proportion of frames for each conversation epoch (unscripted initial conversation; political conversation; non-political conversation) at which the intensity of behaviour was below -1 standard deviation below the mean or above +1 standard deviation above the mean. These proportions comprised our estimates of negative and positive facial behaviour, respectively. Finally, the script placed these data into a new data-frame containing information about each participant's demographic characteristics, personality, conversation ratings and partners.

Appendices

Appendix A. Recruitment Email

Dear Campus Community Member:

The Western Social Behaviour Lab and the Body Politics Lab are joining forces to conduct a study examining how people exchange social signals when they chat about things like hobbies and interests, family, housing, healthcare, etc. To learn about this, we will be hosting a series of conversation sessions in which participants will have a chance to chat with others about a variety of topics.

To be eligible to participate you must be:
• Between 18 and 30 years old
• Willing to attend an in-person study session in which you chat with a series of other participants on several topics. Note: Conversations will be video recorded.

You can find more information about the study and what we are asking participants to do at this link, which will take you to our consent form:
https://uwopsych.eu.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_eEYOYkimcPsdBjw

Participation takes between 2 hours and 2.5 hours. The first part of the study (about 20-30 minutes) will consist of several questionnaires and will take place online. The main study session will take place in person, in the Social Science Centre (Room 6400). Study participants will receive $30 in exchange for their time.

Thank you,

Dr Erin Heerey (eheerey@uwo.ca) and Dr Amanda Friesen (afries4@uwo.ca)
Social Science
Western University

Appendix B. Topic Prompts

Political topics

- What do you think about women in government?
- What are your thoughts about legalized sports betting?
- What does it mean to be a Canadian?
- What do you think of government regulation of social media content?
- What are some issues with climate change?
- What does it mean to live in a democracy?
- Describe your ideal politician.
- Do you think you would ever participate in politics?

Non-political topics

- Would you be in a relationship with a social media influencer?
- Do you usually make New Year's resolutions?
- What do you think about astrology/zodiac signs?
- What activities do you enjoy doing with friends?
- What are your thoughts about gambling?
- Do you play or watch any sports?
- Do you have any recurring dreams?
- If you could live anywhere in the world, where would it be?

Appendix C. Original Pre-registration

Personality, Gender & Dyadic Measures of Quality of Conversation
across Political and Nonpolitical Conversations

Abstract: The political world is rife with conflict, making everyday political discussion a form of social risk-taking. Sometimes people choose to talk politics, but they also may find themselves in conversations with partners that shift into the political. An important element of this interpersonal communication is interaction quality. When people experience their interactions as being higher in quality, they tend to experience more positive and less negative affect. These conversations may also be less stressful. Interaction quality metrics may be especially important in political discourse, where disagreements can become heated. Using round robin dyadic, in-person conversations with 40 groups of 8 participants in Canada in 2023, we will randomly assign political and nonpolitical conversation prompts, following online personality and demographic surveys and before post-conversation partner ratings. We expect participants to rank interaction quality higher for nonpolitical as compared to political topics, but this effect will be moderated by gender and extraversion, such that extraverted men will rate political conversations as equal or as high of quality as nonpolitical conversations. Using the conversation transcripts, we also expect extraverted men to spend the most time talking on all topics, as compared to other men and all women, leading those talking with extraverted men to rate their interaction quality lower. Using remote photoplethysmography from recorded video, we will also explore changes in heart rate alongside these hypotheses, with the expectation that political topics, extraversion, and gender will moderate heart rate changes that occur during sessions.

Hypotheses

1) Participants will rank interaction quality higher for nonpolitical as compared to political topics.
2) Interaction quality rankings will be moderated by gender and extraversion, such that extraverted men will rate political conversations as equal or as high in quality as nonpolitical conversations. Women will rate political conversations lower in quality than nonpolitical conversations, regardless of extraversion.
3) Extraverted men will spend the most time talking on all topics, as compared to other men and all women, leading those talking with extraverted men to rate their interaction quality as lower.

Exploratory

Heart rate will be higher during political relative to non-political topics, but this may be moderated by gender and extraversion.

In addition, we will use coded non-verbal behaviour data (coded with Noldus FaceReader 9.0) data to pilot a comparison of facial expressions and reciprocal social cue use during political and nonpolitical conversations. We will also use the transcripts from the topical conversations as pilot data for understanding how people talk about various issues, with the intent to design future survey questions.

Sample and Methods

We will send out a university-wide recruitment email. Participants will first complete an online survey of demographic and political orientation questions before signing up for a spot in the lab study. When they arrive at the lab, they will be assigned a participant number and placed in a room to complete an online personality questionnaire. Next, participants will be randomly assigned to one of two chairs in 3 separate rooms, with two people per room. A computer monitor in each room will prompt the participants to introduce themselves, then after 2 minutes, the monitor will display the first conversation topic. The topics will be randomized within each round, such that each dyad will be talking about the same topics as the other dyads. Following each dyadic conversation, participants will scan a unique QR code in the room that will take them to a short post-conversation questionnaire in which they will recall the conversation topics, answers some questions about the topic, rate their perceptions of the conversation and their partner. Then they will be told which chair in which room to go to next. This process will repeat until all participants have spoken to each other person in the group. When the conversations conclude, the participants will return to the first room and complete a post-study questionnaire. Upon completion of this entire process, they will receive $30.

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