

Heatedness in Political Talk: Do Perceptions of Tone Shape Reported Political Discussion Aversion?

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Abstract. Political discussions—especially when they involve disagreement—can decrease polarization and better inform the public. Yet people are strongly averse to them. We propose that this aversion is partly driven by a dislike of heated tones. Using three pre-registered survey experiments (N=1,738; N=1,000; N=391) and one robustness check (N=1,230), we indeed find that heated tones shape reported discussion aversion, surpassing even the deterrent effect of disagreement. In other words, people would rather take part in a calm, *disagreeable* discussion than a heated, agreeable one. Our findings suggest that political discussions only have the power to decrease polarization and inform the public if they are calm enough for people to want to engage in the interaction.

Key Words: political discussion; political disagreement; polarization

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Introduction

There are a myriad of concerns about today's political climate. One of the most prominent of these is psychological polarization—partisans disliking, distrusting, and avoiding out-partisans (Iyengar et al. 2019)—which can lead to the dehumanization of out-partisans (Cassese 2021; Martherus et al. 2021) and political sectarianism, or the “othering, aversion, and moralization” of political groups (Finkel et al. 2020). Other related concerns include partisans having party-aligned policy views (Webster and Abramowitz 2017; but see Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope 2008), people's (in)ability to navigate politics, fake news susceptibility, and an increase in anti-democratic attitudes and support for political violence (Finkel et al. 2020; Kingzette et al. 2021; but see Broockman, Kalla, and Westwood 2020).

One potential solution to these concerns is more political discussion, especially across party lines. Political discussions can increase tolerance of others and their views (Allport 1954; Kalla and Broockman 2020; Levendusky and Stecula 2021; Mutz 2006; Pettigrew and Tropp 2006; Rossiter 2022; Rossiter and Carlson 2024), moderate political attitudes (Klar 2014), decrease partisan motivated reasoning (Klar 2014), and increase learning (Ognyanova 2020), as people often learn about politics through discussion (Carlson 2019). These findings align with research noting that discussing politics is vital to democracy (Almond and Verba 1963; Delli Carpini, Cook, and Jacobs 2004). In fact, Iyengar et al. (2019) recommend “constructive engagement” across party lines to mitigate polarization:

One potentially promising strand of research is to build on the insights of inter-group contact theory (Pettigrew & Tropp 2011) and examine whether constructive

engagement between Democrats and Republicans could potentially reduce partisan animus. This is also related to a long tradition of work showing that diverse social networks—which expose individuals to different political points of view—foster tolerance for opposing viewpoints, which should also ameliorate affective polarization (Mutz 2002).

Yet people are averse to discussing politics (Carlson and Settle 2022; Huckfeldt et al. 2013; Mutz 2002, 2006), both with in-partisans (Klar, Krupnikov, and Ryan 2018) and *especially* with out-partisans (Carlson and Settle 2022; Settle and Carlson 2019). Research even finds that partisans feel less out-party animus when told out-partisans rarely discuss politics (Druckman et al. 2022; see also Klar et al. 2018), further demonstrating people’s distaste for political discussion. This aversion has two important implications. First, it harms social relationships (Chen and Rohla 2018; Frimer and Skitka 2020; Warner, Colaner, and Park 2021). Second, it suggests that political discussions may not cure democratic ills, given how averse people are to having them.

We propose, though, that there is one important piece missing from research on political discussion that could influence people’s discussion aversion: the tone with which political discussions occur. Heated tones, we argue, could deter people from discussing politics—and people’s aversion to disagreement could largely reflect an assumption that disagreements are heated, with *tone* (rather than the disagreement itself) driving much of the aversion. Finding that tone is as important as (or more important than) disagreement in motivating discussion aversion would suggest that research has overestimated the importance of disagreement—and underestimated the importance of tone—in people’s desire to discuss politics.

Given the dearth of research on tone and discussion aversion, we first explore tone as a concept—attempting to conceptualize tone in political discussion and contextualize it by examining the types of political discussions people have. Next, we assess if tone (or the perception of tone) shapes reports of discussion aversion and among whom this occurs. Across three pre-registered survey experiments and one pre-registered survey, we find that tone indeed shapes reports of discussion aversion and that it is a stronger reported deterrent than even disagreement.

Our approach, however, has limitations, as we allow respondents *themselves* to define what a heated versus calm discussion is. An alternative and complementary approach could give respondents a discussion that they (the researchers) define as heated and ask about discussion desire. With our particular design decision here, a limitation of our findings is that we can only speak to the effect of a *perceived* heated discussion (as compared to a perceived calm one). These perceptions potentially vary across numerous dimensions—something future research should examine. For now, we feel confident that our findings show that most people are highly averse to a discussion they perceive to be heated, and that their aversion to a heated discussion (as they define it) is stronger than to a disagreeable discussion (as they define it).

While this is merely a first step towards understanding how tone shapes discussion, our findings have important implications for understanding polarization and political interactions. Our results demonstrate that although past research focuses acutely on *disagreement* in discussion aversion, disagreement is not necessarily what is driving most people away from political discussions—it is a dislike (and perhaps anticipation) of the heated tone with which political discussions, especially when they involve disagreement, can occur. Thus, *how* we talk about politics is vitally important to if people report wanting to engage in political discussion.

Theoretical Expectations

Political Discussions. We focus here on informal political discussions—or “everyday talk” (Mansbridge 1999). This is different from political deliberation (Elster and Przeworski 1998), which is more formal and requires certain conditions be met.¹ The discussions we instead examine include informal in-person and online discussions with friends, family, acquaintances, or even strangers (Walsh 2004).² As Mansbridge (1999) explains, “Everyday talk, if not always deliberative, is nevertheless a crucial part of the full deliberative system” (pg. 211).

Scholars have long believed discussions are important for political information transmission, attitude moderation, outgroup feelings, and social relationships, with Delli Carpini et al. (2004) claiming they are an “indicator of democratic health.” Downs (1957), for example, identifies discussion as a “free” information source that helps individuals make political choices.³ And Ognyanova (2020) finds that high-frequency discussion partners can spread political knowledge—which can also mitigate information losses and distortions from single-channel political communication (Carlson 2018, 2019). In fact, even the *anticipation* of political conversation can improve political knowledge as much as the actual discussion itself (Eveland 2004). Although homogeneous political discussions can *exacerbate* polarization (Druckman, Levendusky

¹ Although we do not examine this, we expect that moderators and rules in deliberations should keep tone largely calm—making tone less important because it does not vary much.

² We expect tone to matter similarly in each context, although we leave this for future research. Briefly examining the online versus in-person dynamic, we find that online discussions are more heated than in-person discussions (see also Barnidge 2017; Coe, Kenski, and Rains 2014), likely because they do not have the same social norms that guide in-person discussions (Bail 2021). This suggests that people could be more averse to online discussions, something that should be examined in future work.

³ Although see Connors, Pietryka, and Ryan (2022) for how motivations influence these interactions’ usefulness (see also Ahn, Huckfeldt, and Ryan 2014).

and McClain 2018), when these discussions are cross-cutting they can promote learning (Eveland and Hively 2009), moderate attitudes (Klar 2014), and decrease partisan motivated reasoning (Klar 2014).

Beyond learning and attitude moderation, cross-cutting political discussions can improve outgroup feelings, something noted by Allport's (1954) classic intergroup contact hypothesis. These discussions can increase people's value in the free exchange of ideas and thus tolerance of others and their ideas (Huckfeldt, Mendez, and Osborn 2004; Huckfeldt et al. 2013; Mutz 2002, 2006; Mutz and Mondak 2006; Pattie and Johnston 2008). For example, Kalla and Broockman (2020) find that face-to-face conversations can reduce exclusionary attitudes and Levendusky and Stecula (2021), Rossiter and Carlson (2024), and Rossiter (2022) find that they can decrease affective polarization (but see Busby 2021 and Wojcieszak and Warner 2020). These types of findings are behind Iyengar et al.'s (2019) recommendation for interparty contact to improve out-party attitudes.

Lastly, discussing politics—especially when there is disagreement—is important to our social lives. Political disagreement in relationships can lead to social strain. Research has found, for example, that politically diverse Thanksgiving dinners were shorter than uniform ones, controlling for other factors (Frimer and Skitka 2020). Behavioral data confirms this, finding that people speak less to out-party family members, especially after contentious elections (Chen and Rohla 2018). Similarly, Warner et al. (2021) explain how familial political disagreements can lead people to avoid political discussion and communication generally, which ultimately hurts shared family identity.

Although scholars note the trade-off of disagreeable discussions for participation (Mutz 2006; though see Bello 2012; Nir 2011; Sumaktoyo 2021) as well as identify ways in which

these discussions can instead *increase* identity salience and negative out-group feelings (Walsh 2004; see also Settle 2018; Wojcieszak and Warner 2020),⁴ many of these results indicate that discussing politics, especially when there is disagreement, is beneficial to society (e.g., Mutz and Mondak 2006; Kwak et al. 2005; Minozzi et al. 2020; Pattie and Johnston 2008). As Mutz (2006) explains, “hearing the other side has long been considered important for democratic citizens” (pg. 9).

However, research finds that people are quite averse to discussing politics⁵ (Argyle and Freeze 2024; Carlson and Settle 2022; Huckfeldt et al. 2013), even distancing themselves from people in their network who *do* discuss politics (Klar et al. 2018) and lowering their out-party animus to those who do *not* do so (Druckman et al. 2022). Although this “disappointing frequency of cross-cutting conversations” (Mutz 2006, pg. 61) is not just driven by disagreement, disagreement within these discussions makes people even *more* averse to them (Settle and Carlson 2019). People even use apolitical cues to draw inferences about people’s political beliefs and then use those to decide whether they will interact with them—when they infer disagreement, they are less likely to do so (Lee 2021; see also Carlson and Settle 2022; Huckfeldt and Sprague 1995).

This tendency to avoid cross-cutting political discussions is driven by various factors, largely related to the idea that these discussions are often uncomfortable and costly (Carlson and Settle 2022). This can be true for those both politically- and socially-motivated. For those *politically*-motivated, avoiding the “other side’s” opinions (Frimer, Skitka, and Motyl 2017) can help

⁴ This also suggests there are conditions under which political discussions are useful versus detrimental (Allport 1954; Carlson and Settle 2022). In fact, Connors et al. (2022) find that individual motivations shape whether interpersonal interactions are beneficial or harmful. It is also possible that tone affects this as well, something to be examined in future research.

⁵ Walsh (2004), however, notes that people often discuss politics without realizing they are doing so, and Carlson and Settle (2022) note that political discussions occur quite often.

meet affirmation goals and maintain social distance from outpartisans (Iyengar et al. 2019). For those *socially*-motivated, these discussions can feel especially uncomfortable and risky (Carlson and Settle 2022)—a feeling that is exacerbated when covering divisive topics that provoke visceral reactions (Goodin 2006)⁶ and for those who do not feel especially competent (Conover, Searing, and Crewe 2002), are not especially interested in politics (Klar and Krupnikov 2016), or are in the interaction’s opinion minority (Carlson and Settle 2022). Further, as polarization increases, individuals with contrasting views are even *less* likely to converse with those with which they disagree (Wells et al. 2017). Thus, the very discussions researchers hope could *reduce* polarization will happen less often *because* of polarization.

Research also finds that discussion aversion varies with one’s level of conflict orientation (Ulbig and Funk 1999; see also Testa, Hibbing, and Ritchie 2014). Conflict orientation measures one’s comfort with conflict, where people range from conflict averse to acceptant. Thus, this trait can shape how often people engage in, how people act in, and the outcomes of political discussion (Carlson and Settle 2022; Conover et al. 2002; Doherty et al. 2019; Huckfeldt and Mendez 2008; Mutz 2006; Sydnor 2019a).

Doherty et al. (2019), for example, find that conflict averse individuals believe disagreeable discussions are less interesting and informative while more stressful and frustrating—suggesting that the conversational risks noted earlier are (at least perceived to be) higher (and the benefits lower) among the conflict averse. Indeed, Carlson and Settle (2022) find that the conflict averse perceive more risks and less value in certain conversations and are more likely to deflect or avoid them. Lastly, Sydnor (2019a) finds that conflict orientation shapes how people respond

⁶ Although, conversely, emotions can also *motivate* political discussion (Wolak and Sokhey 2022).

to discussion incivility. This research highlights the importance of conflict orientation in discussion aversion, noting perhaps the most important individual trait in determining how likely someone is to engage in political discussion.

Thus, people are averse to discussing politics. This aversion is shaped by individual variation (e.g. conflict orientation), general context (e.g. societal polarization), and discussion-specific context (e.g. discussion disagreement). We propose, though, that there is another important driver of political discussion aversion that has been overlooked: the perceived heatedness of the discussion.

Tone. We expect that people’s desire to participate in political discussions is determined not just by the aforementioned variables—including whether the discussion is disagreeable⁷—but by the *tone* of the conversation (i.e. whether it is perceived to be heated or calm). By “tone” we mean respondents’ perception of the discussion and whether they would define it as “heated” or “calm”—this could involve incivility (Mutz and Reeves 2005), anger (Webster 2020; Webster, Connors, and Sinclair 2022) and other emotions, and/or even the volume with which the discussion occurs and intensity with which people are speaking. Because we are interested in how people’s perceptions of a discussion’s heatedness influences their discussion desire, we also create a respondent-driven conceptualization of tone using these and other descriptors (see “Conceptualizing Tone”). However, we leave dissecting the *effect* of each particular component of tone for future research. Because this research is a first step, instead we focus on understanding tone more broadly and examining its general effect on discussion aversion.

⁷ For ease of understanding tone’s effect, we conceptualize disagreement as dichotomous—yet note that other research uses a more nuanced approach by conceptualizing it as continuous (Klofstad et al. 2013).

Previous research suggests tone should matter (e.g. Sydnor 2019a). First, research finds that people react to tone-related behavior at the elite level. Mutz and Reeves (2005), for example, show how witnessing others’ incivility on TV reduces trust in government, and Druckman et al. (2019) show that media incivility influences polarization—where out-party incivility polarizes and in-party incivility *depolarizes*.⁸ Similarly, Huddy and Yair (2021) find that witnessing elites’ either hostile or warm interactions influences affective polarization.

Second—and more relevant to our endeavor—research finds that tone-related behavior can drive people away from politics, suggesting it could also drive people away from political discussion. Studies have shown that the intensity of today’s political climate motivates people’s dislike of politics and the politically engaged (Krupnikov and Ryan 2022; see also Klar et al. 2018; Klar and Krupnikov 2016). Similarly, Bor and Petersen (2022) find that the hostility of online political discussions—driven by the visibility of hostile individuals—leads people to infer that all types of political discussions are going to be hostile. And in examining why people distance themselves from disagreeable others in their network, Carlson and Settle (2022) note that people do this to “avoid discussions that led to anger, frustration, and confrontation” (pg. 189).

Lastly, research demonstrates that political interactions’ success depends on variables related to tone. For example, Warner et al. (2021) find that “respecting divergent opinions”—including respecting one’s beliefs and active listening—is the only effective strategy to deal with political disagreement. Similarly, Masullo and Kim (2021) show that when comments attempting

⁸ This research focuses on incivility, a construct related to but distinct from tone. As we conceptualize it, heated discussions can be uncivil—they are likely more uncivil than calm discussions are (indeed, our Study 1 data show that respondents define heated discussions as involving more incivility than calm discussions). Yet incivility does not seem to be a necessary nor sufficient aspect of tone, according to respondents—using nationally representative data from the robustness check study (N=1,230), we find that 87.45% of respondents view incivility and tone as distinct: 10.42% view them as “entirely different” and 5.37%, 28.34%, and 43.32% say heated discussions are “always,” “often,” or “sometimes” (respectively) uncivil but also include other qualities (11.40% view them as “exactly the same” and 1.14% say other). See Appendix D for question wording.

to correct misinformation are uncivil, people increase their dislike of out-partisans. Further, Peacock (2019) finds that conflict causes people to avoid expressing their opinions in conversations, especially when their conversation partner is perceived as being uncivil. Even in Kalla and Broockman's (2020) findings on reducing exclusionary attitudes with conversations, they note that the conversations must involve "non-judgmentally exchanging narratives." Lastly, Levendusky and Stecula's (2021) finding that these discussions can reduce affective polarization have the nuance that their most influential treatment was engaging in "civil discussion" across party lines.

Indeed, Carlson and Settle (2022) note that goals of accuracy, affirmation, and (mostly) affiliation shape people's willingness to engage (and how they act) in political discussion—a heated tone could cripple at least two of these goals, as people might learn less (accuracy) and relationships might be threatened (affiliation) in heated discussions. This further suggests that heated tones should shape people's discussion desire, as these tones may attenuate the effect of accuracy goals in motivating engagement (if people assume they will learn less in heated conversations) as well as heighten concerns about affiliation. In fact, Conover et al. (2002) note how social concerns about discussions can be exacerbated when discussions become heated, explaining: "A few people 'like heated discussions'...But far more worry about the social consequences of contentiousness" (pg. 55).

Inspired by these findings, we expect perceptions of tone will matter in people's reported desire to discuss politics. In particular, we expect people to report more aversion to heated than calm discussions (all else equal) and heatedness to be as important as (or more important than) disagreement in shaping reported discussion aversion.

Empirical Approach

We examine tone and discussion aversion with three pre-registered online survey experiments and one pre-registered robustness check with U.S. adults—using convenience samples (Lucid and Prolific), a national stratified sample from YouGov (Cooperative Election Study [CES]), and a nationally representative sample from Prolific. Discussion of platforms, data quality, and sample demographics are in the Appendix, where details about the robustness check study with the nationally representative Prolific sample (N=1,230) can be found.

All the studies asked respondents about past or hypothetical future experiences. This approach relies on research finding that imagined experiences can elicit emotional responses to real-world situations (Dadds et al. 1997), that imagined intergroup contact functions largely the same way as it does in the real world (Crisp and Turner 2009), and that situational hypotheticality is a valid experimental approach (see Brutger et al. 2022). Although our designs did not assign respondents to “real” discussions, they increased our internal validity by allowing us heightened control over treatments (Shadish, Cook, and Campbell 2002). Of course, it is possible that there is a disconnect whereby even if people do not *want* to engage in particular discussions, when placed in one, they indeed engage. Thus, we hope future researchers extend this work to examine if reported desired behavior in these interactions (e.g. respondents reporting less desire to engage in discussions when they are assigned to a heated versus calm discussion) translates to real world behavior (actually avoiding heated discussions more often than calm discussions). Here, though, we focus on reported discussion *desire* rather than *behavior*.

In particular, Study 1 (Lucid; N=1,738) asked respondents: 1) to conceptualize different discussions, varying disagreement and tone; 2) the proportion of online or in-person political disagreements they have had that are heated versus calm; and 3) about political discussion desire, controlling for issue content (Rossiter 2021) and disagreement. Studies 2 (CES; N=1,000) and 3 (Prolific; N=391) asked respondents about discussion desire, varying tone and disagreement and incorporating conflict orientation (Ulbig and Funk 1999). Study 2 also asked respondents the proportion of political disagreements they have had that are heated versus calm. See Appendix for questionnaires.

We present study details and findings in two empirical sections—first exploring tone conceptually and contextually and then testing if heated tones shape discussion aversion and among whom this occurs. In the first empirical section, we examine how people think about heated and calm political discussions. For tone to be as important as we propose it is, people should conceptualize heated and calm political discussions differently and the former should be more negative than the latter. This is indeed what we find. Relatedly, we ask if people report having disagreements that are both calm and heated. If all disagreements are heated, then we are conflating disagreement and tone, but if people report having calm *and* heated disagreements, this suggests that *within* disagreement, tone can vary—this is, again, what we find.

Next, we address our main question: do perceptions of heated tones shape reported discussion aversion? We first examine if after controlling for disagreement and topic, people report more aversion to heated than calm political discussions. We then test the *relative* aversion to tone and disagreement. Because tone and disagreement are related concepts, we randomly vary these two elements to both disentangle them and examine which more strongly drives aversion. Lastly, we examine which individual traits shape aversion to heatedness and then focus in particular on

conflict orientation—testing if the more conflict averse are also more averse to heatedness, as they typically are to disagreement, and examining how the conflict *acceptant* react to heatedness. Together, our findings demonstrate that people report even more aversion to heated tones than to disagreement, suggesting that past research may have overestimated the effect of disagreement on discussion aversion.

Conceptualizing and Contextualizing Tone

In this section we use Studies 1 and 2 to conceptualize tone and assess the proportion of political disagreements that are heated versus calm. We do this as a conceptualization endeavor, but also to examine where respondents see dividing lines in political discussions: by disagreement, by tone, or by both? Further, here we can address the worry that all disagreements are perceived as heated—if this were the case, respondents would report that most or all disagreements are heated, which would suggest that tone and disagreement cannot be disentangled.⁹ Yet this is not the case: people *do* recognize the difference between calm and heated disagreements—and they have both. We also note that tone is likely correlated with level of disagreement and discussion topic, and our next empirical section (“Does Tone Shape Discussion Aversion?”) addresses this.

Conceptualizing Tone. We first use Study 1 (Lucid, N=1,738), where we randomly assigned respondents to one of four conditions, asking respondents: “What do you think of when you think

⁹ We further validate the distinction between tone and disagreement in the robustness check study (N=1,230), where we indeed find that most respondents view them as conceptually distinct: 7.63% view them as “exactly the same,” 11.04% view them as “entirely different,” and the vast majority view them as related but distinct—26.62%, 38.64%, and 14.94% say heated discussions “always,” “often,” and “sometimes” (respectively) have disagreement, but also include other qualities (1.14% say other). See Appendix D for question wording.

of a [heated/calm] political discussion where people [agree/disagree]?” Respondents were given a variety of words to choose from and could choose as many as they liked (see Appendix A). The most chosen descriptors (Table 1) illustrate what respondents believe happens in these discussions. Although there is some heterogeneity in people’s perceptions that should be investigated in future research, here we focus on the general associational differences between these four types of discussions. Heated political discussions are associated with loud voices, anger, and lack of reason—and heated *disagreeable* discussions also include incivility and anxiety, while heated *agreeable* discussions also include interest and people listening. Calm political discussions—both agreeable and disagreeable—are associated with respect, civility, people listening, reason, and interest.

These data also demonstrate quantitatively (Table A1) that across all 16 descriptors, heated discussions are more negative than calm discussions *and* that the effect of tone on these descriptors is stronger than that of disagreement—sometimes more than 4 or 5 times the size or significant when disagreement is not. Heated discussions have less people listening and are louder, angrier, more anxiety-ridden, sadder, more emotional, more terrible, and less reasonable, civil, fun, interesting, enjoyable, and respectful.

Table 1. Descriptors of Political Discussions

Condition	Word 1	Word 2	Word 3	Word 4	Word 5
Heated, Agree	Loud voices (188)	Interesting (144)	Anger (121)	People listening (111)	Unreasonable (101)
Heated, Disagree	Loud voices (273)	Anger (231)	Uncivil (205)	Unreasonable (191)	Anxiety (174)
Calm, Agree	Respect (288)	Civil (249)	People listening (249)	Reasoned (222)	Interesting (208)
Calm, Disagree	Respect (276)	People listening (257)	Civil (250)	Reasoned (232)	Interesting (202)

Table shows the most chosen descriptors in each condition along with the number of respondents who chose that descriptor.

Contextualizing Tone. We next examine the proportion of heated versus calm disagreements that people report having.¹⁰ Study 2 (CES) asked a third of respondents (N=348) to estimate the proportion of political disagreements they have had that have been calm versus heated. On a scale from “all have been heated” (1) to “all have been calm” (100), the average response (using survey weights) was 53.55 (SD=22.29)—demonstrating that people report largely having a mix of heated and calm disagreements, but that they report actually having more *calm* than *heated* disagreements ($p=.030$). Study 1 (Lucid, N=1,738) asked the same question, but randomized participants to be asked about online or in-person conversations. On a scale from “all have been heated” (0) to “all have been calm” (100), the average response in both conditions was 57.63 (SD=24.91)—demonstrating again that people report having more calm political disagreements ($p<.001$). Splitting this up by condition, we find that people report more heated disagreements online (55.38, SD=25.64) than in-person (59.75, SD=24.00; difference: $p<.001$), although both are reported more calm than heated ($p<.001$).¹¹

Together, these data help to conceptualize tone as well as demonstrate that people report *both* calm and heated political disagreements.¹² This demonstrates that it is possible to have calm

¹⁰ Of course, these estimates are based on self-reports and are thus a proxy for behavior that cannot be validated with our collected data.

¹¹ These data suggest a fair amount of heated political disagreements occur, even though people would rather avoid them. This makes sense, as people often participate in political discussion when they would rather not (Carlson and Settle 2022). Indeed, as Huckfeldt et al. (2013) note in referencing Walsh (2004): “Political discussion is often unplanned. When talking, people jump from topic to topic, as different statements cue new thoughts and recollections” (pg. 676). They continue: “avoidance is not always a practical or even viable option” (pg. 678). Given research on political disagreements, this could be viewed as positive. Yet these data suggest heated political discussions may not be the ideal discussions researchers often imagine, and having these conversations could actually be detrimental. This is left for future research.

¹² One additional concern may be that while people have calm agreements, calm disagreements, and heated disagreements, they do not have heated *agreements*. To ease concerns, we conduct a brief check. Our goal was to see if these discussions were extremely rare, thus potentially threatening inferences using this condition (although people do not necessarily have to *have* particular discussions to be able to conceptualize or answer questions about them). Asking respondents in the robustness check study (N=1,230) if they have witnessed a political discussion where people agree and the tone is heated, while 30.73% say they never had, the vast majority of respondents have indeed witnessed one: 13.01% say “quite often,” 47.07% say “a few times,” and 9.19% say “once.” See Appendix D for question wording.

political disagreements—in fact, people report having them more often than heated political disagreements—and that when political disagreements occur, people are not necessarily inferring a heated tone. Instead, they seem able to differentiate heated disagreements from calm disagreements and to conceptualize the two differently.

Does Tone Shape Discussion Aversion?

In this section we use Studies 1, 2, and 3 to examine our main research question: does tone shape reported discussion aversion? Using these studies, we first examine if tone shapes reported discussion desire while controlling for disagreement and topic. We then test the relative effect of tone to that of disagreement on discussion desire. Next, we look at individual factors that potentially shape aversion to heated tones in discussion. Lastly, we incorporate the potentially most important individual trait in political discussion aversion: conflict orientation (Ulbig and Funk 1999). Across all three studies, we present consistent findings that people do not want to participate in heated political discussions and that this—even more than disagreement—shapes reports of political discussion aversion.

Controlling for Disagreement and Topic, Does Tone Matter? First, we asked respondents in Study 1 (Lucid, N=1,738) if they would “rather take part in a political discussion that is *calm* or one that is *heated*, assuming the **issue** being discussed and level of **disagreement** was **the exact same**?” providing them a sliding scale from 0 (the calm discussion) to 100 (the heated discussion), with “either/neither” at the mid-point (50). We use a continuous scale here to not just measure the choice people make, but also to capture additional variance that should suggest how

strongly they endorse that preference. Further, although “either” and “neither” are certainly distinct responses (Carlson and Settle 2022), the goal of this exercise was to compare the desire to participate in heated versus calm political discussions. Having a mid-point that indicated no preference for one over the other could accomplish this task—people choosing the midpoint (either/neither) would indicate that respondents view these conversations similarly, while people choosing one side of the scale would indicate that people view one as preferable to the other.

Our findings suggests the latter: responses are significantly different from the midpoint (35.47, SD=30.03; $p<.001$). Further, while only 2.46% give the most extreme response endorsing the heated conversation, 15.65% give the most extreme response endorsing the *calm* conversation. Thus, given equal conversations on dimensions of topic and disagreement, respondents are more likely to choose the calm conversation, and over *six* times as many respondents strongly endorse the calm conversation than strongly endorse the heated conversation.

To complement this finding with another approach, we asked a similar set of questions in the robustness check study (N=1,230; see details in Appendix D). Here, half of the respondents were asked to “Imagine two discussions where people disagree about politics, but one is **heated** and one is **calm**. In both discussions, people disagree the exact same amount. If you had to choose, which discussion would you rather join?” In this case, respondents were not given a continuous scale but given three options: the heated disagreement, the calm disagreement, or other. The results here are even more stark: only 5.75% of respondents choose the heated disagreement and a whopping 91.93% of respondents choose the calm disagreement (2.33% choose other). Thus, given equally disagreeable discussions, people would much rather join the calm discussion.

Does Tone Matter More than Disagreement? Studies 2 (CES, N=1,000) and 3 (Prolific, N=391) take this further, and—rather than controlling for disagreement and having respondents choose between conversations—*manipulate* both tone and disagreement and then measure discussion desire. Participants were randomly assigned to be asked about their desire to participate in a *calm* or *heated*, *agreeable* or *disagreeable* political discussion. To measure discussion desire, they were given a 100-point scale from “I would not like to participate” to “I would like to participate.” This design allowed us to directly compare the effect of tone to that of disagreement. If heated tones could make people choose disagreement *over* agreement, this would suggest that research has missed an integral factor in discussion aversion.

Using OLS models to predict discussion desire by tone and agreement (Tables B1 and C1), we find that heated tone makes participants 24.00 points (Study 2) and 28.46 points (Study 3) less likely to want to participate ($p < .001$), while disagreement (compared to agreement) makes participants only 5.21 points (Study 2) and 7.41 points (Study 3) less likely ($p = .004$ and $p = .015$, respectively). Our results demonstrate that tone matters even more than disagreement: people would rather take part in a calm, *disagreeable* discussion than a heated, *agreeable* (likely with their co-partisans) one (Figure 1). The effect size of tone was about four times that of disagreement.

Figure 1. Discussion Desire by Tone and Agreement

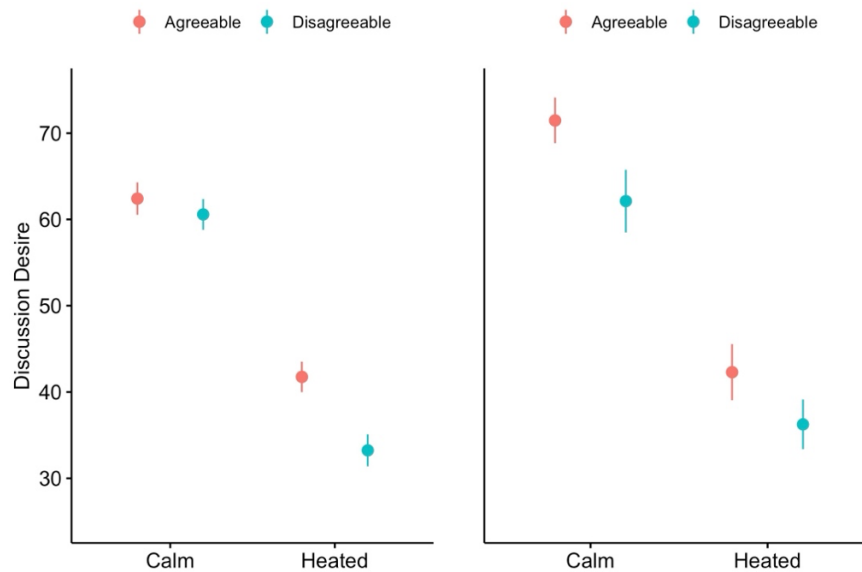


Figure shows mean responses in each condition for both studies. Dependent variable: “not like to participate” (0) → “like to participate” (100). Left: Study 2. Right: Study 3. 95% confidence intervals. Models in Tables B1 and C1.

We push this finding even further in the robustness check study (N=1,230; see details in Appendix D) by explicitly pitting these discussions against each other. We asked half of respondents to “Imagine two discussions. In one discussion, people **agree** with each other but the discussion is **heated**. In the other discussion, people **disagree** but the discussion is **calm**. If you had to choose, which discussion would you rather join?” The finding here confirms that for most people, tone matters even more than disagreement, as 72.53% of respondents choose the calm discussion where people *disagree* over the heated discussion where people *agree* (23.55% choose the heated, agreeable discussion and 3.92% say “other”).¹³ In other words, the aversion to heated discussions can even lead people to choose *disagreement* over *agreement*.

¹³ Of course, some individuals may actually enjoy heated discussions with co-partisans. Indeed, in the previous section, respondents said heated, agreeable discussion could be interesting. Here, though, we see that on average, people would *still* rather take part in calm disagreement even over the agreeable discussion that is heated.

Which Individual-Level Factors Matter? Next, we examine *who* is more likely to choose heated versus calm conversations, all else equal (i.e. when asked if they would “rather take part in a political discussion that is *calm* or one that is *heated*, assuming the **issue** being discussed and level of **disagreement** was **the exact same**?” in Study 1 [Lucid, N=1,738]). It is possible that while *most* do not enjoy heated political discussions—indeed, only 5.75% choose the heated disagreement in the robustness check study—those who are very interested in politics and stronger partisans (the “deeply involved”—Krupnikov and Ryan 2022) actually enjoy these discussions. Thus, we run an OLS regression (Table A2) predicting discussion choice by partisanship, ideology, gender, race, age, education, political knowledge, and deep involvement (Krupnikov and Ryan 2022). We find that respondents who are liberal ($p=.003$), women ($p<.001$), non-binary ($p=.006$), older ($p<.001$), more knowledgeable ($p=.001$; with one measure—see Appendix A), Republican ($p=.003$), weaker partisans ($p=.016$), and less deeply involved ($p<.001$) are more likely than their counterparts to choose the calm conversation. Importantly, though, even among those who are more *likely* to choose the heated conversation, most *still* prefer the calm conversation—they are simply *less* averse to the heated conversation. In fact, the only case in which respondents choose the heated conversation is with the deeply involved.

How Does Conflict Orientation Matter? We next explore conflict orientation (Ulbig and Funk 1999), which should influence people’s discussion desire. Here we use Studies 2 (CES, N=327)¹⁴ and 3 (Prolific, N=391)—which included a measure adapted from Ulbig and Funk (1999)¹⁵—to

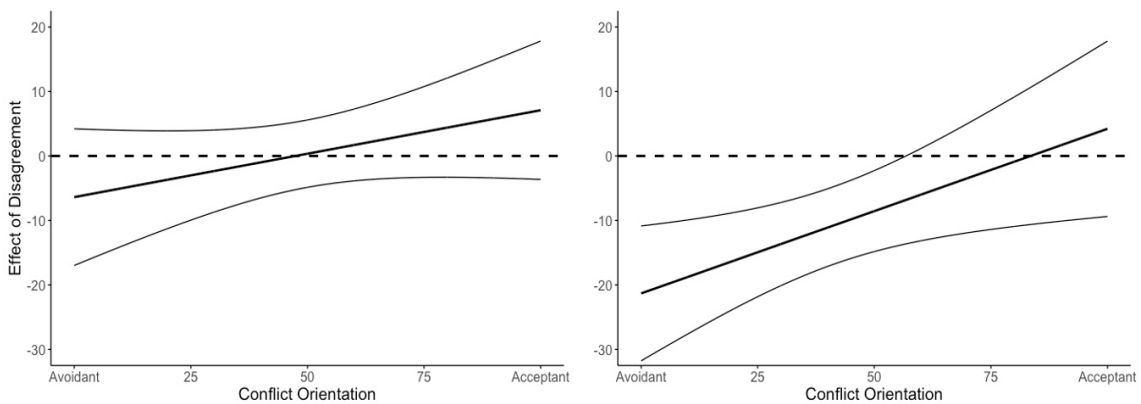
¹⁴ For Study 2, only a random third of participants were asked this question.

¹⁵ We slightly adapt this scale to capture more variance by making response options continuous.

examine if conflict orientation both moderates the effect of tone on discussion aversion and, as a comparison, moderates the effect of *disagreement* on discussion aversion (Tables B1 and C1).

We examine if this trait moderates treatment effects by modeling two interactions (separate models) between each treatment and conflict orientation (0 to 100, most to least conflict averse; Figure 2). We find that in Study 3—aligning with previous research—disagreement only decreases discussion desire for the conflict averse (the effect of disagreement is only significant at 57 or below on the scale—interaction coefficient: .23, $p=.026$). However, in Study 2, there is no significant interaction ($p=.157$), although this might be a result of the small sample.¹⁶

Figure 2. Effect of Disagreement on Discussion Desire by Conflict Orientation



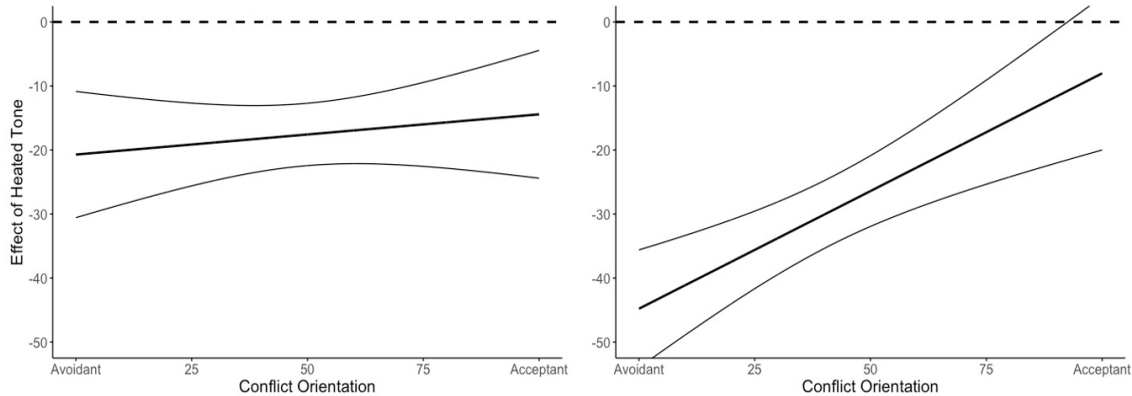
Dependent variable: “not like to participate” (0) → “like to participate” (100). Conflict orientation: avoidant (0) → acceptant (100). Disagreement: in comparison to agreement. Left: Study 2. Right: Study 3. 95% confidence intervals. Models in Tables B1 and C1.

In comparison, as shown in Figure 3, a heated tone decreases discussion desire for *all* participants: even the conflict *acceptant*, who are less averse (or not averse at all) to disagreement are repelled by heated tones. Further, in Study 3 the effect is even stronger among the conflict averse

¹⁶ In this model, the more conflict averse are less likely to want to participate in discussion ($p<.001$), while neither disagreement ($p=.238$) nor the interaction ($p=.157$) is significant.

(interaction coefficient: 0.35, $p < .001$), although this interaction is not significant in Study 2 ($p = .477$).

Figure 3. Effect of Heated Tone on Discussion Desire by Conflict Orientation



Dependent variable: “not like to participate” (0) → “like to participate” (100). Conflict orientation: avoidant (0) → acceptant (100). Heated: in comparison to calm. Left: Study 2. Right: Study 3. 95% confidence intervals. Models in Tables B1 and C1.

Together, these findings suggest that conflict aversion is indeed about aversion to disagreement—and that this varies by individual—but that a more universal trait is aversion to heated discussions. While some may avoid political discussions because of fear of disagreement, both the conflict averse *and* acceptant seem to avoid them because of fear of a heated discussion. Further, even among the most conflict averse, tone is more important than disagreement (Figures 2 and 3): for the most conflict averse, the marginal effect of disagreement in the previous interaction model was -6.39 (Study 2) and -20.76 (Study 3), but the marginal effect of the heated tone was -20.71 (Study 2) and -44.74 (Study 3)—over twice the magnitude.

Discussion & Conclusion

We began this manuscript noting that political discussions—especially those that involve disagreement—are vital to democracy, but that people are averse to them. We then examined how tone shapes this aversion and found that people are especially averse to heated political discussions over calm ones—that this can even lead people to choose *disagreement* over *agreement*. We replicated our findings across different points in time, samples, and designs. This speaks to the robustness and applicability of our findings, as they do not seem to be driven by any one design or measurement choice, but by the effect of tone. Further, although each of our samples underrepresented Republican respondents, this weakness suggests we actually *underestimated* the effect of heated tones, as Republicans report more averse to them than Democrats and independents. Further, the robustness check study used a nationally representative sample and found results consistent with our findings from the three main studies.

Our findings also help to explain what makes people averse to heated political disagreements: people associate these discussions with loud voices, anger, anxiety, incivility, and lack of reason. They are (at least perceived to be) unenjoyable, unconstructive, and stressful. It is no surprise people want to avoid them. Unfortunately, it is possible that when people imagine political discussions, they imagine these types of worst case scenario discussions—they not only imagine *conflict* in the discussion, but also *heated* conflict (see also Groenendyk et al. 2024). This misconceptualization of politics and of conflict could lead people to err on the side of discussion avoidance, successfully evading heated discussions but also missing out on the calmer and perhaps more beneficial discussions that researchers recommend. Future research should examine how people conceptualize conflict and if their conceptualization deviates from simply conflicting viewpoints to a broader definition that is entangled with heated tones.

Our findings open up future research on tone and political discussion. Although we find that perceptions of heatedness—even more than disagreement—decreases reported discussion desire, our findings also show that while people say do not *want* to have heated discussions, they still occur. When they do, tone may then influence how they unfold, including whether people actively participate in the discussion (Carlson and Settle 2022, pg. 115) and whether people glean the benefits researchers hope they will from cross-cutting discussions. It is possible that heated disagreements do not lead to the positive effects such as learning, moderation, and tolerance that calm disagreements can lead to—or that they even backfire, deepening (rather than mitigating) polarization.¹⁷ This could help to explain why certain settings exacerbate, rather than reduce, affective polarization (Settle 2018; Wojcieszak and Warner 2020)—it could be that tone dictates which of these outcomes occur. In fact, Carlson and Settle (2022) note that people distance themselves from those they disagree with to avoid heated discussions (pg. 189), suggesting that even the *anticipation* of heated political discussions can deepen social polarization. Thus, future research should examine if heated disagreements are less likely than calm disagreements to increase learning and attitude moderation and decrease polarization.

Future research should also extend our findings by isolating effects of different aspects of tone and examining how discussion participants, certain topics, and particular settings could shape perceptions of tone, the likelihood a conversation gets heated, and reactions in heated discussions. Certain participants, issues, and contexts could mitigate the chance the conversation gets heated (or is perceived to be heated), as well as change reactions in a heated discussion—for example, affiliation concerns could deter strong ties from letting discussions get heated (Conover

¹⁷ Although there could be times when heated discussions are beneficial—perhaps, for example, to communicate that an issue is important. Sydnor (2019b) similarly argues that there are cases where *incivility* could be useful.

et al. 2002, pg. 57) or make people react less negatively to heated tones. In particular, future research should examine if people perceive and react differently to tone depending on the gender (Djupe, McClurg, and Sokhey 2016; Wolak 2022) and race of potential discussion partners, as well as whether the discussion is in-person versus online, dyadic versus group, and with stronger versus weaker ties. We leave these questions for future research.

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