The impact of dyads and extended networks on political talk: A factorial survey experiment in the Netherlands

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ABSTRACT

Open political dialogue is regarded as foundational to democratic health and our social fabric. Here, we study political dialogue by examining with whom we prefer to talk about politics and why. In so doing, we develop and test hypotheses about what random encounters (e.g., meeting similar versus dissimilar others, meeting friends or colleagues) foster political dialogue, pose and test conjectures about what features of extended networks facilitate political debate, and present a new unique factorial survey experiment to answer our questions. We incorporated this factorial survey experiment within the NEtherlands Longitudinal Lifecourse Study 2022 (NELLS) and presented to a large sample of Dutch citizens – including Dutch ethnic majority members as well as minoritized Dutch with a Turkish or Moroccan heritage – a choice to engage in political talk or not. Hierarchical linear models reveal that relationship strength, rather than identity similarity (e.g., gender, ethnic), is the primary driver of opting for political dialogue. However, in encounters lacking prior relationship history, gender similarity increases the willingness to engage, and similar political views do relate to engaging in substantive debate modeled dichotomously. Ethnic diversity within extended networks fosters political discussion, while network size has a nonlinear association – medium-sized networks are more conducive to dialogue than very small or very large ones. These findings contribute to debates on political polarization by highlighting the relational conditions that encourage political exchange.

Introduction

Open political dialogue is regarded as foundational to democratic health and our social fabric. This is because political talk enables discussants to make sense of political and public issues and form opinions so as to connect to and participate in civic life. Political talk also strengthens our social fabric, as individuals learn to negotiate shared values, contention, or disagreement, and this facilitates mutual understanding and trust, possibly even among those with deeply opposing views.

Engaging in political discussions thus carries significant societal implications. Ideally, public spheres are a space for rational political debate so as to foster democratic legitimacy and social connections (Habermas, 1989). In such a scenario, engaging in cross-cutting political talk with individuals who hold *different* worldviews, life experiences, and norms challenges one's own political views. Exposure to dissimilar (-minded) others may bring new arguments and information, and this

may lead to a more informed and, perhaps, a better substantiated opinion. Such political discussions promote mutual understanding and consensus building, and are essential to a healthy democracy. Yet in practice, political discussions arise in situations that are more selective and constrained (Mutz, 2006). Hence, in another, more likely scenario, individuals often choose to discuss politics with like-minded others and they fail to hear new perspectives, arguments, and miss opportunities to learn about new norms or practices. This renders it challenging to reassess and adjust opinions to new views accordingly. Such echo chambers – where individuals are only exposed to others with similar beliefs and attitudes – may trigger a tunnel vision and fuel processes of ideological radicalization and polarization.

Changing one's political stance after exposure to different views is a social influence process, where one person is influenced to change their (political) opinion as a result of others' (political) opinion. Prior research on peer influence processes has primarily focused on *how* and *why* people are influenced by others (e.g., Moussaïd, Kämmer, Analytis,

and Neth, 2013; Parsons, 2014). Such social influence can be indirect or passive when there is not a clear agent of influence. It occurs when the life experiences of the people we meet, or the new information they happen to provide, put our current views in question. In contrast, influence can also be a more direct and active process, taking place immediately through the exchange of persuasive arguments and active attempts to convince others during discussions.[1] As to the why, social learning (Bandura and Walters, 1977), benefits of conformity and mimicking (Laursen and Veenstra, 2022), receiving positive social reinforcement, fearing social sanctions, gaining status, or positive externalities with groups coordinating their views, may cause people to adopt (political) opinions of their peers. In contrast, the psychological need for distinctiveness (Imhoff and Erb, 2008; Leonardelli, Pickett, and Brewer, 2010), especially to members of negatively evaluated and distrusted outgroups, can be a reason to further distance oneself to the behavior and opinions of others (Mason, Conrey, and Smith, 2007; but see Takács, Flache, and Mäs, 2016).

The social circles one inhabits thus play an important role in political talk and the development of political views. However, prior literature on peer influence processes largely overlooks the question of *who* we prefer to talk politics with and *why*. People make constrained decisions who they let themselves be exposed to, with whom to interact, and how to interact. The case of engaging in or avoiding political talk with others will be no exception to this pattern. These 'selection decisions' will shape our political networks and set the stage for subsequent peer influence processes. And it is out of this resulting, intricate interplay of assimilative influence or repulsive influence processes – becoming either more or less similar to your interaction partner – that societal-level dynamics of a flourishing consensus or an escalating polarization emerge. This motivates the main question of our study: *with whom do we prefer to talk politics and why?*

Our focus on *who* we prefer to talk politics with and *why* allows us to make three key contributions to the literature. First, people generally prefer to interact and select others who are similar to themselves – a phenomenon referred to as "choice homophily" (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Cook, 2001). The shared experiences of similar others facilitate communicative ease (predictability and understandibility) and make receiving instrumental and social support more likely. Investing in social relationships with similar others is therefore less costly (i.e., costs less energy) as there are fewer cultural and norm boundaries to overcome and these situations are less risky (i.e. higher chance to receive the desired support after relationship investments). Choice homophily has been consistently observed with respect to various socio-demographic characteristics (e.g., age, race and ethnicity, gender, education) and various type of social relations (e.g., marriage partners, confidants, friends, sport and study partners, crime partners, acquaintances, Facebook friends) (Hofstra, Corten, Van Tubergen, and Ellison, 2017; Jeroense, Hofstra, Spierings, and Tolsma, 2024; Kalmijn, 1998; McPherson et al., 2001; Rokven, Tolsma, Ruiter, and Kraaykamp, 2015; Wimmer and Lewis, 2010). Because age, gender, ethnic background, and status are correlated with specific political opinions, preferences to form ties along key social identity dimensions will result in social networks that are relatively politically homogeneous as a 'by-product' (Morey et al., 2012). Yet, we know little about the formation processes of actual political discussion networks (Settle and Carlson, 2019). This is surprising

as the mechanisms explaining with whom individuals choose to discuss politics might be quite different than friendship selection processes. People may avoid discussing politics with close friends who hold opposing views to not jeopardize those relationships (Eliasoph, 1998), yet feel more comfortable talking politics with strangers in case their opinions are reaffirmed (Cowan and Baldassarri, 2018). Some groups may even find it thrilling to convince a (political) foe to reassess their views, whereas other groups avoid political discussion altogether in fear of (further) alienation a dominant cultural majority. In short, we do not fully understand how factors like ego-alter (i.e., dyad) characteristics related to tie strength, or identity dimensions such as gender, ethnic background, or prior political views influence decisions to discuss politics (yet for an exception see Morey et al., 2012). As such, here we assess theoretically and empirically how socio-demographic (dis)similarity across key identity dimensions such as gender and ethnic background, opinion (dis)similarity between potential political discussion partners, and prior social interaction histories shape decisions to either engage in or avoid political talk.

Second, we study these decisions in relation to so-called *extended* social networks. The impact of both the size and composition of 'core' networks have been an important subject of researchers within the social network community. For instance, political opinions are influenced by the educational level of our (non-kin) confidants (i.e., the people we discuss important matters with) (Jeroense, Spierings, and Tolsma, 2024a). Yet, research into one's network structure beyond those few core social ties has gained traction as a result of recent advances in statistical modeling, and particularly so advances in Network Scale-Up Methods (NSUMs) (Baum and Marsden, 2023; DiPrete, Gelman, McCormick, Teitler, and Zheng, 2011; Hofstra, Corten, and Van Tubergen, 2020; Jeroense et al., 2024; see Killworth, Johnsen, McCarty, Shelley, and Bernard, 1998; Lubbers, Molina, and Valenzuela-García, 2019; Maltiel, Raftery, McCormick, and Baraff, 2015; McCormick, Salganik, and Zheng, 2010). And justifiably so, as the size and composition of extended networks may be a more-nuanced indicator for social connectedness and cohesion than a few core ties. Yet, while the number of studies on *causes* of the size and composition of extended networks have increased recently (Jeroense et al., 2024; Völker, Hofstra, Corten, and Van Tubergen, 2025), studies on the *consequences* of extended network structure seem to lack behind (Hofstra, 2022; for a few exceptions see, Lu and Hampton, 2016). In the present contribution we will take full advantage of the Network Scale-Up Method – designed to tap into the ethnic and gender diversity of extended networks – to assess how the size and composition of large-scale networks impact our choices to talk politics with specific others. For instance, we study the extent to which embeddedness in larger or more diverse social networks leads people to be more willing to discuss politics with others. Or, phrased differently, if people who in daily life mostly meet and mingle with similar others are less open to discuss politics with dissimilar others. If so, this could lead to spiraling circles where social segregation and opinion polarization mutually reinforce each other. To our knowledge, such questions have not been asked and answered in prior work on political talk.

Third, we contribute a new unique factorial survey experiment to answer our questions. We incorporated a factorial survey experiment within the Netherlands Longitudinal Lifecourse Study 2022 (NELLS) (Jeroense, Tolsma, Kalmijn, and Kraaykamp, 2023) and presented to a large sample of Dutch citizens – including Dutch ethnic majority members as well as minoritized Dutch with a Turkish or Moroccan heritage – a choice to engage in political talk or not. We describe the experiment in detail below but in short, respondents were asked (twice) to imagine that during a random encounter, which could take place at street, public transportation, work, or (sport) organisation, someone tried to strike up a conversation about a concrete policy measure. The socio-demographic characteristics of this fictive person were randomly varied across *gender* (i.e., man versus woman), and *ethnic background* (i.e., majority Dutch, Moroccan heritage, Turkish heritage), as was the prior *relationship*

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[1] People may also adjust their opinions to (perceived) social norms. One may argue that in this case exposure to specific others is not a necessary condition for opinion change but that it is sufficient to just perceive group views and opinions. Moreover, the 'specific other' need not necessarily be a human as also large language models have been shown to be able to convince people to abandon their (false conspiratorial) beliefs (Costello, Pennycook, and Rand, 2024), and the prevalence of certain topics in newspapers changes peoples opinion on that topic (Boer and Van Tubergen, 2019). In this contribution, however, we focus on interpersonal, political communication.

history with this person (i.e., colleague, friend, acquaintance, family member, or stranger), the *policy measure* (higher taxes for high income groups, limiting the number of refugees, reducing subsidies for climate mitigation policies) and *political position* with respect to this policy (i.e., clearly more negative, clearly more positive, about the same). Respondents could then choose several action alternatives: stopping the conversation; steering the conversation to another topic; listening but refraining from sharing one's own political position; starting a conversation and giving one's opinion but not engaging in a substantive debate; starting a discussion, sharing one's own political view and providing arguments. In real-life, the general and ubiquitous tendency to prefer to interact with similar others will contribute to residential, institutional and social segregation and consequently, heavily impact the opportunities with whom we can engage in political talk. In contrast, in our experiment, the relevant choice set is experimentally set. Similar to the study of Settle and Carlson (2019), this allows us to focus on the underlying preferences of individuals for political discussion partners and to precisely assess what impacts the decisions to engage in or avoid political talk.

In sum, this contribution explains who people prefer to talk politics with and why. We incorporated a factorial survey experiment within the NELLS, a large-scale survey (N = 3017) which contained a representative sample of majority Dutch and Dutch with a Moroccan and Turkish ethnic heritage. This unique data allows for a detailed investigation of how key-identity characteristics of ego (i.e., respondent), alter (i.e., the fictive discussion partner described within vignette) and their combination (i.e., dyadic similarity) impacts the decision of ego to engage in political talk. Because NELLS also contains a pre-tested, validated NSUM instrument to capture extended social networks, we are able to scrutinize how the size and composition of our large-scale extended networks of acquaintances impact these selection decisions.

Expectations

Dyads: similarity and tie strength

Under what conditions do two individuals choose to engage in political discussions, and when do they avoid such conversations entirely? To answer this question, we set out to examine the dyadic characteristics of the two potential discussants – this is the smallest meaningful unit of analysis for political discussion partner selection. It is within the dyad that individuals assess conversational dynamics and risks of disagreement, making it an essential point of departure to study in which dyads conversations begin or are avoided. In particular, we consider whether potential discussion partners share similarities in key demographic and political attitudinal traits. In addition, we focus on the nature of their relationship where we distinguish between stronger and weaker relationships. We describe how two factors – dyadic similarity and tie strength – likely play a pivotal role in political talk.

Individuals arrive at social situations with a set of norms, habits, and cultures. As these norms, habits, and cultures align with (potential) discussion partners, the easier and less risky it becomes to invest in these social relationships (Byrne, 1971; McPherson et al., 2001). Expectations of, and earlier experiences with similar norms and habits open individuals up to a safe space for social interaction, and in our case, political discussion. These norms and habits are likely shared with those of a similar rather than dissimilar gender and ethnic background, or are at least expected to overlap to a greater extent compared to people who differ on such key identity characteristics. Therefore, sharing these key identities fosters the likelihood of political talk.

Individuals also favor political opinions and information aligning with their own political beliefs. So much so, that they selectively seek out or expose themselves to politically congruent opinions or information so as to avoid conflict and discomfort (Cowan and Baldassarri, 2018; Eveland and Gee, 2024; Mutz, 2006). Exposure to congruent opinions or information induces less cognitive effort compared to

diverging political opinions or information (Taber and Lodge, 2006). Such 'confirmation bias' has been demonstrated through experiments and studies of online (social media) information seeking (Knobloch-Westerwick, Mothes, and Polavin, 2017). Building on the selective exposure and confirmation bias literature, we expect that when people are accidentally exposed to, or rather, invited by others to engage in political talk – like in our experiment –, they are more likely to avoid political discussion with people holding opposing views. As such, we derive the following hypothesis: *the likelihood of political talk increases when potential discussion partners share a (a) gender, (b) ethnic background, or (c) congruent political views (H1).*

Social relationships vary in tie strength (Granovetter, 1973; Marsden and Campbell, 1984), where some social relationships are very close and other social relationships are distal. Sociological research notes that both type of ties are important to draw different resources from social networks: close relationships are typically trustful and they offer emotional support, whereas weaker relationships are perhaps more instrumental for access, for instance to informational resources (Kim and Fernandez, 2023). So besides looking at dyadic similarity, it is key to consider at what social distance two discussants stand. As such, we distinguish between dyads characterized by stronger (i.e., good friends, family members) and weaker (i.e., colleagues, acquaintances) bonds. When ties are strong and not weak, individuals already established prior norms for their (repeated) social interactions. In these cases, political talk is more likely, as there exists a mutual understanding, there is emotional investment, and established trust. The durability of these relationships renders discussing important topics like politics more likely, or at least actively avoiding political talk less likely. In weaker relationships, an absence of emotional investments and trust causes individuals to be more careful when discussing potentially contentious political talk. As such, we expect that: *the likelihood of political talk increases when potential discussion partners are strong rather than weak ties (H2).*

Gender and ethnic background are salient identity dimensions that demarcate social groups in society. People carry stereotypes about others based on group membership, and to some degree congruently expect that members of specific groups think and act in ways 'stereotypical' for that group. If people do not interact frequently and do not know each other well (i.e., weak ties) they rely more on stereotypes to predict the behavior of others. In contrast, when people are emotionally close, share a social history and meet frequently (i.e., strong ties), there is little need to fall back on group stereotypes despite differences in social identity. We therefore expect that identity characteristics like gender and ethnic background, and associated dyadic similarity, is less salient in decisions whether or not to engage in political talk for stronger ties than for weaker ties. Moreover, stereotypes to outgroup members are commonly negative (or at least more negative than the stereotypes attached to ingroups), leading to positive ingroup bias and negative outgroup attitudes and a tendency to avoid contact with outgroup members altogether. In our survey experiment, we independently varied dyadic similarity as well as tie strength and this allows us to test the following hypothesis: *the positive effect of (a) gender and (b) ethnic background similarity on political talk increases when discussion partners are weak rather than strong ties (H3).*

Engaging in political talk with someone with whom one is in political *disagreement* may either impede or facilitate the deepening of the prior social relationship. On one hand, political disagreement may harm existing relationships, especially in cases where individuals are reluctant to change opinions and concede to discussion partners (Mutz, 2006). In these situations, political talk can be risky and it carries heavier emotional resonance. This is perhaps especially so in cases where one is almost certain to interact with others in the future (e.g., family members); in particular strong ties may cast a long 'shadow of the future' that lead people to avoid political discussions if political views diverge so as to not endanger these harmonious relationships (Eliasoph, 1998; Cowan and Baldassarri, 2018). On the other hand, among strong ties political

disagreement may be more easily navigated in a respectful way through established communicative norms and interaction ritual chains. Strong ties are resilient and durable and not easily broken off due to (some) political disagreement. Morey et al. (2012) argue that "*intimacy fosters self-disclosure*" (p.90) and that includes expressions of political disagreement. Among weaker ties, in contrast, individuals know less what to expect in cases of political disagreement, potentially rendering such situations more volatile. We are agnostic as to which of the two perspectives is the most likely one: the positive effect of political similarity on political talk can either increase or decrease when discussion partners are strong rather than weak ties. We test which one of the two conjectures is most supported when confronted with our data.

Network structure: size and diversity

Social networks encompass a broad web of both strong and weak social connections. These connections are occasionally binned into two key *network layers*: core networks (see Marsden, 1987), which are characterized by trust and emotional support, and extended networks, which include both strong *and* weaker ties that facilitate access to resources such as information. The structure of these broader social networks – comprising both core and acquaintance ties – may very well influence whether individuals engage in political discussions. Here, we examine two critical features of extended social network structure: their *size* and their gender and ethnic *diversity*. These features align well with our prior hypotheses. Network diversity relates to dyadic similarity, as more diverse extended networks include (relatively) more *dissimilar* dyads. Network size relates to tie strength: as larger extended networks often include more weaker ties.

Network size is occasionally referred to as someone's sociability (sometimes called *sociality* (Goodreau, Kitts, and Morris, 2009), or *expensiveness* (Mouw and Entwisle, 2006)) (Wimmer and Lewis, 2010). This sociability relates to the extend that someone is open to (new) social interactions with a range of different others about a range of different (political) topics (see Eveland and Hively, 2009) and may, we expect, consequently also be reflected in their willingness to engage in political talk during chance encounters. Qualitative work also suggests that sociability positively shaped political talk (Kligler-Vilenchik, 2021).[2] Concurrently, individuals with larger networks of acquaintances will also have had more opportunities to engage with others and expand one's view. This may have instilled a confidence, an enthusiasm even, to discuss politics with others if they have the opportunity to do so. As such, we conjecture: *individuals with larger extended networks are more likely to engage in political talk (H4)*.

Individuals with diverse extended networks interact with people from different walks of life, exposing them to a wide range of attitudes, opinions, habits, and cultures. Experiencing chance encounters for an ephemeral political discussion (and even disagreeing) is likely something that occurs more often for these individuals. In contrast, those with homogeneous networks have much less exposure to a diversity of opinions and norms, about politics or otherwise. For these individuals it is most likely more taxing to engage in political talk as they do so less often, or find themselves with less disagreement or contention with their social relationships as they rarely encounter it. Here, we focus on a network's gender and ethnic composition as two main indicators of diversity. As such, we derive the following hypotheses: *individuals with more (a) gender and (b) ethnically diverse extended networks are more likely to engage in political talk (H5)*.

Dyadic similarity and network diversity

The extent to which dyadic similarity affects political discussion further hinges on experiences with the (lack of) diversity in the extended network. As we discussed before, diverse extended networks reflect exposure to and experiences with dissimilar others and a diversity of opinions (and potential disagreement). This renders those with diverse extended networks open to engaging in political discussions. Here we extend that argument and assume that individuals with diverse extended networks perceive only minimal differences between discussing politics with either similar versus dissimilar discussion partners. In contrast, individuals with homogeneous extended networks rely on stereotypes or assumptions about dissimilar others, leading them to preferentially engage with similar others instead, or to disengage from political talk altogether. We study this through gender and ethnic network diversity and correspond this with our dyadic similarity conditions. As such, we derive the following hypotheses: *the positive effect of gender dyadic similarity on political talk decreases when gender diversity in extended networks increases (H6a); the positive effect of ethnic dyadic similarity on political talk decreases when ethnic diversity in extended networks increases (H6b)*.

Methods

To answer our research question, we use the third round of the NEtherlands Longitudinal Lifecourse Study (NELLS; Jeroense et al., 2023). The NELLS questionnaire and data collection procedures were assessed and approved by the ethics committee of the Faculty of Social Sciences at Radboud University (ECSW-2021–095). Respondents were sampled from the Dutch population registry with the target population being non-institutionalized people between the ages of 16 and 45. NELLS contains an oversample of Dutch citizens with an ethnic descent from Morocco or Turkey (i.e., first- and second-generation immigrants: these are the largest minoritized groups in the Netherlands). The survey was fielded between May and October 2022. Respondents were invited by postal mail up to four times to participate in an internet survey in Dutch. To increase response rates, NELLS made use of a lottery incentive; among respondents who completed the survey, five tablets were raffled. The overall response rate was 17.8 %, corresponding to N = 3017 completed questionnaires. NELLS contains survey weights to adjust for observed (minor) deviations of the sample from the target population with respect to gender, age, and region.

NELLS round three employed a split ballot design. The survey experiment centered in this study and from which we construct our dependent variable was included in both ballots, as were general questions on sociodemographic background characteristics. However, the NSUM battery to measure extended network metrics was only included in Split Ballot 2 (N = 1514). Consequently, our main multivariate analyses are based on the set of respondents of Split Ballot 2. This study has a companion website (currently anonymized for review) with links to the data and annotated code to replicate our results located at: https ://politicaltalk.netlify.app/.

Political discussion

Our dependent variable is the willingness to engage in a political discussion. To measure this, we conducted a survey vignette experiment. In this experiment respondents were asked to imagine that during a random encounter someone tried to strike up a conversation about a concrete policy measure. The prompt presented to respondents was (translated from Dutch):

> "*We now present you with two different situations about political conversations. We ask you to imagine yourself in these situations. We are curious as to what you would do. We understand that these situations may not occur (frequently) in your daily life. Still, please try to answer the question as best as possible.*

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[2] Kligler-Vilenchik (2021) conceptualize sociability as a presence of a wider community with which you can also talk about many topics, including politics (as opposed to a community that solely talks about politics).

Table 1
Dimensions of Survey experiment 'Political Talk'.

Gender	Ethnic background	Relationship	Policy measure	Political distance
1. Man	1. Dutch	1. colleague	1. Introduce higher taxes for people with top incomes	1. Thinks substantially more negative about this proposal than you
2. Woman	2. Moroccan	2. good friend	2. Allow less refugees access to the Netherlands	2. Thinks substantially more positive about this proposal than you
	3. Turkish	3. acquaintance	3. Reduce subsidies for sustainability policies (for example electric cars, solar panels and heat pumps)	3. Thinks about the same about this proposal than you
		4. family (in-laws)		
		5. someone you just met		

Imagine that you encounter a [Dimension: Gender] of [Dimension: Ethnic background] descent. This could be on the street, public transport, at your workplace, or at a (sports) club. This person is [Dimension: Relationship type]. This person strikes up a conversation with you. After a while, the recent political proposal regarding [Dimension: Policy measure] comes up. It becomes clear that this person [Dimension: Political distance].

What do you do?

1. *I end the conversation.*
2. *I try to change the subject.*
3. *I listen to the other person: I do not share my own opinion and avoid a substantive discussion.*
4. *I engage in conversation: I share my own opinion but avoid a substantive discussion.*
5. *I engage in a debate: I share my own opinion and discuss arguments for and against."*

As such, the vignette was varied across five dimensions (or 'factors'): *Gender*; *Ethnic background*; *Relationship*; *Policy measure*; and *Political distance*. The elements of each dimension are summarized in Table 1. Each respondent was prompted with two vignette situations and the five dimensions were randomly sampled both times (with replacement).

Table 2 depicts which action alternatives in the experiment are chosen most often, broken down by both gender and ethnic background. We observe that respondents most often choose to engage in political talk and disclose their own opinion (i.e., Option 4 for political discussions, about 43 %). This is also reflected in the mean score of approximately 3.9 out of 5. Actively trying to avoid political talk (i.e., stopping the conversation or trying to change the subject, Options 1 and 2 respectively, combined about 7 %) is a relatively rare outcome for the vignettes.

Women are less likely to go for the 'extreme' options than men; they are less likely to stop the conversation (approximately 2.5 % versus 3.9 % for women and men respectively) and less likely to start a substantive discussion (22 % versus 33 % for women and men respectively), and women listen more than men (about 24 % versus 18 %). Table 2 furthermore shows that the three ethnic descent groups show approximately similar patterns for political discussions. Their mean scores are comparable, though there are some nuances. For instance, Moroccan and Turkish Dutch seem to stop the conversation about twice as often as Dutch majority members. The dependent variable is not normally distributed (see Appendix 1), and we consider this analytically in a set of robustness analyses (detailed below).

Dyads: similarity and tie strength

We consider the gender of respondents as woman ('1') or man ('0'). We distinguished between respondents whose parents and themselves were born in the Netherlands ('Dutch majority') from respondents with an ethnic heritage either in Morocco ('Moroccan Dutch') or Turkey ('Turkish Dutch) when respondents themselves or one of their parents were born in either Morocco or Turkey (i.e., first- and second-generation immigrants). These two minoritized ethnic heritage categories constitute the largest (visible) groups in the Netherlands with a migration background. If a respondent had parents who both were born in a different country than the Netherlands, the country of birth of mother was dominant in assigning ethnic background. In our sample, 13 respondents were assigned a different ethnic background than one of the three groups and were removed.

Dyadic similarity

Based on the vignettes presented to respondents we are able to track the dyadic similarity with respect to gender (same-gender: yes/no) and ethnic background (same-ethnic: yes/no) between our survey respondent (i.e., ego) and the fictive discussion partner described in the vignette (i.e., alter). Dyadic similarity with respect to political position is one of the dimensions of the vignette itself (see Table 1, column 'political distance'), where we coded 'about the same' as politically similar and the other two options as different.

Dyadic tie strength

The survey experiment also contained five relationship type variations strength where respondents were presented with situations where the discussion partner is either a colleague, a good friend, an acquaintance, a family member, or someone they just met. Here, we bin these five into two categories that proxy both weak and stronger ties. We bin "colleagues," "acquaintances," and "someone respondents just met" into weak ties (1) and "good friends" and "family members" into strong ties (0).

Network structure: size and diversity

Extended network size

Following recent work, the NELLS contains a unique metric of extended networks: a battery of questions from which we can employ the so-called Network Scale-up Method (NSUM) (Baum and Marsden, 2023; Killworth et al., 1998; Maltiel et al., 2015; McCormick et al., 2010; Völker et al., 2025). NSUM modules capture extended networks by asking respondents how many others they know from an entire social category. For instance, respondents are asked "How Many people do you know named Miranda?" Say a certain population (e.g., the Dutch) consists of 17 million people, with about 16,600 Miranda's in the Netherlands. If a respondent indicates to know one Miranda, NSUMs assume that this respondent knows $1/16{,}600$ or .006 % of the population. When scaled up, the extended network size is .006 %*17,000,000 ≈ 1020. The precision of this estimate (called the *naive NSUM*

Table 2
Willingness to talk politics – Descriptive Statistics.

	Total	Women	Men	Majority Dutch	Moroccan Dutch	Turkish Dutch
1. stop conversation	0.032	0.025	0.039	0.023	0.045	0.042
2. change subject	0.049	0.051	0.047	0.041	0.056	0.064
3. only listen	0.212	0.240	0.179	0.235	0.162	0.192
4. disclose own opinion	0.437	0.468	0.402	0.433	0.401	0.469
5. substantive discussion	0.270	0.215	0.333	0.269	0.335	0.233
Mean	3.864	3.797	3.941	3.885	3.925	3.785
N	5103	2713	2390	2967	817	1273

Notes. To construct this table both split ballots of NELLS have been used.
- Number of unique respondents: 2.545 (Total); 1.352 (Women); 1.193 (Men); 1.481 (Majority Dutch); 406 (Moroccan Dutch); 635 (Turkish Dutch).

estimator) increases by averaging over more categories (e.g., asking about more names, or about other population types). In NELLS, respondents were shown the following survey prompt:

> *"The following questions concern people that you know personally in the Netherlands. This means you know this person by name and will start a conversation when you randomly meet them on the street or in a shop. How many [X]'s do you know?"*

Respondent were then presented with a battery of [X's] (i.e., sub-populations, detailed below). We follow prior work and reduce respondent burden (e.g., DiPrete et al., 2011) by using interval-censoring (0, 1, 2–5, 6–10, 11–20, 21–50, or >50) and using midpoints. The X-categories we use in this study consisted of 12 name categories and 7 other categories such as knowing others "with a second home." Selecting and validating the name-categories with a first name database (Meertens Institute, n.d.) in the NELLS NSUM module is discussed in detail in Jeroense et al. (2024). In short, names are selected based on frequency (i.e., between.1-.2 % of the population (c.f., McCormick et al., 2010) and are representative to the population based on age and gender (women: Emma, Linda, Ingrid, Willemina; men: Daan, Kevin, Edwin, Albert). Correctly representing ethnic minority-typed names is more challenging as these often overrepresent carriers within but underrepresent carriers outside the minority group. To account for this, we downweigh the ethnic minority typed names (Ibrahim-men-Turkish, Mohammed-men-Moroccan, Esra-women-Turkish, Fatima-women-Moroccan) by averaging the respondent answers over the four categories and by averaging their population sizes. In addition to the nine name-categories, we also include seven other X-categories (e.g., "knowing people attending university"). We excluded 20 respondents with the same answer on all categories (i.e., straight-lining), and excluded nine respondents with unreasonably high answers on the name-categories (i.e., >3 answers of knowing >50 others) as these respondents otherwise end up with unusually large extended networks.

To calculate extended network size we adjust the naive NSUM estimator such that *barrier effects* – some respondents may know more alters of specific subgroups – are taken into account. To this end, we follow the procedure by Zheng, Salganik, and Gelman (2006) and include random effects to regularize degree estimates and allow probabilities that a person knows someone in a given group to vary randomly across individuals. We use the networkscaleup R package and details of the procedure are found in its documentation (Laga, Bao, and Niu, 2022). In short, we use a Gibbs-Metropolis algorithm, extract starting values from the MLE model of Killworth et al. (1998), run 10,000 iterations of the algorithm (warmup = 1000) from which we extract an average extended network size for each respondent. We adjust for rare names *and* over- and underrecalled subpopulations (through comparing average respondent answers to subpopulation size). The correlation between the naive NSUM estimator and our estimation method is is high (∼.89). To rule out sensitivity based on selection of X-categories we ran our procedure three more times, by adjusting for rare name, by only including subpopulations of size lower than 50 K, and with no adjustments, and correlations between all scenarios were high (>.89).

Networks and political talk

Note also that we explicitly ask respondents to recall extended network ties *in the Netherlands*. This is intentional, as we need a baseline population (here: the Netherlands) to be able to scale-up respondent answers. However, especially minoritized persons in the Netherlands may have far more transnational relationships. Given that these are not counted in our setup, this may underestimate their extended networks. Hence, we measure *extended networks in the Netherlands* (and not beyond).

Extended network diversity

The diversity of the extended network in the Netherlands is captured by the Simpson diversity index (Simpson, 1949): $1 - \Sigma_i p_i^2$, where p_i refers to group proportions within the network. We determined the gender and ethnic diversity of the network and used the raw answers to knowing others in the men/women typed names and the Dutch/Moroccan/Turkish typed names in the NSUM module. Higher scores indicate a more diverse network.

Control variables

We control our main analyses for respondents' age in years and educational attainment. For educational attainment we used three categories: 'primary' (i.e., no education, primary school, preparatory secondary vocational education (VMBO)), 'secondary' (i.e. higher general secondary education (HAVO), pre-university education (VWO), secondary vocational education (MBO)), and 'tertiary' (professional college (HBO), university). For respondents currently following education, we assigned their current track.

We also control for the vignette dimensions above and beyond our dyadic measures of interest. We specifically control for alters' genders and ethnic backgrounds (Dutch majority member, Moroccan Dutch, or Turkish Dutch), and the policy measure ('higher taxes for high income rich', 'less refugees', 'reduce climate subsidies'). Note that the vignette dimensions related to political distance and tie strength are part of our key measures of interest.

Working sample

As stated above, for our multivariate analyses we use Split Ballot 2 of NELLS (N = 1514). The survey experiment was placed at the end of the survey. Not all respondents reached the end of the survey and these had to be removed from our sample (266 respondents). There were 12 respondents with an other ethnic background than Majority Dutch, Moroccan Dutch or Turkish Dutch; 2 respondents with a missing value on age and 98 respondents with no valid scores on the variables related to extended networks. We listwise excluded these cases, resulting in an effective sample size for our main analysis of 1143. Descriptive statistics of the independent variables at the respondent-level are summarized in Table 3.

	Mean / proportion	SD	Minimum	Maximum
Women	0.530		0	1
Ethnic background				
Majority-Dutch	0.538		0	1
Moroccan-Dutch	0.191		0	1
Turkish-Dutch	0.263		0	1
Network size in NL	531.794	346.475	89	2691
Network gender diversity	0.407	0.138	0.000	0.500
Network ethnic diversity	0.308	0.232	0.000	0.667
Age	32.343	9.328	16	131
Education				
Primary	0.168		0	1
Secondary	0.391		0	1
Tertiary	0.442		0	1

N = 1143

Analytical strategy

To consider the nested structure of our data – two vignettes per respondents implies two observations nested in one respondent – we use hierarchical regression models with random intercepts.[3] To facilitate interpretation, our main results are based on linear hierarchical models in which we treat our dependent variable as ratio level and where we assume residuals to be normally distributed.

We used the R-package lme4 (Bates, Machler, Bolker, and Walker, 2015) to estimate our models. This study has a companion website (https://politicaltalk.netlify.app/) where the interested reader can study all our data manipulation decisions and replicate all our tables and results (including additional robustness checks not shown in the main paper). We order our covariates in our results tables by first listing the alter (i.e., vignette) dimensions, then listing the ego dimensions, and then listing the ego-alter (i.e., ego-vignette) combinations.

Results

A baseline model in which we only included the vignette characteristics is summarized in Appendix 2.[4] These results show how respondents are more likely to opt for political discussion when their potential discussion partner is a Dutch majority member as opposed to a member of a minoritized group, and that they are more likely to discuss politics with good friends than with colleagues. The other vignette dimensions are not significantly related to engaging in or avoiding political discussion.

Dyads: Similarity and tie strength

Table 4-Model 1 depicts our analysis that tests Hypotheses 1 and 2. We observe that political talk does not become more (or less) likely when the potential discussion partners share a gender, ethnic background, or political view, as indicated by the non-significant 'gender similarity dyad', 'ethnic similarity dyad' and 'similar political position' coefficients. We thus find no evidence to support Hypothesis 1. This is a somewhat surprising finding as we know from a large body of research

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[3] Observations are also nested within vignettes. Yet we analyze dimensions on which the vignettes varied as predictors with our statistical models, and as such we disregard this cross-classified structure of our data.

[4] Policy measure 1 is phrased in a different direction than the other two. Therefore, for vignettes in which Policy measure 1 was randomly picked, the 'more negative' element of the political distance dimension is recoded into 'more positive' and vice versa. After this change, when the potential discussant described in the vignette (i.e., the 'alter') thinks more positive about the presented policy measure this means that this person likely has a more politically right-wing orientation compared to the focal survey respondent (the 'ego').

that dyadic similarity is consistently positively related to the selection of interaction partners, yet it seems less important in our experimental setup to select alters for political discussion.

Naturally, we do need to be sensitive to the fact that in our experimental setup we already control for any previous relationship between potential discussion partners. To this end, our results depict that one is somewhat less likely to talk politics with weak than with strong ties: $B = -0.069, SE = 0.030$. This is evidence in support of Hypothesis 2.

We test Hypothesis 3 by means of the analysis found in Table 4-Model 2 where we interact relationship strength with dyadic similarity. We conjectured that gender and ethnic dyadic similarity may play a larger role when the potential discussion partners are weak ties, or, vice versa, that dyadic similarity is less important among strong tie discussants. The evidence for this hypothesis is mixed. Gender similarity indeed plays stronger role among weak ties ($B = -0.048 + 0.166 = .118$) than among strong ties ($B = -0.048, SE = 0.046$), and the difference between these situations is by itself significantly different ($B = 0.166, SE = 0.060$), hence lending support to Hypothesis 3a. However, ethnic similarity neither becomes less or more important in situations of strong or weak ties, thus not finding any support for Hypotheses 3b.

We did not formulate an explicit hypothesis with respect to how the impact of opinion similarity is moderated by the tie strength between the potential discussion partners but we do observe that opinion similarity in the process of picking a political discussion partner is marginally more important in weak tie situations ($B = 0.113 + -0.185 = -0.072$) than in strong tie situations ($B = -0.048$), and that this difference approaches convential boundaries of significance ($B = -0.185, SE = 0.064$). As such, it seems that intimacy fosters self-disclosure in political talk.

Network structure: size and diversity

We test Hypotheses 4 with the analysis results presented in Table 4-Model 3. Here, we observe that political talk does not become more likely (or less likely) when network size in the Netherlands increases. This is shown by the 'network size in NL' coefficient that is not statistically significantly related to our outcome, and we thus find no evidence in support of our Hypotheses 4.

We test Hypothesis 5 in Table 4-Model 3 by means of the main effects of 'network gender diversity' and 'network ethnic diversity'. We find mixed evidence as to Hypothesis 5. On one hand, the gender diversity of one's extended network in the Netherlands does not seem to relate to the likelihood of political talk. Hence, we find no support for Hypothesis 5a. On the other hand, we do find that as ethnic diversity increases in extended networks the likelihood of political talk increases as well ($B = 0.374, SE = 0.140$). This lends support in evidence of Hypotheses 5b.

It is important to note that some of the mechanisms we describe that underlie Hypothesis 4, are also included in the mechanisms of Hypothesis 5 – i.e., contacts with many diverse others increase as networks of acquaintances grow. Therefore, we also estimated a model in which network size in the Netherlands was the only covariate at the ego-level. Similarly, in this model network size was not significantly related to political talk (see companion website, Data Wrangling & Analysis, 8.7.1). Thus, it is *not* the case that in the model presented in the main text, the impact of network size in the Netherlands is mediated by mechanisms underlying other covariates (e.g., diversity) in our explanatory models.

Dyadic similarity and network diversity

Finally, Table 4-Model 4 depicts our tests of Hypothesis 6, by interacting network gender diversity with gender dyadic similarity and network ethnic diversity with ethnic dyadic similarity. Here, we find mixed evidence as well. As to Hypothesis 6a – the effect of gender dyadic similarity on political talk decreases with increasing gender diversity in extended networks – we find no support, as shown by the 'gender

Table 4

Willingness to talk politics regressed on covariates.

	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3			Model 4		
	Estimate		Std.Error	Estimate		Std.Error	Estimate		Std.Error	Estimate		Std.Error
Intercept	3.729	***	0.122	3.794	***	0.124	3.901	***	0.325	3.946	***	0.329
Gender alter (men = ref.)												
woman	-0.001		0.030	-0.001		0.030	-0.001		0.030	0.005		0.030
Ethnic background alter (maj. Dutch = ref.)												
Moroccan	-0.059		0.040	-0.061		0.040	-0.061		0.040	-0.063		0.040
Turkish	-0.048		0.039	-0.044		0.039	-0.044		0.039	-0.045		0.039
Tie strength (strong = ref.)												
weak	-0.069	*	0.030	-0.185	***	0.051	-0.186	***	0.051	-0.184	***	0.051
Policy (higher tax for high incomes = ref.)												
less refugees	-0.031		0.036	-0.036		0.036	-0.037		0.036	-0.036		0.036
reduce climate subsidies	0.014		0.036	0.018		0.036	0.015		0.036	0.017		0.036
Political distance (diff. = ref.)												
similar	0.016		0.032	-0.048		0.049	-0.050		0.049	-0.049		0.049
Gender ego (men = ref.)												
woman	-0.246	***	0.052	-0.246	***	0.052	-0.249	***	0.052	-0.248	***	0.052
Ethnic background ego (maj. Dutch = ref.)												
Moroccan	0.096		0.076	0.089		0.076	-0.016		0.085	-0.016		0.086
Turkish	-0.046		0.062	-0.049		0.062	-0.146	*	0.073	-0.146	*	0.073
Gender similarity dyad	0.045		0.030	-0.048		0.046	-0.045		0.046	-0.128		0.097
Ethnic similarity dyad	0.028		0.035	0.040		0.051	0.041		0.051	0.044		0.051
Age ego	-0.000		0.003	-0.000		0.003	-0.001		0.003	-0.001		0.003
Education ego (primary =ref.)												
secondary	0.305	***	0.080	0.305	***	0.080	0.311	***	0.080	0.306	***	0.080
tertiary	0.515	***	0.081	0.513	***	0.081	0.531	***	0.081	0.530	***	0.081
Weak tie * gender similarity				0.166	**	0.060	0.162	**	0.060	0.159	**	0.060
Weak tie * ethnic similarity				-0.010		0.064	-0.009		0.064	-0.013		0.064
Weak tie * opinion similarity				0.113	~	0.064	0.116	~	0.064	0.113	~	0.064
Network size in NL							-0.046		0.052	-0.046		0.052
Network gender diversity							0.231		0.208	0.231		0.234
Network ethnic diversity							0.374	**	0.140	0.234		0.155
Gender sim. * gender diversity										-0.001		0.211
Ethnic sim. * ethnic diversity										0.275	*	0.129
Variance respondents	0.610			0.606			0.602			0.604		
Variance observations	0.294			0.293			0.293			0.292		

***p < .001, **p < .01, *p < .05, ~p < .10.

N respondents = 1142; N observations = 2286.

similarity * gender diversity' coefficient that is not statistically significantly different from zero. As to Hypothesis 6b – the effect of ethnic dyadic similarity on political talk decreases with increasing ethnic diversity in extended networks – we find that we have to *reject* this hypothesis: ethnic dyadic similarity becomes *more* important when ethnic diversity in extended networks increases ($B = 0.275, SE = 0.129$).

In sum, we are more likely to talk politics with strong ties than with weak ties, and in situations of weak ties we are more likely to discuss politics with people with whom we share a gender or political opinion. Network ethnic diversity can have a positive impact on the likelihood of political talk, though that seems to become more important with ethnically similar others. Although characteristics of our potential discussion partner clearly influence if we are willing to discuss politics, at the same time we have to acknowledge that effects are relatively minor, also relatively, if we compare these effects with the impact of characteristics of our respondents. For example, the difference between conversation partners with strong ties and conversation partners with weak ties is 0.069 on a scale from 1 to 5 for willingness to talk politics, while ego's gender is approximately three times more important – men are more likely to talk politics – and the difference between higher and lower educated egos is even seven times more important – with people having a vocational college or university degree being more likely to engage in political talk.

Robustness analyses

Network size in categories

In contrast to our expectation, we did not find evidence that (logged) network size in the Netherlands is linearly related to political talk (see

Table 4-Model 3 and our additional analyses that only included network size at the respondent-level). We re-estimated Table 4-Model 3 but now included (raw) network size in quintiles (see our companion website, Data Wrangling & Analysis, 8.7.4). The relation turns out to be curve-linear, with respondents with small networks (less than 281 people; first quintile) and very large networks (more than 730 people; fifth quintile) are least likely to engage in political talk and respondents with network sizes close to the mean (between 281 and 385; second quintile) most likely to engage in political discussion and significantly more so than respondents with network sizes in the fifth quintile. We subsequently performed ethnic subgroup analyses with the same cutoff points and conclude that it is a consistent finding that respondents with small and large networks are least likely to engage in politics, albeit admittedly, in our ethnic subgroup analysis estimates do not reach significance (with fifth quintile as reference category; see companion website, Data Wrangling & Analysis, 8.7.4).

Dichotomous dependent variable

In a set of additional sensitivity analyses, we dichotomized our dependent variable as (1) actively engaging in political talk, consisting of the original answer categories 'I engage in a debate: I share my own opinion and discuss arguments for and against.', 'I engage in conversation: I share my own opinion but avoid a substantive discussion.' and (0) avoiding political talk, consisting of the original categories 'I listen to the other person: I do not share my own opinion and avoid a substantive discussion.', 'I try to change the subject.', 'I end the conversation.'. In our sample in approximately 71 % of observations do people choose to actively engage in political talk (see Table 2). We subsequently estimated hierarchical logistic regression models, the results of which are

summarized in Appendix 3.

Results are mostly in line with those reported in Table 4. For example, based on Model 1 we conclude that people are approximately three percentage points more likely to discuss politics if they form a strong tie with their discussion partner than if they form a weak tie with their discussion partner (the average marginal effect of strong versus weak tie is 0.029 with a bootstrapped standard error of 0.013; see companion website, Data Wrangling & Analysis, 8.5.2). However, we also noted some interesting deviations. Dyadic opinion similarity is now *positively* related to engaging in political talk (Model 2, Appendix 3). Additionally, network ethnic diversity does not seem to be related anymore to engaging in political talk (yes/no).

Ethnic subgroup analyses

To further investigate whether these results are consistent among respondents with different ethnic backgrounds we performed a subgroup analyses for Dutch majority members and those with a Moroccan-Dutch and Turkish-Dutch background. This is because engaging in political talk *or* the meaning of ethnic dyadic similarity or ethnic diversity in networks may vary across ethnic groups as a result of minority or majority status. In Appendix 4 we report the results of this exercise. We altered the ethnic background alter variable to an 'outgroup' variable (yes/no) because otherwise it overlaps perfectly with the ethnic dyadic similarity variable. Two findings merit attention here. First, among Dutch majority members the results are strikingly similar compared to our main results in Table 4-Model 4. Second, the aversion to political talk in weak tie situation seems driven by the Dutch majority, whereas Moroccan- and Turkish-Dutch are open to political talk in both strong and weak tie situations.

Discussion

Our study has advanced our understanding of political talk by investigating *who* people prefer to engage with and *why*. This is key as open political dialogue is foundational to democratic health and our social fabric. Our contributions span three areas: a theoretical an empirical clarification of the mechanisms explaining engagement in political talk at the dyadic level, an extension of existing research by clarifying the role of individuals' extended social networks, and new empirical insights by using a unique factorial survey experiment in the NELLS survey where a large sample of Dutch citizens – including Dutch ethnic majority members as well as minoritized Dutch with a Turkish or Moroccan heritage – were presented with a choice to engage in political talk or not. We employed a series of hierarchical regression models to test our hypotheses. We synthesize our conclusions by means of our three contributions.

First, we reconsidered the relevance of choice homophily – a microlevel mechanisms indicating a preference to associate with similar others (McPherson et al., 2001) – and tie strength – how close are you to another person (Granovetter, 1973) – in the context of political discussions. Similarity in political opinion seems important for decisions whether or not to disclose one's own opinion; we are reluctant to demonstrate disagreement. Surprisingly, our experimental results show no support for the role of dyadic similarity in gender or ethnic background in political talk. This deviates from the body of work documenting consistent effects of choice homophily along key identity characteristics in tie formation (McPherson et al., 2001).

Preferences to interact with similar others have been demonstrated with similar analytic designs but for other types of relationships (e.g., sport partners: Franken, Bekhuis, and Tolsma, 2024a). Survey conjoint experiments on organization and neighborhood choice also revealed preferences for organizations and neighborhoods in which it is more likely to meet similar others (e.g., Dederichs et al., (2025); Valet, Sauer, and Tolsma (2021). We therefore think our null finding with respect to social similarity is not due to our study design (i.e., a survey experiment). However, our finding may reflect specific *design* elements of our

factorial survey experiment. Namely, by design the potential political discussion partners could have been family members, or good friends – relationship types which we classified as 'strong' ties – or colleagues, acquaintances, or strangers – which we classified as 'weak' ties – irrespective of dyadic similarity (by gender, ethnic background, political views). As both strong and weak tie networks are often quite homogeneous in practice (Hofstra et al., 2017; Völker et al., 2025), it is difficult to delineate the importance of tie strength from similarity in network evolution. Our study switches this around and our results offer insights into relationship dynamics when they are already established with varying dyadic similarity. For political talk, stronger relationships seem to be more important than the identities of the alters on the other end of the dyad. This finding mirrors recent work on 'risky conversations' showing that these are held more often with friends and relatives rather than with colleagues (Perlstein, Kantorowicz, and Kuipers, 2025). Although differences were not very substantial in our experimental setup.

Additionally, we designed our experiment such that alters took the initiative to start a political conversation and our respondents could either take up this invitation (i.e., selection) or refuse it (i.e., deselection). Recent work has demonstrated that social similarity's role is weaker, or even absent, in tie *deselection* than in tie *selection* processes (Franken, Bekhuis, and Tolsma, 2024b; Jeroense, Spierings, and Tolsma, 2024b; Tulin, Mollenhorst, and Volker, 2021). This – that our experiment captures deselection dynamics – may also explain our null finding with respect to the minimal role of social similarity. Future work can offer further theoretical deep dives into when, for whom, and to what extent social similarity, tie strength and network composition impact decisions to start, continue or end political discussions.

Second, we theoretically and empirically clarified how individuals' extended social networks in the Netherlands – particularly their size and diversity – shape political exchange. In so doing, we made use of a pretested NSUM instrument in NELLS so as to estimate extended network size and its gender and ethnic diversity and are among the first to identify *consequences* of such extended networks. Theoretically, we conjectured that both the size and the diversity of extended networks in the Netherlands positively influence political discussion. The rationale is straightforward: larger networks, more sociability, and greater exposure to diversity bring individuals into contact with a broader range of others – including, we assume, those who differ from them in key identity or opinion dimensions. As such, individuals embedded in large and/or diverse networks become more accustomed to social heterogeneity, and less sensitive or avoidant when encountering (potential differences) in a political exchange. What did we learn? Who one knows appears to matter more than how many. Network size in the Netherlands does not significantly relate to political discussion. This suggests that simply knowing more people does not make individuals more inclined to talk politics, though additional robustness analyses demonstrated that this relation is more nuanced and perhaps curvilinear. People with relatively small *and* with relatively large extended networks are less inclined to talk politics than those in between. It may be that respondents with very small networks are not the most sociable persons and therefore less likely to engage in political talk, and those with very large networks may already have enough political interactions without needing any more ('saturated'). An alternative explanation is that they might have these large networks especially because they avoid risky conversations.

Turning to the composition of our extended networks, we find that ethnic diversity does significantly increase the likelihood of engaging in political discussion. This supports the idea that familiarity with ethnic outgroup members fosters a willingness to engage across differences. By contrast, gender diversity of networks has no such effect. Our NSUM instrument also allowed us to construct a measure of the degree of network educational diversity. Additional analyses showed that respondents with networks with a relatively high degree in educational diversity were not more likely to start a political discussion (see companion website, Data Wrangling & Analysis, 8.7.3). Why especially

experiences with ethnic diversity makes people more open for discussion needs therefore be further explored. Does ethnic diversity better capture the mechanisms of navigating unfamiliarity, discomfort, or contentious viewpoints – elements salient in political discussion – than gender or educational diversity? Unexpectedly, ethnic dyadic similarity becomes *more* and not less important with ethnic diversity in extended networks. One intuition for this is that greater ethnic diversity may facilitate navigating opposing viewpoints and different norms (increasing overall tendencies of political dialogue). Yet within these diverse, possibly more contentious contexts individuals do gravitate towards similar others as a 'safe option.' As such, diversity can both expand the willingness to engage in political talk overall yet amplify a preference for similarity in specific interactions.

Third, our study contributes methodologically by embedding a rich factorial survey experiment within a large survey. This design allowed us to condition treatment effects of similarity and relational factors on political talk, while mitigating typical confounders in observational data such as self-selection into discussion partners or the endogeneity between tie strength, identity, and network composition. Yet by integrating the experiment in a large-scale survey we increase generalizibility through isolating treatment effects from respondents' sociodemographic profiles and their extended networks. What have we learned? First, by conditioning dyadic similarity on extended network diversity, we learned how dyadic similarity is not always less important with more diversity (despite dyadic similarity having little independent main effects). And second, our design allowed us to disentangle the effects of gender, ethnic, and political similarity from those of tie strength. Familiarity and emotional safety are key enablers of political conversation and play a more decisive role in motivating political talk than identity similarity.

At least five limitations of our approach merit acknowledgment. First, our factorial survey experiment can be build-upon in several respects. For instance, we presented respondents with a number of categorical and (quite) heterogeneous action alternatives that, while informative of predicting those actions, do not represent a neat comparable, continuum of the likelihood to engage in political debate – say, from 0-very unlikely to 10-very likely. While our approach might be closer to real-world decision making and while we can distinguish between qualitative differences of our alternatives, we do lose modeling a finer, comparable gradation in actual engagement, possibly leading to relatively small effect sizes. Note that our binary model results closely mirrored our linear models, but that most people choose to at least disclose their own-opinion and (perhaps due to social desirability) hardly stop conversations or change the subject (causing a left-skewed distribution). Additionally, our measure for relationship strength in the survey experiment can be sharpened. How to define the strength of tie is a literature of its own (Brashears and Quintane, 2018; e.g., Marsden and Campbell, 2012). Here, we binned certain roles (e.g., friends, colleagues) into either strong or weak ties, but we encourage future work to further pinpoint what exact features of tie strength (i.e., emotional closeness, frequency of interaction, structural embeddedness, shared history) make political talk more likely, and to better assess the relative importance of these tie strength features compared to other determinants of political talk (e.g., ego's education or gender).

Second, when we break down our main results by ethnic background group, we find that Dutch majority members seem to drive most of the substantive findings. The effects of tie strength, ethnic network diversity, and the gender dyadic similarity * tie strength coefficients are statistically significant for Dutch majority members, but hardly so for those of Moroccan and Turkish descent. Because coefficients are mostly in the same direction, we commend future work with larger sample size among these minoritized groups so as to validate whether these results hold as well.

Third, while our survey experiment embedded in a large-scale survey improves inference, it still carries risks to causal claims. For instance, there may still be unobservables influencing our results, or reverse causality may play a role; perhaps those avoiding political talk tend to subsequently grow networks that are less diverse or smaller. Additionally, respondents are selecting action alternatives that are hypotheticals, and this carries the risk that they might react differently in real-life contexts. Some of the presented variations on the independent variable side may be hypothetical to the extent that respondents are never confronted with them in real-life. Say, can vignette interactions of alters with ethnic backgrounds that respondents do not have a real-life relationship with be compared to those with which respondents do have a relationship with? This is partly addressed by controlling for gender and ethnic network diversity (under the assumption that these survey responses validly measure extended network contact). Yet, the vignette situations remain hypotheticals which may decrease our construct validity. Yet, the vignette situations remain hypotheticals which may decrease our construct validity. For instance, the cases of ethnically dissimilar alters who are presented as family members may decrease the validity as family members are often ethnically similar by design. As a post-hoc test, we therefore analyzed the effects of ethnic and gender similarity without the vignettes that include family ties and these effects remain stable (see companion website, Data Wrangling & Analysis, 8.4.1). Additionally, these experimental situations may be one of the few ways to highlight tie dynamics when they are already established with alters of different gender and ethnic background as networks are often so homogeneous in real-life.

Fourth, although a reliable and unique study into the lives of different minority and majority groups in the Netherlands and their inclination to political talk, the NELLS 2022 has a relatively low response rate of about 20 %. This has consequences for the representativeness of the study, as women and older people are overrepresented. By design, minorities were overrepresented and the Dutch majority underrepresented, though response rate analyses showed that minorities had a lower likelihood of participating in the study, especially among 1st generation migrants (Jeroense et al., 2023). The self-selection of 2nd generation migrants might confound results as the NELLS response may not include an accurate representation of the minoritized community - i. e., those who are more outgoing may have been more likely to participate. Future studies can invest more in the participation of minorities and 1st generation migrants, perhaps by hiring face-to-face interviewers from these communities to include more of these relatively hard-to-reach populations for surveys. Nevertheless, we observe that when we do or do not weigh the data to be representative of the Dutch population (by ethnic background, sex, age, and region) the scores on political talk in Table 2 hardly vary (companion website, Data Wrangling & Analysis, 4.1).

Fifth, we explicitly asked respondents to recall network ties *in the Netherlands*, which potentially results in underestimating network sizes of those with many transnational ties (e.g., minoritized persons). On one end, this is a pragmatic way to easily find the baseline population of X-categories in NSUM methodology to scale-up to – here: the Netherlands. On the other end, future work may develop solutions to implement network scale-up methods transnationally. For instance, by prompting respondents to recall relationships in two countries simultaneously of which baseline populations are known.

Our study focused on a political discussion with one other person; we took a dyadic approach. Naturally, political talk does not take place within a vacuum. Similarly, dyads may be embedded in one's core or extended networks and be part of higher order network structures (e.g., triads). Group dynamics and structural network effects (e.g., transitive closure) may all shape our political networks. Moving from an ego perspective to a dyadic perspective is a step in the right direction but ideally we would take a more comprehensive social network perspective: *theorize on social network structures*, on how ego's and alter's position in the network may effect decision to engage in political talk; *collect social network data*, for example by large scale multi-actor survey experiments; *apply social network methods* that adequately take into account interdependencies and temporal order of (de-)selection decisions.

Our findings offer reason for optimism and concern. While effect sizes were relatively small – possibly due to reasons discussed above –, it is clear that we are more inclined to engage in political talk when we know our political discussion partners well. Our preference for strong tie political discussion partners may make it more challenging to become exposed to new arguments and information, and consequently to reach a well-informed and substantiated opinion. It may also hamper inclusive (or representative) political debates on social media where our prior relations with potential discussion partners are more likely to be weak.

On a more positive note, most people do *not* seem to actively avoid political discussions or break off conversations. The overwhelming majority of respondents (about 71 %) either discloses their own opinion or engages in a substantive political debate. If we include the 'listeners' in political conversations this increases to about 92 % of respondents who either listen, express opinions, or discuss. Given the importance of everyday political talk in society, we conclude that despite the risk and potential discomfort of engaging in political talk, most people are willing to do so in our experimental setup. Another positive take-away is that while choice homophily is ubiquitous in all types of relationship formation, alter selection for political discussion partners seems to be a surprising exception to this pattern; gender and ethnic or even political (dis)similarity do not seem to drive choices for political talk. This may enhance exposure to diverse viewpoints and facilitate a deeper sense-making and substantiation across differing opinions and views. Moreover, the diversity of our extended networks does not seem to have a consistent impact on decisions to engage in political talk with others; respondents with more gender and educational homogeneous networks are *not* less likely to engage in a political debate, and neither are they more likely to favor political talk with similar others. Given our results, there is less reason to fear vicious cycles where social segregation and opinion polarization intensify each other.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Bas Hofstra: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Project administration, Methodology, Conceptualization. **Thijmen Jeroense:** Data curation. **Jochem Tolsma:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Project administration, Methodology, Conceptualization.

Appendix 1. Distribution of Dependent Variable
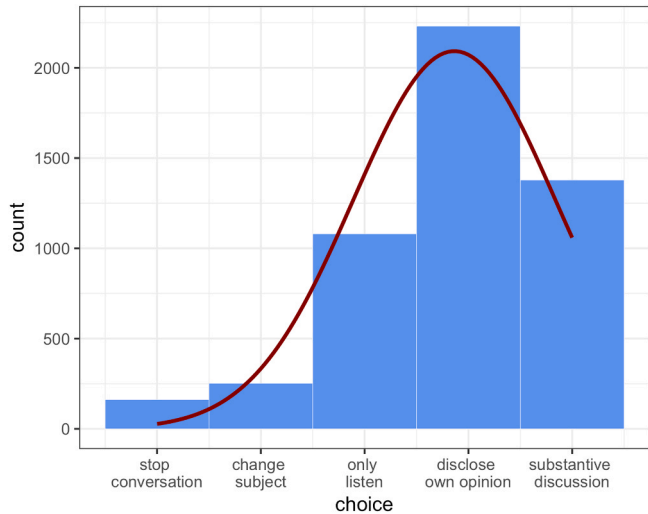
Figure A1.1. Distribution of dependent variable

Appendix 2. Predicting Political Talk With Vignette Characteristics Only

Table A2.1
Predicting political talk with vignette characteristics only

	Estimate		Std.Error
Intercept	3.922	***	0.057
Alter gender (men = ref.)			
woman	-0.000		0.030
Ethnic background alter (majority Dutch = ref.)			
Moroccan	-0.084	*	0.036
Turkish	-0.061	~	0.036
Relationship type (colleague = ref.)			
friend	0.112	*	0.048
acquaintance	0.046		0.048
family	0.060		0.048
stranger	-0.000		0.048
Policy (higher tax for high incomes = ref.)			
less refugees	-0.033		0.036

(*continued on next page*)

Table A2.1 (*continued*)

	Estimate	Std.Error
reduce climate subsidies	0.015	0.036
Political distance (similar = ref.)		
more negative	-0.057	0.036
more positive	0.028	0.037
Variance observations	0.649	
Variance respondents	0.293	

***p < .001, **p < .01, *p < .05, ~p < .10

N observations = 2286; N respondents = 1142.

Appendix 3. Predicting Actively Engaging in Political Talk (yes/no)

Table A3.1

Predicting actively engaging in political talk (yes/no)

	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3			Model 4		
	Estimate		Std.Error	Estimate		Std.Error	Estimate		Std.Error	Estimate		Std.Error
Intercept	6.415	***	0.866	6.825	***	0.906	6.261	*	2.506	6.546	*	2.576
Gender alter (men = ref.)												
woman	0.198		0.257	0.220		0.259	0.216		0.259	0.212		0.262
Ethnic background alter (maj. Dutch = ref.)												
Moroccan	-0.613	~	0.345	-0.615	~	0.349	-0.606	~	0.347	-0.853	*	0.385
Turkish	-0.452		0.341	-0.432		0.343	-0.432		0.341	-0.672	~	0.376
Tie strength (strong = ref.)												
weak	-0.591	*	0.258	-1.344	**	0.432	-1.357	**	0.431	-1.331	**	0.432
Policy (higher tax for high incomes = ref.)												
less refugees	-0.429		0.304	-0.482		0.309	-0.492		0.307	-0.503		0.309
reduce climate subsidies	-0.202		0.303	-0.180		0.307	-0.197		0.306	-0.223		0.308
Political distance (different = ref.)												
similar	1.167	***	0.294	0.638		0.458	0.611		0.456	0.633		0.460
Gender ego (men =ref.)												
woman	-0.870	*	0.403	-0.911	*	0.407	-0.947	*	0.415	-0.968	*	0.417
Ethnic background ego (maj. Dutch = ref.)												
Moroccan	0.505		0.591	0.465		0.598	0.032		0.672	-0.014		0.680
Turkish	0.182		0.474	0.186		0.477	-0.171		0.551	-0.196		0.556
Gender similarity dyad	0.201		0.257	-0.524		0.419	-0.507		0.416	-0.307		0.799
Ethnic similarity dyad	0.430		0.310	0.683		0.499	0.679		0.495	0.003		0.638
Age ego	0.044		0.206	0.045		0.208	0.057		0.211	0.065		0.212
Education ego (primary =ref.)												
secondary	1.232	~	0.663	1.258	~	0.672	1.327	~	0.690	1.350	~	0.698
tertiary	1.662	*	0.682	1.707	*	0.691	1.843	**	0.713	1.854	*	0.720
Weak tie * gender similarity				1.203	*	0.522	1.181	*	0.520	1.148	*	0.522
Weak tie * ethnic similarity				-0.349		0.600	-0.337		0.596	-0.416		0.604
Weak tie * opinion similarity				0.905		0.584	0.932		0.582	0.910		0.584
Network size in NL							-0.042		0.410	-0.037		0.413
Network gender diversity							0.818		1.596	1.044		1.820
Network ethnic diversity							1.581		1.106	0.982		1.169
Gender sim. * gender diversity										-0.477		1.723
Ethnic sim. * ethnic diversity										2.260	~	1.351
Variance respondents	106.696			105.378			101.221			102.285		

***p < .001, **p < .01, *p < .05, ~p < .10

N observations = 2286; N respondents = 1142.

Appendix 4. Ethnic Background Sub-group Analyses of Predicting Political Talk

Table A4.1

Predicting political talk - ethnic sub-group analysis

	Model 4b (all)			Model 4b (majority Dutch)			Model 4b (Moroccan Dutch)			Model 4b (Turkish Dutch)		
	Estimate		Std. Error	Estimate		Std. Error	Estimate		Std. Error	Estimate		Std. Error
Intercept	3.912	***	0.329	4.058	***	0.424	4.169	***	1.001	3.217	***	0.619
Gender alter (Men = ref.)												
woman	-0.003		0.030	-0.002		0.038	-0.036		0.091	0.040		0.061
Ethnic background alter (ingroup = ref.)												
outgroup	-0.027		0.062	-0.046		0.071	-0.030		0.368	0.127		0.173

Table A4.1 (*continued*)

	Model 4b (all)		Model 4b (majority Dutch)		Model 4b (Moroccan Dutch)		Model 4b (Turkish Dutch)	
	Estimate	Std. Error	Estimate	Std. Error	Estimate	Std. Error	Estimate	Std. Error
Tie strength (strong = ref.)								
weak	-0.191 **	0.064	-0.262 **	0.080	-0.024	0.176	-0.104	0.147
Policy (higher tax for high incomes = ref.)								
less refugees	-0.038	0.036	-0.032	0.046	-0.129	0.101	-0.009	0.076
reduce climate subsidies	0.013	0.036	0.015	0.044	-0.084	0.107	0.050	0.079
Political distance (different = ref.): about the same	-0.055	0.049	-0.042	0.062	0.090	0.152	-0.140	0.101
Gender ego (men =ref.)								
woman	-0.252 ***	0.052	-0.332 ***	0.063	0.052	0.184	-0.240 *	0.107
Ethnic background ego (maj. Dutch = ref.)								
Moroccan	-0.013	0.085						
Turkish	-0.140 ~	0.072						
Dyad: gender similarity	-0.068	0.095	-0.104	0.120	0.195	0.376	-0.072	0.179
Age ego	-0.001	0.003	0.001	0.004	0.009	0.009	-0.008	0.006
Education ego (primary = ref.)								
secondary	0.309 ***	0.080	0.319 **	0.107	-0.021	0.209	0.486 **	0.159
tertiary	0.530 ***	0.081	0.483 ***	0.109	0.359	0.228	0.720 ***	0.155
Network size in NL	-0.046	0.052	-0.048	0.066	-0.199	0.166	0.051	0.097
Network gender diversity	0.203	0.233	-0.059	0.284	0.699	0.905	0.677	0.453
Network ethnic diversity	0.459 **	0.166	0.731 ***	0.213	0.673	0.745	-0.091	0.358
Weak tie * gender similarity	0.159 **	0.060	0.185 *	0.074	0.062	0.178	0.155	0.127
Weak tie * ethnic similarity	0.007	0.064	0.032	0.080	0.046	0.187	-0.074	0.141
Weak tie * opinion similarity	0.119 ~	0.064	0.102	0.081	-0.069	0.194	0.176	0.132
Gender sim. * gender diversity	0.065	0.208	0.073	0.261	-0.111	0.850	0.036	0.399
outgroup * ethnic diversity	-0.133	0.134	-0.246	0.201	-0.167	0.667	-0.219	0.312
Variance respondents	0.601		0.529		0.915		0.586	
Variance observations	0.294		0.284		0.329		0.310	

***p < .001, **p < .01, *p < .05, ~p < .10

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