Theorizing Connective Democracy: A New Way to Bridge Political Divides

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Abstract

This two-study package theorizes connective democracy as a means of enabling the type of democratic discourse envisioned by deliberative democracy in highly polarized political climates. Using survey data (N = 1,160) and follow-up interviews with survey respondents (n = 56), we theorize connective democracy. We argue that connective democracy offers a less sanitized view of democracy than deliberative democracy where not all types of polarization are equally damaging to democracy. Further, connective democracy prioritizes cross-cutting political conversations and focuses on shared humanity and genuinely listening to divergent points of view. In essence, connective democracy provides a path forward to forge connections between people, thus providing a boundary condition for deliberative democracy. Our findings explore how the public enacts connective democracy, and the role of the professional news media in that enactment. Theoretical implications are discussed in light of recent concerns about affective polarization as well as deliberative democracy's feasibility.

More than a century ago, sociologist Gabriel de Tarde outlined a deliberative framework for society where the professional news media brought together the dispersed crowds of the public (Clark, 1889/1969), connecting them through rational discussions about the important political issues of the day. These conversations remain important because democracy depends on citizens considering different points of view as they reach political decisions, which is a foundational idea of deliberative democracy (Elstub & McLaverty, 2014; Fishkin, 2011). Although few would disagree with bringing people together to discuss differing viewpoints, the theory of deliberative democracy has been criticized for being unattainable (Delli Carpini, 2004), elitist, and reinforcing of hegemonic viewpoints (Maia et al., 2017). Cross-cutting discussions that have the potential to help people understand divergent views, as espoused by deliberative democracy, have long been elusive but might be even more unlikely in today's politically polarized climate where few are willing to consider counter-attitudinal perspectives. We argue that people's willingness to engage in such conversations can make or break deliberative democracy's ability to live up to its promises. Therefore, we put forth a new theoretical framework, connective democracy, that proposes how political adversaries can be brought together in ways that enact deliberation. We offer connective democracy as a way of bringing about the ideals put forth by deliberative democracy but also as a normatively desirable goal in its own right. We use a survey (N = 1,160) of Americans and in-depth interviews with a subset of those respondents (n = 56) to theorize connective democracy, "which involves understanding the ties that bind and the values that divide us, with an orientation toward identifying practical solutions that bridge societal fissures" (The Center for Media Engagement, 2019). Connective democracy places at its center some assumptions that deliberative democracy takes for granted, and in doing so it offers a more realistic account of how people behave in contemporary

democracies. Our main contribution is to theorize connective democracy by examining the role of three types of political attitudes and behaviors—cross-cutting discussions, preferring to talk about differences rather than avoid them, and getting along with people with different political beliefs—in bridging divides (Study 1). Study 2 investigates how people can enact connective democracy and explicates the news media's role in both reinforcing or thwarting this process (Clark, 1889/1969). By the media, we mean the professional commercial U.S. news media—such as print, online, and broadcast journalism, not hyper-partisan outlets or social media platforms. This is our focus because, as de Tarde argues, the professional news media "promote the formation of broader publics" and "these groupings facilitate the formation of broader ideologically perspectives," (Clark, 1889/1969, p. 56) such as rationality and tolerance that form the cornerstone of deliberative democracy. Indeed, journalism's role as the fourth estate stems from its enshrinement in the public consciousness as "primary catalyst of informed citizenship" (Grabe & Myrick, 2016, p. 2015). Thus, without the media and widespread support for its journalistic mission, deliberative democracy falls short, and so, too, does connective democracy because the professional news media are a main conduit of information about what people and society think and feel about politics and their communities.

The News Media and Democracy

Democratic theory suggests that news media are intrinsic to democracy (Grabe & Myrick, 2016). The underlying assumption of journalism's role in a democracy is that "serious" journalists are supposed to convey "objective and factual information," and that by doing so they earn the right to be viewed as "part of a respected professional collective," and, ultimately, the consumers of this information are made knowledgeable enough to participate fully in a democracy (Grabe & Myrick, 2016, pp. 215-2016). Another way to understand the media's role

in democracy is that journalists' job is to authenticate information, make sense of it for the public, bear witness to events for the public, and be a watchdog of government by exposing malfeasance or other wrongdoing (Kovach & Rosenthiel, 2021), and, as a result, prepare the public to vote (Grabe & Myrick, 2016). Although seeing voting as the main measure of active citizenship can be reductive in today's era of interactive media (Grabe & Myrick, 2016), the connection between the news media and democracy remains clear because the media help the public define and identify their communities by providing the "social connection and information flow" that unites them (Kovach & Rosenthiel, 2021, p. 7). Thus, without the professional news media, the public may not be as fully informed as they need to be in a democracy, which highlights the media's role in our understanding of connective democracy.

Theorizing Connective Democracy

Our theory of connective democracy is rooted in the normative idea that democracy is more than a governmental system. As Dewey (1888) argues, we see democracy as a "way of living" (p. 28) that requires connections between those who are "bound together by shared experiences and a commitment to the common good" (Stroud, 2011, p. 15). It builds onto the theory of deliberative democracy, which posits that everyone should get a voice and that rational discussions, rooted in evidence, have the potential to help people to at least understand divergent views (e.g., Fishkin, 2011) and enable the type of democracy Dewey (1888) envisioned. Connective democracy, however, addresses some of the critiques of deliberative democracy that might inhibit it from delivering on its promise.

These critiques include that certain voices have more societal power to be heard than others (e.g., Maia et al., 2017), undermining marginalized groups' potential to engage in deliberation, even though deliberative democracy aspires to include diverse voices (Delli Carpini

et al., 2004). This is problematic because it may result in some citizens being afraid to speak their minds (Van Duyn, 2021). Further, the rational and inclusive cross-cutting discussions envisioned by deliberative democracy are rare (Delli Carpini et al., 2004), especially in the digitalized public sphere (Dahlberg, 2001).

Deliberative democracy also relies on questionable assumptions. For example, it implies that if voters had access to all relevant information and enough time and capacity to think through the implications of political alternatives, the best ideas should win out. This assumes people are willing to think rationally about political decisions and genuinely consider arguments from those they disagree with. This assumption cannot be taken for granted, particularly in contemporary democracies, such as the U.S., that are characterized by historic political divisiveness (Iyengar et al., 2019). Connective democracy builds on advancements that have challenged the notion of purely logical voters (Lodge & Taber, 2013) to conceptualize voters as being driven, to a great extent, by emotions. Instead of assuming that people are willing to consider arguments from their political adversaries, connective democracy focuses on this willingness. In doing so, connective democracy offers a more robust and less sanitized account of political behavior in polarized climates.

In doing so, we build on prior research (Bennett & Segerberg, 2015) to conceptualize *connectivity* as a willingness to prioritize relationships over competitiveness and engage in conversation with one's political adversaries to genuinely understand their viewpoints. In emphasizing the importance of connectivity, we propose the development and preservation of trustful relationships (especially between opposing partisans) as a boundary condition that connective democracy brings to the viability of deliberative democracy. Without at least some trust, we posit, ideas between opposing parties cannot be freely exchanged as envisioned by

deliberative democracy. In cases where partisans act like "trolls," for example, saying hateful things intended to hurt or demonize a specific group, as opposed to engaging in genuine dialogue, there is no basis for a genuine exchange of ideas to occur—and no reason for such message to be spread or taken seriously by citizens or journalists.

Connective democracy can be seen as a boundary condition for deliberative democracy to take place. Boundary conditions stem from a long line of theoretical work explicating what belongs in theoretical concepts and frameworks (Busse et al., 2017; Whetten, 1989). Boundaries are the "who, where, when" of theory (Whetten, 1989, p. 492) that explore the temporal and contextual factors that shape how a theory operates (Busse et al, 2017). Boundary work is essential to our theoretical development of connective democracy because we argue that for deliberative democracy to happen, fruitful connections between those who disagree must occur. In other words, for people to deliberate, at the very least they must be able to talk to those with whom they disagree. Thus, connective democracy is a hard boundary required for deliberative democracy because it suggests deliberative democracy will *only* happen if connective democracy occurs. We do not suggest that that deliberative democracy will *always* occur if connective democracy takes place, only that that it is possible. But we also propose that connective democracy is normatively valuable on its own, even if it does not always lead to deliberative democracy because talking across differences is intrinsically vital. Therefore, connective democracy is a boundary requirement for deliberative democracy, but deliberative democracy is not a boundary condition for connective democracy. Connective democracy can occur without deliberative democracy taking place.

Several efforts have critiqued deliberative democracy and the notion of the public sphere (e.g., Maia et al., 2017; Warner, 2002) or alternatives to it (Mouffe, 1999). However, we focus

on bringing about the ideals set forth by deliberative democracy, rather than just critiquing it. The core strength of connective democracy (addressing interparty animosity to facilitate the exchange of political ideas) is offered to address what we see as a major limitation of the deliberative democracy model (that deliberation will only occur if people can stand talking with those who disagree with them politically).

The Problem of Divisiveness

Before further conceptualizing connective democracy, it is useful to articulate more fully the problem it tries to solve. Divisiveness is often cast under the catch-all term of polarization, which includes holding divergent views on specific policies or ideologies (Pew Research Center, 2014). Connective democracy does not address that type of divisiveness. Rather, we argue that it is "normatively acceptable and, dare we say, even healthy in a democracy" (Stroud & Masullo, 2020, p. 155) to have citizens who are willing to disagree. In this respect, connective democracy builds on deliberative democracy. We propose connective democracy as a theoretical lens for understanding the boundary conditions for when people will be open to the discourse envisioned by deliberative democracy.

Connective democracy assumes the "democratic merit of robust and heated discussion" (Papacharissi, 2004, p. 260) even when it is uncomfortable because this disagreement can lead to exchanges that result in more reasoned evaluations (Masullo & Overgaard, 2021). Connective democracy acknowledges that some divides are too deep to bridge, thus pushing back against some of the main critiques of deliberative democracy, namely that deliberative democracy imagines a sanitized public sphere, is elitist (e.g., Dahlberg, 2001), and unattainable (Delli Carpini et al., 2004). Connective democracy also appreciates that the disagreeing parties in American politics are not necessarily approaching this discord in good faith. There is some

evidence, for example, that the right spreads false information and manipulates the media more than the left (Freelon et al., 2020; Marwick & Lewis, 2017) and that Republicans are more likely to endorse violence and other forms of extremism than Democrats (Kalmoe & Mason, 2022), although more study of the left is needed. *This leads to the first principle of connective democracy—that it offers a less sanitized and more realistic view of democracy than deliberative democracy.*

It is useful to distinguish between different types of polarization. Ideological polarization, which focuses on ideological disagreement, has been fairly consistent over the past 50 years (Gentzkow, 2016), while issue polarization, which focuses on specific policies, has grown in the past three decades (Pew Research Center, 2014). Affective polarization, or people's dislike for their political adversaries, constitutes the most well-documented and substantial rise in political divisiveness in recent decades (Iyengar et al., 2019). Notably, However, political divisiveness in general has risen in the populist wave (Pierson, 2017) that brought Donald J. Trump into office in 2016 and the years that followed (e.g., Hout & Maggio, 2021). This divisiveness was exacerbated during the ongoing coronavirus global pandemic (e.g., Druckman et al., 2021).

Most work on deliberative democracy does not explicitly mention these labels, but these two forms of polarization are essentially what the theory is attempting to solve. In our theoretical framework, we focus on affective polarization because we argue that it is more normatively problematic than other forms of polarization because it involves actual dislike of outparty members. *Thus, the second principle of connective democracy is that affective polarization is deeply problematic whereas issue polarization or ideological polarization are not.*

In considering affective polarization, we focus on two particularly virulent aspects of the concept—*negative outparty feelings* and *negative trait perceptions*—for several reasons. First,

negative outparty feelings, defined as voters' animosity toward their political opponents, and *negative trait perceptions*, the tendency to ascribe negative traits to outparty members, are consistently employed in the literature to conceptualize affective polarization (e.g., Wojcieszak & Warner, 2020). Second, because these feelings and perceptions are so negative, they are more likely to cut off the type of conversations that connective democracy requires. Unlike other forms of polarization, where people are divided over a topic but may still have charitable feelings toward an outgroup member, that is more difficult with these forms of affective polarization. *Negative outparty feelings* and *negative trait perceptions* are not about merely disagreeing about something—they signify dislike or even hatred for outgroup members.

If people dislike or hate their outgroup members, they are less likely to have the type of friendships or aquaintanships (e.g., Iyengar et al., 2019) that are necessary for connective democracy to occur. In essence, connective democracy can only occur if people at the very least listen to each other. They can only listen to each other if they can at the very least tolerate each other, and overly *negative outparty feelings* and *negative trait perceptions* show that they cannot even do this. This may result in fewer conversations between people who disagree politically, a trend likely to exacerbate discord, encourage stereotyping, and block the potential for good-faith discussions to bridge divides. *This leads to the third principle of connective democracy: Communication between political opponents is not merely admirable but necessary to bridge divides.* Engaging in cross-cutting conversations is essential to help people understand others' viewpoints or at least tolerate them (Mutz, 2006), and affectively polarized people are less likely to engage in these conversations (Heatherly et al., 2017). Affective polarization, research suggests, makes Americans increasingly favor discussing politics with those who agree with them, and this, in turn, makes them more affectively polarized (Hutchens et al., 2019). Cross-

cutting discussions, however, are no panacea. It can make people become more entrenched in their belief or be unsure of them, so they withdraw politically (Mutz, 2002). Yet, we argue cross-cutting conversations are normatively valuable and central to connective democracy because the potential benefits outweigh the downsides.

However, people must also be open to getting to know those who hold different views than they do, not just talk to them. Thus, *the fourth principle of connective democracy asserts that people must see the humanity of the other side by spending time together.* Support for this principle is rooted in Allport's (1954) intergroup contact hypothesis, which argues that contact between groups can lessen stereotyping and misperceptions. Decades of research have shown that this can even occur without actual contact taking place—for example, if people experience positive contact with their outgroups in the news (Wojcieszak & Warner, 2020; for a review, see Overgaard et al., 2021).

Given that these relatively limited forms of contact can lessen affective polarization, we posit that a stronger form of interparty contact, having neighbors that people get along with despite political differences, would likely have similar effects. Therefore, given the positive relationship between cross-cutting and political tolerance found in the literature reviewed above, we predict:

> H1: Negative outparty feelings will be lower among people who (a) get along with neighbors who disagree with them politically, (b) have more frequent cross-cutting discussions, and (c) prefer to discuss rather than avoid political differences.

> H2: Negative outparty trait perceptions will be lower among people who (a) get along with neighbors who disagree with them politically, (b) have more frequent cross-cutting discussions, and (c) prefer to discuss rather than avoid political differences.

Method: Study 1

Respondent Recruitment

The project has Institutional Review Board [IRB] approval. A sample of 1,160 U.S. adults[1] were recruited through CloudResearch, which culls participants from Amazon Mechanical Turk [MTurk], a platform of participants who perform tasks.[2] CloudResearch aims to ensure more high-quality responses from MTurk participants by screening out people who answer demographic questions inconsistently or have suspicious geo-locations that could indicate they are bots (Litman et al., 2017). Participants were paid $1.20, and the survey took 12.22 minutes on average (*SD* = 7.31). The survey ran from April 26 to June 17, 2020.

Rather than using a representative or random sample, we sought Americans who actively follow politics and live in communities they perceive as divided politically. Participants consented and were asked if they "follow what is going on in government and public affairs" (only those answering "some" or "most" of the time were included) and whether they "live in a community where people hold different political views" (only those answering "yes" were included). Table 1 provides demographics.

[Insert Table 1 here]

Independent Measures

Frequency of cross-cutting discussions. We adapted an item (Mutz & Mondak, 2006): "How often do you discuss politics with neighbors who have different political views than you?" (*frequently*, *sometimes*, *rarely*, or *never*). Answers were reverse-scored so a higher score represented more frequent discussions, *M* = 2.42, *SD* = 0.93.

Preferring to discuss rather than avoid political differences. We adapted an item from Pew Research Center (2019), asking if respondents preferred to "talk about these differences in

order to try to find common ground" (56.0%) or "avoid talking about these differences because it usually makes things worse" (44.0%).

Getting along with neighbors who disagree politically. Respondents rated their agreement or disagreement on a 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*) scale to: "I get along with my neighbors who don't have the same political view as me," $M = 3.78$, $SD = 0.97$. The three independent measures were weakly to moderately correlated.[3]

Dependent Measures

Negative outparty feelings. Using a *feelings thermometer* (Iyengar et al., 2019), we asked respondents how they felt toward their outgroup, using a zero (*extremely negative*) to 10 (*extremely positive*) scale. Values were reversed scored so that a greater score indicated greater negativity, $M = 6.49$, $SD = 2.67$.

Negative outparty trait perceptions. Using measures from Wojcieszak and Warner (2020), respondents rated on a seven-point scale how well they felt a series of adjectives "describe people whose political beliefs are not the same as yours": "brainwashed," "racist," "hateful," "misinformed," and "misguided." Responses were averaged together, $M = 4.68$, $SD = 1.48$, Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.89$. The two outcome measures were not correlated ($r = 0.01$, $p = .680$).

Control variables

Demographic variables (age, education, gender, race, and income) along with partisan strength, perceived political polarization, population density, and media usage were used as control variables. Partisan strength was measured on a 1-to-4 scale, with a higher number indicating greater partisanship, $M = 3.27$, $SD = 0.91$. For perceived political polarization, respondents indicated their level of agreement, using a five-point scale, with the statement, "Democrats and Republicans cannot agree on anything" ($M = 3.99$, $SD = 0.96$); a greater score

meant greater perceived polarization. Population density was measured by asking respondents to provide their ZIP codes, which we classified as urban (59.8%), suburban (11.8%), or rural (28.4%) according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture's definition.[4] Media usage was measured by asking respondents if they regularly got news about politics from local TV stations or newspapers (63.6%) or social media (55.3%).

Results: Study 1

Two stepwise regression analyses were conducted. H1 predicted that *outparty feelings* would be less negative among people who (a) get along better with neighbors who disagree with them politically, (b) have more frequent cross-cutting discussions, and (c) prefer to discuss rather than avoid political differences. All the possible two-way interactions between these variables were included in the stepwise procedures, as well as a three-way interaction of all three.[5] The focal independent variables, as well as the described interactions, were entered in the first model, which was significant, $R^2 = 0.30$, Adjusted $R^2 = 0.29$, $F = 149.17$, $p < .001$. In support of H1a-b, *frequency of cross-cutting discussions* ($\beta = -0.28$, $p < .001$) and *getting along with neighbors who disagree* ($\beta = -0.07$, $p = .005$) were inversely associated with feeling negative toward the outparty (Table 2). The third predictor, *preferring to discuss rather than avoid politics*, was discarded by the stepwise procedure. H1c is not supported. One significant interaction, *cross-cutting frequency* by *preferring to discuss rather than avoid politics* was selected by the stepwise procedure ($\beta = -.29$, $p < .001$). In short, it appears that the beneficial effect of cross-cutting discussions on outparty feelings is stronger for those who prefer to discuss politics than for those who do not. All other interactions were discarded by the stepwise procedure. As shown in Table 2, these results remain consistent, when controlling for, demographics, strength of partisan beliefs, perceived polarization, population density, and media usage.

[Insert Table 2 here]

H2 predicted that *negative outparty trait perceptions* would be lower among the same three groups as referenced in H1. The same stepwise regression procedures were used as above. The results echo what we found in H1. In support of H2a-b, negative trait perceptions are inversely related to *frequency of cross-cutting discussions* (β = -0.75, $p < .001$) and *getting along with neighbors who disagree* (β = -0.58, $p < .001$), $R^2 = 0.06$, adjusted $R^2 = 0.06$, $F = 25.10$, $p < .001$. Counter to H2c, the *preferring to discuss politics* variable was discarded by the stepwise regression procedure. And, again, the results remained consistent when adding the control variables. This model yielded a significant interaction for *cross-cutting frequency* by *getting along with neighbors who disagree politically* (β = 1.12, $p < .001$), suggesting that frequent cross-cutting discussions may lead to more negative outparty trait perceptions for people who get along with neighbors who disagree with them. All other interactions were discarded by the stepwise procedure. It is noteworthy, that even with all variables in the model, the model explained only 6% of the variance in *negative trait perceptions* toward outparty members.

Discussion: Study 1

Study 1 theorizes connective democracy by showing that two key concepts—*cross-cutting discussions* and *getting along with neighbors you disagree with*—are inversely related to affective polarization. This suggests that communicating with those who people disagree with and seeing the humanity of the other side by spending time together may be essential to bridging divisiveness. The robustness of these linkages is underscored by the consistency of the results when examined with control variables and when examined across two forms affective polarization, *negative outparty feelings* and *negative outparty trait perceptions*. We also found an interaction effect where the negative relationship between *frequency of cross-cutting*

discussions and *negative outparty feeling* was especially strong for *people who prefer to discuss rather than avoid political* difference. This suggests that the potentially beneficial effects of talking politics with "the other side" is especially pronounced for people who like to engage in such discussions. Yet such preferences did not have a direct relationship with either form of affective polarization.

It is noteworthy that the independent variables did not account for much variance when predicting negative outparty trait perceptions. It could mean that other untested variables may play a more substantial role in influencing these perceptions—a possibility for future research to investigate. Another possibility is that these trait perceptions are sticky, typically not amenable to rethinking. This underscores the difference between feelings and trait perceptions as indicators of affective polarization; more specifically, it suggests that while cross-cutting interactions (and potentially positive vicarious interparty contact) can curb negative interparty feelings, it might be more difficult to change what traits people ascribe to the "other side." This study is cross-sectional, which comes with certain limitations: Although Study 1 focused on cross-cutting behavior and getting along with one's neighbors as predictors of affective polarization, it is possible that affective polarization has effects on cross-cutting and tendency to get along with neighbors with counter attitudinal viewpoints, as our survey cannot established causal order.

These findings leave some important questions answered. How do people transverse disagreement or navigate political differences? How does that enact connective democracy in a way that makes deliberative democracy possible? Finally, given the historic role of the professional news media in facilitating deliberative democracy (Clark, 1889/1969) and in encouraging the political participation necessary in a democracy (Grabe & Myrick, 2016; Kovach & Rosenthiel, 2021), what role—if any—does the media have in connective democracy?

The current findings suggest that local news usage might be inversely associated with interparty outparty feelings. The professional news media's persistent struggle with being perceived as biased and untrustworthy, particularly in the United States (Newman et al., 2021), suggests their role in connective democracy may be complicated. Thus, for Study 2, we asked:

RQ1: What strategies do people have for navigating political differences?

RQ2: How do these strategies enable people to enact connective democracy so that deliberative democracy can occur?

RQ3: What role—if any—does the professional news media play in how people navigate political differences?

Method: Study 2

Participant Recruitment

Participants for in-depth interviews were recruited from the Study 1 sample. All respondents were asked if they were willing to be interviewed. Because we were interested in interviewing people who navigate politically divided communities, interviewees had to meet two inclusion criteria. First, they had to live in a "divided community," defined as a community with a gap of 60 or fewer percentage points between the percentage of people in that ZIP code who voted for Donald J. Trump compared to the percentage who voted for Hillary Clinton in the 2016 presidential election. Voter percentages were based on an interactive graphic by *The New York Times*.[6] The *NYT*'s graphic showed that more than one in five voters live in a voting precinct where 80% of the vote went for either Trump or Clinton, suggesting an electoral bubble. This underscores the need to understand how those who live in divided communities transverse disagreement, especially because such electoral echo chambers may inflame affective polarization (Iyengar et al., 2019). Additionally, participants were only interviewed if they

expressed either feelings of being highly polarized or not very polarized, leaving out those in the middle. In total, 565 respondents met these criteria, and we interviewed 56 until we reached "data saturation," (Saunders et al., 2018, p. 1897) meaning interviews seemed to stop producing novel knowledge. The sample was balanced in terms of gender, race, age, and state location. Interview participants hailed from 26 states (Table 1).[7] Each was paid $25.

Procedures

Interviews were conducted via Zoom from May 12 to June 29, 2020. After consenting, participants were asked open-ended questions about their perceptions of the political beliefs of people in their communities, navigating these differences, strategies for talking to those who disagree with them, and the role of the professional news media in divisiveness. Interviews ranged from 26 minutes to 1.5 hours (averaging 48 minutes) and were recorded and transcribed. Participants selected the pseudonyms used below.

Analysis Strategy

We adapted principles of grounded theory (e.g., Corbin & Strauss, 2015), letting ideas emerge from data without rigid preconceived notions. Our goal was to make meaning from data by immersing ourselves in the data (McCracken, 1988). Researchers combed through transcriptions multiple times, employing the constant-comparative method of re-reading transcriptions repeatedly until commonalities emerged. We grouped data into broad themes (Corbin & Strauss, 2015) interpreted using the theoretical lens of connective democracy.

Results: Study 2

We wanted to know what strategies Americans have for talking across differences (RQ1), how Americans in our sample enact connective democracy so that deliberative democracy can occur (RQ2), and what role the professional news media might play in this (RQ3). Our first two

themes, *See the Humanity* and *Listen to Understand*, answer the first two questions. Our third theme, *Fear Mongers and Scapegoats*, answers RQ3.

See the Humanity

Participants noted that they could see the humanity in those they disagree with better if they focused on them as people, rather than as political opponents, and ultimately this enabled them to enact what we call the tenets of connective democracy. "You know, maybe I didn't know how they felt about a particular topic, but I tend not to let it change my overall view of the person," explained Rex,[8] 35, of Illinois, who leans conservative. "I mean, they're still a friend of [mine] or someone I've had a history with, and I try to be respectful of what they think."

Building a relationship before talking about politics might also help. "If it's someone new or someone who I don't know how they'll react. … [I] generally won't be the person to bring [politics] up," said Democrat Cornelius,[9] 38, of Michigan. Another aspect of this strategy, according to our participants, is not taking comments personally and not defining people based only on their political beliefs. By separating people from their political views, our participants reported they could see past differences and focus on shared humanity. "I'm from Brooklyn, so I grew up with, I guess, a thick skin," explained Tim,[10] 33, who now lives in Pennsylvania and describes himself as politically independent. "… It doesn't make any sense to take things to heart." These observations from our participants illustrate one of the core propositions of connective democracy—that connectivity can best be attained when citizens spend time with people with different beliefs, so they can see them as people. Their experiences demonstrate the effort this takes, that building bridges is not easy, convenient, or comfortable.

Listen to Understand

Republican JoJo,[11] 32, of Florida, said phrasing questions in a way that seeks to understand, rather than challenge is helpful, especially in political discussions with his wife, who identifies as a Democrat. It also helped, participants, said, if they stuck to information they could independently verify, backed up their opinion with evidence from news sources both parties consider reputable, and kept their passions at bay. Thus, our participants suggested that talking to those one disagrees with requires effort and time to rein in one's own feelings and to understand a topic more fully. As Democrat Julie,[12] 66, of Tennessee, explained: "I try to do a little bit of research and find out if it's true or fake news or whatever." Avoiding a confrontational tone also helps prevent conflict and encourages openness to differing viewpoints, participants said. "Certainly, I think they might respect me more if … I don't come off maybe as argumentative or I don't sound like I'm attacking them," said Democrat Kathleen,[13] 42, of Indiana. "I think they'd be more liable to listen to me if I can, you know, back up what I'm saying and say [it] calmly." These observations underscore the third principle of connective democracy—that talking with those people disagree with is essential to mending divisions. Our participants show that in order to productively engage in these crucial conversations, a shift in approach and tone is necessary.

Sometimes the only way to have a productive cross-cutting discussion is knowing when to stop. "I'll just kind of stop the conversation because it's not getting anywhere, and I don't want it to escalate," said Republican Sierra,[14] 55, of Washington state. These comments also underscore that consensus or even merely understanding divergent viewpoints are not always realistic outcomes. Unlike deliberative democracy, which suggests discussions across differences should have the potential to lead to consensus or at the very least understanding (e.g., Fishkin, 2011), connective democracy allows for the reality that some discussions cannot end that way. While connective democracy encourages talking across differences, it takes into account that

striving to do this is not always possible or advisable. The reality is that sometimes the healthy choice for people's relationships is to know when the conversation must end.

Participants noted that it seemed more effective in cross-cutting conversations to explain their own beliefs, rather than trying to persuade others that their opinions were flawed. Some went so far as to try to change their conversational style, so it was more palatable to those with whom they disagree. Ohioan Janie,[15] 38, a self-identified libertarian said she changes her speech style for both Democrats and Republicans to mimic their preference. "When I'm speaking with liberals … I talk a lot more slower. I put in a lot of, 'um's' and 'yeah, I feel ya.' With conservatives I, I speak very clearly. I'm very conscious not to break or pause."

Some participants suggested talking about local politics, which might be less divisive than national politics, and avoiding hot-button issues—particularly former President Trump. Democrat Joe,[16] 49, of North Carolina, said he tries this approach on NextDoor, a neighborhood app, and on Facebook by avoiding topics that "might possibly rub people the wrong way." Again, this suggests that enacting connective democracy requires knowing that sometimes bridging a divide is not always possible.

Scapegoats and Fear Mongers

Some of our participants noted that the professional news media overall try to present a variety of political viewpoints in a way that encourages discussions, although some outlets fail to live up to these ideals. "They're really in a tough spot," said Chloe,[17] 68, a Democrat from California. "…I think most of them, the majority of them do the best they can." Implicit in some interviewees' comments is an assumption that the news media *should* appeal to a wide audience with varied interests, so if they feel media fail at this, they feel let down. This idea resonates with

the theory of interlocking publics, which proposes that journalists have an unwritten rule that they should gear content to a diverse populace (Kovach & Rosenthiel, 2021).

Leslie,[18] 28, a Democrat from North Carolina, explained that people seem to blame the media for stirring up divisiveness, but often they are a "scapegoat." The real culprits, she said, are social media. Others were less charitable toward the news media. Participants noted that the news media seem to inflame divisions through sensational coverage that pits one side against the other, again hearkening to an assumption that it is the job of journalism to serve diverse segments of the audience equally. "I think what sells is inflammatory opinions," said Claire,[19] 22, a Democrat from North Carolina. "I think that the news is making things much worse. I think it's so hard to find a source that reports both sides." Participants pointed to corporate ownership of media outlet as fueling a homogenous media culture that encourage hyperbole in coverage, again suggesting that journalists should somehow appeal to heterogenous audiences more effectively. "I feel like the media's just a bunch of fear mongers right now, so it's really hard to listen to them," said Decker,[20] 40, a Republican from Illinois.

Overall, at least among our participants, the news media was hardly performing the role de Tarde imagined of bringing the public together to enact deliberative democracy (Clark, 1889/1969). Even those charitable toward the media, felt the media were playing little to any role in helping them to navigate political disagreement. Some noted the media's role in connecting across difference was "neutral," implying that the media should be treating diverse groups more equally. But other were much more pointed, castigating the media for igniting divisions. "I think like, FOX News and *Breitbart* and stuff like that have hurt a lot," explained Charlie,[21] 34, a Democrat from North Carolina. "It's definitely pushed the Republicans more to the right, um, from what I have seen. As far as like, MSNBC and other things, I think they push Democrats to

the left, but not as far." Their observations resonate with empirical findings that those on the right might play a larger role than those on the left in spreading conspiracy theories and false information (for a review, see: Freelon et al., 2020) as well as hateful messages (Marwick & Lewis, 2017) and that, according to a national survey (Cassino, 2016), FOX news shapes how conservatives view politics.

Discussion: Study 2

The findings from Study 2 show how the principles of connective democracy perform a boundary condition for deliberative democracy to take place. Specifically, these findings support the third principle, that conversations across differences are vital to deliberative democracy, and the fourth principle, that seeing the humanity in political adversaries is the path toward making these conversations possible. However, Study 2 suggest that some news outlets might amplify divisions, rather than foster the type of connective democracy that could facilitate deliberative democracy. One way citizens could form healthier relationships with news media might be to seek out outlets that leverage solutions or constructive journalism approaches that can mitigate the emotional impact of overly negative news (Overgaard, 2021a, 2021b; for a review, see: Lough & McIntyre, 2021). These approaches might alleviate the sense of fear mongering that some of our participants associated with the news media. Similarly, news organizations might draw on these journalistic approaches to help paint a less hostile view of the "other side," which might work to decrease affective polarization (Overgaard et al., 2021). If successful, such attempts from news outlets could help foster connectivity, thereby, satisfying an important boundary condition for deliberation. Our findings also underscore a key strength of connective democracy—that it offers a less sanitized view of interacting between groups that realizes some topics or issues are so divisive that they are difficult to bridge.

General Discussion

Across two studies, we theorize connective democracy, a new lens for facilitating the productive kind of democratic discourse envisioned by deliberative democracy. We argue that this kind of deliberation requires connectivity; if people do not want to talk to those with whom they disagree, deliberation is unlikely to occur and, consequently, deliberative democracy will be unlikely to live up to its promises. Study 1 demonstrated some of the key predictors of connectivity, cross-cutting conversations and getting along with neighbors who differ politically, are inversely linked to affective polarization.

Study 2 built on these insights by showing how Americans living in divided communities enact deliberative democracy through the boundary condition of connective democracy by relying on strategies, such as seeing the humanity in individual people they disagree with and by listening to understand, rather than react. The findings from Study 2 also underscore that people must spend time together before and see the humanity in others before they can have the conversations that deliberative democracy requires. As articulated by our participants, enacting deliberative democracy requires the work of connective democracy. Although connective democracy implies that cross-cutting discussions are valued, that does not mean they are always productive. When cleavages cannot be mended, conversation might be harmful rather than productive.

Yet refraining from engaging in such conversations is not without limitations. It could potentially allow damaging attitudes to persist because they are not duly challenged. Therefore, the third principle of connective democracy—that communication between political opponents is necessary—remains crucial. So, when should difficult conversations among people who disagree take place in a healthy democracy, and when should they be avoided? The answer lies in

untangling how likely the conversation is to be productive and how likely it is to be harmful. This, in turn, comes down to two questions: (1) How open are the discussants to genuinely listening to each other? (2) How damaging will the conversation be to the relationship of the discussants? Discussions should be avoided when people are unwilling to listen to each other (because it hinders the conversation from being productive) and the discussants, or their relationship, is likely to be permanently damaged.

The interviews conducted in Study 2 did not offer much evidence that the professional news media help people connect with those they disagree with. While a few participants offered some charitable observations about the news media's effort to bridge divides that seem to link to the assumption of the theory of interlocking publics (Kovach & Rosenthiel, 2021), those sentiments were overwhelmed by more negative observations. People described being frustrated with a news media they saw as inflaming divisions and amplifying discord, suggesting they espouse a belief that journalism should cater equally to its diverse publics.

Yet connective democracy can offer normative guidance for news media outlets seeking to foster deliberation. Specifically, by prioritizing content that reduces affective polarization, newsrooms can help ensure the boundary conditions for deliberation are fulfilled. Using approaches like solutions and constructive journalism (Lough & McIntyre, 2021; Overgaard, 2021a, 2021b) for political news coverage, to curb the industry's tendency to over-emphasize problems and negativity, might also be helpful in this endeavor. Our findings, across both studies, suggest merit in interparty contact, including mediated contact, contributing to the growing body of research that sees this as a balm for divisiveness in society (Overgaard et al., 2021). Similarly, if news organizations are to facilitate connective democracy, it might be

beneficial to give more attention to opinions expressed in social contexts where people disagree with each other but nevertheless have strong social ties, such as family members.

We lay the groundwork for future research into how connective democracy can be implemented and how different societal institutions influence it. Scholars could use connective democracy as a theoretical lens for investigating other democratic institutions. How does the public's desire to talk across the political aisle, for example, relate to the problem of political gridlock? Specifically, how does the public's unwillingness to listen to their outparty influence politicians' openness to bipartisan collaboration and compromise—and vice versa?

Our studies are limited in their singular focus on the U.S., although the current divisiveness in the country makes it an apt case study that can yield lessons for other countries. Future research should expand these ideas to other countries, theorize more about the role of media and technology in bridging political divides, and consider whether the right and the left obstruct or enact connective democracy is similar ways. In addition, future research should consider other predictors to explain *negative trait perceptions* of outgroup members, given the low (but significant) explained variance in our model. Despite this, our findings offer some hope. If connectivity can be enacted to overcome the forces of polarization and allow people living in ideologically divided communities to connect, it may be able to also have positive effects elsewhere. It is also worth noting that personality traits or other constructs not examined in the current survey might offer alternative explanations to the results. Future research could test this (for example, focusing on the "Big Five" personality traits) to examine if our suggested predictors—cross-cutting discussions, getting along with neighbors who disagree politically, and preferring to discuss rather than avoid political differences—are related to certain traits.

Our main contribution is to theorize connective democracy as a lens for facilitating the productive kind of democratic discourse and thought processes that deliberative democracy envisions. We argue that deliberation requires connection if citizens feel disconnected from and are suspicious of their political adversaries (Iyengar et al., 2019), they will not want to listen to them or consider their ideas. Connective democracy, thus, constitutes a promising path forward and offers a glimpse of hope that—even in polarized times—political cleavages can be mended in ways that allow for the type of discourse envisioned by deliberative democracy.

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Table 1. Participant demographics

	Survey *N* = 1,160	Interviews+ *n* = 56
Gender		
Male	61.9%	34
Female	37.4	22
Other	0.7	0
Race/Ethnicity		
White/Caucasian	59.1	33
Black/African-American	22.3	6
Asian	13.7	11
Other	3.2	6
American Indian	1.7	0
Hispanic/Latino/Latina		
Yes	25.4	45
No	74.6	11
Age		
18 to 29	27.3	13
30 to 49	57.3	30
50 to 64	13.1	10
65 and above	2.3	3
Education		
High school or less	7.3	2
Some college	20.2	11
Bachelor's degree or more	72.5	23+
Annual Household Income		
Less than $30,000	15.8	11
$30,000 to $49,999	23.2	10
$50,000 to $74,999	28.1	8
$75,000 or more	32.9	27
Political Affiliation		
Democrat/Lean Democrat	52.6	39
Republican/Lean Republican	41.4	14
Neither	6.0	3

+ Nineteen interview participants did not answer the education question.

Table 2. Stepwise regression analyses for negative outparty feelings and negative outparty trait perceptions

	Negative Outparty Feelings				*Negative Outparty Trait Perceptions*			
	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4	
Independent variables	*b*	*β*	*b*	*β*	*b*	*β*	*b*	*β*
Frequency of cross-cutting discussions (Freq cross)	-0.80*** (0.11)	-0.28	-0.75*** (0.11)	-0.26	-1.19*** (0.18)	-0.75	-1.14*** (0.18)	-0.71
Getting along with neighbors who you disagree with (Gets along)	-0.20** (0.08)	-0.07	-0.20** (0.07)	-0.07	-0.88*** (0.12)	-0.58	-0.78*** (0.12)	-0.51
Preferring to discuss rather than avoid disagreement (Prefers disc)								
Freq cross * Prefers disc	-0.50*** (0.07)	-0.29	-0.39*** (0.07)	-0.23				
Freq cross * Gets along					0.36*** (0.05)	1.12	0.32*** (.05)	0.99
Gender			0.21 (0.16)	0.04			-0.04 (0.09)	-0.01
Age			0.01** (0.01)	0.08			0.01* (0.00)	0.06
High school or less			0.51 (0.29)	0.05			-0.41* (0.17)	-0.07
Some college or more			0.62** (0.19)	0.10			-0.11 (0.11)	-0.03
Partisan strength			0.09 (0.10)	0.03			0.24*** (0.05)	0.15
Income			-0.04 (0.06)	-0.02			-0.10** (0.04)	-0.08
Race[b]			0.49** (0.16)	0.09			-0.02 (0.10)	-0.01
Perceived polarization			0.26** (0.08)	0.09			0.36*** (0.05)	0.23
Rural[c]			-0.11 (0.24)	-0.02			-0.07 (0.15)	-0.02
Urban[c]			0.33 (0.22)	0.06			-0.07 (0.14)	-0.03
Local news			-0.54*** (0.15)	-0.10			-0.08 (0.09)	-0.03
Social media			0.16 (0.14)	0.03			-0.04 (0.09)	-0.01
	$F = 149.17^{***}$		$F = 33.94^{***}$		$F = 25.10^{***}$		$F = 12.44^{***}$	
	$R^2 = 0.30$		$R^2 = 0.34$		$R^2 = 0.06$		$R^2 = 0.15$	
	Adj. $R^2 = 0.29$		Adj. $R^2 = 0.33$		Adj. $R^2 = 0.06$		Adj. $R^2 = 0.14$	

Notes: Results are based on stepwise regression models. In models 2 and 4, all control variables are forced into the model. Only significant interactions are displayed in the table. *$p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$; [a]Women is the reference category; [b]white is the reference category; [c] Suburban is the reference category. Standard errors are in parentheses.

Endnotes

[1] In total, 1,428 respondents participated. Some respondents were filtered out for being younger than 18 (n = 1), attempting to take the survey multiple times (n = 20), failing the initial screening questions about their political engagement (n = 124) and living in a politically divided community (n = 113), or having extraordinarily low (n = 3) or high (n = 4) completion times (deviating more than three standard deviations from the mean of the log-transformed completion time variable).
[2] https://www.mturk.com/
[3] *Freq cross* and *gets along* (r = 0.14); *freq cross* and *prefers discussions* (r = 0.50); *gets along* and *prefers discussions* (r = 0.15).
[4] The U.S. Department of Agriculture's definition was accessed at: https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/rural-economy-population/rural-classifications/what-is-rural/
[5] The three-way interaction was not significant. We also ran separate models with the two-way interaction, *freq cross* * *gets along*, for each level of *prefers disc*; the interaction did not differ.
[6] *The New York Times*' interactive graphic was accessed at https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/upshot/election-2016-voting-precinct-maps.html#10.95/30.465/-97.613
[7] Interviewees came from Alabama (1), Arizona (1), California (5), Florida (6), Georgia (1), Hawaii (1), Iowa (1), Idaho (1), Illinois (3), Indiana (2), Kentucky (1), Michigan (2), Montana (1), North Carolina (8), Nebraska (1), Nevada (1), New York (3), Ohio (3), Oregon (3), Pennsylvania (3), South Carolina (1), Tennessee (2), Texas (2), Virginia (1), Washington state (1), or Wisconsin (1).
[8] Interviewed on May 15, 2020.
[9] Interviewed on May 22, 2020.
[10] Interviewed on May 19, 2020.
[11] Interviewed on June 25, 2020.
[12] Interviewed on June 26, 2020.
[13] Interviewed on June 22, 2020.
[14] Interviewed on May 25, 2020.
[15] Interviewed on June 22, 2020.
[16] Interviewed on May 22, 2020.
[17] Interviewed on May 29, 2020.
[18] Interviewed on May 10, 2020.
[19] Interviewed on May 22, 2020.
[20] Interviewed on May 11, 2020.
[21] Interviewed on May 26, 2020.