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Responding to Interpersonal Political Disagreement

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Abstract

A key element of democracy is citizens exchanging viewpoints on political matters. Yet, we know little about how individuals respond to interpersonal political disagreement with peers: do they avoid it or yield, try to dominate others, or seek compromise? Based on two surveys with random assignment to different political statements, we study how individuals respond to interpersonal political disagreement on party choice and issue disagreement. The results from both surveys show that individuals are more likely to yield and dominate when the level of political disagreement is at a respectively low and high level. Citizens are more willing to seek compromise at low and moderate levels of disagreement, while avoiding is unrelated to the level of political disagreement.

Political disagreement has received substantial scholarly attention in the field of interpersonal political communication (Schmitt-Beck & Lup, 2013). Despite tendencies to acquaint with people similar to one-selves, we regularly are exposed to political disagreement with peers (Huckfeldt, Johnson, & Sprague, 2004; Mutz, 2006). This raises the question: How do we respond to interpersonal political disagreement? Do individuals willingly enter arguments, or do they instead prefer to avoid them or yield? Or, do they prefer to seek compromise? Previous research has investigated different strategies of

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responding to disagreement. For instance, the literature drawing on the so-called “spiral of silence” has shown that individuals often circumvent disagreement by avoiding it or yielding (e.g., Hayes, 2007; Hayes, Glynn, & Shanahan, 2005b; Noelle-Neumann, 1974). Other scholars have focused on strategies such as persuading disagreeing others (e.g., Thorson, 2014), or seeking compromise (e.g., Baek, Wojcieszak, & Delli Carpini, 2012).

There are at least two major gaps in the literature that need to be addressed. First, scholars have focused on these strategies individually without considering that citizens have several strategies at their disposal. We thus lack a comprehensive understanding of how citizens respond to political disagreement with their peers (Eveland, Morey, & Hutchens, 2011). How are different strategies to address interpersonal disagreement related, and how can we explain when individuals rely on these strategies? Interpersonal political communication contributes to constructing identities, reaching mutual understanding, and forming political opinions (Kim & Kim, 2008). A better understanding of how individuals respond to interpersonal disagreement thus provides us with a better understanding of the conditions that make democracy work in practice. Second, previous research has demonstrated the need for a more fine-grained analysis of the level of political disagreement to which individuals are exposed (Castro Herrero & Hopmann, 2018; Klofstad, Sokhey, & McClurg, 2013). In this article, we build on this line of reasoning by studying empirically the responses to exposure to interpersonal political disagreement.

In two surveys with random assignment to political statements, we investigate how exposure to political disagreement affects the strategies individuals choose for dealing with interpersonal disagreement. Following the call by Eveland et al. (2011; see also Scheufele & Moy, 2000, pp. 19–20), our study on how citizens respond to interpersonal political disagreement draws on theoretical and empirical insights from the literature on conflict management. In particular, we draw on *Dual-Concern Theory* which predicts that the response to conflict or disagreement depends on the extent of concern for self and concern for others (De Dreu, Evers, Beersma, Kluwer, & Nauta, 2001; De Dreu, Weingart, & Kwon, 2000; Pruitt & Rubin, 1986; Van de Vliert, 1997). The extent of these concerns depends on the communication situation and individual traits. Prior research has shown that conflict management is heavily dependent on situational factors (Callanan, Benzing, & Perri, 2006, pp. 282–283), such as the level of disagreement individuals are exposed to (Van de Vliert, 1997, pp. 89–92). In short, we are interested in investigating these reactions in *specific situations* in which individuals are exposed to different levels of political disagreement.

Strategies of Responding to Disagreement

Several studies have focused on the *effects* of interpersonal disagreement on knowledge, opinion formation, and behavior (for a review, see Schmitt-Beck & Lup,

2013). In this article, we take the first step to address the question about how citizens *respond to political disagreement* itself. To clarify, by *respond*, we mean how people react when exposed to opposing points of view in a conversational situation, while by *political disagreement*, we mean exposure “to viewpoints that are different from” own viewpoints (Klofstad et al., 2013, p. 121). In prior research, three different reactions to political disagreement have been particularly prominent: silence, compromise seeking, and persuasion.

One strand in the literature has focused on the willingness to speak out or to self-censor in interpersonal encounters. Noelle-Neumann (1974, p. 45) formulated the so-called ‘spiral of silence’-theory advancing the argument that the “Willingness to expose one’s views publicly [...] is greater if he believes his own view is, and will be, the dominating one or (though not dominating now) is becoming more widespread.” Studies inspired by the ‘spiral of silence’-theory have found mixed results (Scheufele & Moy, 2000; Shanahan, Glynn, & Hayes, 2007).

A second, but less prominent, strand in the literature has focused on *compromise* (or *consensus*) *seeking* in interpersonal communication, particularly in the field of deliberative democracy (Baek et al., 2012; Barabas, 2004; Conover, Searing, & Crewe, 2002). This said, in a study on the motives behind political conversations, Conover et al. (2002, p. 52) reported that “No one in any of the groups reported that people entered into discussions to reach a consensus or to make a decision about an issue.” This finding does not necessarily imply that citizens do not opt for compromise seeking when encountering interpersonal disagreement, but citizens are rarely driven by such motives before encountering disagreement. Generally speaking, however, our knowledge when citizens seek compromise is limited.

A third strand in the literature has focused on *persuasion*. While rarely mentioned as a motive for entering interpersonal political discussion (Conover et al., 2002), research has documented that persuasion attempts nevertheless are common across democracies (e.g., Karp & Banducci, 2007). Research has also reported that in particular strongly opinionated people tend to express their opinions (e.g., Matthes, Morrison, & Schemer, 2010). Yet, under which circumstances people resort to persuasion remains unclear.

This condensed overview illustrates two key points. *First*, there are several strategies for responding to interpersonal political disagreement. *Second*, and more importantly, while these previous studies each provided important insights into how individuals respond to political disagreement with peers, they do not theorize and empirically investigate this repertoire of response strategies. A theoretical framework to study this repertoire of responses is therefore needed.

The Relationship Between Response Strategies

Above, we defined political disagreement as diverging points of view. Previous research has suggested that such disagreement is not only perceived as someone

arguing *for* a different point of view, but also as arguing *against* a position (Chambers, Baron, & Inman, 2006; Chambers & Melnyk, 2006). From this, it follows that the larger the political disagreement between two parties, the more concerned each party must be about defending the own interest. Dual-Concern Theory offers a framework for theorizing this inverse relationship between concern for *self* versus concern for *others*, and it helps in formulating hypotheses on how individuals respond to interpersonal disagreement.

Dual-Concern Theory, prominent in the literature on social conflict management, provides a framework for theorizing and empirically investigating strategies for responding to interpersonal disagreement in general and in cases of negative goal interdependency (De Dreu et al., 2001; Pruitt & Rubin, 1986). Prior research in other social domains than politics has documented empirical support for Dual-Concern Theory (e.g., De Dreu et al., 2000; Pruitt & Rubin, 1986; Van de Vliert, 1997), but it has not been applied—to the best of our knowledge—in the context of interpersonal *political* disagreement. Specifically, the theory posits that motives for dealing with disagreement are a function of concerns for *self* and concerns for *others* (De Dreu et al., 2001, 2000; Pruitt & Rubin, 1986; Van de Vliert, 1997). Concerns can be understood as outcomes, interests, needs, or values (see Pruitt & Rubin, 1986, pp. 28–32), which therefore also encompass the realm of politics. For instance, a solely self-concerned gun control activist would not be willing to find middle-ground (some gun control, but not too strict) when discussing policy options with someone holding a disagreeing political opinion (no gun control).

According to the *Dual-Concern Theory*, self- and other-concerns are not per definition mutually exclusive, nor correlated. Individuals can score low or high on both of the concerns simultaneously (De Dreu et al., 2000, p. 892). But there are exceptions. Some issues or social domains—including politics—are predominantly characterized by an *inverse* relationship between self- and other-concerns (Easton, 1953; Van de Vliert, 1997, pp. 90–91). In these cases, an increase in self-concern leads to a decrease in other-concern, and vice versa. Hence, there exists negative goal interdependence (Deutsch, 2011). Therefore, there are good reasons to conceive of political disagreement predominantly as a question of inversely related self- and other-concerns.

In sum, *Dual-Concern Theory* predicts that the response of disagreement is driven by self- and other-concerns. Specifically, the theory predicts specific strategies as a response to the relationship between self- and other-concerns. In the next section, we discuss how different levels of political disagreement trigger different levels of self- and other-concerns and, hence, different responses.

The Level of Political Disagreement

Political discussions with peers are driven by various goals. Achieving social goals is one major driver, that is, a wish “to pass time with others” or “to get

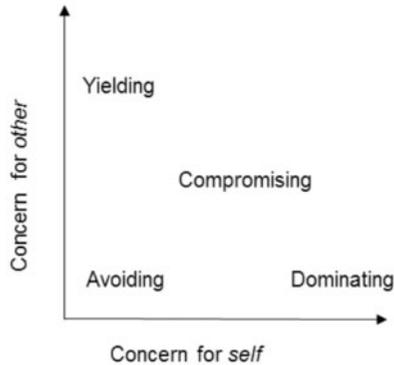
to know others better” (Eveland et al., 2011, pp. 1090–1091; Gil de Zúñiga, Valenzuela, & Weeks, 2016). People are genuinely interested in their fellow citizens. For instance, Conover et al. (2002, p. 58) concluded, based on their study on how ordinary citizens discuss politics, that “Citizens want to hear and learn from the particular perspectives of others. Indeed, doing so is a major reason why they discuss political issues.” In other words, a major driver of engaging in political discussions with others is a concern for others and their values. Moreover, this motivation comes as no surprise when considering that individuals in the same social network will have both past and future interactions, which also calls for a concern for others (Pruitt & Rubin, 1986). Also, Wyatt, Katz, and Kim (2000) found that political topics are most frequently discussed with friends and family—alongside other topics. Based on this backdrop, it is reasonable to assume that other-concern is fairly high in interpersonal communication when it involves peers, at least at the outset. It is this other-concern that makes us discuss politics with others to begin with.

Discussing politics with others, however, carries the risk of unveiling disagreements. When interpersonal disagreement becomes apparent, a conflict emerges between concern for others’ values (which drove the engagement in discussions with others) and the concern for own values (as this disagreement is a perceived opposition to own values). How can this conflict be addressed? Walton (1969) noted in his work on conflict management that a low level of tension produces “no necessity to look for alternative ways of behaving, and no incentive for a person to make conciliatory overtures” (p. 111). At a moderate level of tension, however, “the person searches for and integrates more information, he considers more alternatives” (p. 113), while a high level of tension produces a “rigidity of positions and polarization of adversaries” (p. 113). Brown (1983), in a similar vein, noted that a high level of disagreement leads to coercive influence in which the differences are exaggerated. A productive (moderate) level of disagreement may lead to consensus, while a low level of disagreement may lead to denial of differences (see also Van de Vliert, 1997, p. 119; Van de Vliert & De Dreu, 1994, pp. 214–215). These considerations suggest that more intense disagreement drives individuals to resort to a strategy driven by self-concern. Following the argument about an inverse relationship between other- and self-concerns, this implies that the higher the level of disagreement, the higher the self-concern, and the lower the other-concern.

Figure 1 illustrates the relationship between self- and other-concerns and different strategies for responding to political disagreement.¹ According to

¹Our reasoning implicitly assumes that people hold an opinion or at least form an opinion different from the other individual in the conversation situation. Much scholarly attention has been devoted to how individuals form opinions and whether they are stable or not (e.g., Converse, 1964; Zaller, 1992), which is of less interest in this article. Our interest lies in situations in which citizens disagree with one another, which we secured by study design.

Figure 1

Dual concerns and strategies for managing political disagreement

Dual-Concern Theory, when self-concern is low and other-concern high, we can expect *yielding* (also called concession-making). This strategy covers unilaterally accepting and incorporating others' wishes, that is, downplaying one's own will but not necessarily "total capitulation" (Pruitt & Rubin, 1986, p. 26). The combination of low other-concern and high self-concern leads to *dominating* (also called forcing or contending). Dominating refers to a wish to dominate others by imposing one's own wishes on others. It involves "threats and bluffs, persuasive arguments, and positional commitments" (De Dreu et al., 2001, p. 646). In the case of moderate self- and other-concern, *Dual-Concern Theory* predicts that individuals are motivated to seek *compromise*. This strategy "involves the matching of others' concessions, making conditional promises and threats, and an active search for a middle ground" (De Dreu et al., 2001, p. 647).² These three strategies correspond well to the three strands identified in the literature reviewed above—silence, compromise seeking, and persuasion.

What about *avoiding* interpersonal political disagreement? Prior research on, for instance, self-censorship in interpersonal political communication, has not always strictly distinguished between avoiding and yielding strategies (e.g., Hayes, 2007), and we therefore include both in our analysis. According to *Dual-Concern Theory*, avoiding and yielding are two distinct strategies. As is shown in Figure 1, a low concern for self and others leads to avoiding (also

²A fifth strategy is problem-solving, that is, driven by a high self- and other-concern (De Dreu et al., 2001, p. 646). Participants in our surveys were not presented with a "problem" demanding a solution and therefore it *prima facie* had little relevance for the present purpose. Moreover, one could argue that citizens try to solve problems when they seek to compromise, and, hence, have a shared preference for self and others (see also the discussion in De Dreu et al. (2001)). Hence, our model still contains elements of problem-solving.

called inactivity). If our argument about the inverse relationship between self-concern and other-concern in interpersonal political communication is a correct assumption (i.e., when one is high, the other is low), then it follows that the preference of avoiding is unrelated to the level of interpersonal political disagreement. To put it differently, varying levels of disagreement do not bring individuals into a situation of low other-concern *and* low self-concern. The willingness to avoid therefore is not related to the level of interpersonal political disagreement.

Based on this theoretical framework, we formulate four hypotheses.

H1: The higher the level of political disagreement, the more individuals will be willing to dominate.

H2: Compromise seeking is highest at moderate levels of political disagreement.

H3: The lower the level of political disagreement, the more individuals will be willing to yield.

H4: Avoiding is not related to the level of political disagreement.

In short, drawing on Dual-Concern Theory, we consider the response to political disagreement as predominantly determined by situational factors. This focus on situational factors is warranted by previous research showing “that individuals are not necessarily yoked to a particular style [...] they are willing to switch out their presumably dominant style on the basis of the contingencies they perceive in a conflict-producing event” (Callanan et al., 2006, pp. 282–283).

Preferences for strategies are not only driven by situational factors, but also by individual characteristics (De Dreu et al., 2001; Gerber, Huber, Doherty, & Dowling, 2012). In previous research, styles of conflict handling often have been related to sociodemographics or personality factors. More specifically, in political contexts, various types of engagement, such as political knowledge or turnout, appear to be consistently related to interest in politics (e.g., Dimitrova, Shehata, Strömbäck, & Nord, 2014), which has been described as a rather stable trait (Prior, 2010). Consequently, it can be assumed that the level of political interest affects how a person responds to political disagreement. Moreover, people with a more extreme opinion, for instance, on the left or right on the political spectrum, might differ in their response to political disagreement (cf. Matthes et al., 2010). Thus, while the current study aims at taking a first step in mapping and explaining strategies of reacting to interpersonal political disagreement with a focus on situational factors, we also take the individual traits of political interest and opinion extremity into account.

Research Design

We conducted two surveys that randomly assigned respondents to different political statements to investigate how people respond to political disagreement

with their peers. Both surveys were depicted as taking place in a setting where past and future interactions were likely, but not over-emphasized. Inspired by Hayes et al. (2005a) and Hayes (2007), we asked participants to imagine a realistic and relevant social event with people they already know (details are presented below). By doing so, we did not follow Noelle-Neumann's (1974, p. 36) classic study on the spiral of silence where respondents were asked "to imagine a conversation among passengers on a long train journey." Informal political discussion primarily occurs amongst peers, not strangers (e.g., Bennett, Fisher, & Resnick, 1996; Morey, Eveland & Hutchens, 2012). Moreover, exposure to political disagreement in our own social networks is not uncommon (Huckfeldt et al., 2004; Mutz, 2006).

Study 1: Party Choice Disagreement

Study 1 addresses the expression of a political opinion by stating which party you intend to vote for in a national election. The web-based survey was fielded during the Danish national election campaign of 2011 (10–15 June) by the research agency ICMUnlimited. The sample that participated in the survey ($N = 1,010$) was representative of the larger Danish population in regard to gender, geography, and age (with a slight underrepresentation of younger Danes).³

Each respondent was asked about his or her left-right self-placement using a standard 11-point scale and asked about the intended party vote. Subsequently, the respondent was exposed to one *vignette* in which he/she was asked to imagine a social event where he/she was exposed to an acquaintance revealing that he was intending to vote for a (randomly assigned) party. By design, this party was different from the respondent's party preference: "Imagine you will be participating in a social event later today, for example, with your colleagues or neighbors. At the event, you meet an acquaintance. Your acquaintance tells you that he intends to vote for [Unity List/Social Democrats/Social Liberals/Right-Liberals/Liberal Alliance/Danish People's Party] in the upcoming Folketing [national] elections." Hereafter, the respondents were asked "How likely or unlikely is it that you will react in the follow ways towards him?," using the DUTCH-items presented below.

The degree of *party choice disagreement* between the respondent's and the acquaintance' party choice was measured accordingly: Based on the left-right self-placement of each party's voters, we estimated the average left-right placement of each party mentioned in the stimulus material. The level of disagreement was then computed as the difference between a respondent's individual left-right self-placement and the left-right placement of the party favored by the acquaintance (rescaled to a maximum of 1; $M = 0.37$; $SD = 0.25$; $N = 935$).

³In total, 3,719 interviews were begun, 1,493 were screened out, 1,151 were incomplete, along with 65 errors.

In addition to disagreement as a situational factor, preferences for response strategies can be influenced by personality traits as well, as discussed above. To account for potential individual differences and avoid omitted variable bias, *age* ($M = 49.53$; $SD = 15.59$), *gender* (51.12% female), *education* (4-point scale: $M = 1.59$; $SD = 0.78$), and *political interest* (11-point scale: $M = 7.43$; $SD = 2.51$) were included as control variables. Because people with an extreme opinion might differ in their response to political disagreement, folded left-right self-placement was also included as a measure of opinion extremity (scale ranging from 0 to 0.5: $M = 0.19$, $SD = 0.15$).

Study 2: Issue Disagreement

Study 2 moves beyond party choice disagreement by focusing on disagreement on a salient political issue. The web-based survey was fielded 30 June–1 July 2015 by the research agency Epinion ($N = 703$). The sample used in the survey was representative of the larger Danish population in regard to gender, age, and geography.⁴

We presented our respondents to different opinions regarding family reunification. This issue deals with the question under which conditions foreign family members of residents can obtain permission to move to the country. The issue is useful to examine interpersonal political disagreement, as our respondents most likely were acquainted with the issue, since family reunification—and immigration more broadly—has been in the public debate in Denmark during the last couple of decades. Hereby, conversations about this issue were considered to be a realistic situation for the respondents.

The respondents were exposed to one of two different vignettes in which they were exposed to a political conversation between two peers at a summer party: “Imagine you will be participating in a summer party with your family members, friends, or acquaintances later today. At the table, two of the guests begin to talk about family reunifications, that is, the possibility to get one’s spouse or a family member from another country to Denmark to live. . .”. Hereafter, the respondents were presented with one of two different vignettes that included different exchanges of opinions (see details in Supplementary Appendix A). The presented opinions were their actual real-world opposites in the debate on family reunification as it appears in the Danish news media, according to which family reunification was primarily discussed as either constituting a societal threat or a human right (Bjarnøe, 2016).⁵ The two vignettes depicted the following conversations scenarios: (a) two persons were agreeing that the rules on family reunification

⁴Epinion does not report response rates, as they use generic invitations leading to multiple surveys. Panel members responding to an invitation are forwarded to currently fielded surveys depending on their background characteristics, hereby ensuring representative samples.

⁵The survey included a third vignette with a mixed condition not relevant for the present purpose and therefore not analyzed here ($n = 243$).

should be strict, arguing that family reunification constitutes a societal threat; (b) two persons were agreeing that the rules on family reunification should be less strict arguing that family reunification is a human right. Thereafter, the respondents were asked: “How likely or unlikely is it that you will react in the follow ways towards to their conversation?,” followed by the DUTCH-items presented below.

The degree of *issue disagreement* between the respondent and the two peers was measured based on two questions asked *prior* to exposure to the vignettes: (a) immigration is a serious threat against Denmark; and (b) refugees and immigrants should have the same rights as Danes, even if they do not hold Danish citizenship. On both questions, the respondent could answer on a 5-point scale from “agree very much” to “disagree very much”. We opted for two questions on immigration in general, rather than family reunification in particular, to be placed into a battery of issue-specific policy questions to reduce consistency effects in response behavior. The answer to the first question was reversed and combined with the answer to the other question into one index, rescaled from 0 to 1 (Spearman-Brown = .77). Higher values thus indicate a more critical stance toward immigration. For those in the strict condition (exposed to unanimous opposition to family reunification), the index therefore was reversed. Excluding respondents with no disagreement at all ($N = 45$, i.e., the final $N = 415$), the index thus becomes a measure of disagreement ($M = 0.55$, $SD = 0.27$). Parallel to Study 1, *age* ($M = 46.44$; $SD = 15.77$), *gender* (51.31% female), *education* (10-point scale: $M = 4.28$; $SD = 1.97$), *political interest* (11-point scale: $M = 7.76$; $SD = 2.48$), and opinion extremity based on prior attitudes toward immigration ($M = 0.23$, $SD = 0.16$) were included as control variables.

Measuring Strategies for Responding to Interpersonal Disagreement

In both studies, the dependent variables, the different strategies, were measured based on the *Dutch Test for Conflict Handling* (DUTCH), which was developed based on the *Dual-Concern Theory* (De Dreu et al., 2001; Van de Vliert, 1997). This instrument has been shown to be a reliable and valid tool for measuring interpersonal conflict responding (De Dreu et al., 2001). Each strategy was measured using a battery consisting of four items that were summarized into an index. The order of the strategies was randomized.⁶ Each item was measured using a 5-point scale from very likely to very unlikely (see Table 1 below).⁷ For the present purpose, the wording of the statements

⁶In addition, the items within each bloc were randomized. A full randomization was done in De Dreu et al. (2001) with results similar to what is reported here, so we have no reason to believe that the difference in approaches have substantial consequences for our results.

⁷In Study 1, the questionnaire included a “don’t know” option. For the computation of the Cronbach’s alpha values reported below (Table 1), “don’t know” was recoded to missing. For the construction of the indices, missing values were replaced with the mean value of the remaining responses on a given strategy. We restricted the other analyses to respondents with no missing values on any of the strategy indices, ensuring that the analyses are computed on the same sample ($N = 935$).

Table 1

Descriptives and zero-order correlations of the strategy scales (1–5)

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>N</i>	α	Dominating	Compromising	Yielding	Avoiding
Study 1								
Dominating	3.2	1.0	935	.87	1			
Compromising	2.7	1.0	935	.89	0.22***	1		
Yielding	1.9	0.9	935	.88	-0.06	0.32***	1	
Avoiding	3.0	1.1	935	.86	-0.19***	0.26***	0.21***	1
Study 2								
Dominating	3.3	0.9	415	.81	1			
Compromising	3.0	0.9	415	.86	0.03	1		
Yielding	2.2	0.9	415	.86	-0.17***	0.41***	1	
Avoiding	2.9	0.9	415	.82	-0.24***	0.45***	0.37***	1

 α : Cronbach's alpha of scale.*** $p < .001$. See also note 4.

was slightly adapted. *Yielding* was measured using the following items: (a) I give in to his (their) opinion, (b) I concur with him (them), (c) I try to accommodate him (them), and (d) I adapt to his (their) opinion. *Compromising* was measured by the following items: (a) I try to realize a middle-of-the-road solution, (b) I emphasize that we should find common ground, (c) I insist we both give in a little, and (d) I strive towards a fifty-fifty compromise. *Dominating* was measured by the following items: (a) I forcefully highlight my own point of view, (b) I search for arguments against his (their) opinion, (c) I fight for my opinion, and (d) I do everything to win a discussion with him (them). *Avoiding* was measured by the following items: (a) I avoid a confrontation about our differences, (b) I avoid differences of opinion as much as possible, (c) I try to make differences loom less severe, and (d) I try to avoid a confrontation with him (them).

Analytical Approach

The analysis for both studies proceeded in two parts. First, the interrelationships between the four strategies of responding to disagreement were assessed to evaluate the quality of their measurement and their consistency with the theoretical assumptions derived from Dual-Concern Theory. In addition to zero-order correlations, multidimensional scaling (MDS) was applied to further examine these interrelationships. Our approach follows prior studies that used MDS to describe response strategies in relation to the two dimensions of self and other concern (Daly, Lee, Soutar, & Rasmi, 2010; De Dreu et al., 2001). MDS is a technique to visualize proximity data, in our case displaying

how similar or dissimilar the strategies under investigation are. Exploratory MDS can be used to reveal latent dimensions, that is, underlying attributes that can help to explain similarities between objects. Accordingly, we applied MDS to assess to what extent previous findings can be replicated in the context of political disagreement. Corresponding to the measurement level of the strategies, we deployed interval MDS using the SMACOF package (de Leeuw & Mair, 2009). Dissimilarities between the strategies were represented by Euclidean distances. Technically, the goal is to minimize *stress*, which is a loss function expressing the level of deviation between the actual distances in the data and the estimated distances (Borg & Groenen, 2005).

Second, the relationships between the four strategies of responding to disagreement and the intensity of political disagreement were analyzed in order to test our hypotheses. Linear regression models were estimated with the level of disagreement as the independent variable and respondents' preference for the different strategies as dependent variables. To test whether compromising was more likely for moderate levels of disagreement (H₂), we included a squared term of disagreement in the models of compromising.

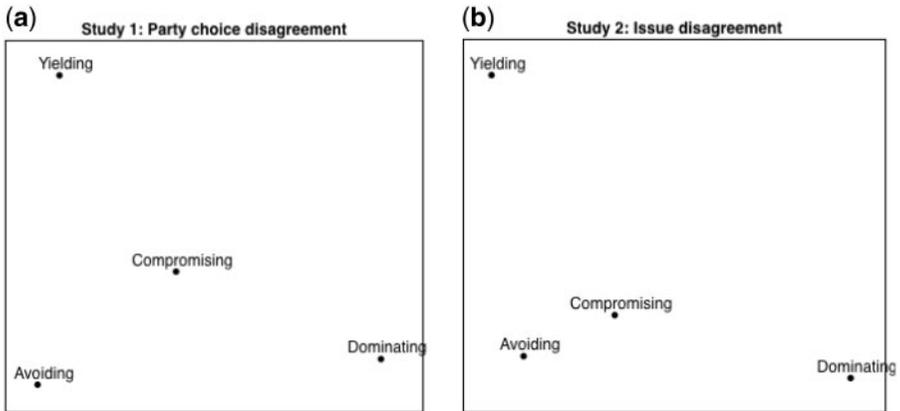
Results

In Table 1, descriptives and zero-order correlations for the four strategies are presented. For both studies, the means show that dominating was the most favored strategy, while yielding was the least favored strategy. We also see that the four scales were correlated, as expected ($\alpha < .05$). Compromising was positively related to dominating, yielding, and avoiding, which makes sense as they to some extent overlap with shared concerns for self and other (see Figure 1; note that compromising and dominating did not significantly correlate in Study 2, $p = .488$). We also see that the differences between dominating (high self-concern) and avoiding (low self-concern) were more pronounced than the differences between yielding (high other-concern) and avoiding (low other-concern). Finally, dominating and yielding were negatively correlated (though the correlation was not significant in the case of Study 1, $p = .076$), which also was expected as they reflect each other's diagonal opposite in terms of a high (low) concern of self and low (high) concern for other.

Table 1 also reports that the reliabilities of all the scales in both studies were well-above any standard minimum requirement; the lowest Cronbach's alpha was .81. Taken together, the results for both Study 1 and 2 showed the same patterns suggesting that results were independent of the type of political disagreement respondents were exposed to. In addition, the results correspond well to previous research findings in a workplace context (De Dreu et al., 2001).

Figure 2

(a and b) MDS representation of the relationships between the reaction strategies. MDS = multidimensional scaling



In a next step, we took a closer look at the relationships between the four strategies by analyzing the data by means of multidimensional scaling (Figure 2a and b). The appropriate dimensionality was determined by comparing stress levels of competing solutions. The stress-1 measure dropped considerably from 0.481 (Study 1) and 0.288 (Study 2) at one dimension to 0.032 (Study 1) and 0.000 (Study 2) at two dimensions suggesting a good to excellent fit (Bühl & Zöfel, 2002, p. 161). In addition, the Shepard diagrams—scatterplots between actual proximities and calculated distances—confirmed the two-dimensional solutions. For Study 2 (Figure 2b) the major difference between a one- and a two-dimensional solution was the (theoretically important) relationship between yielding and dominating, which explains the less pronounced decrease in stress.⁸

Substantively, Figure 2a and b depict patterns that closely resemble the pattern predicted on theoretical grounds in Figure 1. After rotation, the two-dimensional solutions for both studies depicted yielding and dominating in opposing corners of 2×2 matrices, the strategy of avoiding positioned at the interjacent corner, and compromising more toward the middle of the matrices—albeit closer to avoiding and dominating than to yielding. Validating previous research in other social domains, we can thus conclude

⁸As a control, we also checked whether the empirical solutions are different if only those exposed to low or high levels of disagreement were included. The differences were minor and do not change the substantive conclusions. Note that the solutions have been rotated (and in the case of Study 2, flipped on the y -axis) to ease the interpretation of the distances between the strategies.

that also in the context of political disagreement, the four strategies are inter-related in a way that is consistent with our theory and previous findings. Consequently, these findings lend support to our understanding of the functions of the two latent dimensions other- and self-concern. Their inverse relationship also supports the assumption of a negative goal interdependency in the context of interpersonal political communication. Particularly noteworthy is the fact that we see that yielding and avoiding are indeed two distinct strategies, as predicted by Dual-Concern Theory.

Having established the empirical consistency of the basis of our theoretical argument for the relationship between the four strategies and political disagreement, we now turn to the results of the linear regressions of level of disagreement on respondents' preference for the different strategies (Table 2). The results show that the more political disagreement, the more people tended to dominate, while the lesser the disagreement, the more people yielded. These relationships were statistically significant ($\alpha < .05$) and, hence, lend support to hypotheses 1 and 3.

Turning to hypothesis 2, we expected that compromising would be the highest at moderate levels of disagreement. In a first step, we saw that there was a negative linear relationship between the level of interpersonal political disagreement and compromising that was significant for Study 1 ($b = -0.51$, $p = .003$) but not for Study 2 ($b = -0.30$, $p = .08$). At higher levels of disagreement, compromising thus tended to be lower. After including the squared term of disagreement in the regression models, we found small and negative—but uniform—coefficients (Study 1: $b = -0.64$, $p = .22$; Study 2: $b = -1.87$, $p = .35$). In sum, these findings documented a partially significant and negative linear relationship between compromising and the level of political disagreement. The results with respect to a quadratic relationship were as expected but did not meet the criterion for statistical significance ($\alpha < .05$). Finally, hypothesis 4 predicted that there is no relationship between avoiding and the level of disagreement. The results for both studies indicated that indeed no such relationship exists (Study 1: $b = 0.06$, $p = .72$, 95% CI $[-.28; 0.41]$; Study 2: $b = -.10$, $p = .55$, 95% CI $[-0.45; 0.24]$). Because hypothesis 4 expressed, in fact, the null hypothesis, the Type 2 error probability ($1-\beta$) needed to be considered. A post hoc power analysis for a small effect size (Faul, Erdfelder, Buchner, & Lang, 2009) revealed a power coefficient of .999, indicating a very high probability of rejecting a false null hypothesis. This set of findings also suggested that avoiding and yielding indeed were two distinct strategies.

To get a better grasp of the relationships reported in Table 2, we plotted the marginal effects of different degrees of disagreement on each of the strategies in Figure 3a and b (cf. Brambor, Clark, & Golder, 2006). In both studies, the entire range of disagreement was present (slightly skewed to the

Table 2

Level of disagreement and reaction strategies, linear regressions (t-values in brackets)

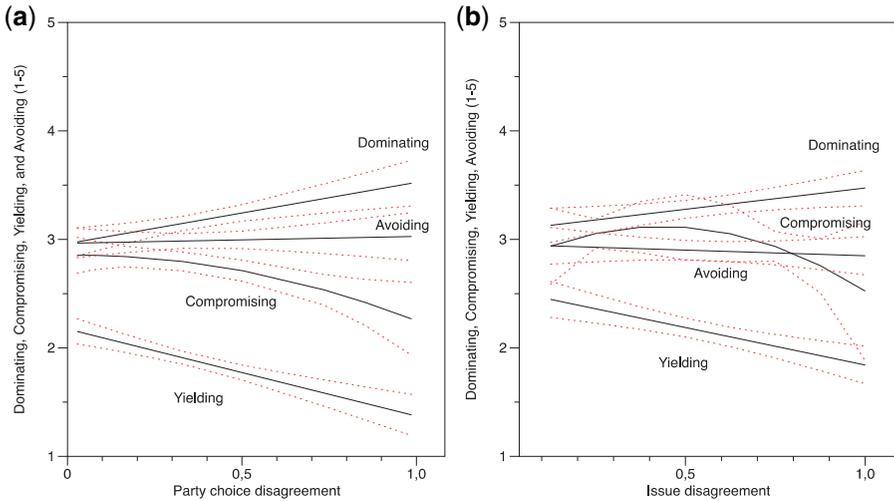
	Dominating	Compromising	Yielding	Avoiding	
Study 1					
Age	0.00 (-0.76)	-0.01** (-2.77)	-0.01** (-2.77)	-0.01** (-3.43)	0.00 (-0.12)
Female	-0.12 (-1.82)	-0.12 (-1.69)	-0.12 (-1.73)	-0.19** (-3.16)	0.00 (-0.03)
Education	0.03 (0.67)	0.03 (0.62)	0.02 (0.54)	0.05 (1.21)	-0.03 (-0.64)
Political interest	0.12*** (8.21)	0.03* (2.12)	0.03* (2.06)	-0.05*** (-3.97)	-0.05*** (-3.64)
Opinion extremity	-0.25 (-0.86)	-0.33 (-1.11)	-0.23 (-0.78)	0.22 (0.84)	-0.60* (-1.98)
Disagreement	0.56*** (3.39)	-0.51** (-2.99)	0.04 (0.08)	-0.80*** (-5.35)	0.06 (0.36)
Disagreement ²	-	-	-0.64 (-1.23)	-	-
Constant	2.24*** (13.92)	3.08*** (18.77)	3.00*** (17.01)	2.87*** (19.78)	3.54*** (21.03)
Adj. R ²	.104	.028	.028	.071	.023
Study 2					
Age	0.00 (-1.16)	0.00 (0.33)	0.00 (0.30)	-0.01* (-2.48)	0.00 (0.42)
Female	-0.08 (-0.91)	0.13 (1.39)	0.13 (1.40)	-0.05 (-0.53)	0.12 (1.31)
Education	-0.04 (-1.92)	-0.02 (-0.99)	-0.02 (-1.00)	-0.03 (-1.11)	-0.02 (-0.91)
Political interest	0.15*** (8.18)	0.01 (-0.25)	0.00 (0.17)	-0.05** (-2.82)	-0.05** (-2.71)
Opinion extremity	0.22 (0.77)	-0.49 (-1.62)	0.37 (0.38)	-0.27 (-0.92)	-0.34 (-1.12)
Disagreement	0.39** (2.43)	-0.30 (-1.75)	1.64 (0.80)	-0.69*** (-4.06)	-0.10 (-0.60)
Disagreement ²	-	-	-1.87 (-0.95)	-	-
Constant	2.23*** (10.86)	3.18*** (14.44)	2.65*** (4.35)	3.49*** (16.06)	3.42*** (15.46)
Adj. R ²	.165	.012	.012	.093	.027

*** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$. $N=935$ (Study 1)/ $N=415$ (Study 2), t -values in brackets.

right in Study 1). The results on dominating showed that it increased from roughly 3 to 3.5 with increasing disagreement. In reverse, in both surveys yielding dropped from above 2 to below 2 with increasing disagreement. Both

Figure 3

(a and b) Level of disagreement and reaction strategies, marginal effects (with 95% confidence intervals).



Notes. Based on Table 2. For Study 1 (party choice disagreement), the margins were computed at the following percentiles: 1, 5, 10, 25, 50, 75, 90, 95, 99. For Study 2 (issue disagreement), the margins were computed at all possible disagreement values

sets of findings demonstrated how the response to interpersonal disagreement was related to the level of disagreement respondents were exposed to.

For compromising, we found some indications of it being most favored at moderate levels of disagreement. Compromise seeking increased slightly when moving from the lowest to more moderate levels of disagreement, while it decreased substantially when moving from a moderate to a high level of disagreement. Compromising was thus least favored at high levels of disagreement. A goal of reaching common ground becomes distant at high levels of disagreement. Finally, there was virtually no change for avoiding across the entire range of political disagreement, as expected.⁹

Turning to the personal traits and characteristics, most notably, political interest showed the most consistent relationship to political disagreement. In both studies, it was associated positively to dominating and negatively to yielding and avoiding. In addition, opinion extremity was negatively related to avoiding in Study 1. Yielding (and, according to Study 1, also

⁹As an additional check, we also re-specified the regressions for dominating, yielding and avoiding by including a squared term for political disagreement. In Study 2, dominating becomes particularly pronounced with more disagreement. That aside, the results do not substantially change any of the conclusions (see Supplementary Figure SAa and b in Appendix B).

compromising) was less likely among older participants. Only one effect for gender was found: Female respondents in Study 1 showed significantly lower levels of yielding. Alternative models without control variables yielded consistent albeit slightly larger coefficients for political disagreement (results not shown here), indicating independent relationships between the strategies and personal characteristics as well as situational ones (i.e., levels of disagreement).

Discussion

Political disagreement is an inherent part of democracy. Numerous studies have focused on the *effects* of interpersonal disagreement on domains such as knowledge, opinion formation, and behavior (Schmitt-Beck & Lup, 2013). In this study, however, our aim was to examine how people respond to interpersonal political disagreement. Three response strategies were identified in previous research: silence, compromise seeking, and persuasion. These strategies are similar to what research on conflict management and the Dual-Concern Theory has dubbed dominating, compromising, yielding, and avoiding (Pruitt & Rubin, 1986; Van de Vliert, 1997). Specifically, we wanted to know when people opt for these strategies. Based on the research on conflict management, we theorized that the preference for the strategies (except avoiding) depends on the level of political disagreement. Our results support this expectation.

What are the larger implications of our findings? To begin with, some people avoid interpersonal political disagreement, but the preference for this strategy is not related to the level of political disagreement but rather to lower levels of involvement with politics. Avoiding conflict might also be used as a strategy (Cowan & Baldassarri, 2018), particularly in emotionally close relationships (Dailey & Palomares, 2004). At the same time, yielding declines with more disagreement, and dominating increases. These findings are good news for our political systems. From a democratic perspective exchanging viewpoints is key for the health of democracy. For instance, exposure to counter-arguments is important for generating political and social tolerance (Mutz, 2006; Pattie & Johnston, 2008). If more disagreement would lead to more yielding it would imply that those holding the most extreme opinions experience the fewest counter-arguments. They could not help but fail to understand the extremity of their opinions.

Moreover, though moderately positively correlated (Table 1), our results also document that yielding and avoiding are two distinct strategies in interpersonal political communication. By replicating findings from other contexts (De Dreu et al., 2001), our results also confirm that politics is not perceived or treated markedly differently, but that political issues are an integral part of interpersonal conversations (Wyatt et al., 2000). Finally, demonstrating that

the response to political disagreement depends on the level of disagreement helps us understand why previous research on behavioral effects of exposure to disagreement is inconclusive (Matthes, Knoll, Valenzuela, Hopmann, & Sikorski, 2018). Our results indicate the benefits of a more fine-grained measurement of interpersonal disagreement. Recent research on the effects of exposure to disagreeing media content supports this argument by showing that the magnitude and direction of the effects on political participation depends on the level of disagreement people are exposed to (Castro Herrero & Hopmann, 2018).

Some methodological and theoretical limitations of this study need to be addressed. First, the external validity of surveys with imbedded experimental components is always debatable. We addressed this by asking survey participants to imagine a realistic social setting, similar to, for example, Hayes et al. (2005a) and Hayes (2007). The validity of responses to imagined situations has been discussed, as they are hypothetical (e.g., Matthes & Hayes, 2014). Our approach is, as discussed, more realistic than previous studies on interpersonal disagreement that have focused on discussing with a stranger during a train ride (Noelle-Neumann, 1974), or the even more exceptional situation of judging the length of lines (Ross, Bierbrauer, & Hoffman, 1976). Moreover, the results were similar in both surveys (party choice and issue disagreement) providing a more robust support for the generalizability of the findings.

Second, another point to be raised is the generalizability of our findings to other political systems and cultures. Neither national elections nor the issue of immigration is particularly Danish in any way. With respect to the frequency of informal political talk (Nir, 2012) or engaging in activities such as persuasion attempts (Karp & Banducci, 2007), Danes tend to score above the mean across Western democracies, but to a limited extent. Hence, we have no particular reason to assume that our results based on Danish samples are not generalizable to other Western democracies. Communication patterns differ systematically across cultural settings, however (Scheufele & Moy, 2000). To what extent our findings travel across cultural settings must be investigated in future studies.

Third, in this article, we have treated preferences for different strategies to respond to interpersonal political disagreement as a question of the level of disagreement encountered in the specific communication situation. As discussed in the introduction of this article, preferences for strategies are not only driven by situational factors, but also by other factors such as personality traits. For instance, Gerber et al. (2012) showed that various personality traits mute or augment the preference for discussing politics with agreeable others. The current study focused on situational disagreement while controlling for political interest, opinion extremity and sociodemographics. We found that avoiding was not related to the level of disagreement experienced in a specific

situation, unlike the other reaction strategies. We suggested that this difference was a result of the negative goal interdependence that characterizes political disagreement. Another explanation could be that preferences for some strategies are more driven by situational factors than others. Future research on interpersonal political disagreement should address this issue in more detail by specifically examining interactions of personality traits and situational factors beyond political interest and opinion extremity. Furthermore, future studies are encouraged to consider measuring the perceived level of political disagreement as well as concern for self and others directly. We argued that the level of (objectively measured) disagreement drives concerns for self and others (which we inferred), but to the extent that these concerns are linked to traits, the question arises whether the level of concerns for self and others drive *perceptions* of disagreement. Doing so may also help increase the proportion of explained variance, which was limited in all models. While the interrelationships between the four strategies as represented by exploratory MDS lend support to self- and other-concerns as underlying dimensions, future studies should further examine these interdependencies. Finally, as most survey research, we measured intentions and not actual behavior, which future studies should consider (De Dreu et al., 2001).

Despite the limitations mentioned above, this study has enhanced our understanding of how individuals respond to interpersonal political disagreement. By doing so, the study underlines the importance of understanding the response to interpersonal political disagreement as a more complex phenomenon involving a repertoire of strategies. Furthermore, we have shown that the response to interpersonal political disagreement is related to the level of political disagreement, and that yielding and avoiding are two distinct strategies.

Supplementary Data

Supplementary Data are available at *IJPOR* online.

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