

Partisan Agreement and Disagreement in Voters' Discussant Networks

Contextual Constraints and Partisan Selectivity in a Changing Electorate

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Introduction

Modern societies are inevitably diverse, socially as well as politically. Democracy can be understood as a regime whose essence is the peaceful solution of the conflicts over the allocation of resources and values that arise out of societies' plurality of interests and preferences (Lasswell 1936; Przeworski 2010). A basic agreement about the fact of political disagreement, as well as its legitimacy, is, therefore, a fundamental precondition for the functioning of any democracy. A vibrant democracy entails exchanges over these political differences at all layers of the political system. Different viewpoints must be represented in the arenas of political decision-making, most notably parliaments. But it is also desirable that citizens experience the plurality of politics in their immediate lifeworld (Huckfeldt et al. 2004a). Being confronted with divergent political views increases citizens' opinionation and political knowledge (Shah et al. 2005; Scheufele et al. 2006; Pattie and Johnston 2008), as well as their ability to process complex political information (Eveland Jr and Hively 2009; Erisen and Erisen 2012). Maybe most importantly, exposure to other views has also been shown to facilitate tolerance for and acceptance of different points of view, even disagreeing ones, thereby creating room for compromise in political decision-making processes (Mutz 2002; Huckfeldt et al. 2004b; Sunstein 2007; Pattie and Johnston 2008; Ikeda and Richey 2009; Stroud 2010).

¹ I am much obliged to Anne Schäfer for numerous invaluable comments on earlier versions of this chapter.

This chapter examines the character and development of partisan disagreement in German voters' social interactions, i.e., political discussions between individuals that support different parties (Klofstad et al. 2013). It is motivated by the assumption that the recent changes in Germany's electorate entail important implications for citizens' experiences of partisan disagreement. At a basic level, citizens' exposure to partisan disagreement can be understood as a function of two factors: their preference for interactions with politically like-minded others, on the one hand, and the availability of such persons in the socio-spatial contexts in which they reside on the other. This is the essence of the so-called "choice-constraint" model of the formation of citizens' networks of political discussants (Fischer 1982; Huckfeldt and Sprague 1995; Johnston and Pattie 2006; Friedland 2016). In line with this perspective, the chapter explores how the increasing fragmentation of the German party system and the emergence of a right-wing populist party as a challenger of the established parties has affected the amount and character of partisan disagreement experienced by voters in their political interactions.

Divergent political views in general, and interactions across party lines, in particular, may appear as a desirable goal for a society, but research has found that people often do not live up to these normative aspirations. In fact, it seems that "few individual people live their everyday lives so as to maximize their exposure to difference" (Mutz 2006: 10). On the contrary, numerous researchers starting with the early Columbia studies have shown that political discussions most often revolve around the "exchange of mutually agreeable points of view" (Berelson et al. 1954: 108; Huckfeldt and Sprague 1995; Huckfeldt et al. 2004a; Gerber et al. 2012; Gärtner and Wuttke 2019; see also Schmitt-Beck and Lup 2013). A central cause for the formation of these homogenous discussant networks might be political homophily, that is people's tendency to purposively search out politically similar others (McPherson et al. 2001; Settle and Carlson 2019; Minozzi et al. 2020). Minozzi et al. (2020) describe this as an intentional process of selection. People are more comfortable among like-minded others because they don't have to fear social isolation as a result of voicing unpopular opinions (Noelle-Neumann 1974; Settle and Carlson 2019). Put more generally, people may try to avoid exchanges across lines of difference to circumvent unpleasant situations (Ulbig and Funk 1999; Mutz 2006) and therefore seek out people who share their political views as interaction partners.

However, oftentimes people only have limited control over who they discuss political matters with. Simply put, selection presupposes availability, and that is necessarily constrained. People are situated in socio-spatial environments which determine who they encounter and consequently what kinds of people are in principle available to them for discussing politics (Huckfeldt and Sprague 1995; see also Finifter 1974; Fischer 1982; Johnston and Pattie 2006; Friedland 2016; Minozzi et al. 2020). Some people may find themselves in contexts where most potential interaction partners share their own views, but others may have a hard time finding a

like-minded soul in their vicinity. The structural composition of socio-spatial contexts thus can facilitate but also severely limit the chances for people to fulfill their desire to restrict their communications to like-minded conversation partners. In particular, people situated in more politically diverse social contexts should have a harder time finding people who share their political views.

As outlined in Chapter 1, the German electorate has changed in ways that may have implications for these general processes. The emergence of a right-wing populist party might have changed the conditions for partisan selectivity. Perhaps voters' adversity to conversations across party lines is particularly intense between right-wing populist parties and the established parties that they reject. At the same time, the increasing fragmentation of the electoral party system should have made it harder to avoid cross-cutting communication, at least if it translated into people's narrow socio-spatial contexts. These recent developments render Germany an ideal case to explore how electoral change maps onto people's everyday political conversations across party lines.

The chapter consists of two parts. The first part pertains to the "constraint" component of the guiding model. It investigates whether and to what extent the growing electoral fragmentation observed at the 2009, 2013, and 2017 federal elections increased the probability of German voters discussing political matters with persons that supported a different party to themselves. This presupposes that the structural changes observed at the national level (as described in Chapter 1) were actually mirrored within voters' lifeworld; the chapter accordingly examines whether this was the case at the level of electoral districts. It then goes on to establish how the composition of these contexts structured the occurrence of partisan disagreement. The chapter's second part addresses the "choice" component of the model by analyzing whether and in which ways voters still managed to surround themselves with like-minded others, despite increasing party system fragmentation. Specifically, the chapter ascertains whether voters have become increasingly selective in their choice of political conversation partners along partisan lines, as a result of the emergence of the right-wing populist AfD.

Choices, Constraints, and Partisan Disagreement

Partisan Selectivity

Homophily is one of the most pervasive facts of social interaction (Smith et al. 2014). It entails that similar people are connected at a higher rate than dissimilar people: like talks to like (McPherson et al. 2001). This pertains to a variety of socio-demographic and socio-economic characteristics such as race, gender, or social status—but most notably also to political attitudes and preferences (Berelson et al. 1954; McPherson et al. 2001). Numerous studies have confirmed that

political conversations within voters' discussant networks more often than not tend to revolve around congenial points of view (Berelson et al. 1954; Huckfeldt and Sprague 1995; Huckfeldt et al. 2004a; Gerber et al. 2012; Gärtner and Wuttke 2019; see also Schmitt-Beck and Lup 2013). People's urge to prioritize interactions with like-minded others has been linked to various psychological processes and motives. Downs (1957), for instance, argued that persons who agree with oneself on political matters are a valuable and highly trustworthy source of useful political information at low cost and are therefore preferred as political discussion partners. Festinger's theory of cognitive dissonance, by contrast, emphasizes the emotional discomfort that may arise from confrontations with information contradicting one's own views (Festinger 1957). Similarly, in her seminal work on the "Spiral of Silence," Noelle-Neumann (1974) has argued that individuals' interactions are driven by an urge to avoid social isolation. Talking politics with disagreeing others might create discomfort so that, again, individuals can be expected to prefer discussions with congenial partners (Mutz 2006; Settle and Carlson 2019; Minozzi et al. 2020).

While these lines of thought emphasize citizens' general tendency to turn to like-minded others when communicating about politics, recent research suggests that there even may be a trend toward increasing selectivity in political exposure (Knobloch-Westerwick and Meng 2009; Iyengar et al. 2008; Flaxman et al. 2016; Knobloch-Westerwick et al. 2017). Hearing the other side occurs less frequently because citizens appear to increasingly isolate themselves within echo chambers and strongly filter their news consumption and online communication (Taber and Lodge 2006; Stroud 2008; Flaxman et al. 2016). It is unclear, though, whether such a trend also affects unmediated communication between individuals.

The tendency to search out politically congenial conversation partners might not only vary over time but also across citizens. Applying a one-size-fits-all framework on voters' selectivity seems somewhat implausible given what we already know about the impact of individual political predispositions when it comes to political behavior (for an overview see McClurg et al. 2017). Having said this, the chapter focuses on how citizens' party preference might differently impact their tendency to selectively expose themselves to political information and in particular to connect with fellow supporters of their party. Recent research shows that people with strong populist attitudes tend to be particularly selective in their news consumption and their communication on social media (Heiss and Matthes 2019; Stier et al. 2020). Selecting congenial information over being exposed to contradicting points of view seems to be especially pronounced among supporters of populist parties. Against the backdrop of electoral gains for populist parties all across Western democracies, it is argued that parties are increasingly aligned not only along issue dimensions but along a populist-pluralist divide (Galston 2018; Norris and Inglehart 2019; see also Chapter 6). Populist parties in principle question the legitimacy of the "established" political parties, referring to them as "dysfunctional" and to the electoral process in which they compete as "fraudulent"

(Hameleers et al. 2017; Norris and Inglehart 2019). These views are diametrically opposed to those held by most voters of other parties. Thus, supporters of populist parties are likely to be particularly selective when constructing their discussant networks in order to avoid exposure to these points of view that challenge their party's views at their very core.

With the AfD gaining 12.6 percent of the votes in the 2017 German federal election, for the first time in the history of the Federal Republic a sizable right-wing populist party was represented in parliament. As the name suggests, the founders of the AfD intended the party to be an alternative to all established parties, fostering a logic of “us versus them” (cf. Schroeder and Weßels 2019b; for the general logic of “us vs. them” of populist parties see Mudde 2007). While in 2013, the AfD had appeared as a mostly Eurosceptic party, by 2015 it had developed into a right-wing populist party (cf. Arzheimer and Berning 2019). This led all established parties to further distance themselves from the new competitor.

Therefore, due to the party's populist rhetoric and its stance against all “established parties,” I expect AfD supporters to show particularly high levels of partisan selectivity when constructing their discussant networks. Given the change in the party's ideological orientation between the 2013 and 2017 federal elections, AfD voters might have become even more inclined to connect to fellow party supporters instead of exposing themselves to partisan disagreement.

Contextual Availability

Importantly, people are not unconstrained in their choice of political conversation partners. Contextual constraints determine the availability of people supporting the same party as oneself in a geographically bounded area at any given time. Whom a person can talk to—about politics or other matters—is circumscribed by the composition of the socio-spatial context she resides in (Books and Prysby 1991). It determines who the neighbors are one can talk to over the garden fence, the colleagues one meets every day at the workplace, or one's drinking fellows in the local pub (Finifter 1974; Fischer 1982; Huckfeldt and Sprague 1988, 1995; Mutz 2006). The people that share one's context constitute a pool of potential conversation partners out of which one can choose. This pool may contain large numbers of like-minded people—or not. The composition of this pool constrains citizens' attempts to selectively construct congenial discussant networks. Thus, who people talk to about political matters may be driven by the desire to talk only to persons of identical attitudes and preferences, but the extent to which this aim can be realized depends on the available options which, in turn, are conditional on the composition of the context (Huckfeldt and Sprague 1988).

For partisan agreement and disagreement, what counts is whether and to what extent the available people support the same party as oneself or another party.

This is directly linked to the overall composition of the electorate within one's context. Since most everyday encounters occur close to one's place of residence, the region one lives in can thus greatly impact the partisan coloration of one's social interactions (e.g., Fischer 1982; Huckfeldt 1983). If a region's electorate is evenly split between just two parties, supporters of both parties have plenty of chances for encounters with others supporting their own party. If however, voters within a region support a number of different parties, overall these individuals are considerably less likely to encounter fellow supporters of their party (Huckfeldt and Sprague 1995; Huckfeldt et al. 2005). While extant research has demonstrated this structuring factor of partisan composition on voters' likelihood of experiencing disagreement from a cross-sectional perspective, this chapter adds a longitudinal view on discussant networks. If the availability of like-minded discussants is a function of the partisan composition of a region it should, of course, be affected by shifts of this composition due to changes in its residents' electoral behavior. Importantly, as more parties gain significant numbers of votes, in the aggregate, the number of available adherents of each single party necessarily declines. Thus, as voters' contexts become more fragmented in partisan terms they are likely to encounter more disagreeing others. Increasing electoral fragmentation and the resulting changes in the partisan composition of regional contexts are likely to lead to a decline in the availability of congenial political discussion partners and consequently increase the chances of political conversations across party lines. As outlined in Chapter 1, electoral fragmentation in Germany changed remarkably in recent decades and reached an all-time high at the 2017 federal election. If German voters' discussant networks were responsive to the overall changes in the makeup of the electorate, voters can be expected to have been more likely to experience partisan disagreement in their social conversations in 2017, when electoral fragmentation reached its peak thus far, than at previous elections (cf. Chapter 1).

Electoral Fragmentation and Partisan Disagreement

Electoral Fragmentation in Regional Contexts

As outlined above, voters' likelihood to interact with people that support the same party as they do can be understood as a (partial) function of the partisan composition of the socio-spatial context within which they reside. Accordingly, partisan disagreement should be more widespread in electorally fragmented contexts. At the most recent federal elections, German voters' choices led to a substantially more fragmented party system. Did this development lead to a higher incidence of experiences of partisan disagreement among voters? This question entails an important premise: that the global trend toward a more fragmented national party

system was reflected at the level of the socio-spatial contexts that circumscribe voters' experiences with their fellow citizens. To ascertain the validity of this premise I begin the analysis with an examination of the development of party system fragmentation at the level of regional contexts. Complementing the overall picture displayed by Figure 1.2, Figure 7.1 shows the development of party system fragmentation since the first federal election in 1949 at the disaggregated level of electoral districts. As a measure of fragmentation, I use the well-known Rae-Index, which indicates the probability of two randomly chosen people within an electoral district voting for different parties (Rae 1968). For comparative purposes, Figure 7.1 also includes the aggregate fragmentation on the national level (dashed line; cf. Chapter 1).

National developments can, but must not necessarily be reflected within subnational levels. Increasing overall fragmentation at the national level could also reflect a trend toward regional sorting, i.e., increasing homogeneity within electoral districts, accompanied by widening differences between them (for mechanisms of regional sorting cf. Mutz 2006; Gimpel and Hui 2015; Mummolo and Nall 2017). If this were the case, immediate experiences in citizens' lifeworlds would not be ones of increased fragmentation, but increasingly homogenous social environments. According to Figure 7.1, however, this is not the case in German electoral districts. The changes in the electorate over time on the national level are clearly mirrored within the regional contexts. There are no tendencies of increasing regional sorting or more generally of increasingly homogenous regional contexts. Although at all

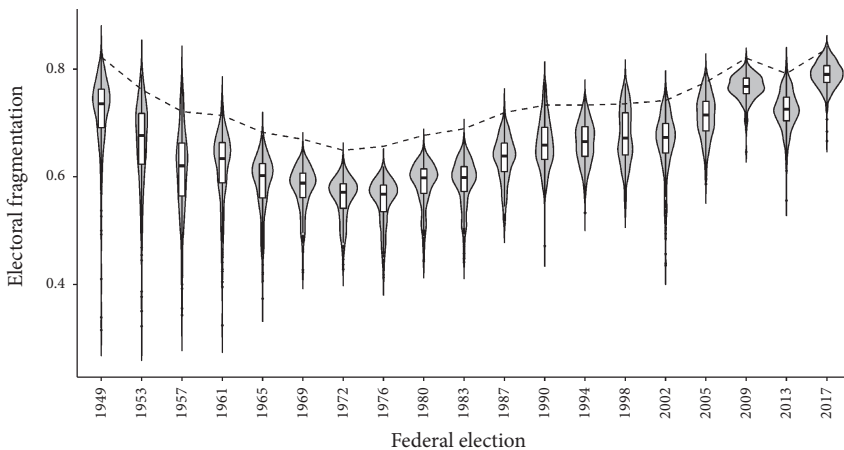


Fig. 7.1 Electoral fragmentation over time and across electoral districts

Notes: Displayed is the distribution of fragmentation across electoral districts and across federal elections. Boxplots show the median fragmentation and the first and third quartiles. Fragmentation refers to the Rae-Index of the electorate in a given electoral district. The dashed line refers to fragmentation on the national level.

Source: Bundeswahlleiter.

elections most regional contexts were less fragmented than the national context as a whole, the overall temporal trends are very similar. Remarkably, the differences between regional contexts decreased visibly over time. During the early elections of the Federal Republic, there were still very homogeneous regions in which for instance the Christian Democrats gained over 80 percent of the votes. This changed over time, however, and nowadays, all German voters live in highly fragmented regional contexts. In 1949, electoral fragmentation ranged between 0.32 and 0.83 across electoral districts and in 2017 only between 0.67 and 0.84.

This means that nowadays German voters are likely to encounter mostly people who hold a different party preference across all regional contexts. However, although regional contexts aligned over time, there are still significant differences across electoral districts at the 2017 federal election securing that citizens face different contextual constraints when constructing their political discussion networks. Since the complementary probability of the fragmentation index indicates the probability that two randomly chosen voters within a region opt for the same party, this implies that at the 2017 federal election the purely stochastic baseline likelihood of partisan agreement ranged between 16 percent in the most fragmented region and 33 percent in the least fragmented one.

In sum, the increase in electoral fragmentation at the national level presented in Chapter 1 was indeed reflected at the level of electoral districts, and thus an object of voters' immediate experiences in their lifeworld. Importantly, although all German voters should have been very likely to encounter others with whose party preferences they disagreed, this likelihood still varied substantially across regions.

Fragmentation and Partisan Disagreement

Did these increased chances of encounters across party lines affect the partisan composition of discussant networks? To answer this question for the 2009, 2013, and 2017 federal elections, I combine the data on election results within electoral districts used in the previous section with individual-level data from voter surveys. To maximize statistical power, I pool data from several survey modules conducted under the auspices of the GLES: the cross-sectional face-to-face surveys, the short-term campaign panel surveys, and the rolling cross-section surveys, conducted in 2009, 2013, and 2017 (RollCrossSec09, RollCrossSec13, RollCrossSec17, CampPanel09, CampPanel13, CampPanel17, CrossSec09_Cum, CrossSec13_Cum, CrossSec17_Cum). Each of these surveys contains a network battery designed to map respondents' political discussant networks. Preceded by a question about the general frequency of political discussions, respondents were asked to think of those persons with whom they had discussed politics most frequently. Subsequently, they were invited to indicate for each of these individuals

which party she would most likely vote for. Up to three political conversation partners could be named depending on the survey. For the following analyses, these data are rearranged into a dyadic format (cf. Huckfeldt et al. 1995) so that the units of analysis are respondent-discussant pairs.

The dependent variable of the following models is partisan disagreement within these dyads (1 = disagreement: respondent's intended vote choice ["Zweitstimme," pertaining to CDU/CSU, SPD, FDP, Greens, Left, and, except 2009, AfD] and discussant's perceived vote intention are not identical, 0 = identical). All observations with missing information on the respondent's and/or the discussant's vote choice were dropped from the dataset. Similarly, all respondents who were undecided at the time of the survey or did not intend to vote at all were dropped from the analyses, as were respondents who never discussed politics with anyone, whose share, however, was rather small (29 percent across surveys). This resulted in approximately 40,300 respondent-discussant pairs with valid information on partisan disagreement.

The following analyses estimate the effect of electoral fragmentation within electoral districts on disagreement between voters and their most important political conversation partners by means of hierarchical logistic regression models with respondent-discussant dyads clustered in respondents and electoral districts. From a methodological point of view, it deserves mention that this setup does not entail the claim that the psychologically relevant regions of experience for voters correspond to electoral districts. They are quite large, encompassing about 200,000 voters. The actually relevant spaces are probably considerably smaller (McAllister et al. 2001), but data availability dictates reference to this rather imprecise measure of context. What this implies is that the analyses entail a rather conservative test of the association between electoral fragmentation and partisan disagreement.

Figure 7.2 shows the predicted probabilities and 95 percent confidence intervals of disagreement in respondent-discussant dyads across the ranges of fragmentation observed in electoral districts in a cross-sectional perspective for each of the three elections. It clearly shows a positive relationship between the contexts' electoral fragmentation and partisan disagreement for all time points under investigation. At the 2009, 2013, and 2017 federal elections, the probability of discussing with people who supported a different party to oneself significantly increased with rising fragmentation in one's electoral district. In other words, people living in more politically fragmented regional contexts tended to discuss politics with people who voted for a different party at a higher rate than people in less diverse contexts. The sizes of these effects are quite astonishing: In 2013, a 1 percentage point higher fragmentation of the regional context was associated with a 1 percentage point increase in the probability of disagreement between two discussion partners and in 2009 with a probability increase of 0.80 percentage points. In 2017, in contrast, the effect was much smaller (0.55). It thus appears that in 2017 regional differences in the chances of encountering disagreeing others may have been less

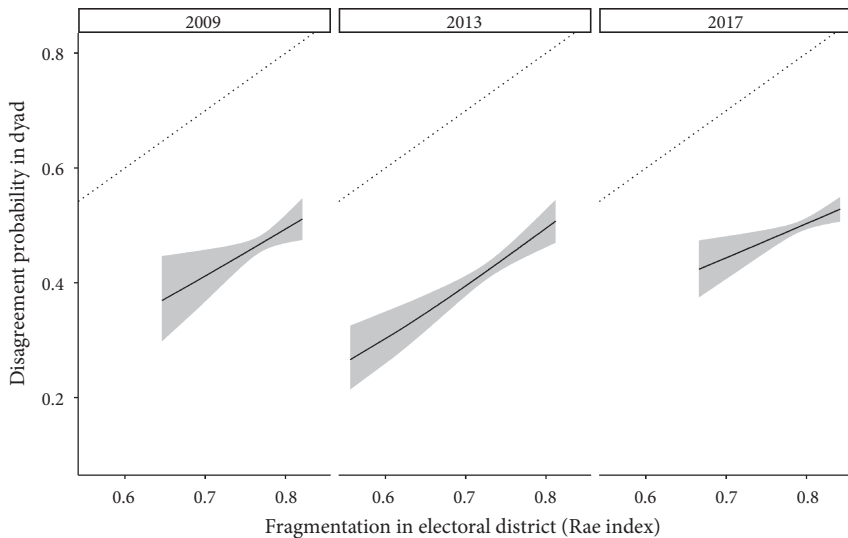


Fig. 7.2 Effects of electoral districts' fragmentation on the probability of talking politics across party lines at the 2009, 2013, and 2017 federal elections

Notes: Displayed are predicted probabilities of a respondent supporting a different party than her discussion partner. Results are based on three separate hierarchical regression models with respondent-discussant dyads clustered in respondents and electoral districts. The dashed diagonal line refers to a scenario in which the makeup of discussion networks is solely a function of the composition of electoral districts. Shaded areas indicate 95 percent confidence intervals.

Sources: RollCrossSec09, RollCrossSec13, RollCrossSec17, CampPanel09, CampPanel13, CampPanel17, CrossSec09_Cum, CrossSec13_Cum, CrossSec17_Cum, Bundeswahlleiter.

likely to translate into voters discussing politics across party lines. This suggests that in 2017 voters in more heterogeneous contexts were particularly selective in their choice of discussion partners—something to which I will return later.

This analysis has demonstrated that cross-sectionally the composition of the voters' socio-spatial contexts mapped onto their discussant networks in 2009, 2013, and 2017. Where people lived was strongly related to how much partisan disagreement they were likely to experience in their everyday political conversations. However, these cross-regional associations could have come about as a result of underlying attributes of the regions themselves. For instance, urban areas could generally be more electorally fragmented because they attract people from all strands of life, and living in a city makes people more accepting of different viewpoints and consequently likely to connect with disagreeing others. To address this possibility, I run an additional model that applies a longitudinal perspective while keeping region-specific time-invariant characteristics constant. The model includes several covariates to account for differences in the socio-demographic makeup of the electorate over time (education levels, coded as 0 = "Hauptschule," 1 = "Realschule," 2 = "Abitur"; age groups: coded as 18–30 = reference category,

30–45 = 1, 45–60 = 2, > 60 years = 3; size of the discussant network, ranging from 1 to 3; sex, coded 0 = male, 1 = female). Table 7.1 shows the average marginal effects in percentage points derived from a logistic regression estimation with fixed effects for electoral districts.² According to these estimates, a 1 percentage point increase in the fragmentation of an electoral district over time led to a 0.66 percentage point increase in the probability of a voter being exposed to a disagreeing discussant on average across all three elections. This confirms that the composition of the regional electorate is a powerful factor in shaping German voters' everyday conversations about politics, and that changes in districts' electoral fragmentation altered people's chances to experience partisan disagreement in their discussant networks. The largest change in fragmentation between two elections in a region amounted to an increase of 13 percentage points. Accordingly, for people in this regional context, the predicted probability of talking to a disagreeing political conversation partner increased by more than 8 percentage points.

The mean absolute change in contexts' fragmentation between two successive elections amounted to about 5.6 percentage points. Accordingly, the associated change in the probability of a voter and a discussant disagreeing amounted to 3.6 percentage points, an effect size comparable to those of individual characteristics. In view of the large sizes of electoral districts, this effect strength is a remarkable finding indeed. For instance, people who completed the highest German secondary school were 5.7 percentage points more likely to disagree with their political conversation partners than those with the lowest educational attainment. Women were 3.7 percentage points less likely than men to disagree with their discussants, and for the eldest in the sample, encountering partisan disagreement was 6.4 percentage points less likely than for voters below the age of 30.

In sum, people in electorally more fragmented regions were more likely to discuss politics across party lines. Notably, people's exposure to partisan disagreement became more likely as the regional contexts' fragmentation increased over time. Thus, as expected, the increasing electoral fragmentation in regional contexts was associated with more frequent political discussions between disagreeing voters. Obviously, the composition of socio-spatial contexts constrained voters' ability to realize their tendency to seek out congenial discussion partners and to avoid partisan disagreement. The next section examines this selectivity component behind the structuration of voters' discussant networks more closely. It will show to what extent voters managed to surround themselves with like-minded others, despite the increasing partisan fragmentation of their social contexts. Indeed, across the three federal elections of 2009, 2013, and 2017 voters displayed an increasing tendency to purposively select fellow party supporters as political conversation partners.

² Electoral districts for which the geographic boundaries were changed between 2009 and 2017 were excluded from the analysis. I owe gratitude to Teresa Haußmann for consolidating the data on electoral districts across federal elections.

Table 7.1 Effects of temporal changes in electoral districts' fragmentation on the probability of talking politics across party lines

	Logits	AMEs
Fragmentation (in %)	0.03*** (0.00)	0.66*** (0.11)
Education (Realschule)	0.05 (0.03)	1.20 (0.75)
Education (Abitur)	0.23*** (0.03)	5.71*** (0.72)
Female	-0.15*** (0.02)	-3.71*** (0.52)
Age: 30–45	-0.19*** (0.04)	-4.57*** (0.87)
Age: 45–60	-0.25*** (0.03)	-6.11*** (0.82)
Age: > 60	-0.26*** (0.03)	-6.39*** (0.84)
N (discussants)	0.12*** (0.02)	3.02*** (0.37)
Intercept	-1.85*** (0.39)	
AIC	51,523.13	
BIC	54,295.44	
Log likelihood	-25,436.56	
Deviance	50,873.13	
Num. obs.	37,429	

Notes: Results from a logistic regression with fixed effects for electoral districts. Displayed are logit coefficients and average marginal effects (AMEs) in percentage points with standard errors in parentheses; * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

Sources: RollCrossSec09, RollCrossSec13, RollCrossSec17, CampPanel09, CampPanel13, CampPanel17, CrossSec09_Cum, CrossSec13_Cum, CrossSec17_Cum, Bundeswahlleiter.

Voters' Partisan Selectivity at the 2009, 2013, and 2017 Federal Elections

Voters' and Discussants' Partisan Agreement

So far, I looked at the structural effects originating from the partisan composition of voters' socio-spatial contexts on the makeup of their discussant networks. As outlined above, voters typically have a strong homophilic tendency and thus are likely to select conversation partners on partisan grounds. This section investigates

the dynamics of this partisan selectivity at the 2009, 2013, and 2017 elections. It aims to analyze to what extent German voters discussed politics with like-minded others despite a very high likelihood of mostly encountering people with differing party preferences within their lifeworld. Given this changed theoretical perspective, the analytical focus will now be on the avoidance of partisan disagreement. Accordingly, in the following analyses, partisan agreement instead of disagreement will be the outcome attribute of interest (technically implying a reversal of the dependent variable's coding). The analyses will evaluate agreement among discussion partners against the backdrop of changing compositions of regional contexts to establish the degree to which German voters were selective on partisan terms in their choices of political conversation partners. The section first looks at the temporal developments of partisan selectivity over the three federal elections. Then it tests whether voters' tendency to select like-minded over disagreeing discussants varied by parties. It demonstrates that supporters of different parties differed with regard to how strict they were in avoiding exposure to disagreement in their political conversations by deliberately choosing to talk politics with congenial others.

To evaluate partisan agreement against the backdrop of changes in the electoral fragmentation of socio-spatial contexts, for all survey respondents I calculate a baseline measure of partisan agreement, which captures the probability of partisan agreement occurring by chance alone, conditional on the partisan composition of the contexts where they reside. It simulates a counterfactual scenario in which respondents do not exercise any choice when constructing their discussant networks, so that these networks only reflect the workings of the constraint mechanism discussed above, as if voters do not choose but simply talk about politics at random with anyone they encounter in their district. This measure provides a benchmark that allows me to isolate the element of choice reflected in voters' experiences of partisan agreement respectively disagreement.³ Based on official election results, these values are calculated as the mean probability of two voters sharing the same party preference across electoral districts. Specifically, I calculate the likelihood of having an agreeing discussant for each survey respondent solely based on the partisan composition of the electoral districts she resides in. These individual probabilities are subsequently aggregated to reflect the overall probability across all respondents of encountering like-minded others in their electoral districts. The dark bars in Figure 7.3 show the results of this operation for each federal election. In contrast, the light bars show the actual levels of partisan agreement experienced by respondents at the 2009, 2013, and 2017 federal elections. They are derived from a hierarchical logistic regression model in which agreement in a

³ It should be noted that individuals may also choose their political discussion partners based on nonpolitical criteria that are correlated with political similarities, which, in turn, might increase the chances of partisan agreement. However, it is beyond the scope of this chapter to disentangle these different processes.

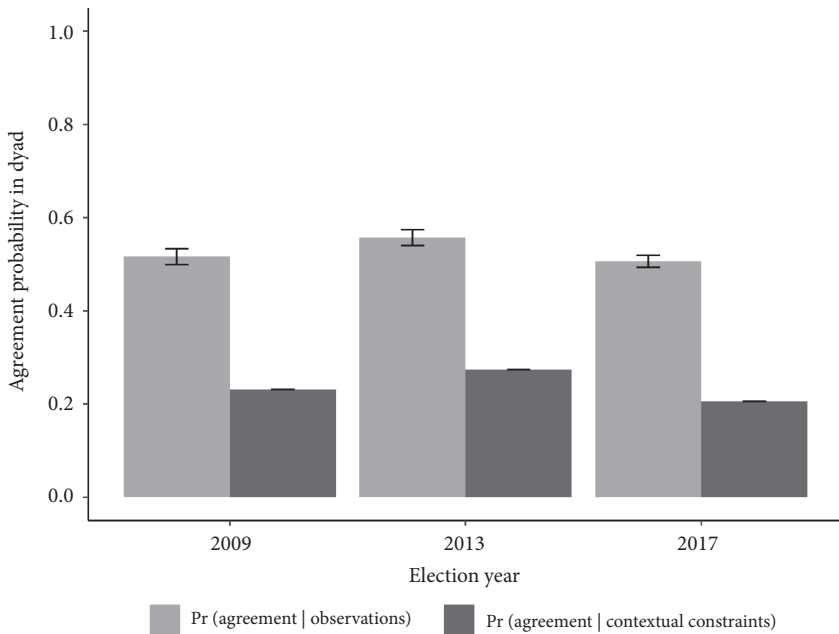


Fig. 7.3 Simulated and actual partisan agreement at the 2009, 2013, and 2017 federal elections

Notes: Displayed are predicted probabilities and 95 percent confidence intervals based on a hierarchical logistic regression with dyads clustered in survey components (Model 1 in Table 7.A1 in Appendix). Dark bars refer to the probability of partisan agreement under the condition of random selection of discussion partners in electoral districts and light bars to the predicted probability of agreement as observed among respondents. Categorical control variables are held at their shares and continuous control variables at their respective means.

Sources: See Figure 7.2.

respondent-discussant dyad is modeled as a function of the respective federal election, controlling for respondents' socio-demographic characteristics to partial out changes in these attributes across the three elections (see Model 1 in Table 7.A1). For each election, the discrepancy between the two bars indicates the amount of selectivity exercised by voters to fulfill their urge for like-minded others as political conversation partners.

Voters indeed connected at a much higher rate with like-minded others than they would have in a scenario where only availability, but not selectivity driven by party preference mattered for the formation of discussant networks. At each election, they managed to have more like-minded discussion partners than disagreeing ones although they were situated in highly fragmented regional contexts. Across the three federal elections, the share of respondent-discussant pairs supporting the same party was over 50 percent. With the regional contexts being more fragmented than ever before, it was to be expected that the probability of discussion partners sharing the same party preference was lowest in 2017 when

electoral fragmentation reached its peak. And this was indeed the case: Partisan agreement amounted to just 51 percent at the 2017 federal election, compared to 56 percent in 2013 and 52 percent in 2009. To see a decrease of 5 percentage points between two federal elections (2013 vs. 2017) is quite remarkable if we consider that this translates to millions of individuals more discussing politics with disagreeing instead of agreeing fellow citizens. Apart from the changes between the three most recent elections, it is also worth noting how strikingly these numbers contrast with comparable data published by Huckfeldt et al. (2005) on the 1990 federal election. They suggest that a few decades ago, when the party system was still much less fragmented, the amount of partisan agreement had been much higher (69 percent in West Germany respectively 61 percent in East Germany).

Voters' Partisan Selectivity

To arrive at a numerical assessment of how selective voters were in their choices of political conversation partners we need to compare the stochastic probability (dark bars in Figure 7.3) with the observed probability of agreement (light bars) in a quantifiable way. By contrasting these probabilities, we can develop an index of partisan selectivity, formally denoted r_t , that provides a measure of the amount of discussant choice exercised by voters net of changing contextual constraints. The index is adapted from Huckfeldt and Sprague (1995: 151) and formalizes as

$$r_t = \frac{(P_t - S_t)}{(P_t * (1 - S_t))}$$

where P_t stands for the predicted probability of partisan agreement for respondents at election t (cf. light bars in Figure 7.3). S_t captures the probability of partisan agreement among respondents solely as a result of the partisan composition of regional contexts (dark bars). The index takes on the value 0 if the probability for actual agreement is the same as in the counterfactual scenario where no choice is exercised. The value 1, by contrast, indicates a situation in which voters completely shun adherents of other parties and discuss politics exclusively with supporters of their own party.

Figure 7.4 displays the index values for 2009, 2013, and 2017. Remarkably, it indicates that although overall partisan agreement had decreased over time (as seen above in Figure 7.3) partisan selectivity in fact increased. It was highest in 2017 (0.75), whereas it amounted to only 0.70 in 2013 and 0.72 in 2009, indicating that the increase was not linear. Thus, while voters were overall least likely to talk to persons supporting the same party in 2017, they were at the same time more likely to actively choose conversation partners based on shared party preferences out of the pools of potential discussion partners available in their electoral districts.

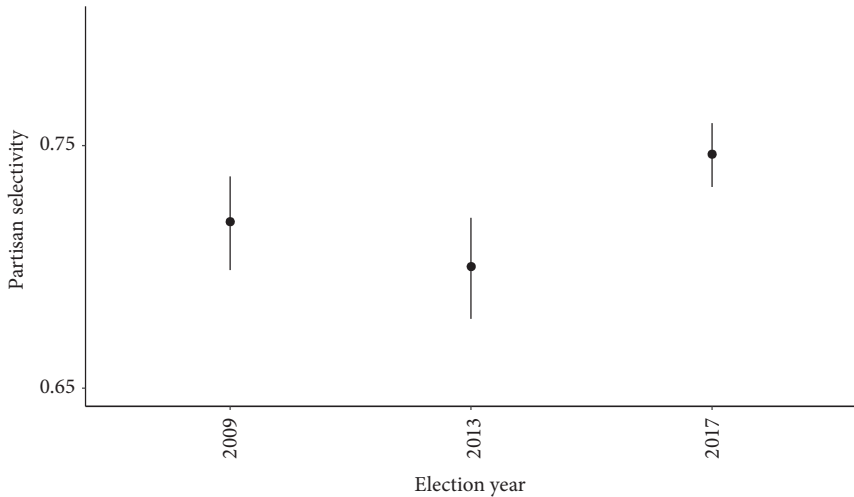


Fig. 7.4 Partisan selectivity at the 2009, 2013, and 2017 federal elections

Notes: Values are calculated based on the probabilities displayed in Figure 7.3; vertical lines indicate 95 percent confidence intervals.

This implies that across the eight years covered by these three elections, partisan agreement between voters and their discussants did decrease, specifically between 2013 and 2017. But it did so to a lesser extent than could have been expected based on the increase in the fragmentation of regional electorates, because voters became more selective in their choices of conversation partners, thus partially offsetting the long-term effect of growing electoral fragmentation.

Variations by Parties

Having looked at partisan selectivity at the aggregate level, I now turn to a more nuanced analysis which is motivated by the idea that perhaps voters' selectivity was not the same for supporters of different parties. In particular, as outlined above, voters of right-wing populist parties might be even more averse to partisan disagreement than supporters of other parties, echoing their parties' massive and generalizing rejection of the alleged "cartel" of established "system parties" (cf. Mudde 2014; Norris and Inglehart 2019). In Germany, this concerns in particular the right-wing populist AfD, which emerged on the political stage at the 2013 federal election, and became the strongest opposition party in the national parliament in 2017. The analyses apply the same methods and follow the same two steps as taken in the previous section. However, they no longer examine all voters together but distinguish between the different parties' supporters. This allows me to clearly identify the differences that might exist between these voter groups.

Figure 7.5 conveys the same information as Figure 7.3 not for the totality of all voters but rather broken down by the different parties' voter groups. The estimates are derived from a hierarchical logistic regression model similar to the one used above but including respondents' party preferences as an additional independent variable (see Model 2 in Table 7.A1). The figure indeed shows large differences between parties that are, moreover, not constant across elections. First, supporters of the larger parties CDU/CSU and SPD generally experienced much more partisan agreement in their political conversations than voters of the smaller parties (light bars). However, this was at least partially a result of the higher baseline probability of voters of the larger parties to encounter agreeing others in their regional contexts (dark bars; cf. Huckfeldt and Sprague 1995). Second, disaggregating partisan agreement over party preferences actually reveals two opposing temporal trends: while most parties' voters discussed politics less frequently with supporters of their own party, AfD voters were exposed to much more partisan agreement in 2017 than in 2013. In 2017, the amount of partisan agreement experienced by

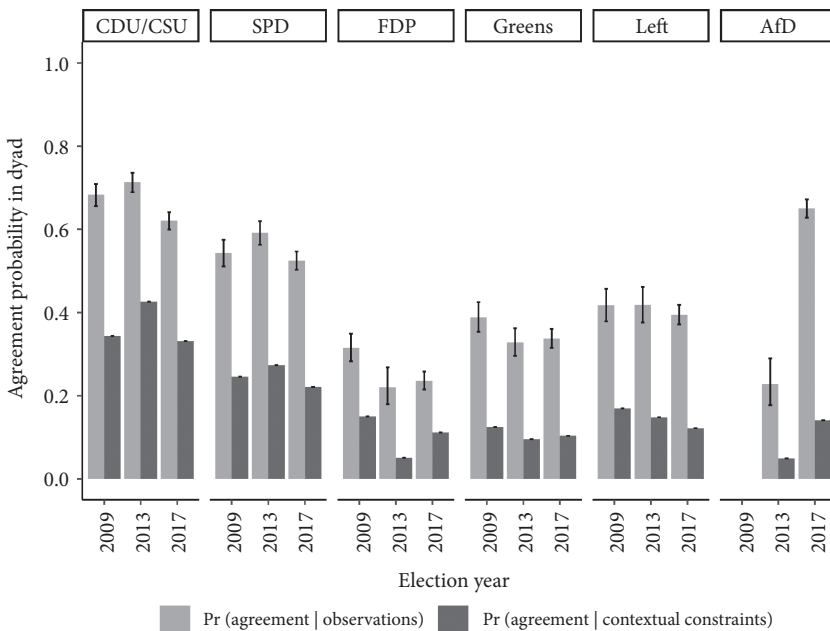


Fig. 7.5 Simulated and actual partisan agreement by party preference

Notes: Displayed are predicted probabilities and 95 percent confidence intervals based on a hierarchical logistic regression with dyads clustered in survey components (Model 2 in Table 7.A1 in Appendix). Dark bars refer to the probability of agreement under the condition of random selection of discussion partners in electoral districts and light bars are the predicted probabilities of agreement as observed among respondents supporting different parties. Categorical control variables are held at their shares and continuous control variables at their respective means.

Sources: See Figure 7.2 .

AfD voters even surpassed the levels detected for CDU/CSU and SPD voters. The discrepancy between AfD voters' chances of encountering like-minded others in their contexts and the actual partisan composition of their discussant networks that becomes obvious at this election is indeed striking. This suggests that over time AfD voters became more selective and, in 2017, were much more selective when constructing their political conversation networks than voters of the other parties.

Yet, as outlined before, only looking at absolute levels of partisan agreement ignores the changing availability of like-minded potential discussants and does not provide a clear indication of the amount of deliberate partisan-driven choice. Similar to Figure 7.4 but broken down by parties, Figure 7.6 displays the amount of partisan selectivity, correcting for changes in the availability of co-partisans within electoral districts. This differentiated analysis confirms that for each party's electorate at each election, separately, there is the general tendency of voters to prefer fellow voters of the same party over other potential conversation partners. Most estimates range between 0.70 and 0.80 with two notable outliers. With the exception of 2013,⁴ FDP voters were least likely to select political conversation partners based on a shared party preference. This seems to be a stable finding over time given that already Huckfeldt et al. (2005) found that at the federal election in 1990,

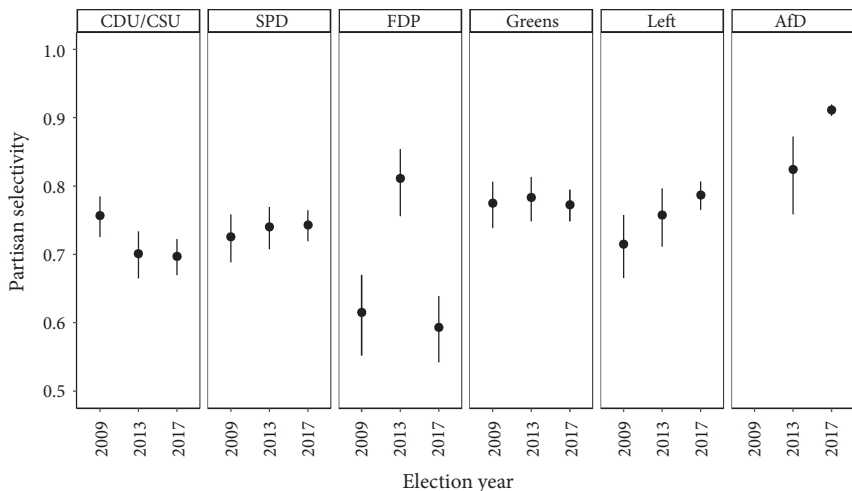


Fig. 7.6 Partisan selectivity by party preference

Notes: Values are calculated based on the probabilities displayed in Figure 7.5; vertical lines indicate 95 percent confidence intervals.

⁴ Since the FDP received less than 5 percent of the total votes in 2013, it is most likely that it was supported only by its core voters, who in turn, might have had the highest inclination to connect with like-minded others.

FDP voters—most likely due to their centrist position in the party system—were most frequently connected to voters of other parties. More importantly, AfD voters show the highest tendency to deliberately encapsulate themselves in homogeneous discussion networks (0.82 in 2013 and 0.91 in 2017). These findings suggest that indeed, as assumed, but only at the 2017 federal election, not yet in 2013, the voters of the AfD were characterized by a much stronger tendency to avoid conversations across party lines than the voters of any other party at any of the three elections. An important implication of this finding is that much of the general trend toward more partisan selectivity on the level of the electorate at large, which has been detected above, can be attributed to differences between the AfD's respective electorates at the elections of 2013 and 2017.

Conclusions

This chapter analyzed political discussions among German citizens across party lines. I used a framework of “choice-within-constraints” (Fischer 1982; Huckfeldt and Sprague 1995) to study two factors that affect the formation of discussant networks: the varying availability of individuals who support the same party as oneself in individuals' socio-spatial contexts and the deliberate choices exercised by them that are presumably driven by the desire to avoid discussions across party lines and instead search out like-minded discussants.

Combining data from three survey modules of the GLES, conducted in 2009, 2013, and 2017, with official election results on the level of electoral districts, I analyzed the probability of voters having been exposed to disagreeing political conversation partners conditional on the partisan composition of their regional contexts. I established that the increasing fragmentation of the German electorate was mirrored within these contexts and affected the likelihood that voters talked to adherents of parties other than their own. From a cross-sectional point of view, I found voters residing within more fragmented electoral districts displaying higher rates of partisan disagreement with their most important political discussion partners. Importantly, in line with my expectations, changes in districts' electoral fragmentation between elections clearly affected their residents' prospects to encounter disagreeing viewpoints in political conversations. Increasing fragmentation led to more numerous experiences of partisan disagreement. The increasing electoral fragmentation at recent federal elections has made decision-making for German voters and coalition formation on the part of party elites much more complex (cf. Chapters 1 and 9), to be sure. But from the more general perspective of democratic theory, it has also entailed a normatively desirable outcome: that voters became more likely to experience the diversity of political views in their immediate lifeworld.

However, from extant research we know that voters are moved by a desire to maintain homophily in their social interactions (Berelson et al. 1954; Huckfeldt and Sprague 1995; Huckfeldt et al. 2004a; Gerber et al. 2012; Gärtner and Wuttke 2019; see also Schmitt-Beck and Lup 2013). The chapter has shown how German voters navigated the more difficult situation arising out of the diminished availability of like-minded potential discussants in their socio-spatial contexts. In the aggregate, the probability of voters having like-minded political conversation partners slightly decreased between 2009 and 2017. However, a more nuanced look at patterns of partisan agreement across voters of different parties showed that this overall decrease concealed two countervailing dynamics: Voters of the established parties increasingly discussed politics across party lines, while AfD voters increasingly surrounded themselves with supporters of their own party.

Only by contrasting partisan agreement as experienced by German voters and the probability of them encountering congenial others in their regional contexts can one get an impression of the amount of partisan selectivity actually exercised by voters. Studying the amount of partisan agreement conditional on extant contextual constraints, the analyses demonstrated that partisan selectivity indeed increased over time. However, this was mainly due to the adherents of one party: the AfD. In 2017, that is after the party's turn toward a clearly right-wing populist agenda (cf. Chapter 1), its voters displayed a far stronger partisan selectivity than in 2013 but also than those of any other party at any of the three elections investigated in this chapter. Thus, AfD voters responded to the increasing constraints imposed on them by the progressing fragmentation of the party system by exercising more deliberate choice when constructing their discussant networks. Presumably, their exceptionally strong inclination to communicate only with like-minded fellow citizens reflected the party's populist across-the-board rejection of all established parties. That AfD voters have come to display a particularly pronounced selectivity with regard to their communication with other people raises concerns about a looming polarization of party politics in Germany at the grassroots level of voters. Apparently, even more than other voters, supporters of the AfD prefer to shut themselves off from what normative theorists have deemed to be crucial for a vital democracy—the discussion of politics across lines of difference and the experience of disagreement as an essential part of democratic conflict resolution.

Appendix

Table 7.A1 Partisan agreement across federal elections and differentiated by party preference

	Model 1: Agreement	Model 2: Agreement
Year (Reference: 2009)		
2013	0.16 (0.05)***	0.14 (0.08)
2017	-0.04 (0.04)	-0.28 (0.08)***
Education (Reference: Hauptschule)		
Realschule	-0.04 (0.03)	0.03 (0.03)
Abitur/FH	-0.25 (0.03)***	-0.07 (0.03)*
Female (Reference: male)	0.16 (0.02)***	0.18 (0.02)***
Age (Reference: 18–30)		
30–45	0.18 (0.03)***	0.13 (0.04)***
45–60	0.26 (0.03)***	0.20 (0.03)***
> 60	0.27 (0.03)***	0.21 (0.03)***
Discussion partners (N)	-0.13 (0.02)***	-0.17 (0.02)***
Vote choice (Reference: CDU/CSU)		
SPD		-0.60 (0.07)***
FDP		-1.54 (0.08)***
Greens		-1.22 (0.08)***
Left		-1.10 (0.09)***
AfD		0.13 (0.04)**
Vote choice X year		
SPD 2013		0.06 (0.10)
FDP 2013		-0.63 (0.16)***
Greens 2013		-0.41 (0.11)***
Left 2013		-0.14 (0.13)
AfD 2013		-2.26 (0.17)***
SPD 2017		0.20 (0.08)*
FDP 2017		-0.12 (0.10)
Greens 2017		0.05 (0.09)
Left 2017		0.18 (0.10)
Constant	0.17 (0.05)**	0.91 (0.08)***

Continued

Table 7.A1 *Continued*

	Model 1: Agreement	Model 2: Agreement
AIC	2,309.58	7,605.06
BIC	2,354.18	7,746.09
Log likelihood	-1,143.79	-3,777.53
N (dyads)	40,302	40,302
N (surveys)	9	9
Var: survey (Intercept)	0.00	0.00

Notes: Results from a hierarchical logistic regression model with respondent-discussant dyads clustered in survey components. Displayed are logit coefficients with standard errors in parentheses; * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

Sources: RollCrossSec09, RollCrossSec13, RollCrossSec17, CampPanel09, CampPanel13, CampPanel17, CrossSec09_Cum, CrossSec13_Cum, CrossSec17_Cum.