

## **“Obstinate Partisanship”: Political Discussion Attributes Effects on the Development of Unconditional Party Loyalty**

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Scholarly work has placed political discussion at the center of a healthier democracy. However, this might not always be the case considering the vast amount of different discussion attributes and their effects. This study extends existing research on the influence of different discussion attributes (cognitive elaboration, network size, exposure to disagreement, and online/offline discussion) on political attitude change. To do so, we introduce the concept of obstinate partisanship and explore different discussion attributes as its antecedents. Obstinate partisans remain loyal to their political party irrespective of its performance, just as staunch sports fans do with their team. Results from a survey conducted in three democracies show that discussion network size, discussion disagreement, and offline discussion are all negative predictors of obstinate partisanship. Conversely, online discussion fosters this negative orientation. We finally examine the moderating role of discussion disagreement and network size on some of these relationships.

*Keywords: obstinate partisanship, party identification, discussion elaboration, discussion network size, discussion disagreement, online discussion, offline discussion*

The idea that political discussion can help transcend ideological, religious, or cultural cleavages by shaping attitudes has been the scope of great academic debate. Thus, the past decades have seen a plethora of studies exploring the effects of political talk on a wide range of prodemocratic dispositions. These have proven to be largely positive. For example, political talk has been found to increase discussants' sense of

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political efficacy, perception of community, political knowledge, and social capital, among others (see Burkhalter, Gastil, & Kelshaw, 2002; Wellman, Haase, Witte, & Hampton, 2001). Nonetheless, some studies have cautioned against an overoptimistic view of political discussion. In a context of discussion with unlike-minded people, certain individuals under certain conditions "dig in their heels" and move their views in the direction opposite to the one advocated by their discussion partners (what is known as attitude polarization and "repulsion effects"; Gastil, Black, & Moscovitz, 2008; Zaller, 1992).

Much less explored, however, is the influence of the different attributes of political discussion on attitude change (Gastil et al., 2008). In this article, we extend prior research by studying how certain interpersonal discussion attributes such as cognitive elaboration, network size, discussion disagreement, and online/offline discussion (Gil de Zúñiga, 2017) affect individuals' political views. To do so, we introduce a new attitudinal outcome that we label as obstinate partisanship (henceforth referred to as OP). Building on the group theory of politics, OP arises as a degraded outgrowth of party identification. An obstinate attitude can be explained in terms of in-group-out-group perceptions, because it emerges from feelings of belonging to a party-based political community in competition for power with other distinct political communities. Connected to these feelings and perceptions, obstinate partisans develop unconditional loyalty and commitment to their political party, which in turns leads to an increased tendency to support it—mainly in the form of voting—regardless of policy proposals or party performance.

Using data from a demographically diverse survey collected in three countries (Spain, United States, and New Zealand), we find that, first, OP is a viable, reliable, and valid construct. Second, OP also performed distinctively when examining convergent and discriminant associations with the related construct of strength of ideology. Third, results reveal that having large discussion networks, being frequently exposed to disagreement, and discussing politics face-to-face help individuals mitigate their political attitude of obstinacy. On the contrary, online political discussions seems to foster an obstinate attitude in the political realm. Finally, the study also examines the moderating role of discussion disagreement and network size on the relationships between online/offline discussion and OP.

### **Party Identification as a Substrate of OP**

Party preference and stability of vote choice have received considerable attention from political science and sociology scholars during the past decades (Smith & Mackie, 2007). From the United States to Italy, from Great Britain to Spain, a substantial number of voters demonstrate a long-term support and commitment to a political party. Behind this tendency there lies what has been called, depending of the theoretical perspective, "party identification" or "partisanship" (Bartle & Bellucci, 2014; Butler & Stokes, 1974).

Social-psychological approaches explain these predispositions in terms of group identification. According to expressive accounts, individuals perceive their political party as a social group to which they belong, and through which they partially define and express their social identity (Smith & Mackie, 2007). This "we feeling" often results in an enduring emotional attachment that explains that many partisans enjoy the victory of their side per se, "quite apart from the uses which the party might make of power" (Butler & Stokes, 1974, p. 37). This political identity is therefore rather stable and relatively immune to external events, but does not imply unconditional or blind loyalty to one's party. From a different approach,

instrumental perspectives explain partisanship as a rational choice of voters, one that is consistent with their issue positions and reexamined in the light of external events (Fiorina, 1981; MacKuen, Erikson, & Stimson, 1989). Although these permanently updated evaluations generate mobility in the direction and intensity of party preference, the dynamic is limited because newly acquired information is compared with prior knowledge, in a “summing up of considerations accumulated to date in the voter’s life” (Johnston, 2006, p. 333; see Fiorina, 1981).

Building on expressive and instrumental perspectives, this study introduces the concept of OP, understood as a quarrelsome, factitious, and degraded outgrowth of party identification. Obstinate partisans are a specific subgroup of partisans that remain completely indifferent to any short-term force, offering their parties a democratically dangerous “all-weather support” (see Bartle & Bellucci, 2014). Contrary to the democratic ideal of holding political power accountable, obstinate ones deprive their vote of any meaningful function, giving political actors free hands to seek their self-interest.

Although they are different concepts, we posit that party identification and OP are interrelated. First, extensive empirical evidence indicates that party identification is directly and strongly related to vote stability, which suggests partisan voters are comparatively less reactive to external events—including party performance or policy actions (Bartle & Bellucci, 2014; Converse, 1964). Second, and related to the above, strong partisans’ political views and attitudes tend to be stronger and more resistant to change, making persuasion, even in politically heterogeneous environments, less likely (Taber & Lodge, 2006). Finally, the affective component that connects a partisan to their party provides a special motivation to be consistent in their political attitudes and behaviors (see “affective consistency” in Sniderman & Bullock, 2004). All these forces pushing strong partisans toward opinion reinforcement give us reasons to argue for a theoretical and empirical connection between party identity and OP:

*H1: Strength of party identification is positively associated to obstinate partisanship (OP).*

### **Exposure to (Contentious) Discussion: Moderating and Polarizing Effects**

For the proponents of the deliberative theory, political talk is the most appropriate way to tackle public disputes and reach a rational consensus with a view to the common good (Cohen, 1989; Dahl, 1989). The basic assumption is that political talk provides opportunities to become aware of different opinions and perspectives, making it more likely for discussants to reconsider their views and shift their attitudes toward common ground (Cohen, 2007). Along these lines, research examining citizen-to-citizen political discussion has generally found positive effects on a range of prodemocratic outcomes, including perceptions of community, internal efficacy, or political participation, among many others (Burkhalter et al., 2002; Wellman et al., 2001).

Notwithstanding the above positive picture, the academic debate on the effects of political talk on attitudes and behaviors is far from over. As Wojcieszak and Price (2010) note, one research area that deserves further attention and clarification is the relationship between discussion disagreement and attitude change. Although deliberative theorists hope that political talk across lines of difference can help bring discussants together, a growing literature about biased processing suggests that this is not always the case

(Gastil et al., 2008; Taber & Lodge, 2006; Wojcieszak & Price, 2010). When exposed to disagreement, some discussants under specific circumstances will "dig in their heels" so that their initial attitudes become stronger in the direction of polarization (Festinger, Riecken, & Schachter, 1956; Taber & Lodge, 2006).

Empirical evidence on the issue provides mixed results, suggesting that both deliberative theory and confirmation bias each explain a different part of the puzzle. It seems reasonable that different discussion contexts (e.g., individuals' investment in the issues under discussion, ideological distance between discussants, attributes of the discussion) result in different attitudinal outcomes (Gastil et al., 2008; Taber & Lodge, 2006). For example, in a study examining the effects of online discussion disagreement on attitudes about sexual minority rights, Wojcieszak and Price (2010) found evidence of both polarization and moderation of prediscussion political positions. On the one hand, strong opponents of sexual minority rights increased their oppositional views after the discussions (polarization effect). On the other hand, strong supporters of gay and lesbian rights at the outset felt less favorable toward these minorities as a result of the exposure to other opinions (moderation effect).

Three different psychological mechanisms have been proposed to explain the sometimes-observed relationship between exposure to disagreement and attitude polarization (Taber & Lodge, 2006; Zaller, 1992). First, and according to the prior attitude effect, congenial arguments are usually perceived as stronger and more convincing than uncongenial or challenging information. Second, people tend to spend significant mental resources on scrutinizing—and often denigrating—arguments with which they disagree, while they usually accept agreeable arguments at face value. This has been called disconfirmation bias. Finally, when people are free to choose the content they want to be exposed to, the confirmation bias will make them prefer attitude-consistent information and avoid counter attitudinal messages—a phenomenon also called selective exposure. Although prior attitude effect and disconfirmation bias can be triggered in any discussion involving disagreement, face-to-face discussants frequently cannot filter out opposing arguments coming from discussion partners in spontaneous discussions—unless they decide not to talk to them again. In these cases, the confirmation bias will hardly work. Discussion in the online arena is different, because Internet users can easily seek for opinion-reinforcing discussion spaces and screen out opinion-challenging ones ("echo chamber" effect; see Iyengar & Hahn, 2009). In this highly personalized digital environment, selective exposure can more easily come into play.

### **Discussion Attributes and OP**

This study uses OP as a probe or pointer of political polarization. Following the above theoretical accounts, we expect different discussion attributes to differently affect individuals' level of OP (i.e., to move them toward either temperance or polarization). While partisanship (and probably also OP) is a relatively stable trait, even the more canonical expressive perspectives concede that its enduring nature "waned somewhat when, year after year, it presides over hard times or lacks effective leadership" (Green Palmquist, & Schickler, 1998, p. 986). Closer to the democratic ideal, instrumental approaches view partisanship as partially determined by short-term influences such as political and economic performance (MacKuen et al., 1989) or personal evaluations of the candidates (Garzia, 2011). In this study, we understand OP as a relatively stable individual attitude, subject to change as a result one's involvement with political discussion and reflection.

### ***Discussion Cognitive Elaboration***

When individuals are confronted with new information about their environment, they need to engage in intellectual effort to integrate the gained knowledge and, if appropriate, reorganize their existing cognitions (Perse, 1990). In the context of political talk, some participants strive to develop a coherent discourse, make reasoned replies to their discussion partners' considerations, and connect new information to their prior knowledge and experiences (Hively & Eveland, 2009; Petty, Briñol, & Priester, 2009). These intellectual strategies, collectively referred to as cognitive elaboration, have been theoretically and empirically connected to long-lasting and resistant attitude change (Petty et al., 2009). Based on these observations, we expect discussion cognitive elaboration to affect discussants' levels of OP. What is more difficult to predict is the direction of the change. Following deliberative theorists, it could be expected that cognitive efforts made during or after the discussion would moderate extreme positions, because participants would be trying to integrate others' point of view into their cognitive models. However, previous work on biased perception has found that this is not always the case, as discussants tend to allocate more intellectual resources to "denigrate or counter [contrary] arguments and bolster their prior convictions" (Taber & Lodge, 2006, p. 762). It could therefore be the case that these cognitive efforts would end up reinforcing prior attitudes (such as OP). Based on these conflicting accounts, we ask our first research question:

*RQ1: What is the relationship between discussion cognitive elaboration and OP?*

### ***Discussion Network Size and Discussion Disagreement***

For individual political attitudes to change, one should have the opportunity to come in contact with different information, ideas, and opinions. Some early findings from social comparison research fit these intuitive expectations, in the sense that deliberation tends to decrease within-group attitude variance and guide group opinion in the direction of the majority (see Gastil et al., 2008; Wojcieszac & Price, 2010). Under this theoretical framework, individuals' size of their discussion network and their frequency of exposure to disagreement should increase their familiarity with alternative, legitimate perspectives, and thus provide them with more balanced judgments (Wojcieszac & Price, 2010). However, as explained above, messages that question one's political attitudes—especially those connected to one's social identity—are more likely to activate perceptual biases (e.g., prior attitude effect and confirmation bias). Because of these conflicting theoretical and empirical accounts, we pose the following research questions:

*RQ2: What is the relationship between discussion network size and OP?*

*RQ3: What is the relationship between discussion disagreement and OP?*

### ***Offline and Online Political Discussion***

Until just a few decades ago, all forms of political discussion demanded face-to-face interaction, except in the rare cases when discussants talked about politics over the telephone. More recently,

technological developments in communication have opened new venues for political talk, in the context of online discussions. Interactive features of social media, news webs, blogs, and mobile messaging apps allow individuals to engage, at minimal cost, in synchronous or asynchronous discussions about current events and politics (Gil de Zúñiga, Ardèvol-Abreu, & Casero-Ripollés, 2019). Following the above theoretical considerations, we expect discussants to respond—either in the direction of moderation or polarization—to the ideological diversity of their discussion environment. In other words, what is important in our theoretical approach is whether individuals are locked in an "echo chamber" of political discussion, or their political conversation networks are inclusive of different perspectives. To explore these influences, and considering the conflicting findings regarding attitudinal responses to disagreement, we test (1) the main effect of offline and online discussion on OP, and (2) the potential interaction with our two indicators of discussion heterogeneity (discussion disagreement and network size):

*RQ4: What is the relationship between offline discussion and OP?*

*RQ5: What is the relationship between online discussion and OP?*

*RQ6: Does discussion disagreement moderate the effect of offline (RQ6a) and online (RQ6b) discussion frequency on OP?*

*RQ7: Does discussion network size moderate the effect of offline (RQ7a) and online (RQ7b) discussion frequency on OP?*

## **Method**

### **Sample**

The data used for this article come from a panel study conducted collaboratively between research groups based at Massey University (New Zealand) and—at that time—at the University of Vienna (Austria). We collected online survey data from 20 countries and two cities from Europe, the Americas, Asia, and South Africa (see the Appendix in Gil de Zúñiga, Ardèvol-Abreu, Diehl, Patiño, & Liu, 2019, for details). To deploy the surveys, researchers contracted Nielsen, a polling firm based in the United States that partners with companies providing opt-in panel respondents from all over the world. Nielsen generated samples at the country level whose characteristics mirrored those reported by official census agencies in at least three key demographic parameters. The first wave ( $W^1$ ) of the data was collected from September 14 to 24, 2015. For the second wave ( $W^2$ ), the same participants were asked to reanswer the questionnaire between March 22 and April 1, 2016.

The three questions of the OP scale were asked only in the second wave of the survey in three of these 22 countries: Spain, United States, and New Zealand. We chose these specific countries because we sought to examine the novel construct in a culturally diverse sample, which increases the external validity of the study. At the same time, we needed to pinpoint certain social and political homogeneity, especially in terms of democratic culture, freedom of expression and of the press, in a multiparty—or at least biparty—

political system. The three selected countries are well-established Western democracies from three different continents, which may serve to provide a benchmark for future comparisons with other contexts.

The Democracy Index of 2015 (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2016) rates all three countries as "full democracies," among the first 20 positions in the full list of 165 analyzed countries. In addition, citizens of the three countries live in "free media environments" (Dunham, 2016) and are also free to engage in open political debate. In  $W^1$ , overall cooperation rate averaged 77% across the 22-country sample (American Association for Public Opinion Research, 2016). For this study, the total sample size was 3,337 respondents in  $W^1$ : Spain ( $n^1 = 1,019$ ); United States ( $n^1 = 1,161$ ); New Zealand ( $n^1 = 1,157$ ). The retention rate for  $W^2$  was 41.83%, for an overall sample size of 1,396 respondents: Spain ( $n^2 = 302$ ); United States ( $n^2 = 489$ ); New Zealand ( $n^2 = 605$ ).

### **Variables of Interest**

#### *Obstinate Partisanship*

Our dependent variable comprises attitudes of blind passion and unconditional fidelity to a certain political party. Because voters in democracies are free to choose the criteria by which they evaluate party performance, our item wording does not prime any external standard (i.e., the media, approval ratings in polls) that respondents could use as a benchmark. The statements we used allow for respondents' own standards to emerge: "I will always vote for the same political party, no matter what they do," "I support my political party, even when they make a mistake," and "being loyal to my party is important, both when they are doing well and not so well" (three items rated on a 7-point scale, 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*;  $W^2$  Cronbach's  $\alpha = .89$ ,  $M = 3.18$ ,  $SD = 1.58$ ). Among all respondents, 50.7% scored 3 or less on the OP scale (3 = *partially disagree*); 38% ranged >3 to  $\leq 5$  (5 = *partially agree*); 7.6% ranged >5 to  $\leq 6$  (6 = *agree with the statements*); and 3.7% scored more than 6.

#### *Discussion Disagreement*

This index measures individuals' relative frequency of political talk with non-like-minded individuals (see Gil de Zúñiga, 2017). We created a subtractive index of relative exposure to political disagreement, in which participants' frequency of discussion with "people whose political views are similar to [theirs]" was subtracted from the frequency of discussion with "people whose political views are different from [theirs]" (1 = *never* to 7 = *all the time*). We then recoded the result variable to a 7-point scale, where 1 represents respondents with the lowest proportion of disagreement in their political discussion diet, and 7 represents those with the highest ( $W^1 M = 2.78$ ,  $SD = 0.58$ ).

#### *Online Discussion*

Building on previous measures of the construct (Cho et al., 2009), we asked respondents how often (1 = *never* to 7 = *all the time*) they talk about politics or public affairs online with "spouse or partner," "family, relatives, or friends," "acquaintances," and "strangers" (four items averaged scale;  $W^1$  Cronbach's  $\alpha = .88$ ,  $M = 2.16$ ,  $SD = 1.42$ ).

*Offline Discussion*

We asked respondents the same question as for online discussion frequency, but this time referring to discussions "face-to-face or over the phone" (four items averaged scale,  $W^1$  Cronbach's  $\alpha = .80$ ,  $M = 3.17$ ,  $SD = 1.32$ ).

*Discussion Elaboration*

This variable measures the ability of political discussion to stimulate thinking at the individual level (see Hively & Eveland, 2009). On a 7-point scale, respondents indicated their level of agreement with the following assessments: "I often find myself thinking about my conversations with other people about politics and public affairs after the discussion has ended," and "I often think about how my conversations with other people about politics and public affairs relate to other things I know" ( $W^1$  Spearman-Brown  $\rho = .93$ ,  $M = 3.50$ ,  $SD = 1.74$ ).

*Discussion Network Size*

We asked respondents to report on the number of people they talked to about politics or public affairs, on and offline, during the preceding month (two open-ended questions; see Gil de Zúñiga, Ardèvol-Abreu, & Casero-Ripollés, 2019). The resulting averaged scale was highly skewed ( $W^1$   $M = 5.85$ ,  $Mdn = 2.00$ ,  $SD = 22.13$ , skewness = 14.79). To minimize the effect of this interference, we transformed the variable by using the natural logarithm ( $W^1$   $M = .43$ ,  $Mdn = .35$ ,  $SD = .41$ , skewness = 1.09).

*Strength of Ideological Identification*

We used this aggregate measure as a proxy for strength of party identification. While both concepts are not equivalent, highly ideologized respondents are more likely to be strong partisans, and the reversed. We asked respondents to indicate their ideological orientation (0 = *strong conservative/right-leaning* to 10 = *strong liberal/left-leaning*) with regard to "political issues" (e.g., government size or functioning), "economic issues" (e.g., taxation policies, trade), and "social issues" (e.g., gun control, abortion). Each item was then folded into a 6-point scale (from 0 = *no ideological identification* to 6 = *strong ideological identification*, either with conservatives/right-wingers or liberals/left-wingers). The final aggregate measure was rescaled to 0–10 ( $W^1$  Cronbach's  $\alpha = .91$ ,  $M = 3.81$ ,  $SD = 2.90$ ).

**Control Variables**

Our models included two measures of news media uses as control variables: Internet news use ( $W^1$  Cronbach's  $\alpha = .79$ ,  $M = 4.07$ ,  $SD = 1.43$ ) and traditional news use ( $W^1$  Cronbach's  $\alpha = .57$ ,  $M = 4.53$ ,  $SD = 1.32$ ). We also expected different forms of social trust to have cross-influences with some of the key variables of the study. For example, individuals with extreme positions on an issue (and probably obstinate partisans as well) tend to believe that the mass media is biased against their side, and are therefore more likely to report lower levels of media trust regarding the coverage of that issue (Gunther, 1988). Similarly, political trust exerts a positive effect on voters' feelings about incumbents and parties (Hetherington, 1998).



To isolate these confounding effects, our models included measures of media trust ( $W^1$  Cronbach's  $\alpha = .72$ ,  $M = 3.28$ ,  $SD = 1.06$ ) and political trust ( $W^1$  Cronbach's  $\alpha = .86$ ,  $M = 3.11$ ,  $SD = 1.28$ ).

We also included a set of sociopolitical antecedents that have been frequently associated to various political attitudes, orientations, and behaviors: political knowledge ( $W^1$  Cronbach's  $\alpha = .48$ ,  $M = 1.61$ ,  $SD = 0.88$ ), and internal political efficacy ( $W^1$  Spearman-Brown coefficient =  $.66$ ,  $M = 3.60$ ,  $SD = 1.50$ ). Finally, we also included five demographic control variables: age ( $M = 47.00$  years,  $SD = 16.21$ ), gender (55.7% female), race (84.8% Whites), income self-perception (from 1 = *people who are the least well off in society* to 10 = *people who are the most well off*;  $M = 5.87$ ,  $SD = 1.83$ ), and education (1 = *elementary school* to 6 = *graduate school or higher*;  $M = 4.11$ ,  $Mdn = \text{some college}$ ).

### Results

OP showed a very good internal consistency: whole sample  $W^2$  Cronbach's  $\alpha = .89$ ; Spain =  $.93$ , United States =  $.89$ , New Zealand =  $.86$ . However, the equivalence of the measure between countries cannot be ascertained until invariance tests are performed. This can be achieved by evaluating the model fit of three increasingly restrictive multigroup confirmatory factor analyses (CFAs) testing for configural, metric, and scalar invariance (Byrne, 2012).<sup>2</sup> In the first model—referred to as baseline—the only constraint is that the items are associated with the same latent variable across countries (configural). Building on configural invariance, metric invariance is attained if the factor loadings of the manifest items are equivalent across countries. Achieving metric invariance indicates that the relationships between the manifest items and the latent factor are the same across groups (i.e., the construct has the same meaning across countries). Finally, and building on metric invariance, scalar invariance requires the equivalence of items' intercepts (Byrne, 2012). Achieving scalar invariance is necessary for making meaningful mean-level comparisons, which is beyond the scope of this study.

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<sup>2</sup> CFAs were conducted using Mplus (Version 8.0).

**Table 1. Zero Order Correlations Among Independent ( $W^1$ ) and Dependent ( $W^2$ ) Variables in the Study.**

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	
1. Age	-																		
2. Gender (female)	-.14 <sup>c</sup>	-																	
3. Race (White)	.16 <sup>c</sup>	.02	-																
4. Income	-.01	-.07 <sup>c</sup>	-.02	-															
5. Education	-.01	-.02	-.06 <sup>c</sup>	.26 <sup>c</sup>	-														
6. Strength of ideology	.07 <sup>c</sup>	-.04 <sup>b</sup>	.02	.07 <sup>c</sup>	.09 <sup>c</sup>	-													
7. Political knowledge	.20 <sup>c</sup>	-.30 <sup>c</sup>	.05 <sup>b</sup>	.12 <sup>c</sup>	.21 <sup>c</sup>	.12 <sup>c</sup>	-												
8. Internal efficacy	.07 <sup>c</sup>	-.19 <sup>c</sup>	-.01	.21 <sup>c</sup>	.19 <sup>c</sup>	.21 <sup>c</sup>	.28 <sup>c</sup>	-											
9. Political trust	.13 <sup>c</sup>	-.06 <sup>c</sup>	-.08 <sup>c</sup>	.29 <sup>c</sup>	.15 <sup>c</sup>	-.04 <sup>a</sup>	.10 <sup>c</sup>	.16 <sup>c</sup>	-										
10. Media trust	-.22 <sup>c</sup>	.03	-.07 <sup>c</sup>	.11 <sup>c</sup>	-.05 <sup>b</sup>	-.03	-.05 <sup>b</sup>	.11 <sup>c</sup>	.32 <sup>c</sup>	-									
11. Traditional news use	.29 <sup>c</sup>	-.09 <sup>c</sup>	.07 <sup>c</sup>	.16 <sup>c</sup>	.06 <sup>c</sup>	.03 <sup>c</sup>	.18 <sup>c</sup>	.18 <sup>c</sup>	.19 <sup>c</sup>	.16 <sup>c</sup>	-								
12. Internet news use	-.36 <sup>c</sup>	.09 <sup>c</sup>	-.08 <sup>c</sup>	.05 <sup>b</sup>	.02	.01	-.03	.13 <sup>c</sup>	.01	.38 <sup>c</sup>	.16 <sup>c</sup>	-							
13. Discussion network size	-.11 <sup>c</sup>	-.10 <sup>c</sup>	.02	.08 <sup>c</sup>	.09 <sup>c</sup>	.17 <sup>c</sup>	.22 <sup>c</sup>	.35 <sup>c</sup>	-.05 <sup>b</sup>	.15 <sup>c</sup>	.16 <sup>c</sup>	.33 <sup>c</sup>	-						
14. Discussion elaboration	-.12 <sup>c</sup>	-.07 <sup>c</sup>	-.01	.08 <sup>c</sup>	.09 <sup>c</sup>	.17 <sup>c</sup>	.19 <sup>c</sup>	.39 <sup>c</sup>	.02	.20 <sup>c</sup>	.14 <sup>c</sup>	.31 <sup>c</sup>	.52 <sup>c</sup>	-					
15. Offline discussion	-.04 <sup>a</sup>	-.08 <sup>c</sup>	.03	.16 <sup>c</sup>	.08 <sup>c</sup>	.19 <sup>c</sup>	.21 <sup>c</sup>	.39 <sup>c</sup>	.03	.21 <sup>c</sup>	.29 <sup>c</sup>	.28 <sup>c</sup>	.58 <sup>c</sup>	.60 <sup>c</sup>	-				
16. Online discussion	-.20 <sup>c</sup>	-.06 <sup>c</sup>	-.04 <sup>b</sup>	.11 <sup>c</sup>	.05 <sup>b</sup>	.11 <sup>c</sup>	.07 <sup>c</sup>	.31 <sup>c</sup>	.01	.25 <sup>c</sup>	.13 <sup>c</sup>	.43 <sup>c</sup>	.55 <sup>c</sup>	.49 <sup>c</sup>	.55 <sup>c</sup>	-			
17. Discussion disagreement	-.05 <sup>b</sup>	-.05 <sup>b</sup>	-.02	-.03	-.13 <sup>c</sup>	-.19 <sup>c</sup>	-.09 <sup>c</sup>	-.09 <sup>c</sup>	-.03	-.02	.01	-.03	-.12 <sup>c</sup>	-.14 <sup>c</sup>	-.14 <sup>c</sup>	-.06 <sup>b</sup>	-		
18. Obstinate partisanship $W^2$	.08 <sup>b</sup>	-.01	-.04	.03	-.04	.14 <sup>c</sup>	-.05	.02	.20 <sup>c</sup>	.15 <sup>c</sup>	.07 <sup>a</sup>	.02	-.10	-.01	-.06 <sup>a</sup>	.01	-.14 <sup>c</sup>	-	

Note. Cell entries are zero-order correlation coefficients ( $n = 1,313$ ). <sup>a</sup> $p < .05$ ; <sup>b</sup> $p < .01$ ; <sup>c</sup> $p < .001$ .

Tables 2 and 3 summarize the results of these nested CFAs. Since the configural model was just identified (27 parameters and 0 degrees of freedom), model fit could not be assessed. However, models with zero degrees of freedom can still be compared with other nested models, considering the value of zero for chi-square and zero for the degrees of freedom (see Muthen, 2014).

**Table 2. Factor Loadings for the Configural Model Across Countries.**

Items	Spain	United States	New Zealand
Always vote for the same party	.933	.877	.839
Always support my party	.946	.924	.915
Being loyal my party is important	.940	.910	.903

Note. Overall sample:  $n = 1,436$ . Spain:  $n = 302$ ; United States:  $n = 528$ ; New Zealand:  $n = 606$ . Coefficients are standardized.

As reported in Table 3, metric invariance model indicates good fit to the data, showing no differences with the fit of the configural model (chi-square difference test),  $\chi^2(4, n = 1,313) = 6.33, p = .18$ . This result is suggestive of factor loadings invariance across countries. Scalar invariance, however, was not attained, which prevents us from making mean-level comparisons between countries. As the chi-square difference test indicates, the scalar model has a significantly poorer fit than the metric,  $\chi^2(4, n = 1,313) = 56.91, p < .001$ .

**Table 3. Measurement Invariance Tests—Model Fit Indices.**

	$\chi^2 (df)$	$\Delta\chi^2 (\Delta df)$	$p$	RMSEA	AIC	BIC	CFI	TLI
Configural	- (0)	-		-	13,069.70	13,209.56	-	-
Metric	6.33 (4)	6.33 (4)	.18	.036	13,069.30	13,188.74	.997	.993
Scalar	63.82 (8)	56.91 (4)	<.001	.126	13,134.34	13,232.77	.930	.921

To further validate our measure of OP, we assessed the scale in terms of convergent and discriminant validity. We first estimated the relationship between the measure of OP and the measure of the separate but related concept of strength of ideology (see Campbell & Fiske, 1959). Table 4 shows the multitrait-multimethod correlation matrix of OP (items H1–H3) and strength of ideology measures (items I4–I6). Figures show a consistent pattern of lower values for discriminant coefficients (roman type) than for convergent coefficients (bold type), which can be interpreted as supportive evidence of construct validity (Campbell & Fiske, 1959; Raykov, 2011). Second, we confirmed the statistical significance of these differences between discriminant and convergent correlation point estimates with the use of latent variable modeling methods (see Raykov, 2011, Model 4). With this factor analytical approach, we calculated a confident interval for mean difference in convergent and discriminant validity coefficients,  $M = .636, 95\% \text{ CI } [.598, .674]$ . This means that in the population, the true difference between convergent and discriminant validity coefficients (in favor of the former) ranges between .598 and .674.

**Table 4. Multitrait–Multimethod Matrix Obstinate Partisanship/Strength of Ideology.**

Variables	H1	H2	H3	I4	I5	I6
H1. Always vote for . . .	–					
H2. Always support my party . . .	<b>.71<sup>c</sup></b>	–				
H3. "Being loyal to 'my' . . . ."	<b>.67<sup>c</sup></b>	<b>.81<sup>c</sup></b>	–			
I4. "On political issues . . ."	.15 <sup>c</sup>	.19 <sup>c</sup>	.18 <sup>c</sup>	–		
I5. "On economic issues . . ."	.11 <sup>c</sup>	.15 <sup>c</sup>	.13 <sup>c</sup>	<b>.83<sup>c</sup></b>	–	
I6. "On social issues . . ."	.10 <sup>b</sup>	.12 <sup>c</sup>	.11 <sup>c</sup>	<b>.83<sup>c</sup></b>	<b>.78<sup>c</sup></b>	–

*Note.* Items H1–H3 comprise the measure of obstinacy, whereas I4–I6 comprise the measure of strength of ideology. Convergent validity coefficients are in boldface, and discriminant coefficients are in roman type. Cell entries are zero-order correlation coefficients ( $n = 1,291$ ). <sup>c</sup> $p < .001$ .

H1 predicted a positive effect of strength of party identification on OP. We found empirical support for H1. The first lagged regression model<sup>3</sup> in Table 5 (first column) shows a direct, positive influence of strength of ideology (used as a proxy measure) on OP ( $\beta = .148, p < .001$ ). Within this first regression analysis, the sociopolitical antecedents block explained the most part of variance in obstinacy ( $\Delta R^2 = .071, p < .001$ ), followed by discussion attributes I ( $\Delta R^2 = .033, p < .001$ ), demographics ( $\Delta R^2 = .014, p < .01$ ), and discussion attributes II ( $\Delta R^2 = .007, p < .05$ ). The third block, containing news use variables, did not reach statistical significance ( $\Delta R^2 = .001, p = .89$ ). Within the block of sociopolitical controls, both trust variables (political trust,  $\beta = .157, p < .001$ ; and media trust,  $\beta = .120, p < .001$ ) were positively and strongly related to obstinacy. Within the first block of demographic variables, age was a positive predictor of obstinacy ( $\beta = .090, p < .01$ ), whereas education level was negatively related to the dependent variable ( $\beta = .062, p < .05$ ). That is, older individuals and those with lower education tend to show higher levels of OP.

<sup>3</sup> Regression analyses were performed using SPSS Statistics 21.0, with the support of the PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2013) to test moderation effects.

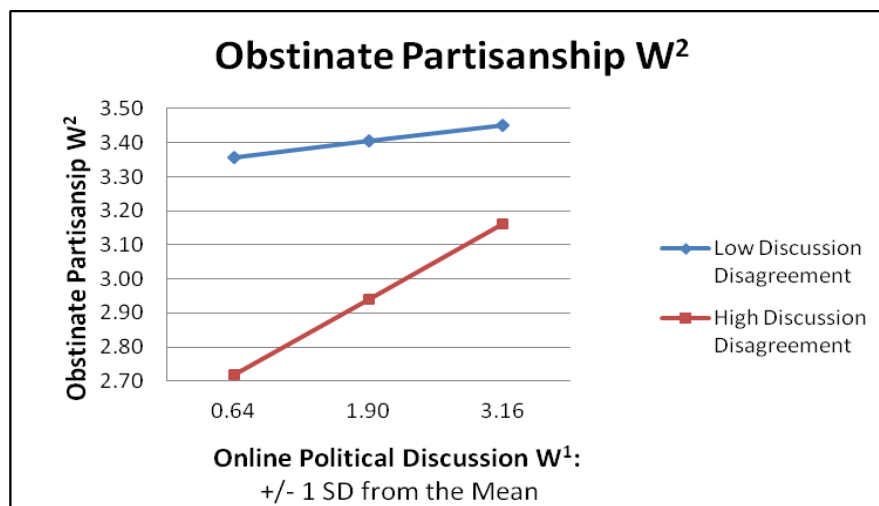
**Table 5. Lagged Regression Models Predicting Obstinate Partisanship**

Variable	Obstinate Partisanship $W^2$		
	Interaction effects	Without interactions	
		Disagreement	Network size
<i>Block 1: Demographics <math>W^1</math></i>			
Age	.090**	.093**	.093**
Gender (1 = female)	-.029	-.029	-.029
Race (1 = White)	-.037	-.034	-.037
Income	-.011	-.010	-.010
Education	-.062*	-.060*	-.063*
$\Delta R^2$	1.4%	1.4%	1.4%
<i>Block 2: Sociopolitical antecedents <math>W^1</math></i>			
Strength of ideology	.148***	.148***	.148***
Political knowledge	-.050	-.049	-.050
Internal political efficacy	.010	.006	.010
Political trust	.157***	.155***	.155***
Media trust	.120***	.120***	.121***
$\Delta R^2$	7.1%	7.1%	7.1%
<i>Block 3: News media uses <math>W^1</math></i>			
Traditional news media use	.017	.014	.012
Internet use for news	.025	.025	.025
$\Delta R^2$	0.1%	0.1%	0.1%
<i>Block 4: Discussion attributes I <math>W^1</math></i>			
Discussion network size	-.158***	-.157***	-.046
Discussion elaboration	.006	.006	-.001
Discussion disagreement	-.133***	-.224**	-.133***
$\Delta R^2$	3.3%	3.3%	3.3%
<i>Block 5: Discussion attributes II <math>W^1</math></i>			
Offline political discussion	-.100**	-.092	-.130*
Online political discussion	.074*	-.192	.189**
$\Delta R^2$	0.7%	0.7%	0.7%
<i>Block 6: Moderation effects <math>W^1</math></i>			
Offline Discussion $\times$ Disagreement	- - -	-.015	- - -
Online Discussion $\times$ Disagreement	- - -	.284*	- - -
Offline Discussion $\times$ Network Size	- - -	- - -	.060
Online Discussion $\times$ Network Size	- - -	- - -	-.245*
$\Delta R^2$	- - -	0.4%	- 0.6%
Total $R^2$	12.5%	12.9%	13.1%

Note. Cell entries are beta coefficients from a lagged ordinary least squares regression. To maximize statistical power, missing values on control variables (except gender and race) have been replaced with the mean. Sample size = 1,110. \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .10$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$  (two-tailed).  $W^1$  = Wave 1,  $W^2$  = Wave 2.

These overall outcomes become more meaningful when we account for moderating effects, as addressed in RQ6 and RQ7 (second and third columns in Table 5, plots in Figures 1 and 2). Research Question 6 asked about the possible moderating influence of discussion disagreement on the relationships between offline (RQ6a) and online discussion (RQ6b; predictors) and OP (outcome variable). We found that exposure to disagreement does not moderate the effect of face-to-face political discussions on obstinacy (second model in Table 5;  $\beta = -.015, p = .93$ ). Thus, offline political discussions, regardless of their level of disagreement, seem to have a negative effect on the development of OP (i.e., frequent offline discussants tend to reduce their unconditional loyalty to their party).

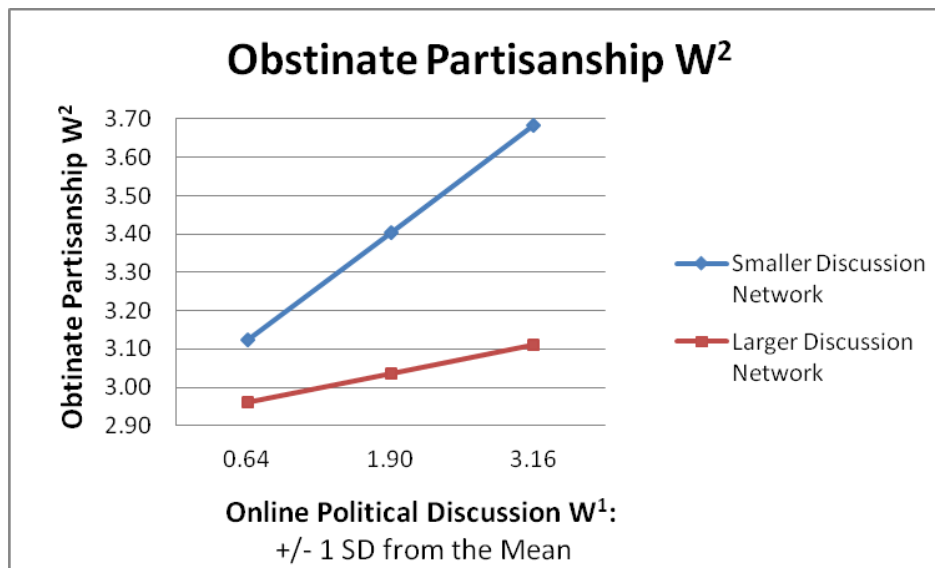
Looking at the interaction in the online arena (RQ6b), we did find a moderating role of discussion disagreement on the relationship between Internet discussion and OP ( $\beta = .284, p < .05$ ). However, the effect is not as straightforward as might be expected. As Figure 1 shows, the positive, direct effect of online discussion on obstinacy is rather small for those with a lower exposure to disagreement. That is, those who primarily discuss politics with people they agree with will show higher base levels of obstinacy, and increasing their frequency of online discussion will barely raise their already high obstinate attitude. However, for those who encounter high levels of disagreement in their discussions, online political talk has a markedly positive effect: the more often they discuss online, the more obstinate they become.



**Figure 1. Interaction between online political discussion and exposure to disagreement ( $W^1$ ) on obstinate partisanship ( $W^2$ ). The  $R^2$  increase due to interaction is statistically significant:  $F(1, 1091) = 4.81, p < .05, n = 1,110$ . Interaction estimated from model in Table 3. Values for the moderator are the mean and plus/minus one standard deviation from the mean.**

Complementary to RQ6, RQ7 aimed to explore the moderating effect of discussion network size on the relationships offline discussion—obstinacy (RQ7a), and online discussion—obstinacy (RQ7b). As in the previous set of research questions, we found a moderating effect of network size only for online (third model in Table 5;  $\beta = -.245, p < .05$ ), but not for offline ( $\beta = .060, p = .63$ ) discussions. Thus, similarly as above, offline discussions contribute to reducing polarization (i.e., to toning down obstinate attitudes), irrespective of the size of the discussion network. In online environments, however, the effect of political discussion on

obstinacy is conditioned by discussion network size (RQ7b; see Figure 2). For those respondents with a smaller discussion network, talking politics on the Internet has a strong, direct effect on obstinacy: The more they discuss, the higher their levels of OP. For this group of respondents, this finding may be of particular concern, as they already show higher base levels of obstinacy (Figure 2). For the other group of respondents (those with a larger discussion network), the relationship between online discussion and OP is also positive (the more they discuss online, the higher they score on obstinacy in time), although the strength of the effect is much smaller.



**Figure 2. Interaction between online political discussion and size of the discussion network ( $W^1$ ) on obstinate partisanship ( $W^2$ ). The  $R^2$  increase due to interaction is statistically significant:  $F(1, 1091) = 6.88, p < .01, n = 1,110$ . Interaction estimated from model in Table 3. Values for the moderator are the mean and plus/minus one standard deviation from the mean.**

Research Question 1 asked about the effect of discussion elaboration on OP. Within the first block of discussion attributes variables (see Table 5), discussion cognitive elaboration showed no meaningful effects on the dependent variable ( $\beta = -.006, p = .87$ ). Differently, we did find a direct, negative influence of discussion network size on OP (RQ2;  $\beta = -.158, p < .001$ ). Also, in Table 5, a similar negative effect on obstinacy was found for discussion disagreement (RQ3;  $\beta = -.133, p < .001$ ). That is, respondents discussing politics with a larger number of others, and more frequently exposed to disagreement during their conversations (in  $W^1$ ) tend to show lower levels OP (in  $W^2$ ).

With respect to RQ4 and RQ5, we found the effects of offline and online discussion on OP to be opposite in sign (see Table 5, fifth block): Offline political discussion has a negative influence on obstinacy ( $\beta = -.100, p < .01$ ), and the effect of online discussion on obstinacy is positive ( $\beta = .074, p < .05$ ). In other words, respondents who more frequently talk about politics face-to-face tend to moderate the extreme attitudes that characterize OP, while those who regularly discuss public affairs via online media are more likely to “dig in their heels” and become more extreme in their positions.

### Discussion

Dialogue between people representing different interests, views, and opinions is credited by many as intrinsic to democracy. Proponents of deliberative theories argue that political talk should be the main tool to resolve deep social conflicts along ideological, cultural, or religious cleavages, and thereby prevent political polarization (Cohen, 1989; Dahl, 1989). As research on biased perception indicates, however, not all is good about political discussion. Exposure to disagreement—for certain individuals and under certain conditions—can lead to attitude change in the opposite direction than expected. Put differently, discussants can "dig in their heels" and shift their attitudes in the direction of strengthening prior beliefs, resulting in polarization (Gastil et al., 2008; Zaller, 1992).

In this study, we introduce the concept of OP as an indicator of polarization. Building on expressive and instrumental approaches to partisanship, we conceptualize OP as a negative drift of the feelings of party identification. Our results indicate that the construct has the same meaning to the respondents across countries as different as Spain, the United States, and New Zealand. According to our theoretical perspective, obstinate partisans tend to simply disregard their party performance as a benchmark to guide their vote. The issue is no longer that obstinate individuals use partisan heuristics to evaluate party candidates, or that they distort new political information to avoid any threat to their partisan identity (Taber & Lodge, 2006). Thus, even though political obstinates may consider that their party is performing badly, making mistakes, or not doing well, they will remain loyal and not change their vote.

Another contribution of the study is the description of the distinct but complementary nature of the concepts of partisanship and OP. As convergent and discriminant validity tests confirm, these two concepts are theoretically and empirically related, but not equivalent. Obstinate partisans are necessarily strong partisans, but not all those showing high levels of partisanship are automatically obstinate partisans. Thus, OP may serve as a predictor of how different persons (including strong partisans) will respond to external events related to political parties and leaders. Partisans with low levels of OP will be more likely to reevaluate and adjust their party preferences according to external events (e.g., party and candidate issue positions, economic and political performance), as instrumental approaches to partisanship suggest. Conversely, and more in line with expressive perspectives, partisans that also score high on OP will be more likely to be unconditionally loyal and essentially immune to any external event.

Our results also shed some light on the important question of which factors determine an obstinate attitude, providing us with some hints on how to counter their negative effects in the interest of democracy. We found that different discussion attributes affect OP differently, which makes us believe that both deliberative theorists and researchers on confirmation bias provide different pieces of the puzzle of the effects of exposure to disagreement. First, we found that discussion cognitive elaboration has no effect on obstinacy. Because prior research indicates that cognitive elaboration is an antecedent of attitude change (Petty et al., 2009; Taber & Lodge, 2006), we suspect that this absence of aggregate effects of cognitive elaboration is concealing individual attitude change in both directions. In other words, depending on individual and contextual factors, discussion cognitive elaboration could lead to either increases or decreases in obstinacy. Previous, more general findings on the effects of cognitive elaboration on attitude change offer some support for this interpretation. For example, according to Petty and Cacioppo's (1986) elaboration likelihood model, extensive issue or argument cognitive



processing can be conducive to either persuasion (if the received messages evoke positive thoughts) or resistance (if the messages elicit counter-arguing; see also Petty et al., 2009).

Secondly, and consistent with the expectations of deliberative theory, we found an overall negative effect of both discussion network size and exposure to disagreement on OP. This means that those with larger and ideologically diverse discussion networks are more likely to critically examine the performance of political parties and use their vote as a means of rewarding or punishing them at the ballot box. On the contrary, people with smaller and like-minded political discussion networks tend to show a more intense obstinate attitude, remaining loyal to their political parties. These findings, however, do not preclude the possibility that biased processing occurs in large and ideologically diverse discussion networks—at least for some people or under certain circumstances. For example, the emotional investment of the discussants in the topic, the perceived democratic quality of the discussion, or the strength of discussion network ties could moderate these relationships and determine different outcomes for different groups or in different situations. Further research should explore possible indirect and conditional effects of network size and disagreement on obstinacy.

Finally, the direct effects of offline and online discussion on OP are opposite in sign. Thus, offline discussion seems to have an overall beneficial influence on obstinacy, meaning that those who discuss politics face-to-face on a frequent basis tend to score lower on OP. The same cannot be said for online talk. Our findings suggest that those who frequently talk about politics on the Internet will ultimately increase their OP levels. A number of reasons could explain these opposing effects of offline versus online discussion on obstinacy, but we shall attempt a theoretical justification. Some scholars have raised concerns about the (frequently low) quality and (not always) democratic nature of political talk in the online arena (Graham & Wright, 2014; Noveck, 2000). Informal political talk in online forums, blogs, and social media is frequently driven by emotions, and it is not uncommon that it uses low levels of argumentation and underdeveloped opinions (Stromer-Galley, 2014). Not only that, Internet-based discussions often fail to adhere to rules of etiquette, such as showing respect for different opinions, listening to others, or refraining from ad hominem attacks (Stromer-Galley, 2014; see also Papacharissi, 2002). When discussions do not meet the principles of democracy and mutual respect, persuasion is less likely to occur, and discussants tend to buttress their prediscussion attitudes (i.e., they polarize their views; Gastil et al., 2008). Differently, the actual physical presence in face-to-face discussions may reduce psychological distances and increase the possibilities that discussion develops in more cordial and democratic ways, thus contributing to a persuasion-friendly context.

These negative findings for online discussion must, however, be nuanced in light of the interaction effects of discussion disagreement and network size. We should first note that in both interaction models, exposure to different ideas and large discussion networks is more beneficial—in terms of subsequent levels of OP—than the confinement in small, ideologically homogeneous discussion groups. In other words, for individuals who use the Internet to discuss politics, no matter how frequently, the more they are exposed to disagreement and the larger their discussion networks, the less intense their obstinate attitude will tend to be in time. Moreover, it should be pointed out that individual levels of OP tend to increase with online discussion frequency, even in the presence of large discussion networks, or—even more intensely—high disagreement. These findings suggest that when it comes to preventing the development of OP, it would be advisable to discuss politics online only in small doses, and in politically heterogeneous and large networks. In line with previous findings, these

results indicate that frequently discussing politics online within "echo chambers" of ideological homogeneity hampers the development of a critically engaged, cohesive society.

Political discussion attributes seem to be important, but not exclusive, antecedents of OP. An important question considering this finding is how OP attitudes develop. We believe that expressive partisanship is the foundation on which OP is built, and our results provide support for this assumption. But the process through which a political partisan degenerates into an obstinate partisan may be complicated and prolonged. We encourage future multilevel studies to examine social and cultural influences (e.g., media and educational systems, type of governance and institutional frameworks, religious and socioeconomic cleavages) that may hinder or favor the development of OP. At the individual level, future research should also explore personality (e.g., agreeableness, openness) and cognitive traits (e.g., perspective taking, cognitive ability) that may be associated with OP.

Another potentially fruitful avenue for future research could focus on the associations between OP and trust in institutional actors (see Gil de Zúñiga, Ardèvol-Abreu, Diehl, et al., 2019). Following previous research, we believe obstinate partisans who identify with "mainstream" parties will be more likely to develop positive attitudes toward the political system overall, although this may be different for obstinate supporters of "antisystem" and "outsider" parties (Söderlund & Kestilä-Kekkonen, 2009). Similarly, further research could examine whether the positive relationship found in this study between media trust and OP relates to selective exposure mechanisms. Obstinate partisans may select ideologically consistent news sources and show increased trust not in "the media," but in "their" (biased) media (Iyengar & Hahn, 2009).

The findings of this study should be interpreted in the light of its limitations. The three survey questions for our measure of OP were only included in the second wave of the study. This forced us to test the effects of political discussion in time base using lagged regression models, which is more appropriate than a cross-sectional approach. However, the lack of a measure of previous levels of obstinacy ( $W^1$ ) prevents us from taking full advantage of raw change score analysis, baseline-adjusted change score analysis, or autoregressive model analysis, which are better suited to address causal relationships. In a related vein, political discussion attributes may be considered as either antecedents or outcomes of individual levels of OP. Considering OP as a "structural characteristic" of the individual or a more dynamic "outcome attitude" has empirical consequences concerning the inclusion of OP as an independent or dependent variable (Cho et al., 2009; McLeod, Kosicki, & McLeod, 2009). The relationship between political discussion and OP is likely to be reciprocally influential, OP being both a cause and effect of discussion attributes. This remains an open question for future research.

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