

# Cross-Cutting Exposure

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*Cross-cutting exposure (CCE) denotes encounters with counter-attitudinal viewpoints, offering a potential solution to societal polarization by affecting political opinions and engagement. Despite its theoretical importance for enhancing critical thinking and political knowledge, empirical findings on its effects are inconsistent, with studies indicating both negative and positive outcomes of CCE. Measurement methods vary, including self-report and network analysis. CCE's contradicting effects—ranging from affective polarization to increased political ambivalence—underscore the need for further research to understand and harness its potential for promoting democratic engagement.*

*Cross-Cutting Exposure; Political Disagreement; Political Discourse; Political Polarization; Political Participation*

Cross-cutting exposure (CCE) denotes the experience of encountering differing viewpoints within communication environments (Matthes et al., 2019). With its potential to influence political opinions, tolerance, and participation (Mutz, 2006; Wojcieszak & Rojas, 2011), this phenomenon is recognized as a potential solution to the escalating polarization in Western democracies (Sunstein, 2009). Despite its democratic significance, our understanding of CCE is complicated by conceptual and operational disagreements (Lupton & Thornton, 2017), leading to inconsistent findings across studies (Kobilke, 2023). This entry delves into the scholarly debates surrounding CCE, with a focus on its measurements, antecedents, effects, and the inconsistencies within the field.

### **Democratic relevance of CCE**

Democratic theories such as deliberation theory value CCE as crucial for communal coexistence because it is believed to enhance critical thinking, political knowledge, and trust (Gutmann & Thompson, 1996). Given the importance of political knowledge and efficacy in catalyzing political participation, CCE is often regarded as a trigger for further political discussions and engagement (Matthes et al., 2019).

Despite these theoretical benefits, empirical studies frequently fail to confirm the positive effects of CCE. For example, research by Mutz (2006) demonstrated a negative relationship between CCE and political participation, raising questions about the advisability of fostering exchanges between opposing political factions in contexts where political engagement is already decreasing (Gutmann & Thompson, 1996, p. 44). In subsequent years, scholars critically examined and reevaluated Mutz's position, leading to contradictory results (Lee et al., 2015). To date, the field remains divided on the effects of CCE (Matthes et al., 2019).

The advent of the internet and social media has further added complexity to our understanding of CCE (Min & Wohn, 2018). These platforms have broadened access to diverse information sources, potentially enabling individuals to encounter a wider range of perspectives (Zerback & Kobilke, 2022). However, concerns about echo chambers and filter bubbles have been raised (Sunstein, 2009), suggesting that significant portions of the population inhabit self-reinforcing information environments that limit their exposure to opposing viewpoints. Yet, due to limited empirical evidence, the claim that echo chambers and filter bubbles are widespread and dominant has been contested (Bruns, 2019), especially when considering multiple potential sources of viewpoint diversity, such as mediated and interpersonal communication (Zerback & Kobilke, 2022).

## **Measurement of CCE**

Measurement of CCE can be approached through either self-report measures or network analysis methods, each with its own strengths and limitations. Self-report measures involve querying individuals about their engagement with various news sources, social media platforms, and interpersonal interactions (Mutz, 2002). These perceived disagreement measures provide insight into individuals' subjective perceptions of their exposure to disagreement. However, limitations exist due to recall biases, social desirability effects, and the fragmented media landscape, often leading respondents to overestimate opinion consonance within their networks (Huckfeldt & Sprague, 1995, pp. 125–126).

To mitigate this bias, network analysis methods offer an alternative approach to measuring CCE. These methods examine the structural heterogeneity within communication networks to assess individuals' connections to others with diverse sociodemographic backgrounds, party affiliations, or political opinions (Kobilke, 2023). Network analysis, by inspecting social ties, yields valuable insights into the exposure opportunities individuals have within their communication environments. Nevertheless, it should be noted that merely having individuals with diverse characteristics in one's communication network does not guarantee encounters with divergent views. These differences could potentially remain unnoticed without active political discourse.

Therefore, Lupton and Thornton (2017) suggested considering multiple properties of political discussion networks. These include the frequency of political discussions, the degree of structural diversity, and the extent of political disagreement within the network. Other characteristics that could be added to this list are the quality of political discussions and the level of intimacy. A comprehensive method for measuring CCE might involve merging network analysis methods with self-reported measures of perceived disagreement to capture all properties of political discussion networks.

## **Antecedents of CCE**

Understanding the factors influencing the frequency of CCE is crucial for comprehending why individuals opt to interact with the politically divergent. There are two primary drivers: individual characteristics and the structural attributes of communication environments.

Existing research indicates that individual factors, such as age, socioeconomic status (including race, income, and education), political interest, knowledge, and personality traits such as conflict avoidance can impact the likelihood of CCE (Mutz, 2006, pp. 29–34). Higher status and political interest can boost the frequency of political discussions while simultaneously decreasing exposure to opposing views. Consequently, highly educated, politically interested, wealthier, middle-aged, white, conflict-avoidant individuals are the least likely to encounter opposing viewpoints (p. 30). Strong party identification and extreme attitudes may also limit exposure to contradictory political information (Wojcieszak & Rojas, 2011), but this limitation becomes significant only at the highest levels of extremity (Zerback & Kobilke, 2022). Moreover, individuals who consider their attitudes important often report more disagreement (Wojcieszak, 2012).

Structural factors also play a role, with the frequency of political discussion and relationship intimacy playing critical roles. Increased frequency of political discussions can amplify exposure to disagreements, but intimate relationships may lead to fewer disagreements despite more discussions (Mutz, 2006, pp. 26–27). Workplaces, given their structural heterogeneity and low intimacy, can serve as significant venues for political disagreement (Mutz, 2006, p. 26), unlike neighborhoods or places of worship (Mutz, 2006, p. 55).

Ultimately, the level of disagreement within a network, which is influenced by discussion frequency, intimacy, and structural heterogeneity, is the most critical predictor of individual CCE. To accommodate these structural differences, researchers have underscored the need for distinct analyses of offline personal networks, online personal networks, and mass media (Barnidge, 2017; Zerback & Kobilke, 2022). These distinct communication environments present unique opportunities for CCE (Steppat et al., 2021).

### **Effects of CCE**

CCE impacts individuals affectively, cognitively, and behaviorally. Affectively, CCE can lead to affective depolarization, heightening awareness and empathy for opposing views (Wojcieszak & Warner, 2020), thereby decreasing attitude certainty (Mutz, 2002) and fostering constructive political discourse. Alternatively, it can also provoke psychological reactance, where persuasion attempts are perceived as threats to individual freedom. In such instances, individuals may become more entrenched in their own beliefs, reinforcing their

sense of identity. Recognizing and understanding the conditions under which CCE either facilitates or hampers depolarization is an important direction for future research. Cognitively, CCE stimulates political ambivalence as individuals encounter a range of viewpoints, revealing the complexity of political issues and promoting a nuanced understanding, thereby increasing attitude uncertainty (Mutz, 2002). As a result, CCE can augment political knowledge, enrich argument repertoire, and foster interest (Kim, 2019), empowering individuals to actively participate in political discussions and decisions. Behaviorally, exposure to diverse perspectives can affect political participation (Kim, 2019; Matthes et al., 2019). As individuals gain exposure to a broader spectrum of viewpoints, they attain a more profound understanding of the intricacies inherent in political issues. This heightened awareness can inspire individuals to translate their knowledge and perspectives into action, but it can also lead to political ambivalence that delays and hampers political decisions (Mutz, 2002).

## **Conclusion**

Cross-cutting exposure (CCE) is a democratically significant phenomenon as it has been shown to alter individuals' political attitudes and behaviors. While ample research exists on the individual and structural factors influencing exposure to diverse viewpoints, further exploration is necessary to comprehend the factors that moderate or mediate the effects of CCE. International comparative research (Castro et al., 2018) and experimental studies focusing on moderators and mediators are urgently required (Matthes et al., 2019). These might include moderators such as discussion quality and the presence of a group discussion leader. By understanding the effects of CCE and the factors that shape these effects, educators and media professionals can more effectively create interventions to promote active citizenship and mitigate political polarization. One notable intervention currently underway is My Country Talks, initiated by the German newspaper DIE ZEIT. This program aims to foster cross-cutting exposure in over thirty countries and promote empathy.

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