

How race affects listening during political conversations

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A new study offers a rare look at how black and white people listen to each other during political discussions, including those that touch on controversial issues about race.

Researchers at The Ohio State University found that, in general, blacks were slightly more likely than whites to say they really listen to others

during [political discussions](#).

But in discussions of controversial topics of race—such as white people's use of the Confederate flag and police treatment of blacks—black respondents were more likely than whites to say that it would be "hard" to truly listen to a cross-race discussion partner.

The results show how much the topics of political discussions matter when it comes to how race affects listening, said William Eveland, lead author of the study and professor of communication and political science at Ohio State.

"It makes sense that [black people](#) may be better listeners in general, because they have to be constantly monitoring for threats," Eveland said.

"But when it comes to talking specifically about issues of race, black people are more likely to have had prior experiences of racism or micro-aggressions, which make it harder for them to have these conversations with whites."

Eveland conducted the study with Ohio State colleagues Osei Appiah, professor of communication, and Kathryn Coduto and Olivia Bullock, doctoral students in communication. Their paper was published recently in the journal *Political Communication*.

Their research encompassed two studies.

The first study involved 749 adult Americans who took part online. The researchers oversampled blacks so that they were roughly half of the participants.

Respondents were asked how much they agreed (on a five-point scale from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree") with four statements that

measured how much of a listening approach they took in political conversations.

For example, they were asked "When I talk politics, it is more important for me to learn from others than to convince them."

The researchers also asked participants if they had had any discussions about politics with cross-race conversation partners in the past month.

Overall, blacks were slightly more likely than whites to engage in political listening. However, that finding no longer applied once the researchers took into account whether participants had discussions with opposite-race partners.

Researchers attributed that change to the fact that blacks were more likely than whites to have opposite-race discussion partners: 48 percent of blacks, compared to only 31 percent of whites.

"People who talked about politics with someone of the opposite race were more open to listening, and blacks were more likely to be in that category," Eveland said.

In a second study, the researchers looked specifically at listening in the context of controversial issues surrounding race.

This involved 800 respondents specifically recruited so the study would include 200 black Democrats, 200 black Republicans, 200 white Democrats and 200 white Republicans.

In addition to listing their own race, each participant was asked if they identified with their own race and with the opposite race. In this study, identification referred to a group that the participants "feel particularly close to—that is people who are most like you in their ideas, interests,

and feelings."

Since the first study found that most whites and nearly half of blacks did not regularly talk to cross-race partners, the researchers instructed participants to imagine political discussions.

Participants were asked to anticipate a conversation about one of three hot-button topics: police treatment of blacks in the United States, [white people](#) displaying the Confederate flag, or black athletes kneeling during the national anthem.

They were told this conversation would be with a person of the other race who was a stranger, co-worker, friend or family member.

Researchers asked participants to take a minute to imagine the conversation, considering who would initiate the conversation, how long it would last, what they might say, what the discussion partner might say, what feelings they might experience and what they might learn that they didn't know before.

After participants had time to imagine the conversation, they answered one question: "Do you think it would be easy or hard to truly listen" to their cross-race partners' views on the topic during the [conversation](#)?

They rated the difficulty on a four-point scale from very easy to very hard.

Results showed that blacks tended to say it would be harder to "truly listen" to their white partners than whites did with their imagined [black](#) partners.

The topic they talked about—police treatment of blacks, Confederate flags or athletes kneeling—had no effect on the results. It also didn't

matter if participants imagined talking to a stranger, co-worker, friend or family member.

The data in this study can't say why blacks said they would find it harder to listen than did whites, Eveland said. But other studies provide a possible explanation.

"Blacks often have had negative prior experiences talking about race-related issues. They've often encountered explicit racism or micro-aggressions that could lead them to put up defensive walls," he said. "They may want to avoid these conversations altogether."

But participants who identified with the opposite race—blacks identifying with "European Americans" and whites identifying with "African Americans"—said they would find listening easier than those who identified only with their own race or with no race at all.

"That was one bright spot. It suggests that getting people to identify with the feelings and ideas of people from the opposite race could be one path to more cross-race listening," Eveland said.

Looking across both studies, the age, sex and education of participants had no relationship to political listening.

"Surprisingly, party identification was also unrelated to listening in either study," Eveland said.

Not surprisingly, Eveland said, it was those people who had the most real-life experience or connection with people of the opposite race who showed the most capacity for listening.

In the first study, the best listeners were people who reported having prior political discussions with someone of the opposite race. In the

second study, it was those who identified with the opposite race and who had more opposite-[race](#) relatives.

Those real-life connections may be difficult to achieve on a broad scale, Eveland said, but they could play a vital role in improving our political discourse.

"If there were more listening—and greater perception that other people would listen to us—we might not have the degree of partisan polarization we currently have," he said.

"It is important to find ways to encourage people to listen."

More information: William P. Eveland et al, Listening During Political Conversations: Traits and Situations, *Political Communication* (2020). [DOI: 10.1080/10584609.2020.1736701](https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2020.1736701)

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