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The effect of being conflict non-avoidant: linking conflict framing and political participation

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ABSTRACT
The news media’s ability to mobilise citizens to participate politically by emphasising elite conflict in politics is not well understood. This article argues that citizens may gain knowledge when exposed to conflict news framing. It further theorises that whether they translate their knowledge into political participation is conditioned by their orientation towards conflict. Individuals who avoid conflict participate less frequently than individuals who do not. The proposed moderated mediation process was tested using a content analysis of news media coverage and a three-wave panel survey (n = 2,061). Results show that the effect of exposure to conflict news framing on (changes in) political participation is positively mediated by knowledge. This mediation effect is moderated by conflict avoidance, where the effect is more positive among conflict non-avoiders than conflict avoiders. This study shows that understanding the news media’s mobilising effect on political participation requires attention to both news content and individual motivational factors.

KEYWORDS Conflict framing; media exposure; conflict avoidance; political participation; knowledge; motivational factors

A healthy democracy needs the contestation of opinions among elite actors and an active citizenry (Satori 1987; Schattschneider 1960; Sniderman and Theriault 2004; Verba and Nie 1972). These two key facets of democracy are linked; in order to make informed decisions about whether and how to participate in politics, citizens need to be exposed to a diversity of opinions (Chong and Druckman 2007a, 2007b; Sniderman 2000). The news media play an important role in this regard as the primary source of information about politics for most citizens (Strömbäck 2008; Zaller 2003). Yet the news media’s ability to mobilise citizens to engage in politics by emphasising diverse opinions is not well understood. This article takes the first step towards filling this research gap.
Our understanding of the underlying process between exposure to conflict news framing and political participation is limited and incomplete for at least two reasons. First, scholars have mainly focused on the mobilising and demobilising effect of conflict news framing on (intended) voting behaviour in European Parliament elections (e.g. de Vreese and Boomgaarden 2006; de Vreese and Tobiasen 2007; Schuck et al. 2016a), while its effect on other types of political activities, such as participation in demonstrations, and in non-election contexts has been left unexplored. Second, previous studies have only examined either the role of a single mediator, such as knowledge (de Vreese and Boomgaarden 2006) and political trust (Kleinnijenhuis et al. 2006), or a single (context-specific) moderator, such as the evaluation of the EU (Schuck et al. 2016a), while a more general examination of the underlying process including both mediators and moderators is missing.

The idea that news media exposure influences political participation positively or negatively is anything but new (e.g. Cappella and Jamieson 1997; Norris 2000; Putnam 2001). Some news media content has been argued to provide ‘mobilising information’ (Lemert 1984), for instance conflict framing, i.e. when conflict between actors is emphasised in a news story (Semetko and Valkenburg 2000: 95). The effect of exposure to conflict news framing on political participation is contested, however. On the one hand, it may alert citizens that something important and urgent is at stake, making citizens more eager to engage politically (Schuck et al. 2016a). Furthermore, political conflict organises and simplifies political issues; and thereby informs citizens about the different sides of issues and the societal effects of decisions (Price 1989), which may provide citizens with reasons to act. Finally, if citizens realise that conflict is an essential part of democratic decision making (de Vreese and Tobiasen 2007), it may likewise positively impact conflicts’ mobilisation potential. On the other hand, since conflict may violates social norms of behaviour (Mutz and Reeves 2005: 4), it may potentially cause a fear of social isolation that silence citizens (Noelle-Neumann 1974; Scheufele and Moy 2000) and conflict may potentially lead to distrust that demobilise them (Kleinnijenhuis et al. 2006). The two perspectives indicate that whether citizens are motivated to participate politically when exposed to conflict may depend on their orientation towards conflict (i.e. their level of conflict avoidance). This is an overlooked motivational factor in political communication research, but its potential importance is indicated by a handful of scholars who have shown that conflict non-avoiders, who feel comfortable with conflict, participate politically more often than conflict avoiders, who dislike conflict (Testa et al. 2014; Ulbig and Funk 1999).

This article argues that the underlying process between exposure to conflict news framing and political participation can be understood as a
moderated mediation process with knowledge as the mediator and conflict avoidance as the subsequent moderator. The democratically ideal decision whether to participate politically is based on a sufficient level of knowledge about politics (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996). Put differently, when you hardly know anything about politics, it is difficult to act politically. Thus, one pathway to political participation is to learn about politics, and exposure to conflict news framing may encourage learning, since conflict attracts attention and thus makes citizens more attentive to the information provided (Schuck et al. 2016a) and offers different perspectives on politics (de Vreese and Boomgaarden 2006; Jebril et al. 2013; Price 1989). However, learning about politics does not automatically transform into action: sometimes knowledgeable individuals refrain from participating while less knowledgeable do participate. The question is why. Political participation can loosely be defined as citizens performing activities to affect politics (van Deth 2014: 351), such as participating in demonstrations or signing a petition. Political participation essentially involves conflictual elements when different opinions are exchanged. We therefore further argue that whether knowledge gained from exposure to conflict news framing transforms into participation depends on individuals’ orientation towards conflicts. In general, citizens attracted to conflictual situations are more easily mobilised than citizens who avoid such situations. In short, we argue that the more individuals tend to avoid conflict, the less the effect of knowledge gained from exposure to conflict news framing on political participation.

In sum, this article investigates whether the effect of exposure to conflict news framing on political participation can be explained by a moderated mediation process in which knowledge mediates the process and this mediation effect is subsequently moderated by conflict avoidance. We are interested in understanding whether political conflict in the public debate facilitated by the news media influences political participation positively through the expected pathway. With regard to political participation, we focus on actual activities targeting the public debate and the political system such as participation in demonstrations (see further van Deth 2014). To test our argument, we rely on a multi-methods design, including a content analysis of news media coverage and a three-wave panel survey from 2014 to 2015 (n = 2,061).

Conflict framing as mobilising information

Political conflict is an important part of news reporting (Bartholome et al. 2015; Neuman et al. 1992), and conflict framing is one of the most frequent generic news frames across different media systems, countries, and
news formats (de Vreese et al. 2001; Gamson 1992; Lengauer et al. 2012; Semetko and Valkenburg 2000). News stories that focus on conflict between actors have a high news value (Price 1989), and the construction of conflict frames is embedded in media routines and professional standards, such as balanced news reporting (Bartholome et al. 2015; Galtung and Ruge 1965; Lawrence 2000; Shoemaker and Reese 1996). Conceptually, conflict framing is defined as frames that ‘emphasize conflict between individuals, groups, or institutions as a means of capturing audience interest’ (Semetko and Valkenburg 2000: 95; see more generally de Vreese 2002; Gamson 2004; Snow et al. 2007). Such a frame is present when, for instance, political parties promote opposite opinions on a political issue or attack each other in the news media. Or conflict may emerge when new problems, on which elite actors disagree, rise on the agenda or when old problems gain new momentum and elite actors try to change the policy status quo.

Conflicts are considered an essential and an inherent part of democracy. As Schattschneider (1960: 138) famously argued: ‘democracy is a competitive political system in which competing leaders and organizations define the alternatives of public policy in such a way that the public can participate in the decision-making process’. Thus, exposure to political conflict is a natural part of the news stream. But why would we expect conflict news framing to mobilise individuals to participate politically? There are at least three reasons why conflict carries mobilisation potential.

First, if citizens realise that conflict is an inherent part of democratic decision making (Satori 1987; Schattschneider 1960), exposure to political conflict may influence citizens’ level of participation positively (de Vreese and Tobiasen 2007: 90). Conflict may thus signal a healthy democracy and mobilise citizens to engage, while consensus, i.e. the absence of conflict, may indicate that everything is settled and there is little reason to act. Second, political conflict carries an attention-seeking potential that may trigger citizens to participate politically. Zaller (2003) argues that the news media should provide information regarding problems in a manner that catches the attention of the public - like a ‘burglar alarm’. Political conflict that highlights differences between parties and other elite actors may draw citizens’ attention to politics (Schuck et al. 2016a). Thus, conflict may mobilise citizens because it conveys the impression that a political issue is important, calling for urgent action.

Third, political conflict carries the potential for citizens to become more informed. It organises and simplifies political issues; and it informs citizens about the different sides of issues and the societal effects of decisions (Price 1989). We know from previous research that exposure to one
or competing frames of an issue in news stories may affect public opinion formation (e.g. Chong and Druckman 2007b; van Klingerent et al. 2017). When citizens are exposed to different opinions, they are also exposed to different perspectives on politics; this may provide them with arguments to act politically and choose sides. If citizens are told that politics can only be viewed from one side, there is less reason for them to engage in politics. Thus, consensus may provide fewer reasons to engage than conflict does.

Empirical studies also support the above arguments that conflict framing may mobilise citizens to participate politically, e.g. (intended) voting behaviour in European Parliament elections (de Vreese and Boomgaarden 2006; de Vreese and Tobiasen 2007; Kleinnijenhuis et al. 2006; Schuck et al. 2016a). Still, it is not well understood how exposure to conflict news framing may transform into political participation.

**The mediation effect of knowledge and the moderation of this effect by conflict avoidance**

There are many possible ways in which exposure to conflict news framing may lead to political participation. In this section, we explore one such possible way: a *moderated mediation process* (see Figure 1). We argue that the effect of exposure to conflict news framing on political participation is first mediated by *knowledge* gained from exposure to conflict news framing. Whether the knowledge gained is transformed into participation is conditioned by whether individuals tend to avoid conflict. Conflict non-avoiders, individuals who feel comfortable with conflict, are expected to participate more frequently in politics than conflict avoiders, i.e. individuals who dislike conflict.

We begin with the *mediation* process. Political *knowledge* is generally considered a key predictor for participation in politics (de Vreese and Boomgaarden 2006; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Verba et al. 1997). Since citizens must ideally form opinions based on sufficient knowledge about politics to participate politically (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996), we focus on knowledge as a first step in the mediation process. The news

![Figure 1. The pathway from exposure to conflict framing to political participation.](image-url)
media are an obvious source of policy-specific information (Barabas and Jerit 2009), and when political conflicts highlight different perspectives on political issues, they may, like a ‘burglar alarm’ (Zaller 2003), spark attention and thus contribute to citizens’ learning about politics (see also de Vreese and Boomgaarden 2006; Jebril et al. 2013). A few studies already show that exposure to news content (like political conflicts) generally has a positive influence on citizens’ level of knowledge (e.g. de Vreese and Boomgaarden 2006; Jebril et al. 2013).

To clarify, this study focuses on knowledge about current affairs in politics and society (Barabas et al. 2014). This approach is appropriate when studying the process leading to political participation (at a specific point in time), as the possession of adequate knowledge almost exclusively depends on exposure to information in the news media rather than learning over years (Barabas and Jerit 2009; Jerit et al. 2006). Citizens’ knowledge level – or more specifically, current political affairs knowledge – may be an important first step on the way to political participation (de Vreese and Boomgaarden 2006). However, sometimes even knowledgeable individuals refrain from political participation, while less knowledgeable individuals choose to participate. The question is why.

We take a closer look at the moderation effect. Individuals’ motivation for political participation also depends on personal characteristics, yet integrating motivational factors into models of political participation is not new (e.g. Mondak and Halperin 2008; Prior 2010; Weinschenk and Panagopoulos 2014). For instance, scholars have shown that the effect of exposure to conflict news framing on (intended) voting behaviour during European Parliament elections is moderated by context-specific factors such as individuals’ evaluations of the EU (Schuck et al. 2016a) or political trust (Kleinnijenhuis et al. 2006). While we acknowledge that a range of moderators may influence the pathway, we focus solely on a single, important and overlooked one: conflict avoidance.

Following Mutz (2002, 2006; Mutz and Reeves 2005; see also Goldstein 1999), conflict avoidance refers to how one reacts to all types of conflict. Conflict avoidance is a relatively stable personality trait. At one end of the spectrum, we find highly conflict-avoidant individuals, who are uncomfortable with and dislike conflict no matter what it is about. At the other end, we find less conflict-avoidant individuals, who are comfortable being in a conflictive environment and may even be animated by conflict. Thus, to distinguish between the personality trait and political participation in society, we focus on conflict avoidance rather than conflict approach, i.e. on conflict-refusing rather than conflict-seeking behaviour (Bresnahan et al. 2009; Elliot and Thrash 2002; Testa et al. 2014). Conflict-seeking behaviour is often measured in a manner that is closely
linked to the participation dimension, for instance via statements like, “I am sometimes reluctant to talk about politics” (Testa et al. 2014: 775). To prevent theoretical and operational overlap we therefore focus on conflict avoidance.

We argue that their level of conflict avoidance is important for understanding whether individuals transform knowledge gained by exposure to conflict news framing into political participation. Political participation can loosely be defined as citizens performing activities intended to affect politics (van Deth 2014: 351). Since politics involves exchange of opinions (Dahl 1989; Satori 1987; Schattschneider 1960) about the allocation of scarce goods (Easton 1953), it inevitably involves conflictual elements, and therefore their orientation towards conflict becomes essential with respect to individuals deciding whether to participate politically or not. Some scholars have already shown that conflict avoiders engage less in politics than conflict non-avoiders (Testa et al. 2014; see also Ulbig and Funk 1999). Conflict avoiders simply avoid (latent) conflict by refraining from participating in political activities, while conflict non-avoiders are more eager to act and participate in the conflictual political environment. Following this line of thinking, we essentially argue for a moderated mediation process: the more knowledge they gain from exposure to conflict news framing and the more they are conflict non-avoiders, the more frequently individuals participate politically.

**Hypothesis and research question**

As argued above and illustrated in Figure 1, we expect that a moderated mediation process conceptualises one important way in which exposure to conflict news framing may affect political participation. Knowledge mediates the effect, and the mediation effect is further moderated by conflict avoidance. Since conflict attracts citizens attention and provides different perspectives to politics, they may learn when exposed to a political conflict. However, some may have a high knowledge gain from exposure to conflict news framing but at the same time refrain from participation because they simply avoid political activities altogether. Others (even the less knowledgeable) may participate since they are conflict non-avoiders and drawn into the political controversy. We therefore, at a static level, expect that:

H1: The more individuals tend to avoid conflict, the smaller the effect of knowledge gained from exposure to conflict news framing will be on political participation.

Citizens’ level and type of political participation are not stable. As argued by Dalton (2008: 94), ‘the trends in political activity represent
changes in the style of political actions, and not just changes in the level of participation’ (see also Norris 2002; Zukin et al. 2006). We are therefore also interested in whether changes in political participation can be explained by the proposed process. De Vreese and Boomgaarden (2006) have already shown that exposure to news content (such as political conflict) positively influences changes in knowledge, and knowledge positively influences changes in (intended) voting behaviour in a (possible) referendum on enlargement of the EU. Indeed, election campaigns provide an extraordinary setting for both news media usage and political participation, which may affect the proposed moderated mediation process. Citizens may be more motivated to participate, parties may make a greater effort to obtain media coverage, and the media may allocate more attention to politics (see for example Drew and Weaver 2006; van Aelst and de Swert 2009). Thus, whether a similar moderated mediation process from exposure to conflict framing to changes in political participation exists in general, we do not know. We therefore ask the following research question:

RQ1: Can the effect of exposure to conflict news framing on changes in political participation be explained by a moderated mediation process, so that the more individuals tend to avoid conflict, the smaller the effect of knowledge gained from exposure to conflict news framing will be on changes in political participation?

Research design

In order to study the proposed moderated mediation effect of exposure to conflict news framing on political participation, we rely on a multi-methods research design including a news media content analysis and a three-wave panel survey conducted in Denmark during 2014 and 2015. The automated content analysis allows us to identify the prominence of conflict framing in different news media outlets, while the survey allows us to assess the conditional impact of exposure to conflict framing in the news media on political participation. With this article, we aim to understand how general exposure to political conflict in the news media influences political participation. Consequently, we move beyond previous studies that have examined the process between conflict news framing and political participation in relation to a specific issue – such as an enlargement of the EU – in a specific context – such as a European Parliament election (e.g. Schuck et al. 2016a). We want to examine whether this moderated mediation process generally exists in non-election times when citizens participate politically in multiple ways. Our operationalisation of the relevant variable, therefore, covers general conflict
news framing exposure, knowledge, and participation, to ensure we capture a general underlying dynamic.

Our case, Denmark, is similar to other Western democracies with a multi-party system in which coalitions between multiple parties are usually necessary to form a government (Lijphart 1999). Furthermore, with its corporatist media system, its strong history of public broadcasting, and its high level of news consumption, Denmark is a useful case to examine the effects of media usage (Albæk et al. 2014; Hallin and Mancini 2004).

In regard to the presence of conflict news framing, previous research suggests that the level of conflict framing in the Danish news media is comparable to what is found in other Western democracies (Esser et al. 2017: 79). The panel design, the content analysis, and the analytical approach are presented below.

**Panel design**

We rely on a three-wave panel survey based on a sample of the general Danish population (aged > 18 years). It was conducted through a web questionnaire managed by the national research agency Epinion. The survey was part of a larger panel study. We used three waves in which the variables of interest were repeated, and these were conducted from 21 November 2014 to 5 November 2015 (w1: 21 November 2014 – 26 January 2015, w2: 10–22 April 2015, w3: 26 October–5 November 2015). The sample was drawn from a population representative database with a quota sample technique on gender, age, and geography. We invited, via email, 10,315 people to participate in the first wave, and 4,641 respondents completed the questionnaire; 3,419 respondents completed two waves, while 2,084 respondents completed all three waves. Only respondents answering all relevant questions in all three waves were included in the analysis (total $n = 2,061$). The attrition led to small increases in the average age and educational level, which are of less concern in this study, as we are interested in the underlying mechanism rather than in drawing inferences to a greater population. A list of descriptive statistics of all applied variables (mean, std. dev, $\sigma$) is presented in Table A1 in Online Appendix A.

**The dependent variable, political participation**

Our conceptualisation of political participation follows van Deth’s (2014) theoretical definition of activities targeting the public debate and political system, which has been operationalised by Ohme et al. (2018) using a confirmative factor analysis. We follow their operationalisation of the concept. How often did respondents: (1) Contact a politician via email or
social media to express their opinion; (2) Sign an online petition; (3) Contact or visit a politician in person; (4) Participate in demonstrations, strikes, or other political happenings; (5) Sign a written petition (on paper) about a political or social issue; (6) Donate money to a political party, a political organisation, or an NGO; and (7) Encourage or invite people to participate in demonstrations, strikes, or other political happenings? Respondents were asked whether they had done any of the above activities during the last 12 months in the first wave and the last four months in the second and third waves (corresponding with the periods between the waves). Each activity was measured on a 5-point scale from ‘Not at all’ to ‘Four times or more’, and the answers were combined into an additive index ranging from 0 to 100. Descriptives of the index as well as each item (mean, std. dev., z) are listed in Tables A1 and A2, Online Appendix A.

The independent variable, media usage

To reduce the risk of underestimating possible media effects, we measured respondents’ use of specific media sources, the so-called list-frequency technique, see Slater (2004) and Andersen et al. (2016a). Media usage was measured on a scale from 0 to 7, reflecting the number of days in the last week respondents utilised a specific source. Television news was measured by the most watched and regular evening newscast on each of the two public service broadcast providers along with their online news webpages (TV Avisen at 6:30 pm on DR1 and Nyhederne at 7 pm on TV2) (TNS Gallup 2014). Newspaper usage captured the three most widely circulated national broadsheet newspapers (Berlingske, Jyllands-Posten, and Politiken) and the two most widely circulated national tabloids (B.T. and Ekstra Bladet) (TNS Gallup 2015) along with their online news webpages. The respondents’ media usage was weighted by a conflict framing measure, see below.

The mediating variable, knowledge

Current political affairs knowledge was measured by the number of correct answers to four questions about current national and foreign politics (see also Barabas et al. 2014). For each question, the respondents were given four answer categories and a ‘don’t know’ option, and they had 20 seconds to provide a response. ‘Don’t know’ responses and missing values were coded as wrong answers. The questions were constructed based on recent news coverage. The answers were summarised into an index ranging from 0 (no correct answers) to 4 (four correct answers).²
The moderating variable, conflict avoidance

In line with previous research (Bresnahan et al. 2009; Goldstein 1999; Mutz 2002, 2006; Mutz and Reeves 2005), conflict avoidance was measured in wave 1 based on five items on a five-point scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree: (1) I hate arguments (reversed in the index); (2) I find conflicts exciting; (3) I enjoy challenging the opinions of others; (4) Arguments don’t bother me; and (5) I feel upset after an argument (reversed in the index). The answers were summarised into an index ranging from 0 to 4, from less to highly conflict avoidant. Cronbach’s alpha and the item–item correlation analysis showed generally satisfactory results (Tables A1 and A3 in Online Appendix A).

Control variables

In addition to the variables presented above, the analysis included controls for gender, age, and education measured by a 7-point scale ranging from primary school to higher education (e.g. Dalton 2008). All control variables were measured in wave 1.

Pre-test

All variables except current affairs knowledge and conflict avoidance were pre-tested on a sample of 200 respondents in October 2014. The pre-test showed good distributions for all variables, and they were kept in their original form.

Content analysis

News media content was analysed in order to weight respondents’ media usage by the prominence of conflict framing in the news outlets they reported using (for a similar approach see Schuck et al. 2016a; also see de Vreese et al. 2017). An automated content analysis was conducted (see also Vliegenthart et al. 2011) based on keywords (e.g. Rose and Baumgartner 2013) that allows for efficient collection of a large amount of data (de Graaf and van der Vossen 2013; Matthes and Kohring 2008). Several random news articles were coded to identify words signalling conflicts (e.g. trouble and disagree) and politics (e.g. party names and political positions). Subsequently, a search string was developed in which a conflict frame was identified when at least one politics keyword and one conflict keyword were present in a news article/news cast (see details in Online Appendix B). To test the quality and reproducibility of the data, an intercoder reliability test was conducted to compare human coding with the data provided by the search string. The results were acceptable.
with Krippendorff alpha values of 0.86 between two human coders and 0.65 between one human coder and the automated coding (/string) ($n = 63$). For further information about the content analysis and the inter-coder reliability test, see Online Appendix B.

The weights for conflict framing were constructed by calculating the average of all news articles/newscasts containing a conflict frame of the total number of news articles/newscasts in each news outlet in a specific period. To account for the causal order in our model between exposure to conflict news framing and political participation, the baseline for the periods was the last 12 months for wave 1 and the last four months for waves 2 and 3, corresponding with the periods in which the respondents were asked to indicate their political activities (w1: 21 November 2013–20 November 2014, w2: 10 December 2014–9 April 2015 and w3: 26 June–25 October 2015).

The percentage of conflict framing in each news outlet is depicted in Figure 2. Broadsheet newspapers (online/offline) had a larger share of conflict framing than newscasts (and their online webpage) and tabloid newspapers (online/offline). Thus, it matters for our respondents’ level of exposure to conflict framing which news media outlets they utilised. The answers were combined into an additive index with a theoretical range from 0 to 100 across waves, where 100 would indicate that a respondent was exposed to all news outlets during the last seven days and that they all included 100 percentage conflict news frames. However, as the percentage of conflict framing in each news outlet was lower than 100%, reaching the maximum score of 100 was not possible.

**Analytical approach**

In order to test the proposed moderated mediation process, we utilised a conditional process model as suggested by Hayes (2012, 2013) (for a similar approach see Andersen et al. 2016b; Schuck and de Vreese 2012). It is based on ordinary least squares (OLS) regressions and can construct bias-corrected bootstrap confidence intervals, which may better reflect the sampling distribution of the conditional indirect effects. Figure 3 illustrates the analytical model to examine the moderated mediation process, the indirect, and the direct effects, respectively. The indirect effect of exposure to conflict news framing on political participation passes through knowledge, and this effect is subsequently moderated by conflict avoidance, while the direct effect reflects exposure to conflict news framing on political participation. When examining changes in political participation (RQ1), we included a lag on the dependent variable from the prior wave ($t−1$), as it allows us to examine changes across waves.
Since Hayes’ (2012, 2013) process tool developed for SPPS does not allow us to pool the data across waves, we applied a similar technique using STATA to exploit the panel structure in our data across waves. We begin by running a path analysis across all waves using the structural equation modelling tool (also based on OLS regressions) (Acoc2013), where we apply cluster robust standard errors to correct for heteroscedasticity. Subsequently, we add bootstrapping with 5,000 replications and show the marginal effect of the low, medium (average), and high
level of conflict avoidance (+/−1 SD from mean) following Hayes’ recommendation. 

**Results**

We begin by analysing the process from exposure to conflict news framing to political participation at a *static* level (H1). Table 1 shows the OLS coefficients with cluster robust standard errors in parentheses for the effect of conflict news framing on political participation based on a path analysis. The results are divided into three steps to explain the independent variable (conflict framing), the mediator (knowledge), and finally the dependent variable (political participation) where the moderation (conflict avoidance) of the effect of the mediator is included in the last step. Each step includes controls for female, age, and education. Exposure to conflict news framing has a positive significant effect on knowledge (0.1130, \( p < 0.001 \)), and the interaction between conflict avoidance and knowledge on political participation is significant (−0.4533, \( p < 0.05 \)). The fact that the effect of knowledge is positive (0.9467, \( p < 0.01 \)) and the effect of conflict avoidance is negative (−1.4944, \( p < 0.01 \)) suggests that the effect of knowledge is more positive among conflict non-avoiders than among conflict avoiders.

If we examine the conditional *indirect* effect of the moderated mediation process, we find significant effects in the direction we theorised. Table 2 shows the conditional indirect effect on political participation at a low, mean, and high level of conflict avoidance (+/−1 SD from mean). OLS coefficients with bootstrap cluster robust standard errors in parentheses are listed along with bias-corrected bootstrap confidence intervals. We find that conflict non-avoiders (low) have a significant positive effect of 0.0775 [0.0183; 0.1411] (\( p < 0.05 \)), individuals with an average level of conflict avoidance (mean) have a less significant and less positive effect of 0.0354 [−0.0040; 0.0745] (\( p = 0.078 \)), while conflict avoiders (high) have an insignificant although slightly negative effect of −0.0066 [−0.0511; 0.0356]. Moving from being conflict avoiders to conflict non-avoiders thus has a positive effect on political participation through the expected pathway. When individuals gain knowledge based on exposure to political conflict in the news media, the results show a positive effect of being conflict non-avoiders, while it does not have a similar positive effect on the conflict avoiders who are hardly mobilised through the expected pathway. Overall, the result supports our expectation about the process at a static level (H1).

Moving on to the research question about explaining *changes in* political participation (RQ1), Table 3 shows OLS coefficients with cluster
robust standard errors in parentheses for the effect of exposure to conflict news framing on changes in political participation based on a path analysis focusing on the independent variable, the mediator, and finally the dependent variable (including the moderator in the latter model). To examine changes in political participation, a lag on the dependent variable is included in the latter model. As found above, exposure to conflict news framing has a positive significant effect on knowledge (0.1140, \( p < 0.001 \)), and the interaction between conflict avoidance and knowledge is negative and significant on changes in political participation (−0.3120, \( p < 0.05 \)). The effects of knowledge (0.8236, \( p < 0.01 \)) and conflict avoidance (0.0381) are positive, but the effect of knowledge is greater, suggesting that gaining knowledge has a more positive effect on changes in political participation among conflict non-avoiders than among conflict avoiders.

Moving on to the conditional indirect effects of the moderated mediation process, Table 4 shows the effect on changes in political participation at a low, mean, and high level of conflict avoidance (+/−1 SD from mean) (including a lag on the dependent variable). OLS coefficients with bootstrap cluster robust standard errors in parentheses are listed along with bias-corrected bootstrap confidence intervals. Again, we find that conflict non-avoiders (low) have a positive significant effect of 0.0734

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### Table 1. Explaining political participation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Conflict framing</th>
<th>Knowledge</th>
<th>Political participation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Conflict framing</td>
<td>0.1130*** (0.0074)</td>
<td>0.5599*** (0.1099)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge</td>
<td>0.9467*** (0.3647)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflict avoidance</td>
<td>−1.4944*** (0.5007)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge * Conflict avoidance</td>
<td>−0.4533* (0.1922)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>−0.6654*** (0.0938)</th>
<th>−0.5054*** (0.0358)</th>
<th>1.1608* (0.4993)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>0.0201*** (0.0031)</td>
<td>0.0160*** (0.0013)</td>
<td>0.0167 (0.0180)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>0.2191*** (0.0252)</td>
<td>0.0871*** (0.0095)</td>
<td>0.2161 (0.1421)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Constant)</td>
<td>1.3632*** (0.2096)</td>
<td>1.2640*** (0.0867)</td>
<td>5.2250 (1.5200)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Structural equation modelling, OLS coefficients with cluster robust standard errors in parentheses.

† \( p < 0.10 \); * \( p < 0.05 \); ** \( p < 0.01 \); *** \( p < 0.001 \); \( n = 2,061 (6,183) \).

### Table 2. Conditional indirect effect on political participation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conflict avoidance</th>
<th>Conditional indirect effect</th>
<th>95% bias-corrected confidence interval</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>0.0775† (0.0315)</td>
<td>0.0183 0.1411</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>0.0354† (0.0201)</td>
<td>−0.0040 0.0745</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>−0.0066 (0.0219)</td>
<td>−0.0511 0.0356</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Conditional moderated mediation test with bias-corrected bootstrap confidence intervals (5,000 resamples). OLS coefficients with bootstrap cluster robust standard errors in parentheses. Levels of moderator are +/−1 SD from the mean.

† \( p < 0.10 \); † † \( p < 0.05 \); † † † \( p < 0.01 \); † † † † \( p < 0.001 \); \( n = 2,061 (6,183) \).
While individuals with an average level of conflict avoidance (mean) have a significant, although less positive effect of 0.0442 (0.0163; 0.0767) \( (p < 0.01) \), and conflict avoiders (high) have an insignificant and even less positive effect of 0.0150 (0.0166; 0.0481). The results show a similar pattern as for the static analysis. There is a positive effect of being conflict non-avoidant. The effect of gained knowledge (from exposure to conflict news framing) on changes in political participation is more positive for conflict non-avoiders than for conflict avoiders. Conflict avoiders are hardly mobilised or even demobilised through the expected pathway.

Summing up, the proposed moderated mediation between exposure to conflict news framing and political participation was found to be significant in a static perspective (H1) and in a dynamic perspective (RQ1).

**Discussion**

The process through which the news media can mobilise citizens to participate politically in society by providing specific content – such as
framing politics as a conflict – is of profound democratic interest. Our study seeks to disentangle the process through which exposure to conflict news framing can mobilise citizens to participate politically by using media content analysis and a three-wave panel survey. We demonstrate that the process from exposure to conflict news framing on political participation can be understood by a moderated mediation process in which knowledge mediates the relationship, and this mediation effect is subsequently moderated by conflict avoidance. Citizens may gain knowledge about politics when they are exposed to conflict news framing, but whether this knowledge transforms into political participation is conditioned by individuals’ level of conflict avoidance. Conflict non-avoiders participate politically more frequently than conflict avoiders, who are hardly mobilised or even demobilised through the expected pathway both in a static (H1) and in a dynamic perspective (RQ1).

At least two general lessons can be learned from this study. First, conflict news framing is not only a natural part of news production (Bartholome et al. 2015; Neuman et al. 1992); more importantly, it mobilises citizens to participate politically. When citizens are exposed to conflict news framing, they may gain knowledge about politics that can transform into participation conditioned by their level of conflict avoidance. Previous research has shown that conflict framing mobilises citizens to vote (at least intentionally) during European Parliament election campaigns (e.g. de Vreese and Tobiasen 2007; Schuck et al. 2016a). However, election campaigns provide an extraordinary setting for participation as politicians more actively seek the spotlight of the news media, the news media focus more prominently on politics, and citizens become more interested in politics (since they feel (or are) obligated to vote on Election Day) (van Aelst and de Swert 2009). Thus, it is possible that citizens are more easily mobilised during such settings. Nevertheless, our study demonstrates that the mobilising effect of conflict news framing on political participation also exists outside election campaigns and in connection with a broader range of political activities targeting the public debate and the political system. Thus, when politics generally is framed as a conflict in the news media, it may have a positive effect on participation and hence on the functioning of democracy, at least among conflict non-avoiders. We will return to the conflict avoiders later.

Second, our study sheds light on the underlying process from exposure to conflict news framing to political participation. We argue and empirically find support for a moderated mediation process. Regarding mediation of knowledge, we consider knowledge a key predictor of political participation (see also, e.g. de Vreese and Boomgaarden 2006; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Verba et al. 1997).
to politics like a ‘burglar alarm’ (Schuck et al. 2016a; Zaller 2003) and provides a range of different perspectives on politics (Price 1989), we argue, and empirically show, that citizens may learn when exposed to conflict news framing. If conflict news framing has a positive effect on political knowledge – the first step towards participation in our model – it suggests that future studies should pay more attention to the factors influencing the presence of conflict framing in the news media (see for example Bartholome et al. 2015). For instance, our findings showed noticeable differences in the level of conflict framing across news media outlets. Conflict framing was more prominent in broadsheet than in tabloid newspapers or even televised newscasts (see Figure 2). The question is why? To enhance our understanding of the mobilising role of the news media, future studies would benefit from in-depth analysis of which factors influence the presence of conflict framing across news outlets.

We also found a moderation of the mediation effect by conflict avoidance. Thus, individuals’ motivation to participate in politics depends on individual characteristics, and using such characteristics as moderators is not new (e.g. Mondak and Halperin 2008; Prior 2010; Weinschenk and Panagopoulos 2014). Nevertheless, including individuals’ orientation towards conflict in political participation models is unexplored in political communication research literature. By nature, politics is conflictual; when engaging in politics, many people have to overcome their aversion to conflicts, while others may be drawn into the political controversy (e.g. Testa et al. 2014; Ulbig and Funk 1999). Our results indicate support for the importance of conflict avoidance as a moderator of the mediation effect of knowledge. When individuals gain knowledge after exposure to conflict news framing, conflict non-avoiders are found to participate more frequently in politics than conflict avoiders. On the flipside, we found that conflict avoiders are less mobilised and even demobilised through the proposed pathway, i.e. they tend to shy away from participation. Again, the question is why?

One explanation may be that conflict framing is less mobilising for conflict avoiders. Since conflict may violates social norms for behaviour (Mutz and Reeves 2005: 4), it may potentially cause a fear of social isolation that silence such citizens (Noelle-Neumann 1974) and conflict may potentially lead to distrust that deactivate them (Kleinnijenhuis et al. 2006). However, we only examine one pathway from exposure to conflict news framing to political participation and there may be alternative mobilising pathways for conflict avoiders. Another explanation for the almost demobilising effect among conflict avoiders may be that our findings are conditioned by the type of political participation we analyse, namely participation targeting the public debate and the political system (see further van Deth 2014). However, individuals participate politically in many
different ways (Dalton 2008; Norris 2002; van Deth 2014; Zukin et al. 2006). Since participation in politics is conflictual by nature, and since we know that the degree of political conflict individuals are exposed to in an interpersonal setting influences their reaction patterns (Hopmann et al. forthcoming), the degree of conflict involved in specific types of activity may influence the mobilising dynamic, especially among conflict avoiders. Whether conflict avoiders can be more mobilised to participate in other types of political activities (than the ones targeting the public debate and the political system) remains to be explored.

Our findings point to some interesting opportunities, as well as challenges, in the current media and political landscapes. With new online possibilities and a growing number of media outlets, the media landscape has undergone fundamental changes during the past decades (Van Aelst et al. 2017; Williams and Delli Carpini 2011). Citizens now increasingly make their own personal media diets based on individual preferences (Prior 2007), which may widen the possibilities to actively avoid conflictual content. Since citizens learn from exposure to conflictual content and thereby improve their ability to make an informed choice on participation (Zukin et al. 2006), avoiding conflictual political content may, from a democratic point of view, be problematic. With the proliferation of avenues for political participation, the political landscape has likewise changed (Dalton 2008; Norris 2002; Zukin et al. 2006). Thus, new opportunities may arise for conflict avoiders to enter the world of politics. They may seek out more friendly rather than hostile participation climates to discuss politics and to act politically (for inspiration see Hayes 2005, 2007; Hayes et al. 2010; Klofstad et al. 2013).

We acknowledge that there are several limitations to our study. First, our comprehensive content analysis has limitations. Generally, our approach has been labelled state of the art in observational media effects research (de Vreese et al. 2017), but a number of challenges have been identified (Fazekas and Larsen 2016; see also Schuck et al. 2016b). We base our framework on theoretical expectations, e.g. that conflict news framing has a mobilising effect (Schuck et al. 2016a), and therefore measure and assess whether conflict framing is present in the news media, instead of simply assuming that it is the case (see further Graber 2004: 516). By building an actual media content analysis into individual exposure measurements (Druckman 2005), we obtain a more accurate and realistic understanding of the media effect. In a similar vein, we use automated content analysis to capture the presence and absence of political conflict in the news media over a long period. We acknowledge that we know less about the political conflict at stake, e.g. type, degree, the relative strengths between sides, actors involved, or issues. For instance, if
citizens perceive that politics, according to their position, is moving in the wrong direction due to the relative strength of the different sides in a conflict, they may more easily be mobilised. Another example could be that different types of conflict, e.g. substantial vs. non-substantial conflicts, may be more or less mobilising (see Bartholome et al. 2015). Thus, a more fine-grained coding of conflict news framing may be valuable in future studies to enhance our understanding of conflicts’ mobilising potential.

Second, we only study the relationship in one country, Denmark, leading to the question whether the context advantages or disadvantages the proposed process. Studies have shown that conflict news framing is rather consistently applied across countries, including Denmark (e.g. de Vreese and Boomgaarden 2006; Esser et al. 2017: 79). Citizens thus seem to be regularly exposed to conflict news framing regardless of the country examined. We have little reason to expect that the proposed moderated mediation process works differently in other Western democracies, but we encourage scholars to elaborate on our study in a comparative design. Third, we use a panel design to examine the proposed moderated mediation process, but we acknowledge that the causal mechanism could be tested more directly using an experimental set-up. Thus, we encourage other scholars to examine the causal links between exposure to at least a single conflict news frame and political participation more rigorously than a panel study allows for. We acknowledge, however, that there may be differences in the mobilising effect of exposure to conflict news framing in the public debate in general compared to exposure to a single conflictual news story.

These limitations notwithstanding, our study demonstrates that exposure to conflict news framing can mobilise citizens to participate politically. Through a moderated mediation process, it was found that the effect on (changes in) political participation is mediated by the knowledge gained (when exposed to conflict news framing). This effect is subsequently moderated by individuals’ level of conflict avoidance. Thus, general political conflicts in the news media are valuable for democracy as they may mobilise citizens – especially conflict non-avoiders – to engage in politics.

Notes

1. In between waves two and three, two separate election waves were conducted, and the response numbers dropped to 2,946 and 2,680.
2. The questions were in wave 1: (1) Which position has Margrethe Vestager been appointed to in the European Commission? (Commissioner for Competition); (2) In what country is there currently war against IS (Islamic State)? (Iraq); (3) Who is the Conservative’s spokesperson on politics? (Mai
3. The mathematical equation goes as follows: The weight for conflict framing \( w = \frac{x}{n} \) in each news outlet, where \( x \) refers to the total number of news articles/newscasts containing a conflict frame in a specific period \( t \), while \( n \) refers to the total number of news articles/newscasts in a specific period \( t \). Similar and even stronger results were found if the weight was calculated by using the average of all news articles/newscasts containing a conflict frame of the total number of news articles/newscasts about politics in each news outlet.

4. Because the index for political participation is naturally skewed (many people only rarely participate politically in society), we ran the analysis with its natural logarithm (a common transformation in such a case, e.g. Trilling & Schoenbach, 2013). We find similar patterns as presented below both in a static and a dynamic perspective. Moreover, the scores are higher in wave one than in the subsequent waves as we asked for the level of activity during 12 months in the first wave and only four months in the subsequent waves. We acknowledge that it may potentially lead to biases.

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Notes on contributors

**Camilla Bjarnøe** is Postdoctoral Researcher at the Department of Political Science and Public Management, University of Southern Denmark. Her research interests include political communication, political psychology, party behaviour, and public policy. [camillabj@sam.sdu.dk]

**Claes Holger de Vreese** is Professor and Chair of Political Communication, ASCoR, University of Amsterdam. His research interests include (digital) political communication, media effects, public opinion dynamics, and electoral behaviour. [c.h.devreese@uva.nl]

**Erik Albæk** is Professor and Research Director in the Centre for Journalism, University of Southern Denmark. His research interests include journalism studies, political communication, and media effects. [eri@sam.sdu.dk]

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