

UC Santa Barbara

Volume 6 (2025-2026)

Title

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Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/38v7f5rx>

Journal

UC Santa Barbara URCA Journal

Author

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Publication Date

2026

Political Emotions:

Undergraduate Experiences and Expressions of Political Grief

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Abstract

Grief is a complex emotion brought about by both perceived and actual losses that can profoundly shape an individual. In the context of politics, one's experience, processing, and expression of grief has significant impacts on our understanding of disenfranchised grief and invisible loss. These dynamics affect individuals who experience grief outside the conventional frameworks of recognition, validation, and support. The present study uses in-depth interviews to gain insight into how college students experience and express their grief in relation to politics with those who both share and conflict in values. Findings suggest strong parallels between the experience of political grief and traditional grief while highlighting differences in how individuals navigate these conversations across a political divide. Participants' willingness to express grief relating to the election with those that disagree with them politically varied depending on their perception of the permanence of the relationship. Ultimately, these expressions of political grief—when adding insight about others' perspectives and experiences—can offer a path toward more productive and empathetic dialogue.

Introduction

Grief is a highly distressing and multidimensional (Bonanno et al., 2008) emotion that is brought about by a loss. Because it is a social emotion in the ways it is both created and processed (Jakoby, 2012, p. 680), it is important to examine the ways in which grief is communicated between individuals. It has often been classified and studied in the context of losing a loved one. However, recent depictions of grief have evolved to encompass other non-death forms of loss.

The present study focuses specifically on political grief, which refers to the emotional response to perceived or actual losses within a political context (Harris, 2022). This may include grief over changes in leadership, the marginalization of a group's identity, or a sense of injustice within a political system. As

these losses occur, the communicating of grief between the bereaved and others becomes central to the grieving process.

Using Social Identity Theory (SIT; Tajfel & Turner, 2004), the present study examines how individuals experience and process political grief and how their communication with others is influenced. It specifically looks at potential differences in expressions of grief between the bereaved and others in contexts of perceived validation or invalidation of grief experiences as it relates to politics.

Literature Review

Grief and Bereavement Research

Across studies, there are various conceptualizations and definitions of grief. At its core, most definitions consider grief as an emotion brought about by loss, often characterised as highly distressing and highly complex (Döveling, 2015). Grief research has greatly expanded in recent years within various disciplines, acknowledging different forms of loss, including non-death loss.

Disenfranchised and Invisible Grief

Non-death losses can be ambiguous, symbolic, or perceived (Gunning and Taladay-Carter, 2024). The recognition of disenfranchised and invisible grief is present in a variety of contexts and can have profound impacts on an individual's experience and processing of said grief. Foster youth reported that acknowledgement of grief could influence long-term outcomes (Mitchell, 2018). Among others, individuals with invisible health conditions that interfere with daily life often experience dismissal of their lived experiences that stay with an individual for a prolonged period of time, impacting their perceived agency, credibility, and ability to seek out care resources (Gunning & Taladay-Carter, 2024). For others, such as those who experience neurodevelopmental disorders, disenfranchisement of both their grief experiences and neurodivergence compound to elicit an increased vulnerability to these impacts (Mair et al., 2024). The "death of possibility" is not limited to foster children and invisible illness but also presents itself with regard to politics.

Political Grief

While political grief shares many of the symptoms of grief associated with traditional bereavement, it also includes elements of invisible and disenfranchised grief. It is typically brought about as a result of events that occur on a sociopolitical level and is unique in its ability to be both individual and collective (Harris, 2022). There has also been a plethora of research on the topic of politics as it relates to other emotions and conditions, such as depression, which is believed to have a cyclical relationship with politics wherein depressive symptoms may limit an individual's ability to participate in the political process (Landwehr & Ojeda, 2021; Ojeda & Slaughter, 2019). Because grief often manifests itself with similar symptoms, these studies provide insight into the detrimental effects of political grief and the dangers of its suppression. With varying experiences of grief as a whole, the present study aims to provide insight into:

RQ1: How is individuals' experience and processing of political grief similar to or different from traditional grief?

Social Identity Theory (SIT)

The present study uses Social Identity Theory (SIT) as a grounding framework upon which the interview and subsequent analysis is formed. Social Identity Theory considers the various ways in which one's identity in relation to group membership plays a role in their actions and view of self (Tajfel & Turner, 2004). For the purposes of this study, I will be focusing on the following aspects of SIT:

Group Identification

Group Identification refers to the extent to which an individual's identification with their ingroup affects their response to social identity threats (Saleem & Ramasubramanian, 2019; Tajfel & Turner, 2004). This becomes increasingly important for the study at hand due to the inextricable ways in which one's identity is tied to their political views, and vice versa. Between identity-based and issue-based ideology in America, identity-based elements tend to produce more heightened levels of affective polarization against the outgroup (Lilliana, 2018).

Avoidance

Avoidance describes the tendency for individuals to distance themselves from the out-group by disassociating from its members and its characteristics, which can limit opportunities for dialogue. Studies have found that minority groups may distance themselves from the out-group in order to avoid judgement and maintain a positive social identity (Tajfel & Turner, 2004). Furthermore, political polarization makes disagreements common yet unavoidable, complicating these dynamics. Contrary to the loss of a loved one, the validity of one's political grief is often contested, minimized, and dismissed. This added context may make individuals even more cautious about disclosing it, especially to those with opposing views. When considering how group ties might encourage sharing or how avoidance prevents it, the present study aims to explore:

RQ2: What influences an individual's decision to disclose their grief with those who disagree with them politically?

Expressions of Grief

The expression of grief can provide both insight into the grieving process and produce actualized benefits for the bereaved. Expressing emotions can help individuals feel better by reducing emotional distress and fostering psychological well-being through social connection and validation (Pennebaker et. al., 1997). Bereavement research acknowledges the importance of talking about grief generally. Yet, the study at hand explores more deeply:

RQ3: What are positive and negative outcomes of communicating political grief?

Methods

Sample

The entirety of the sample was comprised of undergraduate students. Participants' ages range from 18-22 years old. In order to be eligible, participants had to be somewhat aware of politics, in the sense that they have actively engaged with political discourse or activities at least once in their life.

Individuals were recruited using the SONA research pool at the University of California, Santa Barbara (UCSB) Department of Communication, as well as from the community through a snowball sampling method of sharing advertisements over social media. Individuals recruited through SONA (n = 10) were compensated with 1 unit of research credit while those from the community (n = 18) received a \$20 electronic Amazon gift card.

Of the interview participants, 18 identified as cisgender females and 10 identified as cisgender males. Participants could identify as more than one race, so the following percentages add up to more than 100 percent. Overall, 36% of participants identified as East Asian (Chinese, Japanese, Korean, etc.), 32% identified as Caucasian (White/of European ancestry), 25% identified as Hispanic/Latino/Chicano/Puerto Rican, 11% identified as South Asian (Indian, Pakistani, etc.), 11% identified as Bi-racial/Mixed/Multicultural/Multi-racial, 7% identified as Black American, and 7% identified as Middle Eastern or North African.

In regards to political affiliation, 82% of the sample identified as Democratic, 7% identified as Independent, and 11% identified as Something else. Similarly, regarding political ideologies, 75% of participants identified as Liberal, 18% identified as Moderate, and 7% identified as Something else. Of these participants, 11% characterized themselves as Slightly interested in politics, 36% were Moderately interested in politics, 46% of participants identified as Very interested in politics, and the remaining 7% identified as Extremely interested in politics.

Procedures

I engaged in a qualitative study to examine participants' experiences with political grief. The study included a brief form followed by an in depth interview, conducted over zoom. Participants were asked to complete a brief questionnaire on Qualtrics that asked basic demographic information (Appendix A) and contained the consent form. Secondly, participants were reached out via email to schedule an appointment for an interview. Each interview was conducted and recorded through Zoom and lasted approximately 30-60 minutes. Participants were asked questions about their experiences with political grief in relation to this past election and asked to reflect on past conversations with others pertaining to their political grief. If more information was needed to answer the question in full or if it seemed as though the participant was withholding information, the interviewer probed through follow up questions.

Data Collection and Analysis

Individuals signed up for an interview time slot with the researcher and were scheduled to attend a recorded zoom call about their experiences with political grief. Participants were asked to read and sign informed consent forms prior to the interview and report basic demographic information. Participants were notified that the interview would be recorded for later analysis. Interview questions are presented in Appendix B. Audio from the interviews were transcribed using Otter.ai, an online artificial intelligence transcription software. The transcripts underwent preliminary cleaning where it was checked for accuracy before being imported into Atlas.ti for analysis. All identifying information was removed from the transcripts during this step. Transcripts were coded descriptively using Atlas.ti, an online software used for qualitative data analysis. Codes were then grouped together and sorted into theoretically similar categories and subcategories to identify emerging themes.

Tracy's (2018;2020) phronetic iterative analysis was used to analyze the interviews for overarching themes. As the sole researcher conducting the interviews, transcribing, and analysis, I was able to draw comparisons between interviews and identify emerging themes that would repeatedly appear. During the data immersion phase, each transcript was read multiple times, which allowed me to check the interviews for any errors that occurred during the audio recording process and make corrections as well as garner a strong familiarity and understanding of the transcripts. Each transcript was read at least twice in full during this process. Following this, the transcripts underwent primary cycle coding, in which codes descriptively identified components of the interviews and marked them using Atlas.ti. At the conclusion of this phase, the interviews underwent secondary/axial coding in which the first order codes were sorted into theoretically similar categories and later collapsed into themes. The main themes that pertained to the research questions at hand are outlined in Figures 1-3.

Results

Overall, the interview data suggests that political grief manifests itself in the same way as more traditional forms of grief in terms of the individual experience. However the communication of this grief and subsequent outcomes of that communication differ. The conversation data elicited several themes (see Figures 1 to 3) that will be explored in detail below. The first theme, ***Experience of Political Grief***, addresses RQ1 which asks: How is individuals' experience and processing of political grief similar to or different from traditional grief? This theme explores the emotions that one experiences in relation to traditional grief losses and compares them to the emotions that one experiences in relation to politics, specifically tied to the 2024 presidential election results.

The second theme, ***Strength of Relationship Affects Willingness to Share***, refers to RQ2 which asks: What influences an individual's decision to disclose their grief with those who disagree with them politically? This theme, informed by Social Identity Theory, uncovers an interesting inverse relationship between the strength of one's relationship and one's willingness to share their political grief with a member of the outgroup.

The last two themes refer to RQ3 which asks: What are positive and negative outcomes of communicating political grief? The third theme, ***Redundancy Leads to Burnout***, reveals how conversations involving political grief can have negative outcomes when repetitive and redundant. The

fourth theme, ***Additive Conversations are Productive***, conversely explores how added insight and perspective make conversations involving political grief productive and meaningful for individuals.

Experience of Political Grief

There was a wide variety of emotions that constituted how an individual experienced grief. Many individuals within the interviews discussed losses of loved ones (parents, grandparents, family pets), losses of relationships, or losses of opportunity (college admissions decisions, job opportunities, impacts of Covid19). When describing their grief experiences, for example the death of a loved one, participants often cited feelings of deep sadness, disbelief, and disconnectedness.

5F: "I felt deep, deep sadness... disbelief, sadness and then a bit of almost out of body separation"

18M: "It was hard. It was very fast...So I felt very disconnected. I mean, it was harder for me to process that, personally"

When describing their emotions in relation to the 2024 presidential election, they described feeling almost the exact same way, with participants noting shock, deep sadness, and dissociation as the main emotions experienced.

5F: "The next day it was still definitely just like like a shock and also a deep sadness"

18M: "I feel like the whole day it kind of felt like everyone was removed, kind of like a... like a dissociation feeling"

The individual experience of political grief is fundamentally similar to traditional grief. Throughout the conversations, individuals cited direct parallels between their grief with the election and feelings associated with traditional grief. Whether it be the loss of rights, opportunity, or a vision of the future, participants used language that directly related to loss and grief when describing their experiences with the election.

15M: "The whole election thing... was just very hard to wrap my brain around. It did definitely feel like a loss... a loss of my rights... a communal loss."

4F: "I was sad for what directly went on also for what could have been and all of the great things that I wasn't going to be able to experience, whether that's like the loss of a loved one and all of the times that like we're not going to be able to have... in addition to the actual loss of the person. And so with the election, I was upset... at what we could have had and like all of the change that could have been done."

Political grief can then be recognized as a more valid form of grief due to the ways in which the experience of political grief directly mirrors the same emotions as those associated with more traditional forms, such as the loss of a loved one. Participants also cited moving through and processing their emotions in a similar way. With both traditional and political grief, they mentioned journaling, internally processing, and talking to others as the main ways they processed their grief.

17F: "I talked a lot to my mom about it... And then I kind of started trying to get back into the things that I was doing before... I journaled a lot... and I tried to get out of the grief."

35F: "Well, I definitely cried. And it was a very hard couple of days after that but I relied on my best friend and my mom. And I just didn't think about it for a little bit in order to process those feelings... I took a break and a step back for a tiny bit."

This consistency across participants suggests a shared emotional coping framework, regardless of whether the grief was rooted in personal or political experiences. These coping strategies highlight the importance of both internal and external processes in navigating complex emotions, which remain consistent across both traditional and political forms of grief.

Strength of Relationship Affects Willingness to Share

When looking specifically at conversations with those who disagree with them politically, the data revealed that in the context of politics there is actually an inverse relationship between relational strength and willingness to share. When participants reflected on conversations with someone with low relational strength, they expressed a greater willingness to express their political grief and disagreement.

36F: “We're never going to see each other again...So I want to make those connections outside of just making long-lasting friendships, you know you just want to talk to people who differ from you”

However, when considering relationships with high relational strength, participants described more hesitation and unwillingness to share their negative emotions.

7F: “If it's a relationship that I have to maintain... and I disagree with them, I'm more likely to not talk about it...Like my friend, she lives with me...I'm not going to get into a huge blowout fight with her.”

1F: “It's hard, especially when the only conservatives I know are in my family because it's hard to separate politics from family. I think it'd be easier to approach it with a stranger because I don't have an emotional tie to them.”

This finding indicates that when individuals are experiencing these intense, deep negative emotions relating to politics, they would rather reach out to strangers than turn to those closest to them.

Redundancy Leads to Burnout

Individuals cited that conversations involving political grief can have both positive or negative outcomes. On one hand, when conversations become redundant, sharing political grief may exacerbate negative feelings and increase burnout and conversation aversion.

41M: “I feel like there's not much to be gained by everyone sitting in a circle like let's all talk about how we don't like Trump. I've done that. You've done that. We've all done that. I've done it enough... I'm tired.”

35F: “My one issue with talking about politics is like, I don't think that they're productive. I think it's very hard to have a productive conversation when you're in a bubble. Because I share the same opinions as most of the people who I talk to, whatever they're saying, it's nothing I haven't heard before. It's kind of redundant, which is one of the reasons why I kind of avoided talking about the election after results were in just because like whatever was going to be said I probably already have heard it.”

Redundant conversations can interrupt the grief healing process and lead to burnout and even boredom. This highlights how repetitive or stagnant conversations about political grief can exacerbate distress, rather than alleviate it. Participants described feeling emotionally drained and increasingly disillusioned when conversations lacked direction or resolution. Participants expressed how over time, these

conversations led to burnout and a tendency to withdraw from political and emotional conversations altogether.

Additive Conversations are Productive

However, on the other hand, these conversations become a meaningful process when they add insight about others' unique perspectives and experiences—both with those that agree and disagree with them politically.

1F: “That's something I want to work on, like I really do want to get out of my bubble. I deeply value hearing opinions different from mine. ”

32F: “Everyone does have their own unique experiences and perspectives and viewpoints and when you have these conversations... you get that other perspective... I think that's what kind of makes it feel like meaningful to me, is that I'm learning from them and they're learning from me.”

Sharing political grief may exacerbate negative feelings and increase burnout and conversation aversion. However, it becomes a meaningful process when it adds insight about others' perspectives and experiences—both with those that agree and disagree with them politically

Ultimately, conversations involving political grief, where each conversation partner is learning from the other, can shift conversations to be more constructive.

Discussion

These results provide valuable insight regarding how we experience and communicate political grief and highlight nuances in bereavement experiences and expressions that may lead to increased understanding across political divides. By garnering a deeper understanding of how individuals experience political grief, we can work to acknowledge political grief as legitimate emotional labor and foster more empathy in our political conversations. Rather than dismissing these emotions as overreactions or irrational responses, we can begin to recognize them as valid and meaningful expressions of how individuals relate to political realities that shape their lives. We also gain insight on who they share it with. This inverse relationship between relational strength and willingness to share challenges us to create emotional conditions where it feels possible to talk honestly without running the risk of ruining a relationship. Given the higher emotional risk and the deeply personal nature of political grief, this finding reminds us of the importance of trust, safety, and empathy when approaching these kinds of conversations. By understanding what makes the outcome of a conversation involving political grief positive or negative for individuals, it also provides insight on what might make them want to have more conversations. In this case, what makes people want to have more conversations involving political grief is not simply the need to vent or confirm their beliefs, but a desire to gain added knowledge, insight, and perspective.

Whether it be through the media (Kutlu, 2018) or through our day to day conversations (Larrosa-Fuentes, 2020), communication is central to the existence and execution of politics. We can take this knowledge and use it to inform our political conversations. By validating emotional responses like

political grief, encouraging learning-oriented conversations, and creating spaces that balance safety with openness, we can build a more empathetic and constructive political culture.

Limitations and Future Research

Despite the diversity in race, ethnicity, gender, and educational focus, the scope and generalizability of the results is limited to a narrow population. Future research would benefit from widening this sample and exploring the political grief experiences of a more diverse population. For example, it would be valuable to source data from other colleges or a different age bracket. Moreover, a large portion of the sample self-identified as Democratic and Liberal. While this was extremely beneficial to explore given the results of the 2024 Presidential Election, subsequent studies might delve deeper by asking Republican or Conservative individuals to reflect on their experiences from a past election or political outcome.

The present study focused primarily on how individuals experience political grief, how they express their grief with those who both share and conflict in political values, and what makes these conversations positive or negative experiences for individuals. Future research could delve more deeply into the specific expressions of grief and political grief experiences, potentially looking more closely at what specific language or non-verbals participants express within these conversations. The same concepts explored within this study may open the door to more research pertaining to how grief is experienced in other contexts.

Within the interviews, some individuals noted how political events appearing on their social media feeds exacerbated feelings of grief. They also pointed to social media as some of the ways they chose to express and share their grief with those around them. It may be valuable to touch on the role that media plays in the larger scheme of the experience, expression, and outcomes of political grief. Nowadays, the media are playing an increasingly significant role in politics, influencing the ways in which it exists, functions, and spreads. Research in political grief, and bereavement research as a whole, would benefit largely from exploring these areas so that we may be more well equipped to navigate these difficult and complex emotions in an ever changing world.

Figure 1

Theme #1: Experience of Political Grief

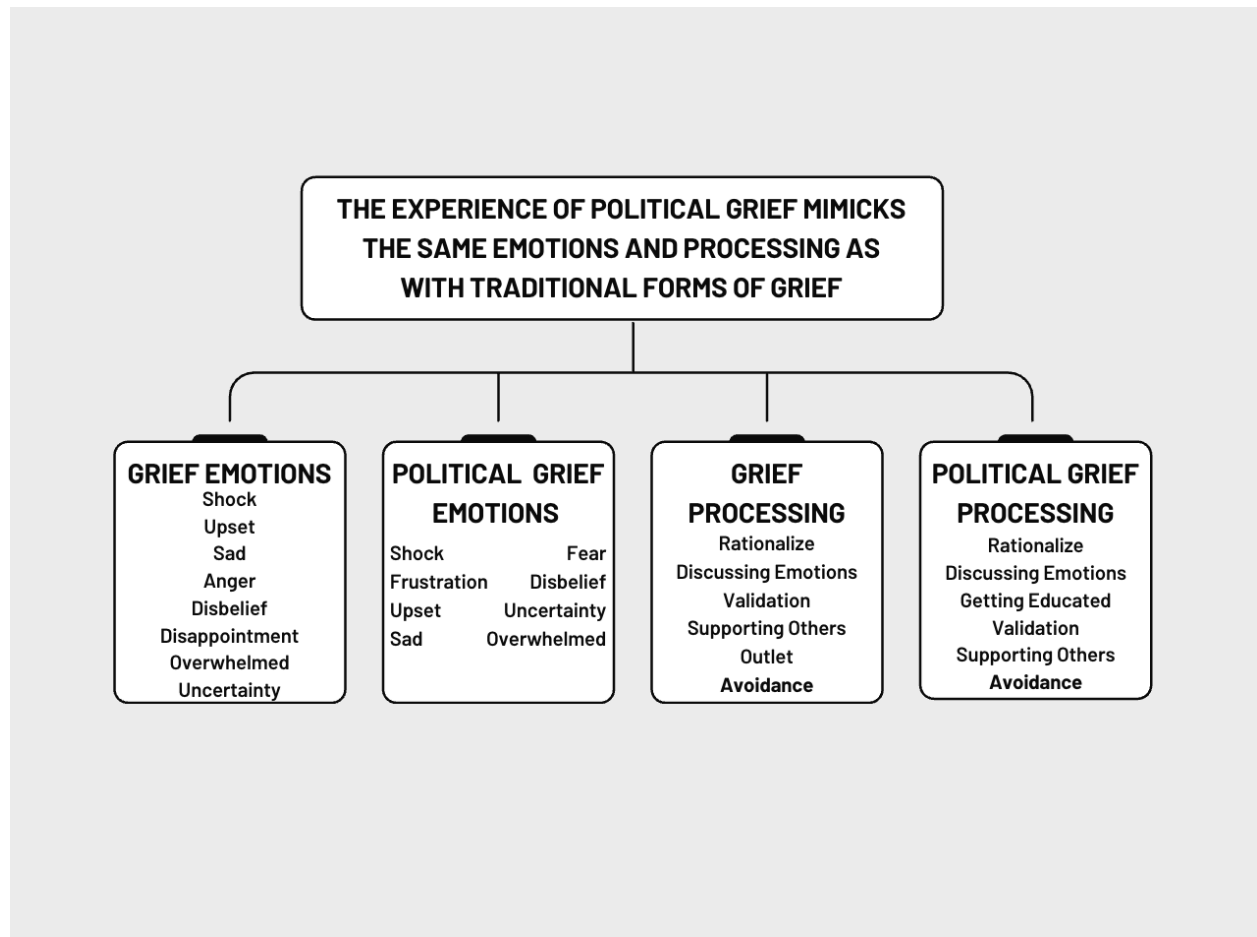


Figure 2

Theme #2: Strength of Relationship Affects Willingness to Share

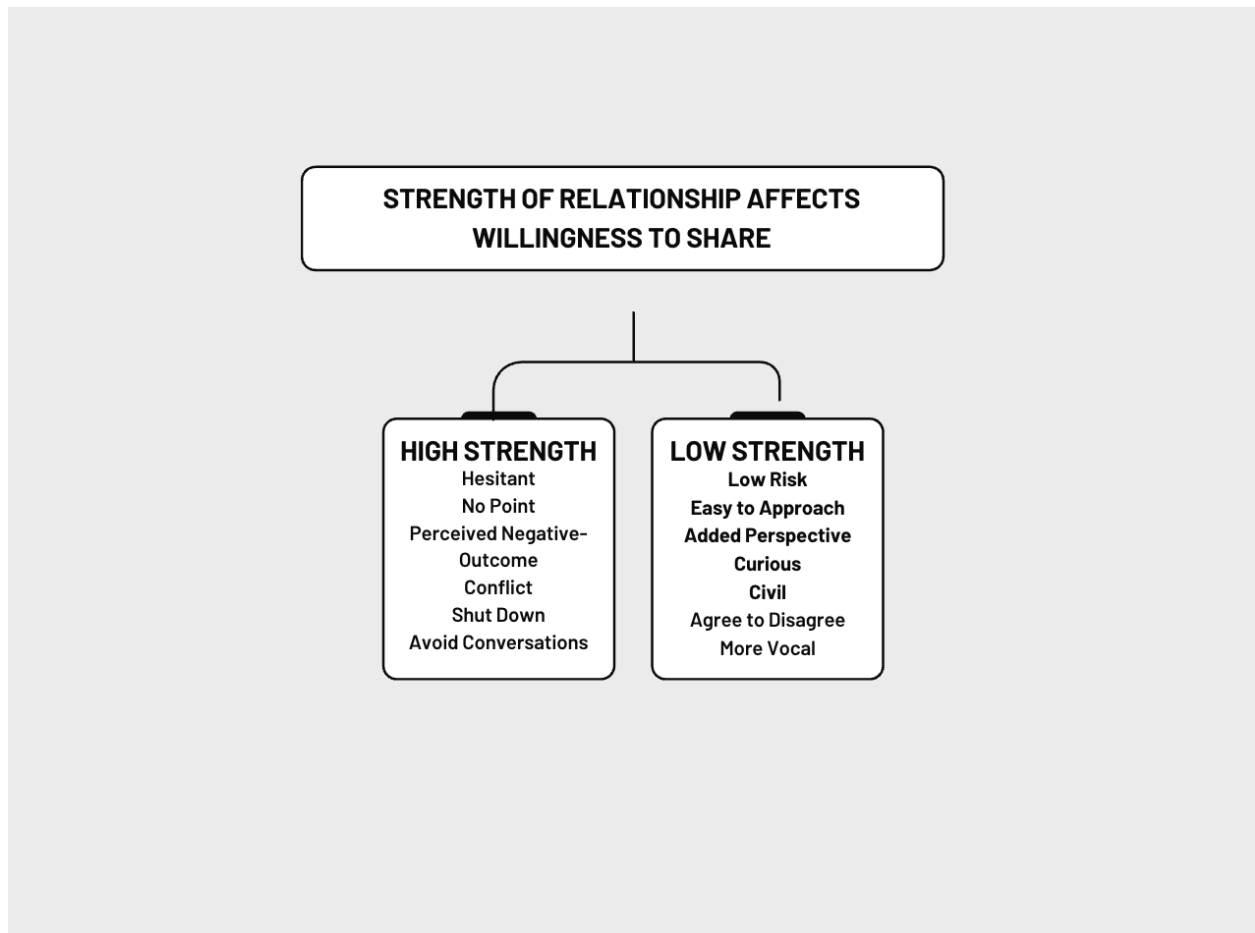
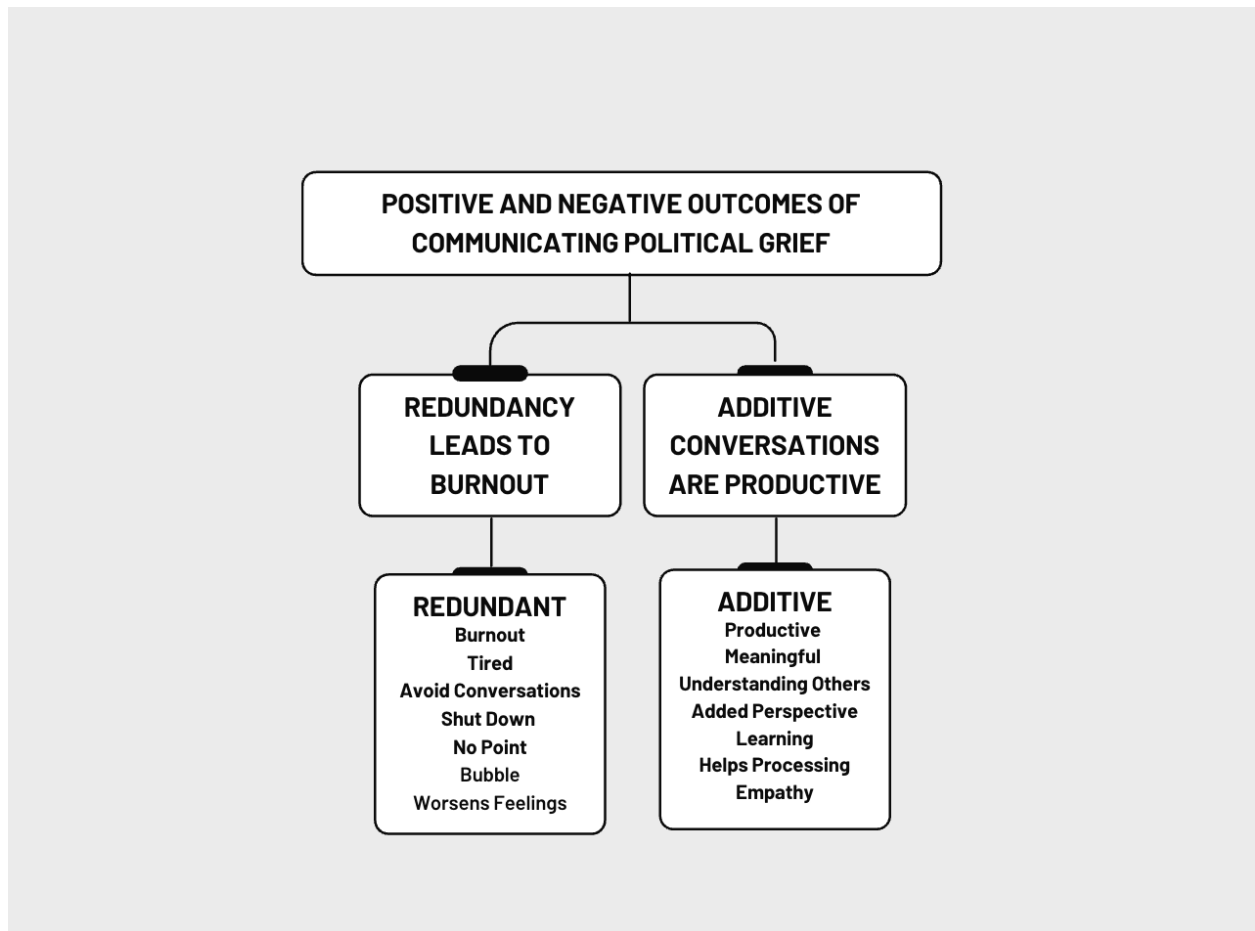


Figure 3

Themes #3 & #4: Redundancy Leads to Burnout and Additive Conversations are Productive



Appendix A: Qualtrics Survey

Demographic Questionnaire

- 1) Please indicate your sex assigned at birth:
 - a) Female
 - b) Male
 - c) Other
 - d) I prefer not to answer this question
- 2) Please indicate your gender identity:
 - a) Woman/Female
 - b) Man/Male
 - c) Another gender identity (with open-ended response box)
 - d) I prefer not to answer this question
- 3) Please indicate your race or ethnicity (select all that apply)
 - a) Caucasian (White/of European ancestry)
 - b) Black American
 - c) Black Non-American (e.g., African, West Indian, etc.)
 - d) East Asian (Chinese, Japanese, Korean, etc.)
 - e) South East Asian (Cambodian, Laotian, Vietnamese, etc.)
 - f) South Asian (Indian, Pakistani, etc.)
 - g) Pacific Islander (Filipino, Samoan, etc.)
 - h) Hispanic/Latino/Chicano/Puerto Rican
 - i) Bi-racial/Mixed/Multicultural/Multi-racial
 - j) Middle Eastern or North African
 - k) None of the above
- 4) What is your major of study?
 - a) (open-ended response box)
- 5) Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as a Republican, a Democrat, an Independent, or another political affiliation?
 - a) Republican
 - b) Democrat
 - c) Independent
 - d) Something else
 - e) I prefer not to answer this question
- 6) Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as Liberal, Conservative, Moderate, or another political ideology?

- a) Liberal
- b) Conservative
- c) Moderate
- d) Something else
- e) I prefer not to answer this question

7) How interested are you in politics?

- a) Not at all interested
- b) Slightly interested
- c) Moderately interested
- d) Very interested
- e) Extremely interested

Appendix B: Interview Questions

Instructions: Thank the participant for agreeing to participate in the interview. Let them know that they are being recorded and that these interviews are confidential.

Election: First, I want to talk about your campus after the election.

1. Can you describe what campus felt like?
2. What about your personal experience, what was that like? What kinds of emotions did you feel in response to the election?
3. What kinds of conversations did you have with others on campus?
4. Are there times when you choose not to share your feelings about politics? What influences this decision?

Grief: Now I'm going to ask you a few general questions about grief.

1. Can you describe a time where you experienced disappointment, loss, or grief?
2. Have you ever felt this way with regard to politics?
3. How did this experience affect your emotions, thoughts, and actions? Why do you think this situation affected you in this way?

FOR THOSE WHO EXPERIENCE GRIEF

Communication with Like-Minded Individuals:

1. Who do you typically talk to about these sorts of things? Can you give an example of a specific conversation or interaction?
2. How do people typically respond?

Communication with Those Who Disagree:

1. Do you share your emotions/grief about the election with them? Why or why not? How do you approach the topic? Can you share a specific example?
2. What kinds of responses do you typically get from them?

FOR THOSE WHO DON'T EXPERIENCE GRIEF

Communication with Those Who Disagree:

3. Tell me what it was like when you saw others experience negative emotions or grief. How do you feel when other people express their political grief/negative emotions toward the election with you? Can you share an example? How is it different when they align or differ from your political values?
4. Do you share your emotions/feelings about the election with those who feel differently about the election? Why or why not? How do you approach the topic? Can you share a specific example?
5. What kinds of responses do you typically get from them?

BOTH

Comparative and Nuanced Dynamics:

1. Do you feel like these interactions help you process your emotions?
2. Are there any patterns or strategies you notice in how you express yourself in each group?
3. How does the nature of the relationship (e.g., friend, family member, colleague) affect the way you share your political grief?
4. In your experience, what helps make these conversations more productive or meaningful?

Closing and Insights:

1. How do you feel these conversations, whether with like-minded or opposing individuals, affect your overall experience of political grief?

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