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Mediated Contact with Politicians and Citizens' Experiences of Democracy

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Abstract: In contemporary society, democracy is increasingly experienced through media rather than direct political engagement. Since people constitute the core of democracy, their perceptions of it matter for the functioning of democratic societies. Rooted in the constructivist paradigm and utilising interviews and focus groups, this study explores how mediated contact with politicians influences experiences of democracy. The findings show that such encounters are interpreted in ways that construct politicians as distant and problematic, generating affective responses like

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shame and disappointment. These responses are associated with shifts in trust and with citizens distancing themselves from democratic participation.

Keywords: mediation, democracy, affect, trust, Estonia

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Contact médiatisé avec les politiciens et expériences démocratiques des citoyens

Résumé: Dans la société contemporaine, la démocratie est de plus en plus vécue à travers les médias plutôt que par un engagement politique direct. Les citoyens étant au cœur de la démocratie, leur perception de celle-ci est déterminante pour le bon fonctionnement des sociétés démocratiques. S'inscrivant dans le paradigme constructiviste et s'appuyant sur des entretiens et des groupes de discussion, cette étude examine comment le contact médiatisé avec les responsables politiques influence le vécu de la démocratie. Les résultats montrent que ces rencontres sont interprétées de manière à présenter les politiciens comme distants et problématiques, suscitant des réactions affectives telles que la honte et la déception. Ces réactions sont associées à une érosion de la confiance et à un désengagement des citoyens vis-à-vis de la participation démocratique.

Mots-clés : médiation, démocratie, contact médiatisé, affect, confiance

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Introduction

Democracy as a concept emphasises the significance of the people. For instance, Held (2016) defines democracy as "a form of government in which, in contradiction to monarchies and aristocracies, the people rule" (p. 1). Carpentier and Wimmer (2024) further describe the core elements of democracy and its conditions of possibility. The former include, among others, representation and participation as well as a political community, while the latter require non-passive people and a democratic culture. The people figure in both categories not only as a group to be ruled but also as active participants in the construction and maintenance of democracy. As Dahlgren (2009) explains, "[w]hile the formal institutions and processes of democracy are essential, not least the state itself, these structures and processes need to be populated by real-life people with democratic inclinations" (p. 104).

However, these inclinations are not inherent; rather, they are developed through a combination of social and cultural contexts. Important actors in these contexts are media institutions which influence citizens' perceptions of public issues and the legitimacy of democratic processes through their narratives, journalistic practices, and representational modes. Increasingly, digital platforms and algorithmic systems have emerged as central arenas where attitudes toward democracy are negotiated, contested, and reshaped, often amplifying both democratic engagement and withdrawal (Lorenz-Spreen et al., 2023).

In this complex environment of democratic knowledge construction, most democratic processes and information about them are not directly accessible to the public. Therefore, democracy, like any social process, and representative democracy in particular, requires mediation (Hofmann, 2019). Existing research on the relationship between media and democracy has extensively examined how media influence democratic knowledge, behaviour, and trust (e.g., Grecu et al., 2025). However, less attention has been paid to how citizens subjectively experience democracy through mediated encounters with politicians as the democratic powerholders and how they construct meaning about these experiences. Therefore, to better understand the role of mediation in people's relationship with democracy, we ask the following research questions:

RQ1: How do people interpret mediated contact with politicians?

RQ2: How do people construct their experiences of democracy by interpreting mediated contact with politicians?

1. Mediation and Mediated Contact

The relationship between media and democracy is complex and can be understood as a mutually influential and contingent interconnection between two co-evolving areas (Berg & Hofmann, 2021). This view challenges the idea that media technology transformations have a one-way, linear effect on democratic developments or vice versa. Instead, it maintains that social processes are contingent and always mediated by technology; therefore, developments in and of democracy are always interconnected with developments in media and communication (Hofmann, 2019).

In a wide sense, mediation is "the act of transmitting something through the media" (Couldry, 2008, p. 7), but, more substantially, it is also an everyday element of communication, "a transformative process in which the meaningfulness and value of things are constructed" (Silverstone, 2002, p. 761). This means that mediation is a part of constructing knowledge about reality. Dahlgren (2018) argues that knowledge should not be regarded merely as a static repository of facts or data, but rather as a dynamic process. He stresses that knowledge is "the integration of new information with people's existing frames of reference - including not least lived experience - to further extend or modify those frames, including even possibly identity aspects" (p. 21). In this sense, new knowledge acquired, for instance, via media combines with prior knowledge, lived experience, worldviews, and social context, in the subjective construction of lived reality. In the process of mediation, this intrapersonal construction process combines with that of media institutions. Silverstone (2002) explains that mediation is "the fundamentally, but unevenly, dialectical process in which institutionalised media of communication … are involved in the general circulation of symbols in social life" (p. 762). These processes then "change the social and cultural environments that support them as well as the relationships that

participants, both individual and institutional, have to that environment and to each other" (Silverstone, 2005, p. 189).

Considering this dialectical process, in this study, we focus specifically on the perspectives of the people who constitute media audiences, as people's engagement, trust, knowledge, and participation are some of the conditions that make democracy possible (Carpentier & Wimmer, 2024). Setting aside normative ideals and related concerns to examine the relationships people have with actually existing democracy (Fraser, 1990), we explore how people's experiences of democracy are influenced by their interpretations of mediated contact with politicians.

Politicians are key participants in democratic environments, especially in the public spheres (Bruns, 2023) of representative democracies. They constitute a social minority with whom most people have little or no direct contact; they are mainly encountered via media. This distance between people and their representatives can lead to a social dynamic in which politicians are perceived as the Other. Not only are politicians mainly encountered via media, but they are also often portrayed critically. The news media tend to focus on the negative as problems and conflicts are considered more newsworthy (Müller, 2020). At the same time, when politicians broadcast themselves, it might not be received favourably (Kelm, 2020), unless the audience agrees with them (Hassell et al., 2025). Politicians can be perceived as an outgroup for the worldviews they hold (Harteveld, 2021) and how these are shown in media (Kim et al., 2023), but also because they are often seen as divorced from the everyday realities of common people (Allen & Sarmiento-Mirwaldt, 2015) and, therefore, seen as not necessarily fit to govern them (Noordzij et al., 2021). Furthermore, unfavourable mediation of individual politicians can increase negative attitudes towards other politicians who are seen as members of the same outgroup (Jacobs & van der Linden, 2018).

As politicians are the political powerholders in representative democracies, perceptions of them can also reflect perceptions of the democratic system and democracy itself more generally. A media-supported negative perception of the political culture and the feeling that democracy is not working as it should can further contribute to distrust, citizen passivity, and even the questioning of the system's legitimacy, thereby threatening the core components of democracy (Carpentier & Wimmer, 2024).

2. Affective Experiences of Mediated Democracy

The act of consuming, engaging with, and interpreting media entails cognition, affect, and behaviour. The same goes for engaging with and participating in democracy. Complementing and complicating the idea of a rational democracy (Habermas, 1996), affect plays a significant role in shaping people's political and democratic attitudes and actions (Ahmed, 2004). In combination with cognitive elements, like knowledge, interest, and efficacy (Nai, 2022), it is a factor in experiences such as opinion

formation (Kim, 2014), voting, or protesting (Bettarelli et al., 2024). More specifically, various discrete emotions have been shown to influence both individual and collective democratic mindsets and behaviours. For instance, anger can increase participation (Weber, 2013), while anxiety heightens attention and information-seeking (Romanova & Hutchens, 2024). Among positive emotions, joy, inspiration, and hope are some that have the potential to motivate political action (van Zomeren, 2021). While not the only factors, emotions have a significant part in the human experience of being a citizen.

Beyond the specific emotions mentioned above, less is known about other emotional responses to politics. Two closely related emotions pertinent to this study are embarrassment and shame. While some literature suggests that being ashamed of politicians may move people to engage with others on political matters (Wolak & Sokhey, 2022), there is not much research to suggest the kind of impact this emotion can have on citizens' perceptions and behaviour. However, the nature of this emotion does imply a negative perception that may contribute to distrust, disappointment, and distancing from that which people are embarrassed by and what they associate with it.

These unfavourable feelings can be directed at individuals and groups. A widely studied phenomenon is affective polarisation (Renström et al., 2021), in which intergroup tensions are not only caused by rational disagreement, but also by affective dislike, while ingroup ties are, conversely, strengthened. Although affective polarisation has been viewed as a problem for democracy (Harteveld & Wagner, 2023), it has also been shown to increase democratic and mainly electoral participation (Lubej et al., 2025). What is more, members of political parties and especially their leaders appear to be the objects of affective polarisation as well as mobilising agents (Ferreira da Silva & Garzia, 2025), exemplifying the influence of political personalities and cultures on citizens' attitudes and behaviour. However, less is known about intergroup tensions between citizens and politicians as groups in themselves, regardless of ideological affiliations, and its effects on people's democratic engagement, empowerment, and trust.

In fact, trust is considered a foundational condition for the functioning of democratic societies. As Dahlgren and Hill (2022) note, democracy depends on both vertical trust directed toward institutions of governance and horizontal trust "between citizens who need to work together " (p. 79). The erosion of either undermines democratic functioning: when vertical trust stumbles, cynicism replaces accountability; when horizontal trust declines, social cohesion fractures. Carpentier and Wimmer (2024) argue that democracy presupposes a dynamic interplay between citizens' belief in democratic ideals and their active participation in public life. Both, in turn, require trust in the functioning of the democratic system. However, when citizens feel frustrated or powerless because of their perceptions of politics, their

institutional trust and, therefore, democratic engagement can decline, leading to further feelings of insignificance (Lahusen, 2026).

This relates to the broader question of political legitimacy, which rests, among other factors, on how citizens perceive those who govern (Ananieva & Rozhkova, 2021). Rousseau (1762/2018, Book II, ch. 6) suggests that authority is legitimate only when grounded in the peoples' endorsement: "The people being subject to the laws ought to be their author: that is the only foundation of any legitimate authority". When consent is uncertain, or openly absent, "the government which results from it is not legitimate; it has no right to command, and the citizens have no obligation to obey" (Rousseau, 1762/2018, Book I, ch. 6). Therefore, legitimacy is relational and tied to micro-level factors such as value alignment (Grosfeld et al., 2022) and people's perceptions of the actions and adequacy of the rulers (Lammert & Vormann, 2019).

In contemporary terms, these classical arguments extend to the mediated nature of people's encounters with the political sphere. Since most citizens come into contact with politics through media rather than direct experience, media act as key agents of legitimisation. This includes both decisions made by media institutions and interpretations constructed by audiences. Seen in this light, legitimacy today emerges from the capacity of politicians to gain direct trust, from the media environments through which citizens come to know, evaluate, and accept or reject political authority, and through citizens' own life experiences and lived realities.

Building on the above discussion, this study conceptualises citizens' relationship to democracy as partly emerging from their interpretations of mediated contact with politicians. In contemporary democracies, where direct encounters with political powerholders are rare, such mediated contact is interpreted in relation to individuals' prior knowledge, lived experiences, and social contexts. These interpretations often include a strong affective element, giving rise to emotional responses that influence how politics, political culture, and democracy itself are experienced. In turn, these affective experiences contribute to shifts in trust in politicians, institutions, and fellow citizens, influencing citizens' engagement with democratic processes. This study therefore approaches lived democracy as a subjective process in which mediated contact, interpretation, affect, and trust are interconnected in shaping how democracy is understood and experienced.

3. Methods

This study is rooted in the interpretivist and constructivist framework with a focus on people's subjective perceptions and their own interpretations of their lived experiences. In addition, throughout the research process, we acknowledged and embraced the interpretive role of the researcher.

The data were generated in Estonia in focus groups and interviews. Estonia is a young liberal democracy (Nord et al., 2026) with a high level of press freedom (Reporters Without Borders, n.d.) and high trust in media, especially public service

media (Republic of Estonia Ministry of Culture, 2024). At the same time, trust in institutions involving politicians varies: state government and parliament are trusted significantly less than local governments and the president (Republic of Estonia Government Office, 2025). In socio-demographic terms, Estonia has a large Russian-speaking population that includes citizens of Estonia, people with no citizenship, and citizens of Russia. The studies mentioned above also illustrate the influence of ethnicity and language on political, institutional, and social trust as well as levels of democratic engagement and participation. These features make Estonia a revealing case as it combines high media trust, uneven trust in political institutions, and socially and politically differentiated democratic experiences.

We conducted four focus groups and 14 interviews, with a total of 47 participants. The focus groups were divided by two factors: ages 18-35 and 36+ as well as medium to high and medium to low political interest. The participants' political interest was determined by their answers in the recruitment survey regarding their interest in politics, engagement with political news, and political activities. The interviews were meant to ensure the participation of marginalised groups, so the interviewees represent a variety of ages, genders, ethnicities, and languages. However, despite achieving a level of participant diversity, this study did not reach those strongly disinterested in politics or with very low levels of trust. Moreover, while effective in producing a variety of views and the negotiation of disagreements, group dynamics in focus groups can also lead to self-censorship, especially when discussing sensitive topics (Wutich et al., 2010). Additionally, our groups included more dominant and less active participants. One of the aims of dividing focus groups by interest and age was to have potentially more similar people converse with each other, thus at least somewhat mitigating self-restraint. In contrast, interviews allowed for more in-depth insights from individuals.

The interviews were conducted both online and in person, whereas all focus groups were conducted in person. The focus group participants were recruited by a research agency and constituted a volunteer sample, while the interviews were based on a convenience sample. When participants are quoted in the Results section, they are referred to as codenames that indicate whether they took part in a focus group (FG) or interview (I), which focus group (number 1-4), and their individual identifying letters (e.g., FG1A is participant A from the first focus group, IB is the participant from interview B). Focus groups 1 and 3 had participants from the older age group, 2 and 4 from the younger age group, while groups 1 and 2 represent participants with a higher political interest and groups 3 and 4 lower political interest.

We conducted an abductive reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Thompson, 2022) in NVivo with the aid of visual mapping on the online platform Miro. First, we categorised and subcategorised the data by lump coding (Saldaña, 2021) in accordance with the broad topics of this paper, that is, perceptions of democracy and politics, trust, and mediation. Second, we generated themes (Saldaña, 2021) within and across these categories and subcategories. Finally, we reviewed the themes' internal coherence, external distinctness, analytical adequacy, and relevance

for answering the research questions (Byrne, 2022). Abductive analysis was conducted iteratively by continuously comparing data and theory and recursively moving between the phases of analysis as it progressed, inviting the reinterpretation of data. The reflexive elements of the analysis pertain to searching for meaningfulness in the data in addition to or instead of recurrence and acknowledging the flexibility of the interpretation process (Byrne, 2022).

4. Findings

4.1. *Mediated Contact with Politicians*

Participants discussed the value of media as it allows them to come into contact with others, their views, and their activities. Media were considered especially important as the main source of mediated contact with politicians, but also as a means citizens themselves could employ:

> Media is a form of contact—you get into contact with people; and it doesn't matter if it's propaganda or not; whatever. In a word, you get into contact with people, whoever is reading you, and whether they think along with you or not, it's still a form of contact. So, in this sense, yes, a platform where you can get to certain people and they can take that message in and then it's a two-way thing. What they will think of it is another question. But it's a specific form of contact. (FG2A)

At the same time, direct communication was valued over mediation because it was said to best ensure the verity of the interaction. Interestingly, however, what was considered direct communication sometimes also included mediation. For instance, a reporter interviewing a politician live on a news show or citizens contacting their representatives via phone or email was considered a good way to directly communicate their message or question. Nevertheless, the main sentiment was that media were necessary to "learn about what the politician is doing, or… The politician won't come to you to tell you about it" (FG2D).

Mediation also provides information about different views, about "what has happened or is happening or is going to happen" (IH) in your own country as well as other countries for comparison, and about a general idea of society and culture. Some participants assessed the state of democracy in Estonia by comparing it to other countries, especially the US and its culture and political tactics (Joe Biden and Donald Trump were running for president at the time of data generation), as well as European democracies that Estonia was considered similar to. Moreover, the mediated information about politicians and political culture, which participants were largely critical of, was said to reflect the tendencies in society at large. For instance, by experiencing mediated contact with representatives and seeing them behave in unbecoming ways, participants gauged what was considered acceptable in society.

These results illustrate that mediation and mediated contact play a key role in the construction of knowledge (Dahlgren, 2018) about democracy and society in general.

In a large, complex society, face-to-face encounters with politicians are unlikely for most citizens. Even when contact is subjectively experienced as direct, it can still contain elements of social and technological mediation. As a result, people rely on mediation for the symbols of social life (Silverstone, 2002) that help them form views on democracy and its powerholders.

4.2. *Perceptions of Politicians*

Observing politics through mediation, citizens construct their views of politicians as a social Other. Not only are politicians seen as a physically and culturally distant outgroup, perceptions of them are often unfavourable.

To start, many participants experienced power and powerholders as distant, both physically and mentally. On the one hand, administrative decisions have removed state representatives from smaller places, leaving local residents without contact with the state. As one participant explained, "we were on the fringes of the municipality, in the periphery, and power grew so distant that we no longer even see the municipal mayor—we only hear of him having been to places" (FG1C). On the other hand, politicians as people were also seen as removed from the realities of citizens, as "the perception on the top … of how the world actually works, of how people actually deal with certain situations, tends to get lost" (FG4E).

Even if distant, politicians are still observed and their work followed. However, participants expressed strong dislike towards politicians' behaviour and the political culture they espoused. The deterioration of political culture was frequently mentioned. Communication between politicians was repeatedly called "mudslinging" and their dignity was called into question, with one participant comparing it to "the aggression of a cornered animal" (FG3B). Furthermore, some participants believed that these developments in the Estonian political culture were imported from elsewhere, especially by populist politicians:

> They've seen what has been successful elsewhere and they've copied it. Perhaps it isn't so much about poor upbringing or something like that; perhaps they even practice it in front of a mirror; and perhaps they even feel a bit ashamed of themselves—but they see that it brings results. (FG3G)

In addition to being critical of politicians' behaviour, participants also exhibited discontent with their work. A pronounced opinion was that, in general terms, politicians failed at their duties. This criticism did not contain legal doubt, as several participants shared the sentiment that democratic outcomes needed to be accepted even if they were not to your liking. However, many did say that political parties served their own interests, which could include corruption, that they lacked the knowledge and abilities necessary for their elected and appointed positions, that they broke promises and appeared not to adhere to their worldviews, and that they did not care about the people. With multiple politicians in Estonia having recently switched parties, many participants believed that they would do whatever it takes to secure them a job in politics:

> [Y]ou see how the people just go, they knock, I don't know, but I imagine that they knock and say, I have such a constituency behind me, and I still have a kind of platform who listens to me, and what do you offer me, what kind of post, what kind of salary, what kind of thing. It's so transparent. It creates this kind of mistrust. And then they add some stuff about values and then it creates a kind of complete, kind of... It does create mistrust. (IB)

Even if the legality of political power was not questioned, the relationality of its legitimacy was underlined by the mediated interpersonal and intergroup perceptions (Lammert & Vormann, 2019) that separate politicians from the people and mark them as a problematic Other. Moreover, while discussions of a deteriorating political culture did include explicit mentions of populist politicians and parties, the overall sentiment implicitly applied to most or all politicians, suggesting an extension of perceptions from individuals to the whole outgroup (Jacobs & van der Linden, 2018).

4.3. *Affective Responses*

In addition to shaping opinions on political culture, mediation was also said to generate affective responses that influenced how politics and democracy were viewed. While doubting the capacities of those who were governing in the name of the people, participants often reported experiencing feelings like disappointment and shame.

The dominant theme is that, in the eyes of citizens, political culture has deteriorated to the point that people feel aversion towards it and have difficulties following politics, even when they want to. As one participant explained, "sometimes I think I should listen, it just seems like an educated person should be informed, right. I can't listen to it, I get embarrassed and I rarely get embarrassed" (IB). In fact, shame emerged as a strong affective response:

> [T]here have been several times when I've switched on the TV and tried to watch the broadcast of Riigikogu [parliament of Estonia] Question Time [a regular slot in the parliament schedule when members of parliament can ask questions to ministers of government], and I quickly switch it off again, because it is just embarrassing to watch it. I just feel ashamed and I can't bear it, so I switch it off, even though I'm interested in it, to learn how it proceeds. But I feel ashamed. And I don't know how they're not ashamed of themselves… (FG3B)

This perceived negative political environment also contributes to people's sense of powerlessness. As one participant noted, "that's what invokes this feeling of powerlessness, as you think to yourself, 'Wait a minute, I do not share these values; we do not sling shit at each other!'" (FG3D). Political circumstances were said to create feelings of being left out, unheard, unwelcome, and unable to enact change, experiencing the "disappointment that you get when you've waited for something, voted for some idea that they then begin to implement, but in the end, they still go, 'ah, let's not do it; let's put it aside; let's focus on other things'" (FG4F).

Several participants compared the current political culture to the time in the 1990s when Estonia had regained its independence from the Soviet occupation, and politicians "were dignified… You were in awe of the people who were there, and of what they're doing" (FG3D). Today's politics were also compared to other, more positively viewed political cultures, like in Finland: "Lord, how fierce the Finnish presidential election was. It's like the debate culture, the way people talk to each other … And their parliament is also a place for debate, where things are really discussed and it's interesting to listen" (IB), whereas mediated debates in Estonia were seen by one participant as irritating "bickering" (IC).

These findings indicate that combined with or even despite cognitive elements like interest in politics (Nai, 2022), affect, and specifically negative emotions, is a significant part of the experience of observing politics. In the words of participants, the behaviour of politicians elicits emotions like shame and embarrassment and the dislike of what they see feeds their sense of powerlessness, invisibility, and distrust, affecting their democratic engagement and participation.

4.4. *Trust*

Participants often said that trust was a major factor in citizens being a part of democracy, but it was also frequently difficult for them to define trust or answer whether they had it or not. Nevertheless, many shared that, ultimately, trust was a choice, as no one could ever be fully certain of, for instance, the inner workings of politics and state institutions. Still, many believed that critical thinking necessarily included some level of distrust and, for instance, comparing several media sources to form one's opinion was considered a discerning approach to news consumption:

> Actually, I deliberately look at all the different channels before making a decision. And for Estonian politics—yes, ERR, and even Delfi. But for world news, I go through all the sites. It has happened in the Estonian media several times that, just to get these clicks, they take some news that is actually not news at all, and also misinterpret it. So it's reasonable to constantly doubt everything. Is that okay? I think it is, because that's the only way in the contemporary world. Otherwise you'll fall victim to false information. (FG3A)

When it came to politicians, participants expressed various reasons for trusting or, more often, distrusting them. Some people had a general distrust towards politicians as a whole or towards certain individuals. Others had more specific reasons, like the resident of a town whose administration had a history of known corruption or a non-binary person feeling that as a marginalised person "I don't exist for them" (IA). Yet another participant connected trust to personal experience that came with voting for politicians who did not represent the expected worldviews once they got in power.

Furthermore, distrust towards politicians can be compounded by perceptions of mediation. For instance, a participant said that "it's also a bit about branding—about how politicians or political parties brand themselves, right? One takes on the brand of

being a bawler like that. The other one is more reserved" (FG3I). Distrust in politicians and in media thus intertwine:

> The picture in the media and the other picture don't quite match. When certain politicians call each other idiots in the media, it often turns out that they later went to a party together, or… And the media… Well, take the MEPs in Brussels—they're constantly at each other's throats, but the next media piece shows how they go out to a bar for drinks. Something is different…(FG3E)

Beyond politics, people's trust in politicians can have implications for their trust in their fellow citizens. Multiple participants said that politicians mirrored society, that "it's actually a cross-section of who your neighbours are and who you're living with here in this country" (FG3F). This idea was especially prominent when discussing the deteriorating political culture, as participants found that "[w]e ourselves elected these people" (FG3A). Because elected political representatives are seen as reflections of the wider society, negative perceptions of them can undermine social cohesion and horizontal trust between citizens (Dahlgren & Hill, 2022). Nevertheless, although some participants found that certain elected or appointed politicians were not suitable for their positions, their legality was never questioned, implying a trust in the mechanisms of the democratic system, even if those populating the system inspire distrust.

4.5. *Democratic Consequences*

Evidently, although a certain level of distrust is considered a prerequisite for informed participation and is seen as part of critical thinking (Carpentier & Wimmer, 2024), the levels it has reached for many citizens, in combination with negative subjective experiences, are contributing to democratic disengagement.

Although study participants said that everyone should be able to participate in democracy, even though it is not mandatory for everyone all the time, they conceded that many people did not or did not want to participate. Speaking of themselves, they claimed that negative perceptions, feelings, and experiences lead them to distance themselves from politics and democratic participation. One participant was knowledgeable of politics but said that

> I'm the kind of person who has actually pushed politics away, because the whole thing frustrates me very much and I've decided to employ this ostrich method. I just stick my head into the sand and won't listen to it. It's not right, I know. I have someone at home who tries to keep me informed all the time. But it's just that, well, it's a complete circus. And then I'm like, the less I know about it, the better. (FG4E)

Participants expressed concern about their own distancing due to indifference or a sense of powerlessness, but also of its influence on democracy more widely. They connected negative perceptions of political culture to a decline in people's willingness to contribute to politics and governance, as, for instance, one participant suggested

that “It's this low political culture that definitely keeps a lot of sharp pencils out of politics. Eventually it starts to affect who is willing to participate” (IB). At the same time, some also found that participation was, in some ways, ineffective because politicians did not take citizens into account, saying, for instance, “I very much support people standing up for their rights and their opinions. But are those wishes coming true or not? I haven't heard that they've been very fulfilled by what people have been asking for” (ID).

Taken together, these findings suggest that citizens experience negative affective responses to the current political culture which they mainly witness via mediation, leading them to perceive politicians as a distant Other. They connect these responses, which include frustration, shame, and a sense of powerlessness, to democratic disengagement in their own lives and in the society around them.

Conclusion

Contemporary democracies rely on mediation processes (Hofmann, 2019). It is necessary for horizontal and vertical interactions, information exchange, and participation. As people are at the core of democracy (Held, 2016), their perceptions and experiences of it matter for its functioning. Moreover, in a representative democracy, mediation of politicians further affects perceptions of the political sphere, which essentially guides the democratic state. Using qualitative data from Estonia, we explore how people’s perceptions of democracy are influenced by mediated contact with politicians. Rather than proposing a causal model, this study shows how people articulate connections between mediated encounters, affective responses, and democratic engagement in their lived realities.

The data are from Estonia, a highly ranked liberal democracy (Nord et al., 2026) with high levels of media freedom (Reporters Without Borders, n.d.) and trust in media (Republic of Estonia Ministry of Culture, 2024), yet the results illustrate citizens’ concerns and discontent with institutional systems. Therefore, these findings may offer insights into settings where democratic systems are formally strong, but trust in political institutions varies and is largely shaped by mediation. Additionally, while these findings offer nuance, it is clear that the majority of them are about negative perceptions of democracy and politics. This is likely a result of both negativity bias and the research design, so it is important to be mindful of these factors in the interpretation and contextualisation of these findings.

Our findings suggest a process in which mediated contact with politicians is interpreted in ways that construct politicians as distant and problematic, generating affective responses such as shame, frustration, and disappointment. These affective experiences are linked to shifts in trust in politicians, institutions, and fellow citizens, and to forms of distancing from democratic participation. With this, the study contributes to research on mediated democracy by demonstrating not only the role of affect in the construction of democratic experiences, but also of certain emotions directed specifically at political powerholders and how that reflects on perceptions of

democracy in general. More broadly, the study highlights lived experiences and embodied interpretations of democracy in a highly mediated society.

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