

Predicting Deliberative Conversation: The Impact of Discussion Networks, Media Use, and Political Cognitions

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This study explores the meaning and origins of deliberative political conversation, characterized by an openness to political conflict, the absence of conversational dominance, clear and reasonable argument, and mutual comprehension. Adapting McLeod, Scheufele, and Moy's (1999) model of democratic engagement, we posit a series of relationships among discussion networks, media use, political cognition, and public participation. Using two divergent samples—one consisting of 149 adult literacy students and another comprising 130 public forum participants—we test the model's utility as a predictor of deliberative conversation. Structural equation modeling indicates that network characteristics had mixed effects. Print media use and interpersonal discussion tended to enhance deliberative conversation, and television news viewing hindered both the reasonableness of one's arguments and the comprehension of others' views. Taken together, these results suggest that the deliberative quality of public talk has a complex relationship with common predictors of other political communication behavior.

Keywords deliberation, political conversation, political participation, media effects

Over the past two decades, a new wave of scholarship in communication, political science, and philosophy has highlighted the role of citizen deliberation in the democratic process. Contemporary theorists have argued that democracy without regular and meaningful deliberation results in poor public policy and political alienation. As a result, political and social reformers have suggested designing new forums for civic discussion or simply new ways of communicating in existing public spheres (Barber, 1984; Bohman, 1996; Fishkin, 1997; Gutmann & Thompson, 1996; Mendelberg, 2002).

Recent research on deliberation has demonstrated the significance of engaging in face-to-face and online political talk (Delli Carpini, Cook, & Jacobs, 2004). For example, research indicates that conversations among family members, friends, and neighbors can have considerable influence on voting choices (e.g., Huckfeldt & Sprague, 1995), though such conversations are often among only like-minded individuals (e.g., Mutz & Martin,

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We would like to thank Michael Briand, Jim Dillard, David Mathews, Jack McLeod, David Mortensen, and Gina Sapiro for their comments on earlier versions of this article. The data presented herein were collected while the second author was under contract with the Kettering Foundation.

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2001). Just as public forums can bolster political knowledge (Fishkin & Luskin, 1999) and refine opinion (Gastil & Dillard, 1999; Sturgis, Roberts, & Allum, 2005), so can more informal discussions, even in online settings (Price, Cappella, & Nir, 2002). Interpersonal political conversation is also associated with more frequent participation in public forums and other forms of political interaction (Kim, Wyatt, & Katz, 1999; McLeod, Scheufele, & Moy, 1999). In addition, the development of political conversation networks can lead to sustained campaign involvement and political action (Knoke, 1990; Leighley, 1990).

With some exceptions (e.g., Huckfeldt, Johnson, & Sprague, 2004; Price et al., 2002), past research has focused largely on political conversation network variables, such as conversation frequency and network heterogeneity, rather than the nature of the conversations taking place. We investigate the antecedents of deliberative conversation, focusing on how deliberative talk may be systematically related to mediated deliberation and conversation networks. We adapt McLeod, Scheufele, and Moy's (1999) theoretical framework and examine the extent to which the frequency and quality of deliberative conversation is predicted by the same classes of variables underlying participation in public forums and other forms of political engagement. Before introducing and testing the applicability of this model, however, we begin by clarifying the role of informal political talk in participatory democratic theory.

The Role of Deliberative Conversation in Democracy

Historically, definitions of democratic citizenship have varied considerably. However, general conceptions of democratic citizenship maintain that citizens should possess certain types of political knowledge that allow them to discern their interests, assess alternatives to public problems, and vote according to their values and principles. In other words, because democratic citizens welcome the burden of self-government, they must develop habits and capacities conducive to sound political judgment (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996; Gastil, 2000; Mathews, 1994). They can reach sound public judgments by learning relevant facts, considering others' views, and reflecting on both personal and public interests. In other words, citizens arrive at judgments—and influence others' views and actions—through skilled and democratic conversation.

Not all conversations contribute equally to sound political judgment, however. Using Schudson's (1997) terminology, we distinguish problem-solving face-to-face conversation from that which is simply sociable. Whereas social conversation tends to occur between like-minded others and has no real goal, problem-solving conversation is essentially public and can take place among people of different values and backgrounds. In this latter model, speaking to others can generate sound judgment and ultimately lead to good government, which presumably focuses on the common good.

Our study emphasizes the importance of political conversation among citizens. Like others, we acknowledge the need for communication between citizen and policymaker, but communication among citizens must also be appreciated. Citizens have more opportunities to speak with one another about political matters as they are greater in number and have more free time than officials. Thus, the easiest way for citizens to increase the frequency and duration of their political discussions is to turn to fellow citizens. Such conversations are intrinsically valuable as citizens can exchange and enlarge each other's perspectives, thereby leading to more informed, empathic, and reflective judgments. In sum, then, sound political judgment grows out of deliberative conversation, which comprises several dimensions.

Deliberative Conversation

First, deliberative conversations embrace conflict. Although citizens may seek a consensus judgment, they welcome conflicting conceptions of the public good (Burkhalter, Gastil, & Kelshaw, 2002; Cohen, 1989). Optimal collective decisions may exist for many issues, and in such cases, citizens can deliberate to discern the best single policy. At the same time, participants in a deliberative conversation remain open to—and even expect—significant political conflicts among individuals and the groups with which they identify. Moreover, citizens might expect that on some topics, fellow conversants might reject the very notion of a shared public good (Sanders, 1997). Even on such issues, which often have emotional moral implications, deliberation requires participants to remain open to political conflict (Gutmann & Thompson, 1996; Pearce & Littlejohn, 1997).

Though deliberation entails conflict, participants in deliberative conversations disagree without being overbearing or aggressive. Democratic deliberation has an egalitarian and respectful atmosphere and affords each participant an equal and adequate speaking opportunity (Gastil, 1993). Whereas typical conversations can be dominated by individual participants, participants in deliberative discussions resist the urge to impose their own view on other conversants. In deliberative conversations, speakers can make and challenge one another's validity claims. This requires participants to present clear and logical arguments. Though speech need not be sterile and free of metaphors (Sanders, 1997; Thompson & Hoggett, 2001), deliberation is disrupted by unnecessarily vague statements, innuendos, and hidden messages. Logical arguments connect claims to premises and avoid fallacies and contradictions. By contrast, deceptive statements, unreasonable claims, and evidence-free arguments interfere with the deliberative process (Gastil, 1992; Makau & Marty, 2001).¹

Finally, deliberative speech is complemented with careful, considerate listening (Burkhalter et al., 2002). That is, listeners make certain that they understand the gist of what is uttered and try to consider the speaker's arguments and perspective. When a conversation is truly deliberative, participants emerge from it with a clearer understanding of the reasons and values underlying opposing points of view. This emphasis on respect and listening is a corrective to the strictly rationalist, argumentative account of deliberation, which can downplay the importance of plurality, cultural differences, and perspective taking (Benhabib, 1992, 2002).

In sum, deliberative political conversation is an inclusive problem-solving process that provides opportunities for citizens to reach meaningful judgments on public issues. This process is characterized by an openness to conflict, nondominance, the use of clear and logical argument, and mutual comprehension. Though a single conversation rarely resolves a political disagreement, over time ongoing, deliberative political conversation can contribute to the democratic process by improving the sophistication of the public's judgments, which ultimately influence the policy-making process.

Antecedents to Deliberative Conversation

Given this conceptual definition of deliberative political conversation, we examine the antecedents of deliberative conversation. Though deliberation is a distinct form of political engagement, it does share much in common with other forms of political activity, such as writing a letter to a representative, working in a campaign, and even voting. After all, deliberation is often oriented toward articulating a point of view on an issue or selecting a candidate for office. Thus, it is plausible that some of the same predictors of other forms of political participation may also prove to be antecedents of deliberative conversation.

Though traditional disciplinary boundaries have divided political participation research into separate bodies of literature, recent efforts have begun to integrate the various demographic, social, and psychological approaches. Verba, Scholzman, and Brady (1995) provide a fairly comprehensive model of those factors leading to acts of political participation. Their civic voluntarism model identifies demographics, preadult experiences (e.g., activities in high school), institutional involvement, resources, time, and interest as antecedents to acts that include “formal” acts (Steinberger, 1984) such as voting, donating money, signing a petition, and contacting an elected official. Similarly, Nie, Junn, and Stehlik-Barry (1996) posit that education spurs democratic citizenship, by developing verbal proficiency and stronger social networks. Though the present study does not foreground demographic variables, we include these measures as controls.

In sum, past research shows that an array of factors explains the variation in different forms of public political participation. Although examinations of these various forms emphasize different factors (often depending on the researcher’s discipline), a model already exists that can bring together these diverse predictors into a coherent set of hypothesized relationships about the antecedents of deliberative conversation. Specifically, McLeod et al. (1999) developed a model that brought together conversation networks, media use, political knowledge, and cognitions to predict both conventional political participation and speaking at a public forum.

For instance, research indicates that social interaction grounded in group membership (Olsen, 1972; Verba & Nie, 1972), community integration (McLeod et al., 1996), and interpersonal networks (Calhoun, 1988) enhances various forms of political participation, including deliberative conversation. Nevertheless, the mere fact that a person belongs to a group or has a large social network does not tell us much about the person’s likelihood of participating in such activities. Rather, one must consider network characteristics, such as heterogeneity, that can affect the frequency and quality of engagement. According to Krassa (1990), heterogeneous networks increase one’s likelihood of confrontation with other members of that network, and perhaps because they are more accustomed to encountering opposing points of view, members of heterogeneous networks may be less intimidated by the idea of speaking out. If, on the other hand, individuals’ decisions to participate in politics are based in part on the likelihood of encountering similar viewpoints (MacKuen, 1990; Mutz & Martin, 2001), then network heterogeneity may have a detrimental effect on the quality of deliberations. Because the size and heterogeneity of one’s network can have complex effects on political discussion (Ikeda & Huckfeldt, 2001; Leighley, 1990), both variables are included in the present study.

Traditional measures of political participation also have been linked to communication, particularly media use. Studies tend to show that newspaper reading enhances participation, whereas television use detracts from it (e.g., McLeod et al., 1996; McLeod & McDonald, 1985). These media effects, however, are not necessarily direct effects. Rather, the relationship between media use and quality of deliberative conversation may be mediated by cognitive variables. After all, newspaper reading has been shown to lead to greater levels of political sophistication or expertise (see Guo & Moy, 1998, for a review). Political experts look for patterns, use deeper representations, spend more time analyzing a problem, have greater self-awareness, have more knowledge, and learn more quickly (Krosnick, 1990). Those who know more also express stronger levels of internal efficacy—the belief that one’s actions have an impact on the system (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996).

In sum, the present study adapts and extends the McLeod et al. (1999) model of local political participation to the study of deliberative conversation. Specifically, we examine

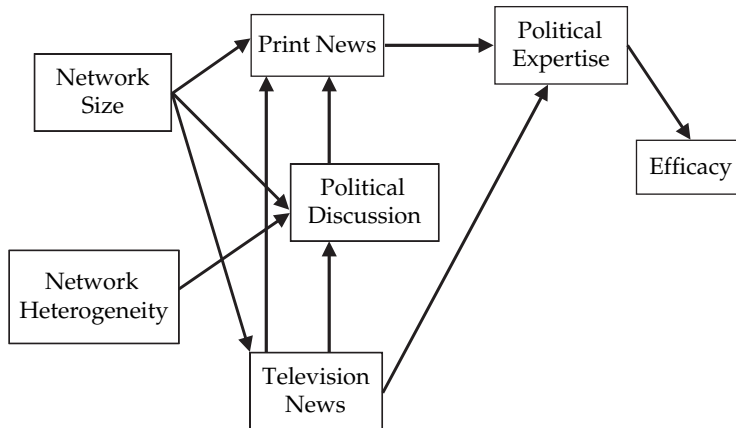


Figure 1. Theoretical model of antecedents to political conversation quality (adapted from McLeod et al., 1999).

the theorized relationships between deliberative conversation and the antecedents noted in Figure 1. The results of this study allow us to understand how various antecedents account for the qualities of deliberative conversation and test the scope of such a model across different subgroups of the U.S. population.

Methods

Participants

We test the proposed model's general validity² by including two samples that represent opposite ends of the spectrum of education, political sophistication, and civic engagement. The first sample tested the model within an educated, politically engaged population. This sample comprised 130 respondents, contacted by study assistants who had originally met them while planning public forums on behalf of the National Issues Forums (NIF) network (Mathews, 1994). NIF events often attract politically knowledgeable and active citizens, many of whom hold college or graduate degrees (Gastil & Dillard, 1999). These participants (hereafter referred to as "the NIF sample") voluntarily completed the survey and mailed it back to the investigators.

The second sample consisted of 149 adult literacy students who received \$10 for completing the questionnaire with the aid of paid English tutors. Each of these respondents was, at the time of the study, enrolled in a course designed to teach basic English reading and writing skills. Students in these courses were generally fluent in spoken English but had limited reading and writing skills. This sample (hereafter referred to as "the literacy sample") was designed to test the model within a relatively less-educated population. This sample represents a population that deliberation practitioners often seek to reach (Gastil & Levine, 2005), and for our purposes it represents a very different slice of the larger public compared to the NIF sample or other conventional survey samples. By including a sample that has only basic literacy skills, it is possible to assess the proposed model's validity for less educated—and likely less politically engaged—citizens.

All study participants received the same basic instructions: an overview of the general purpose of the research; an explanation of scale response, with an example; information

about the answer sheet; and a definition of the word “politics” that encompassed “neighborhood and community affairs (e.g., decisions about a neighborhood watch crime prevention program), local and state concerns (e.g., school board disputes and sales taxes), national issues (e.g., health care, welfare policy, and foreign affairs), and broad cultural and social issues (e.g., civil rights, moral values, and the environment).”³

Criterion Variables: Measures of Deliberative Political Conversation

Respondents’ *willingness or reluctance to engage in political disagreements* was measured with four items derived from Rahim’s (1983) conflict style measures (e.g., “I try to stay away from political disagreements with my peers”). Responses were reverse coded and averaged to create an openness-to-conflict scale ($\alpha = .77$) (see Appendix for complete question wording). To tap other aspects of deliberative conversation, we asked respondents to “recall a recent conversation about a political issue that you have had with a friend or family member.” To enhance recall of the details of the conversation, respondents were instructed to “try to remember the topic of the conversation, what you said, what the other person said, and what you thought and felt. Take a few seconds now to reflect on the conversation.” Following this preface, respondents’ *dominance during political conversation* was measured with two items ($r = .37$), averaged to create a single measure. The *clarity* with which respondents expressed their views during political conversation was measured with four items, averaged to create a single index ($\alpha = .70$). The extent to which respondents used *reason, logic, and evidence* when discussing political issues was measured with three items that were averaged to create a single index ($\alpha = .65$). Respondents’ *understanding of other conversants’ views* was measured with two items that were significantly correlated ($r = .33$); the items were averaged to create a single measure of comprehension.

Antecedent Variables: Networks, Media Use, Knowledge, and Efficacy

Political Conversation Network Characteristics. *Network size* was gauged by asking respondents the number of individuals with whom they regularly discussed politics. *Network heterogeneity* was measured by asking respondents the extent to which they “discussed politics with individuals of the same ethnic, social, and economic background” as themselves. Although heterogeneity certainly is a multifaceted concept, and thus can be measured along different dimensions (e.g., ethnic, social, political), the item used parallels heterogeneity measures used by McLeod et al. (1999). Respondents also were asked to state the *frequency* with which they “talk about political topics with family, friends, neighbors, and coworkers.”

Media Use. Respondents’ *use of print media* was measured with two items dealing with local and national news and editorial sections of the newspaper ($r = .62$); the items were summed to form an index of print media use. Respondents’ *use of television news* was measured with a single item (i.e., “I often watch discussions of community or national issues on the television”).

Political Expertise. Given the multidimensional nature of political expertise and scholars’ belief that of expertise’s many facets, “(political) knowledge seems likely to be the most potent on average” (Krosnick, 1990, p. 157), the survey included eight items asking respondents to state the degree to which they recognized a series of contemporary political

names, terms, or phrases. Responses were averaged to form an index of political expertise ($\alpha = .88$).

Self-Efficacy. Borrowing from Niemi et al. (1991), the survey instrument also included three items tapping internal political efficacy. An index of these items had a reliability coefficient of $\alpha = .68$.

Analytic Procedures

In analyzing the proposed relationships presented in Figure 1, we adopt Jöreskog's (1993) two-step "model generating approach" to run structural equation models. First, an initial model is specified, based not necessarily on specific hypotheses about single paths between variables, but "at least some tentative ideas of what a suitable model should be" (Jöreskog, 1993, p. 313). Second, paths can be freed or fixed based on the Lagrangian multiplier (LM) test (Bollen, 1989). All parameters added based on the LM test, equivalent to Jöreskog and Sörbom's (1993) modification index, should be meaningful and substantially interpretable (Jöreskog, 1993).

Results

Comparison of Samples

As anticipated, the two survey samples differ significantly in their demographics, media use, knowledge, cognitions, and political behaviors. NIF participants were much older ($t=181.76$) and had considerably more years of formal education ($t=386.18$) than the literacy sample. The NIF sample also had larger ($t=24.06$) but more homogeneous ($t=27.16$) political conversation networks. Respondents in the literacy sample less frequently engaged in political conversation ($t=61.91$), used print news media ($t=57.71$), or watched television news ($t=3.98$). They also had substantially lower levels of political expertise ($t=462.24$) and self-efficacy ($t=85.60$). Finally, with regard to the criterion variables, the NIF sample was more open to political conflict ($t=25.57$), less conversationally dominant ($t=19.62$), and reported their arguments to be clearer ($t=20.64$) and more logical ($t=30.23$).

Relationships Among Antecedents

Maximum likelihood estimates indicated that the best-fitting structural models for the two samples provided some support for the theoretical model of antecedents to conversation quality (see Figures 2 and 3 and Table 1). In some respects, the models obtained for the two samples resembled those reported by McLeod et al. (1999). Increases in the size of one's discussion networks, in both samples, generated higher levels of television news viewing as well as political discussion but were unrelated to reading print news. Among NIF forum participants, network size also increased one's level of self-efficacy ($\gamma = .19$). Contrary to what we had expected, the heterogeneity of respondents' networks did not lead to greater political discussion but, instead, increased NIF respondents' reading of print news ($\gamma = .14$) and adult literacy students' political expertise ($\gamma = .18$).

In addition, the hypothesized relationships among mass and interpersonal communication variables emerged from the data. In both the NIF and the literacy samples, television news viewing was associated with greater political discussion and reading of print news. Additionally, political discussion was positively related to print news consumption,

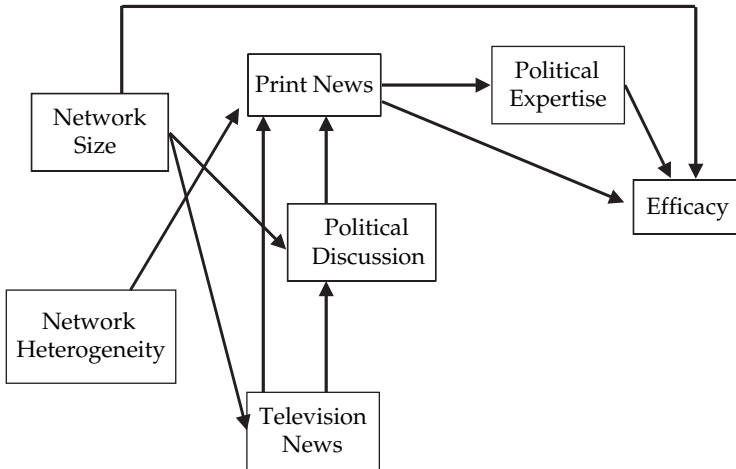


Figure 2. Relationships among antecedent variables in NIF sample.

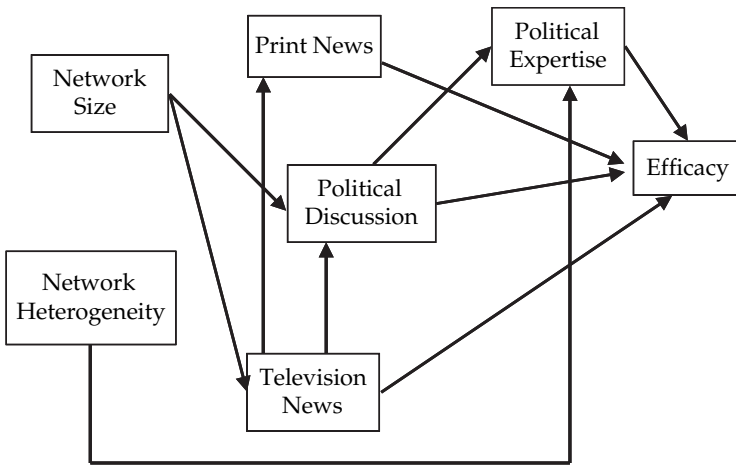


Figure 3. Relationships among antecedent variables in literacy sample.

a relationship that held only for the NIF sample $\beta = .20$). The hypothesized relationship between communication and political expertise and efficacy was partially supported in this sample. Consumption of hard print news increased one's political expertise, but television news did not. Television news, however, led to a higher sense of efficacy among the literacy sample $\beta = .19$). Political discussion also increased expertise $\beta = .21$), but decreased self-efficacy $\beta = -.29$), in this same group. In sum, the best-fitting models bore a strong resemblance to the original McLeod et al. (1999) results.

Predicting Deliberative Political Conversation

Our second goal in this study was to examine how variables in this adapted model would relate to the different facets of deliberative political conversation. As shown in the bottom of Table 2, the 10 models (five criterion variables for each of two samples) fit the data

Table 1
Direct effects of antecedent variables, by sample type (NIF vs. literacy)

Variable	Network size		Network heterogeneity		TV news use		Political discussion		Print news use		Political expertise		<i>R</i> ²	
	NIF	LIT	NIF	LIT	NIF	LIT	NIF	LIT	NIF	LIT	NIF	LIT	NIF	LIT
TV news use	.25*	.19*											.06	.04
Political discussion	.27*	.18*	.15#	.23*									.12	.10
Print news use			.14*		.44*	.26*	.20*						.28	.07
Political expertise				.18*			.21*	.17*					.13	.11
Self-efficacy	.19*				.19*		-.29*	.21*			.32*	.38*	.24	.14

Note. Empty cells for antecedent variables indicate no direct effect.
#*p* < .10; **p* < .05.

Table 2
Direct and total effects of antecedent variables on deliberative conversation, by sample type (NIF vs. literacy)

	Network size		Network Heterogeneity		TV news use		Political discussion		Print news use		Political expertise		Self-efficacy		R ²		Goodness of fit			
	NIF	LIT	NIF	LIT	NIF	LIT	NIF	LIT	NIF	LIT	NIF	LIT	NIF	LIT	NIF	LIT	NIF	LIT		
Openness to political conflict	.23*	.22*	.27*	.20*	.22*	.22*	.14 [#]	.17*	.19*	.17*	.17*	.19*	.19*	.19*	.25	.14	6.57 (13)	14.15 (14)	p=.92	p=.44
Conversational dominance	.37*	.19*	.03	-.02	.03	.13*	.03	.27*	-.31*	.18*	.18*	-.31*	-.31*	.25*	.14	.10	10.89 (17)	14.16 (15)	p=.86	p=.51
Clarity of opinion expression	.37*	.19*	.01	.04	.01	-.06*	.01	.07*	.25*	.07*	.07*	.25*	.25*	.25*	.14	.10	10.44 (16)	13.71 (15)	p=.84	p=.55
Logic/reason in political talk	.27*	.27*	.01	-.04	.04	.08*	.15*	.29*	.25*	.16*	.29*	.24*	.24*	.24*	.11	.13	12.74 (15)	12.13 (15)	p=.62	p=.67
Comprehension of opposing views	-.05	.19*	-.01	-.20*	-.04	-.17*	.08*	.18*	.24*	.24*	.18*	.18*	.24*	.24*	.12	.11	6.72 (14)	11.57 (14)	p=.95	p=.64

Note. Empty cells for antecedent variables indicate no direct effect, and italicized entries are total effects. Fit statistics are represented by chi-squares, with degrees of freedom in parentheses. #p<.10; *p<.05.

very well, with 9 of the 10 models accounting for at least 10% of the variance in a particular quality of conversation. At the same time, there was noticeable variation as to which antecedents proved predictive in the two different samples and across the five measures of deliberative conversation behavior.

Openness to Political Conflict. The ability to predict openness to political conflict differed greatly depending on the sample. Whereas data from both the NIF and literacy samples indicated that respondents with greater network heterogeneity were more open to conflict in political conversation, other similarities were nonexistent. For the NIF sample, direct effects of openness to political conflict stemmed from one's network size ($\beta = .23$), use of television news ($\beta = .20$), and self-efficacy ($\beta = .19$). For the literacy sample, however, only reading print news ($\beta = .14$) and political expertise ($\beta = .17$) had any bearing on openness to political conflict. This model for the NIF sample accounted for a quarter of the variance in the criterion variable, as compared to 14% for the literacy sample.

Conversational Dominance. Conversational dominance was unrelated to the antecedent variables in the NIF sample. In the literacy sample, however, the greater one's political expertise, the more conversationally-dominant one tended to be ($\beta = .27$). Also, the more self-efficacious one felt, the less dominant one's behavior was in political conversations ($\beta = -.31$).

Clarity of Opinion Expression. The size of one's network was the only antecedent variable to directly predict clarity of opinion expression in both samples. The magnitude of this direct effect was nearly twice as strong in the NIF sample ($\beta = .37$) as it was in the literacy sample ($\beta = .19$). Self-efficacy also was a significant predictor of clarity of opinion expression, but only for the literacy sample ($\beta = .25$). The NIF model accounted for 10% of the variance, and the literacy sample explained 14%.

Use of Logic/Reasoning in Political Talk. As with previous models, the antecedents to reasonableness of political talk differed between the two samples. Specifically, the greater the size of one's political discussion network ($\gamma = .27$), the higher the level of reasonableness, but only for respondents from the literacy sample. Also, the more reading of print news, the more reasonable, but only for the NIF sample ($\beta = .15$). Self-efficacy, however, was positively related to reasonableness in the two samples. Similar levels of variance in reasonableness of political talk emerged from the two samples (11% for the NIF sample and 13% for the literacy sample).

Comprehension of Opposing Views. Unlike some of the other four models, strong direct effects of communication on comprehension emerged. Among the NIF participants, the more one turned to television news, the less one reported comprehending others' views in deliberative conversations ($\beta = -.21$). Similarly, interpersonal discussion decreased comprehension of others' views in both samples. Network size increased comprehension ($\gamma = .24$), as did political expertise ($\beta = .18$), but only for the literacy sample. Self-efficacy increased comprehension as well ($\beta = .24$), though only for the NIF sample. The models of comprehension for both groups accounted for similar levels of variance in the criterion variable (12% for the NIF sample and 11% for the literacy sample).

Discussion

Aimed at identifying antecedents to deliberative political conversation, our study reveals that one's political discussion network characteristics *do* influence how one deliberates.

The larger one's network, the more one tended to engage in those behaviors that make conversation deliberative. Network size had a positive direct effect on making participants more open to conflict in their political conversations; however, this effect was found only in the NIF sample, which consisted of people with considerable formal education and high levels of political activity. Among adult literacy students, network size increased the likelihood that points raised were backed up with logic and arguments and led to participants reporting greater comprehension of others' views. For both samples, network size directly enhanced the clarity of opinions expressed. The effects of network size were direct as well as indirect, working through the three forms of communication—the print media, television, and political discussion—as means of political information dissemination.

Why does network size enhance different aspects of deliberative conversation for the different samples? This difference may stem from participants' different starting points and the likely political sophistication of conversation partners. For the literacy sample, conversations with a larger number of peers might stimulate the development of conversants' basic deliberative skills—articulating one's own views and comprehending others' views. By contrast, persons in the NIF sample (and their conversation partners) are more likely to have already acquired those tools; for them, a large network stimulates sustained, substantive political conflict, to which they become more open and accustomed.

The diversity of one's conversation network, on the other hand, had less impact on the deliberative qualities of participants' political conversations. Across all deliberative conversation behaviors, network heterogeneity had only two direct effects: a positive effect on openness to political conflict (for both groups) and a negative effect on the reasonableness of political talk (for the NIF sample only). The latter finding was contrary to hypotheses, but it was a weak association compared to the stronger and more encouraging effect of conversational diversity on openness to conflict for both samples.

Our data also showed markedly different relationships between media use and the character of political conversation. Our results echo previous findings suggesting that newspapers are better at imparting political information than is television. This is certainly the case if the construct tapped by our political expertise measures reflects some gain of political information. Moreover, print media use had generally positive direct effects on deliberative conversation, whereas television viewing had mixed effects, including a relatively strong negative path to comprehension of opposing views for NIF participants.

This may be due in part to the incivility characteristic of many televised "discussions of community or national issues" (as the questionnaire item was worded). Just as Mutz and Reeves (2005) found that particularly caustic television programs can erode public trust, such programs may stunt the development of deliberative conversational skills. After all, much of human learning is observational (Bandura, 1986), and television often provides poor models of political talk, at least by deliberative standards. Future research focused on this variable should be careful to distinguish among the different style and content of television (and radio) programming on public issues.

Why would this effect be found only for the NIF sample and not the literacy sample? One possibility is that the literacy sample is not viewing the same programming as the NIF sample. The survey asked how often respondents watched "discussions of community or national issues on the television," and this may have meant different programs to the two different samples. Future research with more precise measures of media use may shed more light on this question.

Our data revealed another surprising finding: In the adult literacy student sample, there was a negative association between political discussion frequency and various dimensions of deliberation—specifically, the clarity and logic of one's arguments and the

comprehension of others' views. Speaking more often does not necessarily translate into speaking more clearly or listening more carefully. Results such as these are consistent with our original premise that not all political conversation makes an unambiguous contribution to the larger deliberative process. For these respondents, increasing the frequency of one's conversations would not necessarily cultivate deliberative habits of speech. Following Bandura's (1986) general social learning theory, if deliberative conversational behaviors are not the norm, more frequent conversation reinforces less deliberative behavioral patterns.

In addition to revealing some of the antecedents to deliberative political conversation, this study also provides evidence of the applicability of McLeod et al.'s (1999) model of political participation. Although we adapted the model somewhat to examine deliberative political conversation, the results for the two samples studied herein were generally consistent with McLeod et al.'s findings with regard to the relationships *among* the antecedent variables. Not surprisingly, the literacy sample had fewer significant predictors for print news use, given that the participants in this sample generally could not read. Nonetheless, television news use was a predictor of print news use for this sample. Given their difficulty using print media, in retrospect it should not have been surprising that the literacy sample had direct paths from political discussion frequency to political expertise and political self-efficacy. In the absence of print media, political conversation plays a more prominent role in building political knowledge. More surprising is the negative association between conversation frequency and political self-efficacy. It may be that the discussion of politics is disheartening for this population, which has relatively low levels of political knowledge and participation. Rather than ameliorating this problem, further conversation, in the absence of other changes, may simply make conversants more skeptical about their ability to act skillfully in a political world that becomes increasingly complex the more one talks about it.

In sum, deliberative conversation is partly a function of one's conversation networks, media use, knowledge, and self-efficacy. Though this study did not examine links among the different qualities of deliberative conversation, it has attempted to clarify what it means to say a conversation is deliberative, and it has examined some of the likely antecedents of such talk.

Future research can go beyond the present study by taking a number of different tacks. One would entail securing independent reports from those with whom respondents deliberated to corroborate such self-assessments. Previous research on deliberation has had success with using direct indicators of behavioral change, rather than self-report data (e.g., Gastil, Deess, & Weiser, 2002), and with the exception of subjective experience variables, behavioral data are preferable when their collection is feasible. Thus, future studies should look more directly at the content of actual, recorded conversations. This move will necessitate the development of coding guidelines for deliberative conversation, but it will permit a much more direct assessment of the prospects for deliberation in everyday political talk.

In this particular research area, there are additional, special reasons for directly observing conversations, rather than relying exclusively on self-report data. Self-reports can prove problematic when the variables are prone to social desirability bias, particularly among certain cultures. Respondents may tell researchers what they perceive to be "appropriate" responses, rather than providing genuine representations of their experiences. Moreover, the development of deliberative conversational habits and attitudes may have the confounding effect of yielding more self-critical, reflective, and honest responses relative to persons without such deliberative inclinations. In other words, deliberation could

lead participants to produce more critical self-reports, producing negative correlations between deliberation and subsequent self-report conversational data.

Such critical self-reflection is one of the qualities of deliberation that was not included in this particular study. Our investigation used a conception of deliberation that shared much in common with Burkhalter et al.'s (2002) broader conception of face-to-face public deliberation, but we did not include more dialogic elements, such as the perspective taking emphasized by Benhabib (1992, 2002). It is difficult for any single study to take into account every facet of deliberation, let alone its myriad effects, but as the body of research on deliberation grows, it will be important to explore each deliberative feature in its own right.

Notes

1. These three aspects of democratic deliberation—manipulation/power, clarity/directness, and the use of logic/reason—are recognized as important aspects of messages across a wide range of contexts. For instance, alternative message typologies distinguish messages in terms of: directness and rationality (Falbo, 1977); directness, manipulation of sanctions, locus of control, and explicitness (Wiseman & Schenck-Hamlin, 1981); and direct-rational, exchange, manipulation, threat, and expertise claims (Cody, McLaughlin, & Jordan, 1980).

2. To explore the generalizability of the model proposed, we tested it using divergent survey populations. A theory's validity is demonstrated only when it proves to be useful in a wide variety of contexts (Campbell & Fiske, 1959). Just as cross-national studies provide a powerful means of testing theories in different cultures (Merritt & Rokkan, 1966), so can comparing different subgroups test the strength of a theory within a single society (Patton, 1987).

3. A pilot test study of this definition of politics showed that its presence at the beginning of a questionnaire had the desired effect (i.e., it resulted in a broad interpretation of the term "politics" throughout the survey).

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Appendix: Wording of Items Used

Openness to Political Conflict

I try to keep political disputes with my peers to myself in order to avoid hard feelings. (Reversed)

I usually avoid open discussion of my political differences with my peers. (Reversed)

I try to stay away from political disagreements with my peers. (Reversed)

Preface to Conversational Recall Items

Try to recall a recent conversation about a political issue that you have had with a friend or family member. Try to remember the topic of the conversation, what you said, what the other person said, and what you thought and felt. Take a few seconds now to reflect on the conversation. The following questions ask you to describe how you behaved during this political conversation.

A. Conversational Dominance

I dominated the other person.

I was a bit overbearing.

B. Clarity of Opinion Expression

I “beat around the bush” a little when expressing my opinions. (Reversed)

I was very explicit about my opinions.

I expressed my positions clearly and directly.

I was somewhat vague about my views. (Reversed)

C. Reasonableness of Political Talk

I presented sensible arguments in support of my views.

I backed up my arguments with evidence.

I was unreasonable and illogical when stating my point of view. (Reversed)

D. Comprehension of Opposing Views

I understood the reasons behind the other person’s views.

I recognized the values underlying the other person’s point of view.

Political Conversation Network Size

How many family members, friends, neighbors, and coworkers do you regularly discuss politics with?

Political Conversation Network Heterogeneity

I usually discuss politics with people of the same ethnic, social, and economic background as myself.

Frequency of Political Conversations

On average, how often do you talk about political topics with your family, friends, neighbors, and coworkers? Less than once every 4 months? Once every 4 months? Once every

2 months? Once a month? Once a week? Once a day? Or more than once a day? (“Don’t know” option also provided.)

Print Media Use

I regularly read the local and national news and editorial sections of the newspaper.
I often read magazine or newsletter articles addressing community or national issues.

Television News Use

I often watch discussions of community or national issues on the television.

Political Expertise

Which of the following names, terms, or phrases do you recognize from things you have heard or read in the news or in political conversations? On your answer sheet, use the following scale:

- 0 I definitely recognize the name, term, or phrase and know its political context.
- 1 I recognize the term, but I do not know its political context.
- 2 I don’t think I recognize the term.

(This scale was used for the following eight items, each of which had appeared in the news frequently in the year prior to the study.) William Rehnquist, Operation Rescue, The Spotted Owl, Carol Mosley Braun, Branch Davidians, United We Stand America, Jesse Helms, Single Payer Health Care System

Self-Efficacy

I am capable of participating effectively in group discussions about important political issues.

As an individual citizen, I am able to engage in political action.

I can’t think straight about politics, regardless of how much I read or talk about the issues.
(Reversed)